**Epistemic Injustice in Speech Acts**

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## Abstract

Epistemic injustice has seen substantial exploration regarding the harm hearers can inflict upon speakers, largely following the foundational work of Miranda Fricker. However, far less work has been put into epistemic injustice generated by speakers, and the academic landscape lacks an integrated, systematic investigation into scenarios where speakers cause harm to hearers in their epistemic capacities. This thesis stands as an endeavour to fill this knowledge gap, offering an in-depth analysis of circumstances where speech acts generate epistemic injustice, with a specific emphasis on the harm speakers impart on hearers.

This research outlines the distinct ways in which asserters can enact epistemic injustice upon hearers, classifying the harm into two main categories: quantitative and qualitative epistemic deprivation. Through a detailed examination of these types of deprivation, this thesis sheds light on the complex dimensions of epistemic injustice perpetrated by speakers, adding a fresh and needed viewpoint to the existing academic conversation on this topic. The insights offered in this thesis aim to deepen the understanding of speaker-hearer dynamics, fostering a more comprehensive approach to addressing and mitigating such injustices in diverse communicative scenarios.

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## Author's Declaration

I confirm that this thesis is my own work and that I have: (i) read and understood the University of Glasgow Statement on Plagiarism, (ii) clearly referenced, in both text and the bibliography or references, all sources used in the work; (iii) fully referenced (including page numbers) and used inverted commas for all text quoted from books, journals, web, etc.; (iv) provided the sources for all tables, figures, data, etc. that are not my own work; (v) not made use of the works of any other student(s) past or present without acknowledgement. This includes any of my own works, that has been previously, or concurrently, submitted for assessment, either at this or any other educational institution; (vi) not sought or used the services of any professional agencies to produce this work; (vii) in addition, I understand that any false claim in respect of this work will result in disciplinary action in accordance with university regulations.

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# Introduction

Recent literature has been abuzz with discussions regarding the prerequisites for epistemic justice, a conversation sparked by Miranda Fricker (2007) who highlighted two crucial types of epistemic injustice: testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. Numerous philosophers have since explored the ways listeners can harm speakers in their role as knowers. However, the reverse scenario, where speakers epistemically harm listeners in testimonial exchanges, remains underexplored. This project endeavours to fill this knowledge gap by investigating paradigmatic ways in which speakers can inflict harm on listeners in their capacity as knowers. It particularly focuses on two forms of harm: quantitative epistemic deprivation and qualitative epistemic deprivation.

The central aim of this project is to discern how speech acts can lead to epistemic injustice. It embarks on two sub-objectives. Firstly, it argues that Miranda Fricker's account of epistemic injustice necessitates revision due to its being too narrow for extensional adequacy, and for generalisability to the overall normative framework. I argue that Fricker's view struggles to accommodate scenarios of blameless and non-harmful epistemic injustice. Secondly, this project seeks to utilize the modified account to pinpoint two ways speakers can unjustly treat listeners epistemically: through quantitative and qualitative epistemic deprivation.

I take quantitative epistemic deprivation to occur in cases in which speakers withhold pertinent information, deeming the listener's understanding capacity as limited. An example can be drawn from a scenario presented by Fricker (2007), where a philosophy professor, unknowingly conversing with a fellow ethicist, holds back on discussing the topic fully, underestimating her interlocutor's intellectual capacity.

Another form of harm is qualitative epistemic deprivation, occurring when speakers intentionally disseminate false or unjustified information, thereby undermining their hearer's epistemic status. An instance of this is observed in the recent media events where the Russian press was criticized for spreading fake news about their invasion of Ukraine, intending to manipulate the hearer's doxastic status for their specific interests. The issue with such false information lies not just in their untruthfulness but in their deliberate deception, making those disseminating such information both ethically and epistemically liable.

Both quantitative and qualitative epistemic deprivation represent cases of testimonial injustice inflicted by the speaker on a listener. In our era of significant media reliance, exploring the issue of epistemic injustice from speaker to listener is not only timely but also holds substantial societal relevance.

Much of this project is influenced by my first-hand experiences working with Ukrainian refugees, predominantly women. For several years now, I have worked in for several non-governmental, as well as governmental agencies and organizations in Brussels offering social support to refugees. Observing their daily challenges in navigating the intricate system of a foreign nation that has opened its doors to them yet is also home to individuals who, with their actions, increase their vulnerabilities, has been eye-opening. My observations extend beyond their mental battles with PTSD and the apprehension of new, unfamiliar life in a foreign land. It encompasses a spectrum of injustices they confront as refugees, and, intersectionally, as women refugees.

Beyond the fundamental unmet needs such as securing housing, sufficient food, and accessible education, these refugees grapple with additional layers of hardship. One of the most glaring injustices they encounter is testimonial injustice. Their credibility frequently faces erosion not just because of their accents or their struggle to communicate fluently in the official language, but also due to entrenched prejudices against Eastern European women. These women bear the brunt of harmful stereotypes that unjustly sexualizes them and casts aspersions on their moral status. They are unfairly labelled as opportunistic, with their intentions and integrity constantly under unwarranted scrutiny. This prejudiced perception paints them as individuals seeking material gain, further marginalizing them, and adding to the myriad challenges they already confront as refugees in a foreign land. The intersection of linguistic barriers and bias against Eastern European women heightens their vulnerability, making their path to stability and acceptance in a foreign land even more daunting[1].

To better illustrate this and observe how a revised account of testimonial injustice operates in a real-world scenario, let's consider the following examples involving Ukrainian refugee women who experience harm as hearers inflicted by a speaker in real-life cases of qualitative and quantitative epistemic deprivation. It is

[1] For discussion on prejudice against Eastern European women and the creation of a new identity see e.g., (Krivonos & Diatlova, 2020), and (Ibroscheva, 2006)

crucial that these cases are not mere thought experiments: they are cases inspired from and based on real-life situations that I have encountered in my work with refugees:

Case 1.

Olena, a young Ukrainian refugee holding a master's degree in politics, approaches a Belgian local organization dedicated to assisting refugees in finding additional courses. These courses, typically free or highly affordable, aim to expedite the integration process for refugees and unemployed foreigners. Olena's master's degree was already recognized by the Government, as she graduated post the signing of the Bologna Treaty[2], making her degree equivalent to one within the European Union. She is also fluent in English, but she aspires to attain fluency in French to enhance her employment prospects in her field of expertise.

The employee handling Olena's file at the organization harbours significant prejudice against foreigners, particularly those from outside the EU. Despite having proof of diploma equivalence from the Belgian government, she holds an unfounded belief that their educational standards are incompatible to those in Belgium. This bias clouds her judgement, impacting her professional interactions with Olena.

She holds the unfounded assumption that Olena's efforts to take intensive French classes with the hope of securing a job afterwards are futile. In her view, Olena is merely attempting to delay the inevitable: settling for a blue-collar job that she believes would be more fitting for her. This biased perspective further hinder Olena's opportunities and undermines her legitimate aspirations for professional achievement.

Case 2

Marina, escaping the turmoil of Ukraine, is striving to adapt to her fresh start in Belgium, with aspiration to further her education in the medical domain. She finds shelter with a man who is a practicing doctor. On top of her intellectual acumen, Marina is also conscientious about her physical appearance, and, in line with what she has been taught in her home country, always ensuring her makeup is impeccable.

However, each time she seeks academic guidance from the doctor, she confronts his scepticism and dismissiveness. His preconceived notions about women,

[2] For more on the effects of the Bologna Treaty see e.g., (Huisman, Adelman, Hsieh, Shams, & Wilkins, 2012)

especially those who prioritize their appearance like Marina, cloud his judgement about her capabilities. When Marina approaches him for insights on a research paper she's writing, he condescendingly simplifies his explanation, reverting to basic biology concepts, underestimating her understanding and knowledge.

This scenario is a classic instance of 'mansplaining', where the doctor's biases against Eastern European women and scepticism about Ukrainian higher education converge, undermining Marina's epistemic authority. His unfounded assumption about her intellectual capacity, based on her nationality and appearance, inflict epistemic harm, diminishing her confidence and obstructing her academic progress.

Case 3

Maria, escaping the conflict in Ukraine, finds refuge with her Belgian boyfriend in Brussels. Armed with a degree in management and fluency in English, she is a competent and independent individual. However, each altercation with her boyfriend leaves her questioning her worth and reality. He consistently uses her vulnerable status as a refugee to assert dominance, reminding her of her origins and his role in her safety in Belgium.

His late-night, inebriated arrivals, followed by his anger when questioned about his whereabouts, further erode Maria's mental peace. He labels her as an Eastern European gold digger, accusing her of ingratitude and greed. This continuous degradation and manipulation lead Maria into a spiral of self-doubt and confusion. Indeed, she is now living in an upscale apartment in the core of Europe, while her friends back in Ukraine are seeking shelter from bombings in basements. This stark contrast leads her to question her own perspective. She begins to wonder if her boyfriend's harsh words hold some truth, further deepening her emotional and epistemic turmoil.

This is a clear instance of gaslighting, where her boyfriend, perhaps unconsciously, is inflicting epistemic harm on Maria. Even if he believes in his own righteousness and perceives his actions as a form of help to a Ukrainian refugee, the impact of his behaviour is undeniably harmful, leaving Maria questioning her sanity, judgement, and self-worth.

In the narratives of Olena, Marina, and Maria, we observe a recurring theme of epistemic injustice inflicted upon Ukrainian refugee women in various contexts.

Olena, despite her recognized educational qualifications, faces prejudice from an organization employee who doubts the equivalence of her education to Belgian standards. This scepticism, unfounded and rooted in bias, hinders Olena's pursuit of language proficiency and further career advancement in her field of expertise. The employee's refusal to acknowledge Olena's legitimate qualifications and aspirations exemplifies a form of epistemic injustice, undermining her credibility and self-confidence.

Marina's experience further highlights the intersection of appearance-based and xenophobic prejudices. Despite her intellectual capabilities and academic ambitions in the medical field, the doctor hosting her dismisses her inquiries, offering unsolicited and basic biological explanations. His assumptions about her intellectual capacity, based on her meticulous attention to her appearance and her Eastern European origin, lead to a demeaning and dismissive attitude, a clear instance of mansplaining. This behaviour stifles Marina's educational growth and diminishes her self-esteem, further exemplifying epistemic harm.

Maria's story presents a more personal and emotionally charged scenario of epistemic injustice in the form of gaslighting. Her Belgian boyfriend's derogatory remarks and accusations cause her to question her own sanity and judgment. Despite her educational background and language proficiency, she is reduced to stereotypes associated with Eastern European women, facing accusations of ingratitude and gold-digging. The emotional manipulation she experiences exacerbates her vulnerability as a refugee, leading to significant epistemic and emotional harm.

These scenarios are based on and inspired by real-life cases that I have encountered in my line of work. These stories collectively shed light on the multifaceted nature of epistemic injustice faced by Ukrainian refugee women in Belgium. Whether in professional, educational, or personal contexts, these women navigate a labyrinth of prejudices and biases that undermine their credibility, silence their voices, and inflict substantial epistemic harm.

Against this backdrop, let us now delve into the structure of the dissertation. The first chapter embarks on a comprehensive examination of the multifaceted issues surrounding pornography, with a particular focus in its epistemic harms. This chapter does not argue for limiting or banning pornography. Instead, it highlights the epistemic injustices women encounter due to the consumption of pornography. The early sections

will explore the anti-pornography arguments, referencing Rae Langton's work and wider feminist discussions. The following sections will introduce a contrasting narrative, underscoring the crucial role of free speech and its connection with pornography. In the final sections, a convergence of these perspectives will take place, aligning with certain anti-pornography feminists' viewpoints and affirming the undeniable role of contemporary pornography in exacerbating gender inequality and harm. The argument will predominantly lean on Amanda Cawston's (2019) work, which redirects the criticism from the pornography industry to its consumers.

I will argue that shifting the focus onto the consumers of pornography is paramount. This is because even if the pornography industry were to become ethical in its production overnight, ensuring no women are harmed during the process, the impact of certain types of pornography could still perpetuate harm towards real-world women. This is evident in genres of pornography that do not even involve human women, such as Hentai or the use of Sexbots.

In these instances, while no women are physically harmed during production, the portrayal and objectification of female characters can still perpetuate and reinforce harmful stereotypes and prejudices. These mediums often depict women in submissive roles, contributing to skewed perceptions and expectations of female sexuality and agency. This can inadvertently perpetuate a culture that undermines women's rights and equality, further entrenching societal gender disparities.

The consumption of such material, even if ethically produced, can still perpetuate and even exacerbate harmful stereotypes and biases against women, underscoring the importance of addressing consumer attitudes and understanding in the discourse on pornography and epistemic injustice.

The second chapter will delve deeper into instances of qualitative epistemic deprivation, providing a thorough analysis of the process of belief formation based on false information disseminated in the media. This chapter will explore how misinformation and deceptive narratives in various media forms can distort public perception and understanding, leading to a widespread dissemination of false beliefs.

The analysis will encompass an examination of the mechanisms through which media influences public opinion, and how this can lead to a systemic undermining of credible sources and information. The chapter will also scrutinize the impact of these

distorted beliefs on various societal aspects, including, but not limited to, public discourse,

By dissecting the intricate web of media influence on public beliefs, this chapter aims to shed light on the pervasive issue of qualitative epistemic deprivation, highlighting the critical need for media literacy and robust mechanisms to counteract the spread of misinformation.

I will commence by examining the system that has historically cultivated a fertile environment for misogyny to flourish: patriarchy. A detailed exploration of Kate Manne's (2018) account of misogyny will be undertaken, delineating its distinctions from sexism. This exploration will lay the groundwork for understanding the deep-seated roots of misogyny within societal structures.

Following this, the discussion will transition to the mechanisms through which misogyny is propagated and disseminated. Insight will be drawn from Jason Stanley's (2015) account of propaganda, providing a lens through which to view the spread of misogynistic beliefs and attitudes. This will be complemented by an exploration of Regina Rini's (2017) account of fake news, further illuminating the channels through which misinformation and biased narratives permeate society.

In the concluding sections, attention will be directed towards the portrayal of women in the media, and how such representations contribute to the reinforcement of existing prejudices. The media's role in perpetuating harmful stereotypes and biased perspectives will be critically analysed, highlighting the intersection between media portrayals and real-world implications for women's treatment and perception in society.

Through this comprehensive exploration, the chapter aims to unravel the intricate tapestry of factors contributing to the perpetuation of misogyny, offering a holistic understanding of its origins, propagation mechanisms, and the role of media and misinformation in its sustained presence in society.

Continuing the exploration from the second chapter, the third chapter will shift the focus to the music industry, examining its role in disseminating prejudicial attitudes about women. Through a meticulous analysis of the most listened to songs across diverse genres, this chapter aims to shed light on the pervasive nature of prejudiced attitudes towards women within the realm of music.

The argument will be built around the premise that music and music videos, given their widespread accessibility and comparatively benign reputation compared to

pornography, potentially wield a more significant influence on their audience. This influence extends to shaping perceptions and attitudes towards women, often reinforcing and perpetuating harmful stereotypes and biases.

The chapter will delve into the lyrical content and visual elements of popular music and videos, analysing the portrayal of women and examining the messages being conveyed to the audience. The exploration will seek to establish connections between these portrayals and the perpetuation of prejudicial attitudes, underscoring the subtle yet profound impact of the music industry on societal perceptions of women.

By unearthing these dynamics, the third chapter contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted sources of prejudice dissemination, highlighting the need for critical engagement with not only explicit but also more insidious and pervasive forms of media and entertainment.

In the fourth chapter, the focus will shift to a pervasive instance of quantitative epistemic deprivation: mansplaining. The discussion will commence with an exploration of existing definitions, positing that they are overly restrictive. The traditional understanding of mansplaining, as coined by Rebecca Solnit, is a man condescendingly giving an unsolicited explanation to a woman who is already an expert in the field. This chapter will argue for a broader interpretation of mansplaining, encompassing scenarios that do not strictly adhere to Solnit's definition but still embody the essence of mansplaining.

Consider situations where a woman, not an expert in a particular field, seeks an explanation from a man who holds expertise in that area. If the man delivers a condescending explanation, presuming her to be intellectually inferior solely based on her gender, this interaction should also be classified as mansplaining. This expanded definition acknowledges the diverse contexts in which mansplaining can occur, highlighting the underlying issue of undermining women's epistemic authority based on prejudiced assumptions about their intellectual capabilities.

By broadening the scope of mansplaining, this chapter aims to shed light on the various dimensions in which women's credibility and intellectual capacity are unjustly diminished, contributing to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of this form of epistemic injustice. The exploration will underscore the importance of recognizing and addressing these subtle yet impactful forms of epistemic deprivation, advocating for a more inclusive and respectful epistemic environment.

The fifth chapter will delve into the realm of conspiracy theories, particularly those intertwined with sexism and misogyny within the manosphere, following the framework established by Quassim Cassam. Cassam (2019) delineates five principal characteristics of conspiracy theories: their speculative nature, esotericism, premodernism, amateurishness, and contrarian stance. This chapter will propose the addition of a sixth characteristic to this list: the romanticization of the past. This additional feature will enhance the understanding of the intersection between conspiracy theories and misogynistic and sexist ideologies.

The romanticization of the past is a significant element in explaining why individuals who harbour sexist and misogynistic views often employ rhetoric centred on collective nostalgia and disseminate false beliefs about women. This chapter will argue that this sixth feature is crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of conspiracy theories related to misogyny and sexism. It elucidates the allure of these theories for individuals entrenched in misogynistic ideologies, offering insight into the mechanisms that perpetuate these harmful beliefs.

In alignment with Alessandra Tanesini's (2016) perspective on epistemic vice, this chapter will further argue that a propensity for conspiracy theories is a form of epistemic vice. This connection underscores the detrimental impact of conspiracy-mindedness on individuals' epistemic integrity and highlights the role of such vices in perpetuating sexist and misogynistic beliefs. By examining conspiracy theories through this lens, this chapter aims to contribute to the broader discourse on epistemic injustice and the various forms it can take.

In Chapter 6, the discussion will transition to the examination of the role of the internet and the manosphere in the amplification of misogyny and sexism. The chapter will posit that these platforms have significantly contributed to the ubiquity of misogynistic and sexist ideologies, providing a space where such harmful beliefs are not only shared but also reinforced and normalized.

Given the pervasive and escalating nature of this issue, and the tangible dangers it presents, the chapter will advocate for the consideration of no-platforming as a viable response to instances of hate speech and other forms of dangerous communication. It will explore the ethical implications of no-platforming, addressing potential concerns

and objections related to free speech and censorship. The chapter will argue that the imperative to protect vulnerable individuals and communities from the harm inflicted by hate speech and dangerous discourse outweighs the potential drawbacks of no-platforming.

In the discussion on no-platforming, I will engage with Neil Levy's (2019) perspective as a contrasting viewpoint to my own stance. While I concur with Levy on the justification of no-platforming, particularly emphasizing the rights of vulnerable groups to be shielded from further attacks and exclusion, I diverge from his position on two significant aspects.

Firstly, I contend that Levy's conceptualization of no-platforming is excessively narrow. His definition of a platform is confined to traditional stages such as university contexts. This limitation overlooks the expansive and influential realm of social media and other online platforms that play a pivotal role in disseminating information and shaping public opinion in contemporary society.

Secondly, I disagree with Levy's assertion that higher-order evidence of expertise is exclusively derived from association with reputable sources such as university invitations, prominent newspaper publications, or high-profile documentaries. Contrary to this view, I argue that in the current digital age, social media platforms can also confer a form of credibility that contributes to higher-order evidence. The rapid dissemination of content on these platforms, often unvetted and unverified, is consumed by a significant audience who view traditional sources of expertise with scepticism, dismissing them as government propaganda. In this context, an influencer's substantial following and the echo chambers of social media communities serve as alternative sources of credibility and higher-order evidence.

Expanding the discussion beyond Levy's framework, I will argue that the discourse prevalent in the manosphere transcends the boundaries of hate speech to encompass dangerous speech as well. This form of speech, amplified by the extensive reach and accessibility of social media platforms, poses significant risks by perpetuating harmful narratives, reinforcing prejudices, and contributing to the marginalization and victimization of vulnerable groups. The discussion will explore the implications of this phenomenon and advocate for a more inclusive and expansive approach to no-platforming, encompassing online platforms and addressing the unique challenges and considerations presented by the digital landscape.

The discussion will delve into the criteria for determining when no-platforming is justified and explore potential alternatives and complementary strategies for combating online misogyny and sexism.

By examining these issues, Chapter 6 aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on the most effective and ethically sound approaches to addressing the proliferation of harmful ideologies in online spaces, emphasizing the critical need for concerted efforts to mitigate the impact of these issues on individuals and society as a whole.

In the seventh and concluding chapter of this paper, the focus will shift to Sanford Goldberg's (2020) recent exploration of silencing, particularly his introduction of the "No Silent Rejection" (NSR) concept. Goldberg posits that within conversational contexts, silence from the audience is generally perceived as agreement with the speaker's statements. This assumption underpins a social epistemic norm governing conversational exchanges. Despite its theoretical grounding, the NSR norm faces criticism, particularly regarding its potential misuse by authoritative figures to further oppress marginalized groups. Goldberg counters these arguments by presenting conditions under which the expectation of no silent rejection is defeasible, asserting that the issue lies not in the practice itself but in its misuse. He further suggests that victims of silencing contribute to their oppression by choosing silence.

While Goldberg’s perspective provides a structured understanding of silencing, this paper will argue that it does not sufficiently address the epistemic value of NSR, especially considering its potential to disproportionately benefit privileged individuals while perpetuating the oppression of marginalized epistemic agents. Additionally, Goldberg's analysis does not fully encompass the psychological dimensions of silencing, particularly the various factors that might compel individuals to remain silent.

This chapter will emphasize the necessity of considering the psychological aspects of silencing, exploring how patriarchal structures contribute to both external and internal silencing. It will delve into the work of Kate Manne (2020), examining the role of "male privilege" in perpetuating silencing, and will incorporate insights from clinical psychology to understand the mental health implications of silencing experiences.

Furthermore, this chapter will argue that silencing is inherently connected to broader patriarchal social and epistemic structures, serving as a tool for maintaining the subordination of disadvantaged groups. It will challenge Goldberg's assertion of the neutrality of the NSR practice, arguing for the fundamental impossibility of identifying 'safe' conditions for NSR given the ubiquity of patriarchal norms.

To support these arguments, this paper will employ a multi-disciplinary approach, integrating philosophy, social epistemology, and psychology. The first section will offer a comprehensive critique of Goldberg's account, underscoring its epistemic and psychological limitations. The second section will propose an alternative framework for understanding silencing, incorporating both epistemic and psychological elements. The third section will utilize case-based analysis to illustrate the real-world implications of these theoretical constructs.

In conclusion, this comprehensive exploration is structured to provide a detailed and multifaceted examination of the various forms of epistemic injustice and harm, particularly focusing on the experiences of women in diverse contexts. The initial chapters of the thesis offer a critical analysis of the epistemic harms associated with pornography, emphasizing the importance of focusing on consumers and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes, even in scenarios where no direct harm occurs during production.

Subsequent chapters delve into the exploration of qualitative and quantitative epistemic deprivation, examining the processes of belief formation based on false information disseminated by various media. The thesis further explores the propagation and dissemination of misogyny, providing a critical analysis of existing definitions of mansplaining and offering a more inclusive perspective.

# Chapter 1. Silenced and Subordinated: The Epistemic Effects of Pornography as a Speech Act

## Introduction

The 20th century, especially the transformative decades of the 1960s and 1970s, was a crucible of change, particularly in the realm of societal attitudes towards sexuality. Historically, Western societies, deeply anchored in a Judeo-Christian ethos, upheld the virtues of sexual restraint. This framework, which had persisted for centuries, celebrated sexual expression primarily within the sanctity of marriage. Extramarital or premarital engagements were not just frowned upon but were often met with societal disdain, stigmatization, and in some cases, punitive measures. However, as the 1960s dawned, these deeply entrenched norms and conventions began to face rigorous challenges from multiple fronts[3].

The Sexual Revolution, a movement that would redefine societal perceptions of sexuality, emerged as a potent force (Greenwood & Guner, 2010). Fuelled by second-wave feminists, countercultural movements, and broader socio-political shifts, this revolution sought to dismantle age-old conventions that had long governed sexual behaviour and expression. Central to this transformative period was a fervent push against traditional heterosexual conventions[4], coupled with a passionate advocacy for women's sexual autonomy and rights.

One of the most significant catalysts for this change was the introduction of the birth control pill[5]. This seemingly simple medical innovation had profound societal implications. By providing women with unprecedented control over their reproductive rights, it symbolically and practically separated sex from procreation (ibid). This empowerment, combined with the countercultural movements of the 1960s and the

[3] See, e.g., (Scott, 1998), (Brown, 2012)), (Szreter & Fisher, 2012), (Fishman, 2017), and (Wallhead, 2023) for introductions and related discussion on the history of the sexual revolution and its implications in the women's liberation movement.
[4] See (Robertson, 2002) for a detailed introduction on queer history during the sexual revolution.
[5] See, e.g., (Bailey, 1997). Bailey contends that while the birth control played a pivotal role in the behaviour and cultural shifts known as the sexual revolution, historians frequently overlook a significant aspect: the pill required a prescription, which posed challenges for many, young, unmarried women.

writings of influential feminist figures like Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, began to challenge, deconstruct, and ultimately reshape long-standing sexual taboos.[6]

Parallel to these societal shifts, the discourse around pornography underwent its evolution. The advent of home video technology, the proliferation of media, and changing societal mores made sexually explicit material more accessible and less taboo. With this newfound visibility and accessibility, pornography began to carve a space within mainstream discourse. This led not only to its commercialization but also to fervent debates around its implications, especially concerning its portrayal, treatment, and representation of women.

While some feminists, particularly those from the sex-positive camp, viewed pornography as a potential tool for sexual liberation and empowerment[7], others approached it with deep scepticism and criticism. Figures like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon contended that explicit content didn't just objectify women but actively commodified them for male consumption, potentially normalizing and desensitizing society to acts of violence against them.

Into this complex and often polarized debate stepped Rae Langton (1993). Drawing inspiration from speech act theory, Langton offered a nuanced and ground-breaking perspective. She posited that pornography did more than just objectify women; it actively subordinated and silenced them. Through her lens, pornography could function as a form of speech that perpetuated and reinforced women's subjugation, offering a fresh, epistemological perspective on its potential harms.

The implications of pornography are vast, extending beyond mere societal or moral concerns. They delve deep into the realms of ethics, epistemology, and power dynamics. One of the most pressing epistemic concerns arising from pornography is the credibility deficit. By perpetuating false beliefs, stereotypes, and misconceptions about women, it can inadvertently silence their voices, casting them as intellectually inferior or merely as objects of desire.

This chapter aims to provide an exhaustive exploration of these multifaceted concerns, with a pronounced emphasis on the epistemic harms of pornography. The objective of this chapter is not to advocate for the restriction of pornography. Instead, it

[6] See e.g., (Chansky, 2008)

[7] Carol Avedon (1995) emphasizes the distinction between anti-pornography feminists and traditional feminists. As a self-proclaimed traditional feminist, Avedon critiques the former for their lack of open-mindedness.

argues that a blanket ban or unrestricted access does not address the complexity of the issue. Instead, it highlights the need for a more tailored approach, where access to certain types of pornographic content is regulated based on the potential impact on specific audiences. This approach acknowledges the diversity of pornographic material and its varied impact, advocating for a more nuanced and thoughtful strategy in addressing the concerns related to pornography consumption. It emphasizes the importance of safeguarding vulnerable audiences from content that has the potential to perpetuate sexism and contribute to epistemic injustice, while also respecting the autonomy and rights of individuals to access adult content responsibly.

The initial sections will delve into arguments from the anti-pornography perspective, drawing heavily from Langton's work and the broader feminist discourse. Subsequent sections will present a counter-narrative, emphasizing the sanctity of free speech and its intersection with pornography. In the concluding segments, I will present my own view. I will argue that a blanket ban on pornographic content may not be the optimal solution, as it fails to address the complexities involved. A more refined approach is necessary, where regulation of access to specific types of pornographic material considers the potential impact on particular audiences. This method appreciates the varied nature of pornography and its differential effects, advocating for a strategy that is sensitive to the nuances of pornography consumption. Drawing from Mona Simion's (2023) insights on disinformation, which highlight the critical role of audience context, I will suggest that the influence of pornography on promoting sexist perspectives is similarly dependent on the audience. Just as a message's interpretation can vary across individuals, so too can the effect of pornographic content. A regulatory system informed by an understanding of the audience's context can more accurately target the propagation of harmful sexism, thereby addressing the pertinent issues related to the consumption of pornography.

## 1. The Anti-Pornography Perspective

The cultural acceptance of pornography as a legitimate form of expression wasn't solely orchestrated by men. Intriguingly, a significant number of women and feminist writers believed, and some continue to assert, that by endorsing explicit content, society would finally recognize and cater to their physiological desires, marking

a milestone in their journey towards sexual liberation.[8] As Ariel Levy (2005) argues that their aspiration was not just to challenge the status quo but to integrate into it, to be "in the inner circle" or to align with the dominant male perspective. If they couldn't confront or change the prevailing norms, they sought to assimilate. This explicit portrayal of women in media, some argue, doesn't signify a setback for feminism. Instead, they view it as evidence of the fruition of feminist goals (Levy A. , 2005, p. 3).

However, the endorsement of this dominant masculine culture by certain women is a point of contention for radical feminists. Their unease isn't necessarily directed at these women, who they perceive as products moulded by a patriarchal system. Their primary concern is the broader implications of a society steeped in hyper-masculine norms, epitomized by the current state of pornography.

As previously discussed, the impact of pornography on women is multifaceted. To borrow MacKinnon's phrasing, women are doubly victimized by pornography. Initially, they face the direct influences of the industry, dominated by its primarily male stakeholders, from directors to actors and producers. Subsequently, they grapple with the perceptions and behaviours of its male consumers.[9] Given that the industry primarily caters to a male audience, it establishes a daunting benchmark for sexual dynamics. As consumer demand surges, the industry diversifies, often into niches that depict women in degrading roles. A significant portion of this content positions women as subservient, either deriving pleasure from their subjugation or portrayed as victims. Despite the varied portrayals, the underlying message remains consistent: women are portrayed as relishing their subordinate roles.[10]

Before we delve deeper into the discussion, its's essential to begin with a clear definition of pornography. According to Dworkin and Mackinnon (1988) pornography is "the graphic, sexually explicit subordination of women whether in pictures or in words" (ibid, p. 36).[11]

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[8] See (Millett, 1978); Willis (1992); (2012) and Avedon (1995) for related discussion on individual sexual expression.

[9] See MacKinnon (1979), (1984), (1989).

[10] For further reading on the social impact of pornography and its influence on attitudes and behaviors toward women, see for example the following works: Marshal et al. (2021) offer a comprehensive look at the correlation between pornography use and sexual coercion; Sullivan and McKee (2015) delve into the cultural dimension of pornography; and Cowburn and Pringle (2000) provide early insights into the interplay between masculinity and pornography consumption.

[11] It is pertinent to clarify that in this discussion the focus is on forms of pornography that subordinates women. While acknowledging the existence of diverse genres, including gay pornography or non-

The relationship between pornography and real-world acts like rape remains a nuanced and debated topic. While it's contested, as MacKinnon and others suggest, whether pornography directly fuels acts like rape, it's undeniable that it perpetuates misleading stereotypes about women, their desires, and their boundaries.

### 1.1.1 The Deceptive Narrative of Pornography

The global perspective on pornography is a complex tapestry, with countries showcasing a spectrum of acceptance and prohibition. The United States stands out in this context, having legally recognized pornography as an intrinsic component of freedom of speech, safeguarded by the First Amendment[12]. Given that the freedom of speech is central to much of the Anglo-Saxon discourse on the subject, will be a cornerstone of our exploration.[13]

The First Amendment, deeply influenced by Mill's liberty principle, categorizes pornography as a facet of free speech and expression.[14] Through a liberal lens, even if pornography is perceived as distasteful or offensive, it is undeniably a form of expression, and for some, an artistic endeavour.[15] This perspective argues for its protection, granting individuals the autonomy to produce or consume it in private. Critics, however, raise concerns about its potential societal harms. Yet, the empirical evidence required to substantiate these claims is often lacking. Establishing causality becomes exceptionally challenging when ethical considerations prevent the manipulation of the variables of interest. The available evidence[16] doesn't conclusively determine a direct causal relationship between pornography consumption and detrimental sexual attitudes or behaviours. Such determination would necessitate study conditions that are both unfeasible and unethical, such as mandating exposure to

subordinating content, the primary emphasis here centers on examining instances where women are subject to subordination within the context of pornography.

[12] See, e.g., (Strossen, 1996).

[13] Most of the academic discussion surrounding the intersection of pornography and free speech have been predominantly contributed by American scholars.

[14] A fundamental tenet of American legal jurisprudence is the principle of viewpoint neutrality. This principle embodies the philosophy that in a free society, the suitable reaction to dissenting speech is not to suppress it but to counter it. The idea is to promote more dialogue, not restrict it.

[15] For more on viewpoint neutrality see for example Maes (2013).

[16] For research on the effects of pornography, see e.g., (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016), (Baer, Kohut, & Fisher, 2015), (Willis & Bridges, 2022).

pornography to subsequently observe possible harmful behaviours. Without irrefutable proof, any legal efforts to ban or reconfigure the standing of pornography face significant challenges. The disdain of a section of feminists, while valid, doesn't provide a substantial legal basis for its prohibition.

This discourse naturally leads to a pivotal feminist concern: If restricting pornography is perceived as curtailing individual freedom, how do we address the compromised liberties of the myriad women negatively affected by it? Langton (1993) presents a compelling argument in this context. If limiting pornography is seen as infringing upon freedoms, especially the freedom of expression, then this freedom must be balanced against the corresponding rights of women. However, a discernible paradox arises when evaluating the societal contributions of pornography. Radical feminists posit that pornography, rather than being a harmless entertainment medium, perpetuates detrimental stereotypes, disseminating distorted perceptions about women, effectively maligning half the global population. This discourse prompts introspection about the prioritization of freedoms and who truly benefits from such a hierarchy.

Catharine MacKinnon, a stalwart in radical feminist ideology and an accomplished legal expert, has consistently challenged pornography, asserting that it goes beyond mere speech, manifesting as a tangible act. This act, she avers, diminishes women to dehumanized sexual entities, subjected to a spectrum of degradations. Rae Langton, resonating with MacKinnon's perspective, views pornography as a speech act. In her influential work, "Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts" (1993), Langton investigates the multifaceted nature of pornography, examining its symbolic representations and its tangible real-world ramifications. She argues that pornography not only symbolizes female subjugation but actively reinforces it, resulting in palpable disparities in women's day-to-day experiences (ibid).

A crucial distinction must be made between explicit depictions of female sexuality and violent, degrading pornography.[17] While the former may have historical or artistic value, the latter, especially in its glamorized avatar, poses grave societal

[17] The conception of pornography utilized herein aligns with the framework established by Mackinnon and A. Dworkin, as referenced on page 26 of this chapter. However, it is pertinent to clarify that the term 'pornography' within this context is specifically narrowed to denote materials that subordinate women, and it is not an umbrella term for all sexually explicit imagery or videos.

threats[18]. Modern pop culture, saturated with hypersexualized images of women, underscores this concern.[19]

The more covert damage inflicted by pornography is its propagation of erroneous beliefs about women It perpetuates stereotypes of women as passive, frequently portrayed as victims, with their primary worth tied to their sexual appeal. These skewed narratives, amplified in the digital era, permeate societal consciousness, intensifying gender prejudices. While pornography may not be the singular driver of gender bias, it undeniably amplifies it, relegating women to roles that diminish their agency and intellect[20].

Historically, societal hierarchies have been biased against those who deviated from the archetype of a privileged, heterosexual white male. Women have been consistently portrayed as inferior, both physically and intellectually. The pornographic industry thrives on, and further entrenches, these outdated beliefs. Dominant themes in mainstream pornography revolve around power dynamics, with women often on the receiving end. These narratives imply that women's sexual emancipation is confined to fulfilling male fantasies and enduring objectification.[21]

Such portrayals have significant epistemological repercussions. Women, overshadowed by these portrayals, find themselves pigeonholed into clichéd roles, their credibility constantly questioned. They are often valued not for their intellect or skills but through a lens of sexualized stereotypes. These skewed perceptions manifest in tangible ways, influencing women's professional and personal trajectories.

In sum, the interplay between pornography and mainstream culture[22] is inescapable. The pervasive hyper sexualization of women in media, albeit more socially acceptable than explicit adult content, is rooted in the same problematic narratives. A deeper exploration reveals that the impact of pornography transcends personal

[18] (Eaton, 2007) suggests focusing on inegalitarian pornography, which refers to sexually explicit representations that eroticize relations characterized by gender inequity. This category includes violent pornography but is not limited to it.
[19] More on this in the second chapter.
[20] See (Eaton, 2007); (MacKinnon & Dworkin, 1988); (Dworkin, 1981)
[21] For more on objectification see e.g., (Saul, 2006)
[22] Mainstream culture refers to shared customs, beliefs, and practices accepted by a society. It includes everyday habits, popular entertainment, and values that shape how people live and interact. It reflects what is considered normal or common, influencing social behaviors and providing a collective identity for a community. Mainstream culture evolves over time, adapting to changes in societal values and technological advancements. For more on the interplay between pornography and mainstream culture see e.g., (Kirkham, 2012; Boyle, 2011).

consumption, moulding societal perceptions and shaping overarching attitudes towards women.[23]

### 1.1.2 The Silencing Effect: Pornography and the Dynamics of Speech Acts

The debate surrounding pornography and its implications on society is a contentious one, with radical feminists and liberals often holding diverging views on the idea that pornography fosters false beliefs. These beliefs, rooted in the consumption of explicit content, present a direct epistemic challenge. Beyond the propagation of these misconceptions, another equally troubling consequence emerges: the silencing of women.

The concept of silencing, especially in the context of pornography, has been a focal point of numerous discussions. How does pornography, a medium of expression and fantasy, lead to the muting of a woman's voice? Langton (1993) explores the confluence of legal and philosophical discourse pertaining to pornography. The judicial system's classification of pornography as a variant of speech, coupled with Catharine MacKinnon’s postulation of pornography as an act, provides a backdrop for Langton's argument. She amalgamates these viewpoints to assert the characterization of pornography as a distinctive form of speech act, offering a nuanced understanding of its societal and legal dimensions. Adopting an Austinian framework, Langton explores the controversial feminist assertions that pornography both subordinates and silences women. She examines how pornography, as a speech act, can perpetuate the subordination of women by reinforcing sexist attitudes and contributing to the objectification and commodification of women's bodies. This perspective highlights the performative aspect of pornography, where it not only represents but also enacts gender inequality. Langton’s argument underscores the importance of recognizing the impact of pornography beyond its explicit content, focusing on the societal and gender dynamics it perpetuates. By viewing pornography as a speech act, Langton contributes to the broader conversation about the societal implications of pornography and the ways in which it influences and reflects gender relations and inequality (Langton, 1993).

[23] Although there isn’t definitive empirical data directly linking the consumption of pornography to violence against women, studies have indicated that pornography consumption can desensitize men, leading to a reduced empathy towards women and victims of rape, as well as fostering biases against women. For more discussion on this see e.g., (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016)

To bridge the gap between speech and action, Langton turns to J.L. Austin's (1962) seminal work 'How to Do Things with Words.'[24] Echoing Austin's concerns, Langton concurs with the observed inclination to focus on the content of a linguistic utterance and its impact on the audience, while neglecting the inherent action it constitutes. In alignment with Austin, Langton contends that uttering a statement is tantamount to performing a multifaceted action, underscoring the performative dimensions of language and its implications in the context of pornography as a speech act (ibid, 295).

To elucidate this concept, Langton employs an example from Austin. Imagine a scenario where two men are standing beside a woman. The first man instructs the second, saying "shoot her." In response, the second man, albeit shocked, raises a gun and shoots the woman. As a witness, you later recount the event. Your description of the first man saying "shoot her," referring to the act of shooting with a gun and indicating the nearby woman, captures the content of what was said, termed by Austin as the locutionary act. This act involves uttering a sentence with a specific meaning. However, your observation encompasses more than just this. You note that the first man's words "shoot her" not only shocked the second man but also persuaded him to shoot the woman. This observation highlights the effects of the uttered words, what Austin referred to as the perlocutionary act. Yet, stopping at this point omits a crucial aspect. The act of the first man *directing* the second to shoot the woman by saying "shoot her" is an action in itself, termed by Austin as the illocutionary act. This act is constituted by the utterance itself, capturing the action performed in saying the words. Other examples like warning, promising, and marrying fall under illocutionary acts. Austin's grievance lay in the frequent oversight of this dimension of speech, where the focus often shifts to locutionary and perlocutionary acts, neglecting the significant illocutionary aspect (ibid). It's crucial to emphasise that all speech inherently involves illocutions. As we speak, we are not just uttering words; we are performing an action with a specific intention. This illocutionary dimension is the bridge between a speaker's intent and the actual words spoken. This is how we use language to achieve various objectives, be it to inform, persuade, question, or command. Thus, every spoken sentence, phrase or

[24] For and excellent and very comprehensive introduction to these topics, see (Kemp, 2013)

word carries on illocutionary force, underscoring the action that the speaker is performing through speech.

Pornography, even when devoid of words, vividly portrays and perpetuates subordination. This characterization touches upon its locutionary and perlocutionary dimensions in Austin's terminology. However, what remains unaddressed is the elucidation of the actions embodied by pornographic expressions, or in other terms, the illocutionary force of pornography. This aspect delves into the inherent actions and implications that pornography carries within its depictions, beyond just the content and its effects, highlighting the significant acts constituted within the realm of pornography itself (ibid, p. 296).

Langton leverages Austin's work to shed light on MacKinnon's objectives, particularly the aim to dismantle the dichotomy between word and deed. Langton's focus is twofold: she examines the assertions that pornography both subordinates and silences women. Utilizing Austin's framework, Langton argues that the silencing of women in the context of pornography is not a metaphorical concept but a literal phenomenon.

Langton argues that the *assertion* that pornography subordinates women, regardless of its interpretation, establishes women's inferior civil status and in doing so, silences her (ibid). To see how this works consider a scenario where a 10 year old child is present at a gathering of adults. The child, amidst a discussion on a topic she is knowledgeable about, attempts to contribute to the conversation. However, the adults, perceiving the child as too young to offer any valuable input, ignore or dismiss the child’s attempts to speak. This act of disregarding the child’s contribution solely based on their age is an example of silencing. The child’s potential to add meaningfully to the discussion is ruled out not because of what she says, but because of the adult’s preconceived notion about a child’s ability to participate in adult conversations. As a result, the child is effectively silenced, her voice and perspective excluded from the dialogue. This example parallels the experiences of many women who find themselves silenced in discussions, not due to a lack of valuable input, but because of pervasive societal attitudes that undervalue women’s contributions.

The subordination Langton mentions, presents a conflict between the right to liberty of pornographers and the right to equality of women. Moreover, if pornography indeed silences women, it introduces an internal conflict within the realm of liberty, juxtaposing the right to speech of pornographers against that of women. This silencing

effect hinders women's ability to counteract subordinating speech with their own voices, further exacerbating the issue of inequality and subordination within the context of pornography (ibid, 297).

Ronald Dworkin (1981) building on Isaiah Berlin's (1958) conceptualization of liberty, offered another dimension to this discussion. Berlin identified two types of liberties: negative and positive. Negative liberty is the inherent right to be free from external interference, while positive liberty is the entitlement to act upon one's will. Dworkin suggests that the silencing of women by pornography negatively affects positive liberty. This interpretation implies that the act of silencing is an inability to express ideas (Dworkin 1981, as cited in Langton 1993, p. 298).

However, Langton challenges this perspective. She believes that Dworkin's interpretation misses the mark on what feminists advocate for. For Langton, the crux of the issue isn't that ideas are being silenced. Instead, it's that certain actions, especially in the realm of pornography, can act as silencing mechanisms. The real concern is the inability to act or convey intent through words (ibid).

In essence, the debate on pornography's role in shaping societal beliefs and its subsequent impact on silencing women is multifaceted. While pornography might be a medium of expression for some, it can also be a tool of suppression for others. The challenge lies in navigating this complex landscape, understanding the nuances of speech acts, and ensuring that every voice, especially those marginalized, is heard and acknowledged.

### 1.1.3 Credibility Deficit: Undermining Women's Epistemic Authority

Through the feminist lens, pornography's harms are multifaceted. Pornography, by leaning heavily on age-old stereotypes, crafts an environment where women are consistently depicted as not just socially, but also intellectually inferior. This portrayal is further exacerbated by the glamorization of the pornographic lifestyle, which has seeped into mainstream culture. The aspiration to emulate the appearance and allure of porn actresses isn't limited to a niche audience; it's widespread, spanning celebrities to everyday individuals. The term 'dumb blonde', though predating the digital age, has been amplified in the internet era, becoming a mainstream stereotype. This label derogatorily paints blonde women as superficial, narcissistic, and lacking depth.

Even with its negative undertones, the 'dumb blonde'[25] image is paradoxically sexualized. Some argue that this portrayal paints women in a light of endearing naiveté, their perceived 'stupidity' likened to childlike innocence. Their physical attributes, especially the iconic platinum blonde hair, are seen as symbols of youthful allure. This image, despite its problematic nature, is coveted, with desirability being a prized attribute for both genders. The mainstreaming of erotic content and pornographic media, with figures like Hugh Hefner and Paris Hilton at the forefront, further entrenched these perceptions.

The early 2000s, with its unabashed celebration of sexuality, further amplified these stereotypes (Levy A. , 2005). Icons like Jenna Jameson became mainstream, not just within the adult industry but in popular culture. However, this overt sexualization further deepened the credibility chasm women faced. The narrative, fuelled by both pornography and pop culture, presented a binary choice for women be attractive and desirable but inevitably perceived as unintelligent, or risk having one's femininity questioned. This dichotomy resulted in women, who had historically fought for a voice, being either marginalized or stripped of credibility. In the words of Gail Dines (2010) women must choose between fuckability and invisibility (ibid, p. 105).

The film *Legally Blonde* (Luketic, 2001) serves as a poignant illustration. Elle, the protagonist, embodies the 'dumb blonde' stereotype. Yet, her journey from being underestimated to proving her mettle in the hallowed halls of Harvard Law School underscores the pervasive biases women grapple with. The film, while comedic, delves deep into societal perceptions and the challenges faced by women who don't conform to conventional moulds.

Such portrayals, whether in film or other media, underscore the insidious impact of pornography on societal perceptions. It perpetuates the notion that women are primarily valued for their physical attributes, with their intellect and capabilities relegated to the background. Women, when portrayed in this infantilized manner, are often treated paternalistically by their male counterparts. Their statements, if even acknowledged, are frequently dismissed, their credibility constantly under scrutiny. This credibility deficit is not just an abstract concept; it has tangible repercussions in the real

[25] See (Weir & Fine-Davis, 1989) for a discussion on stereotyping based on physical appearance.

world. If society internalizes the belief that women are inherently inferior, it invariably extends to the epistemic realm, leading to a profound epistemic injustice.

Now, to delve deeper into the concept of credibility assessments, we will turn our attention to Jennifer Lackey's (2017) work on the subject. Lackey's Theory provides a nuanced understanding of how credibility "[can] be a finite epistemic good that can wrong knowers through both deficits and excesses" (ibid, p. 2).

In Jennifer Lackey's essay (2017) "Credibility and the Distribution of Epistemic Goods", she delves into the concept of credibility and how it ties to testimonial injustice. Every day, we are inundated with a plethora of information, from mundane weather updates to critical revelations like admissions of sexual harassment. In many of these instances, our belief hinges on the testimonies of others and our trust in them is deeply rooted in their perceived credibility. Given this, it's essential to have a framework for evaluating credibility. In *Epistemic Injustice and the Ethics of Knowing*, Miranda Fricker suggests that our credibility evaluations are steered by an evidentialist norm. This principle implies that our beliefs about someone's credibility should align with the evidence of their honesty. To clarify, consider Fricker's definition.

*Evidentialist Norm (of Credibility)* [EN]: A hearer, H, should match the credibility judgement of a speaker, S, to the evidence that S is offering the truth (Fricker, 2007, as cited in Langton, 2017, p. 146).

Fricker posits that the evidential norm is straightforward: a listener should align the credibility they grant to a speaker with evidence of the speaker's truthfulness. Fricker contends that the evidential norm is clear-cut, suggesting that listeners should align the credibility they give to a speaker with the evidence of the speaker's honesty. However, Lackey challenges this perspective. In her article, she delves deeper into the debate, pinpointing and elaborating on two forms of testimonial injustice: *distributive* and *normative*. Lackey's primary objectives are to: (i) counter Fricker's assertion, emphasizing that merely adhering to the Evidentialist Norm of Credibility doesn't guarantee moral or epistemic righteousness, (ii) introduce and expand on two distinct injustices that underscore the limitations of the Evidentialist Norm, and (iii) put forth and champion an alternative, the Wide Norm of Credibility (ibid).

To grasp why Lackey finds fault in Fricker's stance, let's examine Fricker's definition of testimonial injustice "[a] speaker sustains …testimonial injustice if and

only if she receives a credibility deficit owing to identity prejudice in the hearer; so the central case of testimonial injustice is identity-prejudicial credibility deficit" (Fricker, 2007, as cited by Lackey, 2017, p. 147). In simpler terms, a speaker is undermined in her role as an informant and faces a credibility gap when the trust she's given by her conversational partner is less than the evidence she presents, especially when the listener holds a bias against the speaker's identity. This prejudice is typically resistant to evidence. It's perceived as though the speaker is being categorized by the listener based on social, economic, racial, or religious affiliations. Both Lackey and Fricker argue that such biases are often impervious to evidence.

Fricker asserts that when a speaker, perhaps due to racial affiliations, is given limited credibility by the listener, she is wronged in her role as an informant, thus experiencing testimonial injustice. By adhering to the Evidentialist Norm, the listener is deemed morally and epistemically blameless, at least according to Fricker. However, Lackey challenges this by scrutinizing two interpretations of the Evidentialist Norm: the categorical and the conditional (ibid, p. 147).

"Categorical EN: for every speaker, S, and hearer, H, H should match the credibility judgement of S to the evidence that S is offering the truth" (ibid).

From the categorical interpretation of the EN, it's inferred that a listener is not just expected to align their credibility judgements of speakers with the present evidence, but also to constantly form such judgements. This means that individuals would be continually evaluating the credibility of others, even when there's no moral or epistemic reason to do so. For instance, if I'm on my morning bus ride and happen to overhear a conversation, I'm under no moral or epistemic duty to gauge the credibility of the speaker. Lackey believes this expectation is excessive and unwarranted. To further clarify, consider Lackey's example: Imagine a surgeon engrossed in a complex procedure, focus on removing a patient's liver tumour. Simultaneously, the operating room nurses chat about their weekend plans and the weather. In this context, the surgeon has no moral or epistemic responsibility to question the nurses' credibility, as her concentration is on a task of higher epistemic and moral significance. Such instances highlight the undue demands of the Categorical interpretation of the EN (ibid).

Moving on, Lackey introduces another interpretation, the Conditional reading of the EN, which states: "For every speaker, S, and listener, H, if H evaluates S's

credibility, then H should align with the evidence S presents as truth." However, this interpretation has its shortcomings, primarily because it's overly lenient. The conditional approach suggests that a listener only need to consider the evidence that the speaker presents as truth only if they've already formed an opinion about a speaker's credibility, even when morally and epistemically required to do so (ibid).

To elucidate, Lackey provides an example: Imagine a team of scientists, both male and female, with equal qualifications and experience, collaborating on a project. Given their shared objective, it's essential for each member to form opinions about the credibility of their peers. Yet, if the male scientists harbour sexist views and choose not to form any credibility beliefs about their female counterparts, they miss out on valuable insights. This not only hampers the research but also undermines the female scientist's epistemic roles. Since the Conditional EN only mandates matching credibility beliefs to evidence when such beliefs exist, it's easily met in this case. The male scientists, having formed no beliefs about their female colleague's trustworthiness, don't need to align any beliefs with evidence. Thus, they adhere to the Conditional EN, seemingly without fault, both morally and epistemically. This scenario underscores a different kind of epistemic injustice. The problem isn't that female scientists received insufficient credibility, leading to a credibility deficit. Instead, their male peers entirely bypassed the process of credibility assessment, effectively side-lining the female scientists from the knowledge-sharing domain. In Lackey's words "The problem here is not that they afforded credibility deficits, even massive ones, but that they are regarded as lying outside the realm of knowers altogether" (ibid, p. 148). After considering all these factors, Lackey argues that relying solely on the Conditional reading of the EN is insufficient (ibid).

Let's delve deeper into Lackey's critique of a purely conditional interpretation of the EN, using the scientist scenario as a backdrop. Imagine a collaborative research endeavour involving both female and male scientists. In this iteration, the male scientists do acknowledge the credibility of their female counterparts based on the evidence of their equal training and experience. However, despite this acknowledgment, these male scientists, influenced by their sexist beliefs, still consider themselves superior in credibility. This undue elevation of their own credibility is what Lackey terms as 'credibility excess'. Several factors might contribute to this skewed perception. For instance, the male scientists might grudgingly accept the expertise of their female

colleagues but harbour resentment that women could potentially outshine them. Alternatively, deep-seated sexist beliefs might automatically position them as superior, regardless of evidence to the contrary. In both situations, while the Conditional EN is technically met, it doesn't absolve the male scientists of moral and epistemic shortcomings (ibid, p. 149).

Revisiting Fricker's definition of testimonial injustice, she posits that such injustice arises when a speaker is undervalued in their role as a knower, receiving less credibility than they deserve. However, the scenarios presented highlight that testimonial injustice isn't solely about credibility deficit. In the case of the scientists, the female participants were given their due credibility. The injustice arose when the male scientists unjustly elevated their own credibility. In essence, credibility excess can be as detrimental as credibility deficit.

The academic discourse has been rife with discussions on credibility deficit, primarily because of our collective awareness of biases and prejudices. Many harbour "unconscious attitudes" towards marginalized groups, whether it's the unfounded fear associating Muslims with terrorism, the stereotype that women aren't as adept at abstract thinking as men, or the baseless notion that people of colour are prone to theft. These examples underscore the origins of credibility deficit, where individuals are undervalued simply because they belong to a marginalized group (ibid, p.150).

Regarding hearer-excess, a relevant concept from cognitive psychology can shed light on this phenomenon: the Dunning-Kruger effect, introduced by researchers David Dunning and Justin Kruger (2000). This effect describes a cognitive bias where individuals, particularly those lacking in skill, possess an inflated sense of their own abilities, leading to an illusion of superiority. Conversely, highly competent individuals might underestimate their abilities, assuming that tasks that are easy for them are as equally easy for others. For context of our discussion on hearer-excess, we'll centre on the aspect of Dunning-Kruger effect where individuals, in this instance the hearers, are ensnared by this illusion of superiority (Lackey, 2018, p. 151).

Let's revisit Fricker's perspective, particularly her stance on the issue of credibility excess. Fricker acknowledges that while speakers can experience credibility excess, this is not typically associated with hearers. While she didn't delve into this topic or assign it significant weight, Fricker did acknowledge that prolonged instances of credibility excess could substantially increase the risk of testimonial injustice. However,

she didn't view immediate harm arising from credibility excess in hearers. Instead, she saw it as a cumulative issue, i.e., something that builds up over time. She suggests that when someone consistently gives themselves more credibility than deserved, it can lead to epistemic arrogance. In Fricker's words "...credibility deficit can constitute… a wrong [as a knower], but while credibility excess may (unusually) be disadvantageous in various ways, it does not undermine, insult, or otherwise withhold a proper respect for the speaker *qua* subject of knowledge; so in itself it does her no epistemic injustice, and a *forteriori* no testimonial injustice" (Fricker 2007, as cited in Lackey 2018, p. 152).

Lackey, on the other hand, has a contrasting perspective. She believes that not only credibility deficit can lead to immediate testimonial injustice. As demonstrated in the scientist example, the phenomenon of hearer-excess can also inflict immediate harm. Lackey argues that in such a scenario, the male scientists could wrong their female counterparts in two distinct ways, both rooted in hearer-excess testimonial injustice and marked by a significant credibility imbalance. By attributing excessive credibility to themselves, the male scientists not only deprive their female colleagues of their rightful epistemic standing within the community but also potentially disregard their testimony, even if they've accorded them an appropriate level of credibility (ibid).

Having talked about hearer-excess and the damages it can cause, Lackey goes on further to discuss the broader phenomenon in which the hearer-excess testimonial injustice is in place, namely *distributive testimonial injustice*. Another problem that the evidentialist norms are facing is that they focus only "on our judgement of *a single speaker*, but leave our evaluations not only of ourselves, *but also of the other member of the conversational context or community in question*" (ibid, p. 154). To illustrate this better, consider a teacher and a student. Even if the teacher appropriately judges her student based on the available evidence and believe accordingly, if she illegitimately regards everyone else as better than that student, the student is still a victim of injustice That said, there is no big difference between receiving the right amount of credibility or too little credibility, if everyone else receives credibility excess, then the person in question is still harmed in her capacity as a knower. When everyone else receives a credibility excess, if a person is given the correct amount of credibility, they are still at a disadvantage because Lackey views credibility as a limited resource. If one student is evaluated accurately according to her performance, but all other students are given higher grades than their work merits, the accurately graded student is disadvantaged.

This, Lackey argues, will beget further wrongs. If the teacher in question regards everyone else more reliable than the student mentioned, then the student will miss on many opportunities and will be disfavoured. To distinguish this form on injustice from the others mentioned before, Lackey calls this *peer-excess testimonial injustice* (ibid, p.154).

As we venture deeper, we'll uncover the pervasive nature of testimonial injustices. Specifically, we'll dissect another nuanced form of distributive testimonial injustice that differs from hearer-excess or peer-excess injustice, namely *expert excess* testimonial injustice (ibid, p. 155).

The injustice of expert-excess emerges when an individual is unduly granted credibility based purely on their expertise. To shed light on this, Lackey draws from Deborah Tuerkheimer's (2014) "Flawed Convictions: Shaken Baby Syndrome and the Inertia of Injustice" (as cited in Lackey 2007, p. 155). In the realm of Shaken Baby Syndrome (SBS) cases, the weight of the prosecution often rested squarely on scientific assertions. In practical terms, this meant leaning heavily on the testimonies of medical professionals. These experts would assert that, even in the absence of other abuse indicators, the simultaneous presence of three specific neurological symptoms was irrefutable evidence of shaking. This trio of symptoms, termed "the triad," was deemed to be solely indicative of shaking. The science was so unequivocal that it could even single out the most recent caregiver with the alert baby as the culprit, based on the premise that the infant would have lost consciousness immediately after the incident. What's truly staggering is that the testimony of these medical experts, standing alone, could seal the fate of the accused. This approach to SBS solidified its position as a standardized prosecution framework, grouping together cases with strikingly similar characteristics.

The case of [Audrey] Edmunds perfectly exemplifies this paradigm. Her trial unfolded in 1996, during a time when SBS-related charges were on the rise. Throughout the ordeal, Edmunds, a caregiver and a mother to young children, staunchly proclaimed her innocence. No one claimed to have witnessed her shaking the infant, and there were no clear signs of trauma. Yet, based solely on expert testimony about the triad, Edmunds was convicted of reckless homicide. This trio of symptoms sealed her fate, leading to an eighteen-year prison sentence.

However, by 2001, the prevailing understanding of SBS was upended. Recent research suggested that the same symptoms could arise from various infections or even from prior injuries that had no connection to any mishandling by the caregiver. Despite this compelling new evidence challenging earlier scientific beliefs, the justice system lagged in adapting to these revelations. Revisiting the trial scenario, it becomes evident that regardless of a defendant's vigorous defence, the corroborative testimonies of witnesses, or their track record as a trustworthy caregiver, the expert's testimony typically holds sway with the jury. This undue weight given to the expert's opinion, even when it disregards pertinent evidence, showcases an epistemic resilience of the highest order.

While Lackey's primary focus has been on scientists, it's essential to recognize that many other professionals are often granted undue credibility simply because of their expert status. This list includes religious leaders, politicians, and other figures of authority. We'll delve deeper into this subject in the fourth chapter, where we'll explore the realm of propaganda.

Revisiting Fricker's assertion, she believes that credibility excess in hearers doesn't immediately result in wrongdoing; instead, it accumulates over time. For instance, it happens when an individual consistently receives undue credibility. While Fricker contends that only a credibility deficit can harm a speaker in their role as a knower, we've seen that excessive credibility, when self-assigned by the hearer, can also inflict significant harm on the speaker.

Let's now explore situations where the speaker is granted undue credibility yet still experiences testimonial injustice. Lackey terms this as "*content-specific credibility excess*" (ibid, p. 152). Stereotyping women as naturally adept in the kitchen or caregiving, assuming black individuals have extensive knowledge about drugs, or presuming Muslims have insights into potential terrorist activities are all instances of granting undue credibility based on biases. Such credibility excess doesn't benefit the individuals in these groups; instead, it marginalizes and offends them, undermining their epistemic standing. For example, presuming a black individual would be more knowledgeable about illicit substances than Einstein's theory of relativity, due to ingrained prejudices, is detrimental. In such cases, even though the individual is technically receiving credibility excess, it's still an act of epistemic injustice (ibid).

Thus far, our exploration has primarily centred on the various means through which a hearer can undermine a speaker's epistemic standing. In summary, a speaker's capacity as a knower can be compromised when:

i. The hearer undervalues the speaker, resulting in a credibility deficit.

ii. The hearer overvalues their own credibility, leading to hearer excess.

iii. The hearer overestimates the speaker's credibility based on prejudiced views, termed as content-specific credibility excess.

iv. The hearer entirely excludes the speaker from the realm of knowledge.

From this analysis, it's evident that there are numerous avenues through which a speaker can experience both epistemic and moral injustices.

To address these challenges, Lackey introduces her own perspective termed the *Wide Norm of Credibility*. This approach not only sidesteps the pitfalls of Fricker's more "limited" perspective but also emphasizes that our evaluations of credibility should be rational. In other words, they should encompass other participants within the pertinent conversational context and community (ibid, p. 163).

The discussion of credibility, as explored through Lackey's and Fricker's perspectives on testimonial injustice, can be seamlessly connected to the debate on pornography. The pornography debate often revolves around issues of representation, power dynamics, and the credibility of those who participate in or critique the industry. Here's how the concepts we've discussed can be related:

Credibility Deficit: Just as speakers can be afforded too little credibility in testimonial exchanges, individuals (often women) who work in or have experience with the pornography industry might find their testimonies and experiences dismissed or devalued. Their accounts might be seen as less credible due to societal biases against their profession.

Hearer-Excess: In the context of the pornography debate, certain voices, often those with more conservative or traditional views, might be given undue weight or credibility, overshadowing the lived experiences of those directly involved in the industry.

Content-Specific Credibility Excess: Negative stereotypes associated with the pornography industry can lead to unjustified assumptions. For instance, assuming that

all performers are victims or that they lack agency can be a form of content-specific credibility excess. While some individuals may have negative experiences, it's an injustice to assume that everyone's experience in the industry is the same.

Exclusion from the Knowledge Realm: Just as some speakers might be excluded from being seen as "knowers" in testimonial exchanges, those involved in the pornography industry might be excluded from discussions about the very industry they're a part of. Their insights and experiences might be dismissed outright, excluding them from the realm of credible voices in the debate.

Wide Norm of Credibility: Applying Lackey's concept to the pornography debate suggests that any discussion or policymaking related to pornography should consider a wide range of voices, especially those directly affected by the industry. This includes performers, producers, consumers, and critics. By ensuring that credibility assessments are relational and encompass all members of the community, a more holistic and just understanding of the issues can be achieved.

In essence, the concepts of testimonial injustice and credibility can shed light on the power dynamics at play in the pornography debate. They highlight the importance of ensuring that all voices are heard and given appropriate weight, free from biases and preconceived notions.

### *1.2 The Pornography Debate: A Liberal Perspective*

The discourse surrounding pornography is multifaceted, with radical feminists and traditional feminists[26] highlighting the potential harms stemming from its consumption. However, an alternative perspective exists, emphasizing the potential pitfalls of suppressing such content. This viewpoint is rooted in the apprehension of a slippery slope that might erode the foundational principles of freedom of speech.

Imagine a scenario where the entire sex industry is abolished, deemed detrimental by governing authorities. While this might appear as a triumph for those

[26] I borrow the term “traditional feminist” from Carol Avedon. She contends that while pornography can indeed be empowering for some women, certain genres, or types of it can have detrimental effects.

advocating against sex trafficking or forced prostitution[27], it neglects the segment of workers who genuinely find fulfilment in their profession. Beyond these workers, there's a substantial demographic of women who consume pornography as an exercise of their personal liberty. Restricting this industry could inadvertently suppress their freedom of expression and choice, leading to a situation where one form of freedom is sacrificed at the altar of another.

It's imperative to distinguish between liberals championing freedom of speech and activists advocating for the rights of pornography. While they might converge on the same side of this debate, their motivations diverge. Liberals, exemplified by figures like R. Dworkin, perceive pornography as a "pseudo-harm." While it might be distasteful or even offensive to some, it doesn't pose a tangible societal threat. The discomfort or offense it induces isn't justification enough for its prohibition. Conversely, activists, often identified as sex-positive feminists, view pornography as an essential form of sexual expression that warrants protection.

The sexual revolution of the 1980s marked a pivotal moment for these feminists. They ardently championed gender equality, asserting that sexual enjoyment was an integral component of this equality. This era witnessed a surge of women entering the pornography industry, not merely as performers but also as influential directors. Trailblazers like Candida Royale fervently advocated for women's right to sexual pleasure and the freedom to consume adult content without judgment.

Historically, sex was stigmatized, frequently labelled as obscene, deviant, or sinful. Men were the predominant consumers, often in clandestine settings, while their wives, deemed the "respectable women," engaged in sex primarily for procreation. Any indication of pleasure was frowned upon. Sex-positive feminists sought to reclaim and assert control over their bodies and desires, viewing freedom as the conduit to achieve this empowerment.

However, the inclusion of women in decision-making roles within the pornography industry didn't necessarily revolutionize its content. While some women, like Hugh Hefner's daughter, Christie Hefner, claimed to infuse a 'feminist touch' to their

[27] This thesis is specifically cantered on the subject of pornography, as it is more readily accessible and common in society than other facets of the sex industry such as prostitution. Delving into the complexities of prostitution, which itself encompasses various forms including services for disabled individuals, falls outside the parameters of this study. For an insightful exploration of prostitution services for disabled individuals, see Earp (2015).

productions, the core content and themes remained largely unaltered.[28] The industry burgeoned, but it didn't necessarily evolve to become more inclusive or respectful of diverse perspectives.

From an epistemological standpoint, the tangible benefits of this shift remain a topic of debate. While women within the industry might now command more respect and have a more significant say, the broader societal ramifications of pornography consumption remain largely unchanged. The content, irrespective of its director or producer, can still perpetuate harmful stereotypes and behaviours. Even in scenarios where no direct harm occurs during production, such as in Hentai, the content can still mould and influence perceptions and behaviours towards women in real-life contexts.

### 1.2.1 Female Empowerment and the Epistemic Risk of Regulating Pornography

The feminist journey, with its myriad battles for autonomy, rights, and recognition, has always been punctuated by the tension between personal freedom and societal expectations. One of the most contentious arenas in this journey is the debate surrounding pornography. While many feminists decry the objectification and potential harm inherent in pornography, others see it as a medium for sexual expression and empowerment. The danger of outright banning pornography, however, lies not just in curtailing freedom of expression but in the looming shadow of epistemic paternalism.

Epistemic paternalism refers to the act of intervening in someone's belief-forming processes for their perceived good, often without their consent. In the context of the pornography debate, this paternalism can manifest as telling women how they should dress, behave, or express their sexuality. The underlying assumption is that an external authority, be it societal or governmental, knows better than the individual about what's good for them.[29]

Banning pornography based on its potential harms might seem like a protective measure. However, it risks sliding into a broader narrative where women's choices, especially regarding their bodies and sexuality, are regulated by external entities. This is not to say that all pornography is empowering or devoid of problematic elements.

[28] For more on Christie Hefner's point of view see Bonanos, C. (2017). Remembering when Christie Hefner took over Playboy. *The Cut*. https://www.thecut.com/2017/10/remembering-when-christie-hefner-took-over-playboy.html

[29] For more on Epistemic Paternalism see e.g., (Bullock, 2016)

Still, the decision to engage with or produce such content should be an individual's choice, free from the overarching hand of epistemic paternalism.

Prominent figures in the entertainment industry, like Emily Ratajkowski, exemplify this tension. While Ratajkowski's bold expressions of her sexuality might be seen by some as empowering, her participation in controversial projects like "Blurred Lines"[30] raises questions about the fine line between empowerment and objectification. Yet, regardless of one's stance on such expressions, the danger lies in allowing epistemic paternalism to dictate the terms of the debate.

If society or the state were to ban pornography, what's to stop them from further regulating women's choices in other areas, such as their attire or behaviour? The risk is that, under the guise of protection, women might find themselves once again constrained by a set of standards and expectations not of their own making.

In conclusion, the debate surrounding pornography is complex and multi-faceted. While there are valid concerns about its potential harms, the solution should not be an outright ban driven by epistemic paternalism. Instead, the focus should be on fostering a society where women can make informed choices about their bodies and sexuality without external entities dictating the terms.

### 1.2.2 Limitations on Freedom

From our discussions, it's evident that the primary justification for maintaining the legality and accessibility of pornography is to sidestep the potential pitfalls of the slippery slope argument. The essence is to prioritize some form of liberty over a complete absence of it. However, the liberty of one group shouldn't overshadow or infringe upon the rights of another. While the epistemic benefits and empowerment derived from women's participation in pornography might be challenging to discern, granting them the autonomy to make choices is crucial to preserving their freedoms. Yet, it's essential to weigh this against the potential harm that real-world women might experience because of pornography. The damage to everyday women resulting from pornographic portrayals could, in fact, outweigh the potential infringement on the liberties of those involved in its production and consumption.

[30] (Thicke, Williams, Harris Jr, & Gaye). The song's lyrics were widely criticized by both music critics and the general public for seemingly promoting rape culture.

To better understand and contextualise the debate surrounding freedom of speech, it's beneficial to delve into one of its most frequently referenced defences: John Stuart Mill's (1859) seminal work, "On Liberty".

Mill posits that governmental intervention is only justifiable when an individual's actions cause harm to others. In all other instances, society should embrace and respect diversity (Van Mill, 2017).

The question then arises: when is it appropriate for the government to curtail individual freedoms through the implementation and enforcement of laws? Indeed, the concept of free speech is not absolute. Every society imposes certain boundaries on the expression of speech, balancing it against other competing values. Thus, we must determine the weight we assign to speech relative to other significant principles like privacy, security, democratic equality, and, crucially, the prevention of harm.

Speech doesn't inherently hold supremacy over other values. So, how unrestricted should our freedom of speech be? Mill provides a compelling argument in favour of free speech, grounded in what he terms the "harm principle (ibid).

Mill elaborates that within a political community, certain guidelines governing behaviour are essential. The sole restriction he imposes on free expression is encapsulated in the harm principle (ibid).

Essentially, if your actions inflict harm upon another individual, the government possesses the authority to prevent you from continuing and to penalize you if you persist. However, this principle is invoked only when another individual is adversely affected. If the sole person at risk is oneself, then the legal system should remain indifferent. Take alcohol consumption as an example. If an individual chooses to excessively drink, that's their prerogative, as they have full sovereignty over their own body. However, the moment they decide to drive under the influence, jeopardizing others' safety, legal consequences ensue. This aligns with the well-known adage: the extent of your liberty to swing your arm stops just before it hits another's face.

The crucial inquiry we must address is: which forms of speech, if any, lead to harm? By answering this, we can delineate justifiable boundaries for free expression.

Mill illustrates this with the corn dealer scenario. He posits that it's permissible to assert in writing that corn dealers are responsible for the starvation of the poor. However, voicing such an opinion in front of an agitated crowd assembled outside a corn dealer's residence is not. The distinction lies in the immediate threat the latter

scenario poses, potentially jeopardizing the rights and even the life of the corn dealer (ibid)

The challenge here is that the corn dealer might face significant financial distress if he's publicly accused in print of causing starvation among the poor. Mill, therefore, differentiates between acceptable and unacceptable harm. He concludes that speech can only be restricted when it leads to a direct and evident infringement of rights (ibid).

Another challenging case to consider is hate speech. Many liberal democracies impose restrictions on hate speech, but there is ongoing debate about whether these restrictions can be justified within Mill's harm principal framework. To illustrate this issue, let's examine an example involving the Public Order Act 1986 in the UK., which is more restrictive than the harm principle, "[a] person is guilty of an offence if he…. displays any writing, sign or other visible representation which is threatening, abusive or insulting, within the hearing or sight of a person likely to be caused harassment, alarm, or distress" (ibid).

Let us now look at another similar difficult case concerning the evangelist Harry Hammond who was prosecuted for the following statements: "Jesus gives peace, Jesus is alive, stop immorality, stop homosexuality, stop lesbianism, Jesus is Lord". For his sins he was fined 300 pounds and made to pay 395 pounds in costs. (ibid)

Harry Taylor, a militant atheist, and philosophy tutor found himself in a similar situation after he left anti-religious cartoons in the prayer-room of Liverpool's John Lennon Airport. The airport chaplain was "insulted, offended, and alarmed" by the cartoons and called the police. Taylor was prosecuted and received a six-month suspended sentence. (ibid)

In contrast with the British legislation, The United States fits most closely with Mill's principle. An example would be the 2017 Nazi march through a Jewish community in Skokie, Illinois. Such a parade would not be allowed in many other liberal democracies. Many people, particularly those residing in Skokie, were outraged, and offended by the march, but were they harmed? (ibid)

The pressing question revolves around the criteria for defining harm. Depending on our interpretation of harm, the harm principle can be seen as either too permissive or too restrictive. While harm to others is deemed a necessary condition for restricting liberties, it alone is not sufficient. The essence of the harm principle lies in

the underlying motivation for enacting a law. Consequently, there exist subtle ways to circumvent it. Consider a law mandate that every citizen engage in 30 minutes of daily jogging. If the justification behind this law is to enhance people's health, it may conflict with the harm principle. According to this principle, individual's cardio fitness is their personal concern, and if they opt not to exercise, it should be their prerogative.

However, if the law is enacted with the intention of reducing the burden on public healthcare, thereby reallocating resources for the greater good of society, then the harm principle would deem it acceptable. Hence, there exist strategies to navigate around it. Consider the distinctions between hard paternalism and soft paternalism. In the case of hard paternalism, the government might prohibit smoking due to the harm it inflicts on both individuals and those in proximity. Soft paternalism, conversely, allows individuals the option of engaging in potentially harmful activities but necessitates that they be fully informed of the consequences. (ibid)

While it might appear inconsistent with the harm principle for the government to ban smoking outright, it aligns with the principle if the government opts for alternatives such as affixing warning labels on cigarette packs, imposing taxes, designating specific areas for smoking, and generally discouraging the habit. An instance of this approach can be observed in the sale and consumption of marijuana in Belgium, where one is legally allowed to use marijuana but prohibited from selling it. The definition of harm profoundly shapes the scope of individual liberties. One plausible definition of harm is "causing someone to be worse off than they would have been otherwise" (ibid).

Assisted suicide for terminally ill patients is legally permitted in some countries but remains illegal in many others. However, even in countries where it is a criminal offense, there are instances of individuals, often without medical expertise, assisting someone in ending their life. One particularly well-publicized case involved an American priest[31] who aided an Irish woman in her wish to die. In this situation, it becomes challenging to argue that the terminally ill woman, who was experiencing immense pain due to her condition, was left in a "worse off" state after the priest's intervention.

[31] Ronson, J. (2008, May 12). *'I make it look like they died in their sleep'.* Retrieved from The Guardian

Let's revisit the topic of pornography and examine its relevance to Mill's principle. We've observed that the idea of liberty and the subsequent freedom of speech necessitate that everyone should have the opportunity to experience them. The only exception is when a person's liberty adversely affects another individual.

We have also observed that establishing a precise definition of harm can be a challenging endeavour. Nevertheless, we can choose to adopt the definition mentioned earlier and contend that consumerism and the pornography culture ultimately have a detrimental impact on women. This harm manifests in multiple ways, including the dissemination of false beliefs about the essence of womanhood, the suppression of their voices stemming from the propagation of these false beliefs, and the diminished credibility assigned to them for these various reasons.

Advocates for pornography might assert that pornography offers numerous advantages beyond merely upholding freedom of speech, with female empowerment being one such benefit. The key inquiry here is whether these advantages surpass the associated harm.

There are minimal, if any, discernible benefits stemming from the Adult Industry, especially in terms of clear epistemic advantages. Instead, there exists a wide array of harms that women experience, either directly or indirectly, due to the industry. While there are adult films that adhere to a more sustainable and equitable approach, they may not align with Mackinnon's definition of pornography. In these films, actors aren't subjected to subordination, physical coercion, or degrading practices, and the sexual interactions portrayed are based on equality. It appears that such films do not contribute to significant epistemic harm. However, it's essential to note that this niche market remains relatively small, resulting in limited production of such content.

Conversely, what becomes evident is that pornography isn't particularly unique; it ultimately represents another facet of freedom of speech or a speech Act. Any form of art perceived as an expression of freedom of speech is prone to generate similar issues. An exploration of various art forms throughout history reveals comparable concerns. There's no need to delve into an analysis of works like those of the Marquis de Sade[32] to argue that instances of art, considered virtuoso in nature, can indeed be offensive and pose risks to women. Numerous other widely embraced novels, paintings,

[32] See e.g., (Corey, 1966), (Driver, 2020), and (Bonomi, Nichols, Carotta, Kiuchi, & Perry, 2015)

and songs have celebrated macho culture and sexualized gender inequalities to an extent akin to pornography. A case in point is the immensely popular novel “Fifty Shades of Grey”, particularly among women. This erotic narrative narrates the tale of a young woman seduced by a wealthy sadomasochist billionaire, who offers her his heart and an apartment in exchange for engaging in sadistic sexual activities with him. This arrangement is formalized through a kiss and a legally binding contract.

### 1.2.3 Pornography and Free Speech: A Nuanced Exploration

Nadine Strossen (1996) distinguishes between "obscenity," which is constitutionally unprotected, and "pornography" (ibid, p. 450). The latter, especially when viewed through a feminist lens, is seen by some as a form of hate speech against women. This distinction underscores a pivotal challenge: defining what constitutes harmful or hateful content. Cass R. Sunstein (1986) in his exploration of pornography and the First Amendment, further emphasises this challenge. He proposes a definition of pornography that focuses on materials that sexualize violence against women, highlighting the societal implications of content that portrays women as subordinate or deserving of violence (Sunstein, 1986, p. 592).

The protection of even the most controversial forms of speech, including hate speech and pornography, has been a hallmark of traditional U.S. free speech principles (Strossen, 1996). This protection is rooted in the belief in viewpoint neutrality, a principle that mandates the government cannot limit speech based on its content or point of view (ibid, p. 454). However, as Lawrence Friedman's (1994) exploration of ‘speech acts’ suggests, the real challenge lies in distinguishing between pure expression and actions that might have tangible, harmful consequences. This distinction becomes even more complex in the digital age.

The rise of online platforms has added a new layer to the free speech debate. Strossen in her discourse on the paradox of free speech in the digital realm, points out that while these platforms are private entities, their influence over public discourse is undeniable. Their content moderation decisions, driven by policies that might suppress content protected under the U.S. Constitution, can significantly impact freedom of speech. This digital dimension introduces a new set of challenges, as platforms grapple with the responsibility of shaping global communication while adhering to free speech

principles. In Strossen's words "[c]ensoring hate speech and pornography would not effectively advance equality for women or other disempowered groups, but to the contrary, could well undermine their equality" (Strossen, 1996, p. 453).

Strossen contends that the suppression of pornography not only conflicts with foundational tenets of free speech but also runs the risk of unintended adverse consequences. She details the specific reasons why curbing pornography may not further, and could potentially impede, the vital objectives of diminishing discrimination and violence directed at women. According to Strossen, censoring pornography might unintentionally silence valuable works for women and feminists. This censorship could favour marginalized groups like feminists and lesbians and could lead to several adverse outcomes: promoting harmful stereotypes about women, underscoring women's victimhood, distracting from genuine solutions for women's issues, affecting women in the sex industry, inhibiting women's sexual self-discovery, empowering conservative agendas against women, restricting free speech essential for feminist advocacy, and potentially violating broader human rights tied to sexual expression. Strossen contends that even proponents of censorship acknowledge that such measures wouldn't eradicate all pornography. Instead, it would likely push its production into hidden, underground channels (ibid, p. 461) .

Strossen asserts that while free speech has traditionally been a potent tool in championing equal rights, censorship has often been the means to obstruct such efforts. Given the relative powerlessness of women and minorities, equipping the dominant power structure with additional censorship tools risks further side-lining these groups. To illustrate, she points to the enforcement of anti-hate speech laws: The British Race Relations Act of 1965, which criminalized incitement of racial hatred, ironically first targeted black power leaders. This demonstrates that those from traditionally discriminated groups, like women, are often the ones most suppressed by such laws. Historically, censorship has repeatedly stifled speech related to women's issues. Laws censoring sexual content have frequently obstructed information vital to women's rights, especially reproductive rights. In the U.S. for instance, anti-obscenity laws have curtailed information dissemination about contraception and abortion, even targeting figures like Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood (ibid, p. 466).

Strossen's broader work on hate speech provides context for understanding the challenges of regulating not just hate speech but also content like pornography. Well-

intentioned hate speech laws, she argues, often suffer from vagueness, potentially suppressing legitimate political speech. Similarly, attempts to regulate pornography, especially when perceived as a form of hate speech against women, can inadvertently curtail free expression.

## 2. Pornography as Disinformation

The creation of pornography is linked with considerable harm, encompassing coercion, maltreatment, and physical harm to the actors involved. Certain feminists opposing pornography contend that although it may not be a direct precursor to sexual assault, it undeniably fosters and bolsters sexist perspectives, thereby exacerbating gender disparity. Contrary to this, Amanda Cawston (2019) posits that the conventional feminist critiques, which predominantly target the pornographic material itself, could be misdirected. She advocates for a shift in focus towards the individuals consuming the pornography, emphasizing the examination of the attitudes mirrored in their consumption patterns.

The flaw I identify in Cawston's claim lies in her redirection of attention towards the consumers of pornography. This is because speech acts can inherently embody sexism, irrespective of external perception or recognition of their sexist nature. The existence of sexism within speech acts does not rely on audience acknowledgment, highlighting the independence of such acts from consumer interpretation.

To elucidate this argument, consider the hypothetical scenario involving Adrian, a middle-aged alcoholic residing in a small town. Whenever he encounters a conflict with his wife, his response is to visit the local pub, consume alcohol, and vocally express his opinion about the supposed stupidity of women to any willing listener. His audience's reaction may vary, with some agreeing with his sentiments and others dismissing them. However, the crucial aspect for our examination is this: the nature of Adrian's speech act retains its sexist characteristic regardless of its impact on the audience. The inherent sexism in his utterances does not depend on successfully instilling sexist beliefs in the listeners. Note that it is the illocutionary force of Adrian’s speech act, not its locutionary content, that preserves its sexist nature, independent of how it affects the audience. The significant factor is the potential of a speech act to propagate sexist beliefs, not its guaranteed success in doing so for every individual.

I believe that the central issue revolves around the potential of a speech act to engender sexism, rather than its actual success in generating such beliefs.

To construct a robust argument, it is imperative to delve into Mona Simion's (2023) theoretical framework on disinformation. Simion's insights provide a comprehensive understanding of how disinformation operates, its characteristics, and its impact on various audiences. Her account emphasizes the role of context and audience susceptibility in determining the effects of disinformation, offering a nuanced perspective that is crucial for analysing complex issues such as the debate on pornography.

Simion posits that the same content can have diverse impacts depending on various contextual factors, including the audience's evidential backgrounds, shared presuppositions, and social norms. This contextualist view highlights the importance of considering the audience's specific circumstances and vulnerabilities in assessing the potential harm of disinformation, including pornographic content.

By integrating Simion's account into the discussion on pornography, we can better understand the multifaceted nature of pornographic material and its potential to generate or perpetuate sexist beliefs and attitudes. It allows for a more refined analysis, considering the diversity of audiences and their varying susceptibilities to the influences of pornography.

Simion's perspective on disinformation questions numerous prevalent theoretical assumptions regarding disinformation. It contests the ideas that disinformation is a type of information or misinformation, inherently false or misleading, or fundamentally designed to create false beliefs or mislead listeners. Additionally, Simion's account highlights that the difficulties encountered in tracking disinformation extend far beyond simple fact checking. According to Simion, the recent 'infodemic' crisis manifests in two primary ways, contributing to societal ignorance. The first aspect involves the extensive dissemination of disinformation. The second aspect is characterized by a prevalent resistance to evidence. Even when credible and accurate information is available, numerous information consumers neglect, resist, or discredit it, further exacerbating the issue (ibid, p. 2).

In traditional epistemology, the relationship between knowledge and information has been understood with a right-to-left explanatory direction. Simion, however, proposed a knowledge-based account of information that investigates the

potential of a left-to-right explanatory direction. In this perspective, “a signal s carries the information that p iff it has the capacity to generate knowledge that p” (ibid, p. 6).

In this context, Simion proposes considering disinformation as the opposite of information. Essentially, it is something that holds the potential to create or augment ignorance, obstruct access to knowledge, or diminish one's proximity to knowledge. According to Simion, we should view disinformation as ignorance generating content (ibid, p. 1).

Simion contends that this perspective is contextualist, meaning the same conveyed content can have varying effects based on contextual elements like the audience members' evidential backgrounds, shared presuppositions, existing social relationships, and societal norms. She underscores that, akin to dispositions in a broader sense, such content does not necessarily have to produce ignorance in the context, as dispositions can occasionally be concealed (ibid, p.6).

Simion also underscores the multiplicity of methods by which ignorance can be generated or augmented, this suggests that disinformation will manifest in various forms. Here are the five forms from Simion’s taxonomy of disinformation: 1) “disinforming via spreading content that has the capacity of *generating false belief”*: the classic example of this form of disinformation involves deliberately spreading falsehoods that can lead to false beliefs in hearers. 2) “disinformation via misleading defeat: this type of disinformation can strip the audience of their knowledge via defeating justification”. 3) “disinforming via content that has the capacity to inducing epistemic anxiety: this form of disinformation possesses the capability to deprive the audience of knowledge through belief defeat”. 4) “confidence-defeating disinformation: this type of disinformation can reduce justified confidence through justification or doxastic defeat”. 5) “disinforming via exploiting pragmatic phenomena: pragmatic phenomena can readily be manipulated to achieve disinformation in all the previously mentioned ways” (ibid, p. 7). Despite their diversity, all these forms of disinformation share a common characteristic: they foster ignorance by either producing false beliefs, causing a loss of knowledge, or leading to a reduction in warranted confidence. In Simion's framework, disinformation is characterized as something that diminishes one's standing as a possessor of knowledge.

Importantly, Simion's framework posits that disinformation can exist for an audience A even without A holding any relevant belief or credence. For instance, even

if an individual irrationally disbelieves the safety of vaccines or the occurrence of climate change, they remain susceptible in that they are exposed to content that, under normal conditions, has the propensity to undermine epistemic support available to them regarding the safety of vaccines and the reality of climate change. In this context, disinformation can engender ignorance even without any doxastic attitude by diminishing proximity to knowledge through the negation of available evidence. This aspect of the account elucidates the most perilous type of disinformation – that which targets the already epistemically vulnerable (ibid, p. 9).

Akin to various other forms of communication, the modulation of speech acts is imperative based on the audience. This modulation reflects the speaker's acknowledgment of the cognitive capacities of the listener. For instance, the complexity and technicality of language used when conversing with a peer would differ significantly from the language used when communicating with a child. This adjustment is made in recognition of the child's limited understanding and cognitive development. This classical approach to modulating discourse based on the audience's capacity to comprehend underscores the importance of context and audience awareness in effective communication, further highlighting the nuanced nature of speech acts and their potential impact.

After examining Simion's account on disinformation, a clearer perspective emerges, highlighting the parallels between pornography and other forms of speech acts. This examination underscores the significance of analysing the content itself, alongside its potential impact on diverse audiences. Cawston's suggestion to shift the focus exclusively to the consumers of pornography overlooks the inherent characteristics of the pornographic material that can independently perpetuate sexist beliefs and attitudes.

Simion's framework emphasizes the role of context and the audience's specific circumstances in determining the effects of disinformation. Applying this to the debate on pornography, it becomes evident that both the content and the consumer's reception play a crucial role in understanding the potential harm or perpetuation of sexist ideologies. The content of pornography, akin to other speech acts, possesses the capacity to generate or reinforce sexist beliefs, irrespective of its reception by the audience.

Even so, Cawston's account should not be entirely dismissed. Her emphasis on the potential of different types of pornography to generate varying degrees of sexism, contingent upon the specific audience, holds merit. This understanding underscores the

importance of discourse modulation, akin to the adjustments made in everyday communication based on the audience's cognitive capacity and sensitivity.

In the context of pornography, this modulation is already implicitly acknowledged. The restriction of access to pornography for children is a clear example of this. Society, recognizing the potential influence and impact of such content on impressionable minds, imposes these restrictions to shield children from potential harm. This protective measure underscores the acknowledgment of the need to tailor content access based on audience characteristics, reinforcing the importance of audience-specific modulation in the dissemination and consumption of content, including pornography.

This approach does not negate the inherent potential of certain content to perpetuate sexism or other harmful ideologies, but it emphasizes the role of audience characteristics in determining the extent of this impact. It highlights the shared responsibility of producers, disseminators, and consumers of content to be mindful of these dynamics, advocating for a more nuanced and considerate approach to content creation, distribution, and consumption.

Different genres of pornography exist, some inherently offensive and sexist, regardless of their audience impact, and others not inherently so, featuring individuals who willingly participate. Despite this, audience-specific censorship is crucial. Certain audiences are more prone to adopting sexist beliefs. According to Simion's perspective on disinformation, audience context is pivotal. Utilizing her example: communicating scientific disagreement about climate change to a peer might convey the minority status of dissenting opinions within the scientific community. However, the same message to a more impressionable individual could be misconstrued as significant disagreement, leading to climate change denial. Similarly, the potential of specific pornographic content to propagate sexism is audience dependent. The approach should not be a uniform ban or allowance of pornography but rather a tailored restriction based on audience susceptibility.

In the context of pornography, not all content will have the same impact on all viewers. Some individuals may consume explicit material without internalizing harmful or sexist beliefs, while others may be more susceptible to such influences. This susceptibility, as highlighted by Simion, can lead to the propagation of sexism, reinforcing gender inequality and perpetuating harmful stereotypes about women. It

underscores the importance of considering the audience's context in the dissemination and consumption of pornographic material.

Applying Simion's account to the pornography debate suggests that a blanket ban or unrestricted access does not address the complexity of the issue. Instead, it highlights the need for a more tailored approach, where access to certain types of pornographic content is regulated based on the potential impact on specific audiences. This approach acknowledges the diversity of pornographic material and its varied impact, advocating for a more nuanced and thoughtful strategy in addressing the concerns related to pornography consumption. It emphasizes the importance of safeguarding vulnerable audiences from content that has the potential to perpetuate sexism and contribute to epistemic injustice, while also respecting the autonomy and rights of individuals to access adult content responsibly.

## 3. Conclusion

The debate surrounding pornography is a complex and multifaceted one, encompassing a range of arguments from different perspectives. On one hand, proponents of pornography emphasize the importance of freedom of speech and expression, asserting that adults should have the autonomy to choose what they consume and produce, even if it includes explicit sexual content. They argue that pornography can serve as a form of sexual expression and empowerment, particularly for women who choose to participate in the industry. Furthermore, they contend that attempts to ban or restrict pornography could set a dangerous precedent for curtailing freedom of speech and expression more broadly.

On the other hand, critics of pornography, including radical feminists and proponents of epistemic paternalism, highlight the potential harms associated with the consumption and production of explicit sexual content. They argue that pornography perpetuates harmful stereotypes, objectifies, and degrades women, and normalizes violent and degrading sexual acts. Moreover, they contend that pornography can have negative social consequences, such as contributing to a culture of sexual violence and influencing harmful attitudes towards women.

The application of John Stuart Mill's harm principle to the pornography debate further complicates matters. While proponents of pornography emphasize that it should be allowed if it does not harm others, critics argue that defining harm in this context can be challenging. They assert that the harm extends beyond physical harm to include epistemic harm, such as spreading false beliefs, silencing women, and undermining their credibility.

In examining the arguments for and against pornography, it becomes evident that the issue is not easily resolved. The tension between freedom of speech and the potential harms associated with pornography poses a significant ethical and social dilemma. Striking a balance between individual liberties and the well-being of society remains a formidable challenge.

Ultimately, the pornography debate reflects broader societal discussions about the limits of free speech, the impact of media on individuals and society, and the rights and autonomy of individuals. It calls for ongoing critical examination and dialogue to navigate the complex terrain of personal freedom, empowerment, and harm prevention in the realm of explicit sexual content.

While pornography and other adult content are already subject to censorship on daytime television, primarily to prevent children from viewing it, popular culture is replete with songs and music videos accessible to everyone, irrespective of location. While they may not contain explicit X-rated material, they often contain copious sexual innuendos. The forthcoming chapter will delve further into this ongoing discourse.

# Chapter 2 Beliefs, Behaviours, and Mass Media

## Introduction

Every individual, without exception, operates with a foundation of deeply ingrained beliefs. These foundational truths and principles, for most of us, begin to form during childhood years, taking shape either from our personal experiences or from the narratives and assertions handed down to us by those around us. Such beliefs exert a potent influence on our perceptions of ourselves, our interactions with others, and our consequent behaviours. Consider the age-old tale of Santa Claus: parents often weave stories of this jolly figure, emphasizing that he rewards only the well-behaved children with gifts. Such tales might subtly guide a child toward more obedient behaviour. Similarly, a traumatic event, like being bitten by a dog during one's early years, might embed the notion that all dogs are inherently dangerous, leading an individual to bypass even the friendliest of canines throughout their life.

Yet, it's not just personal experiences that shape our beliefs. Societal and communal surroundings play a role too. For instance, growing up in an insular community might foster the idea that outsiders are inherently untrustworthy or that anything unfamiliar is threatening. Furthermore, exposure to prejudiced beliefs, whether rooted in sexism or racism, can warp one's understanding. It might lead someone to wrongly assume that women are not as intellectually capable as men or that people of a certain race have malevolent intentions.

However, human psyche is intricate. There are instances where our actions diverge from our proclaimed beliefs. For example, an individual who identifies as an egalitarian might still feel uneasy when navigating through a neighbourhood perceived as "dangerous." Or they might unfairly judge a female colleague as overly emotional when she's merely voicing a dissenting opinion. Such unvoiced, often unrecognized thoughts are termed implicit biases. They have the capacity to steer our actions as powerfully as our overt, conscious beliefs do.

In contemporary times, the Western world often champions itself as a beacon of democracy, tolerance, and equality. Yet, beneath this surface, there remain pressing

issues awaiting resolution. With movements like #MeToo gaining momentum, the deeply entrenched problems of sexism and gender-based prejudice have been thrust into the spotlight. The media, a formidable influencer of public opinion, often perpetuates these biases. All too frequently, women are portrayed either as passive, over-sexualized entities existing solely for male pleasure or as figures incapable of leadership roles.

The media, in its vast reach and influence, has often weaponized information, utilizing propaganda to further specific agendas. This chapter endeavours to unravel the intricate mechanism through which such propaganda perpetuates and magnifies misogynistic perspectives. To achieve this understanding, we will delve into Kate Manne's (2018) innovative insights into misogyny and sexism. Further, we will explore Jason Stanley's (2015) interpretation of propaganda and Regina Rini's (2017) insights on the phenomenon of fake news, seeking to understand their roles in propagating misogynistic beliefs. Concluding this exploration, I will posit that Stanley's definition of propaganda and Rini's understanding of fake news fall short in explaining how misogynistic behaviours can arise in the absence of corresponding misogynistic beliefs.

### *2.1 The Logic of Misogyny*

In “Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny,” Kate Manne (2018) delves into the dynamics of western patriarchy, describing it as a system that metes out rewards and punishments. Drawing upon contemporary events and popular culture, she paints a picture of society that lauds conforming women and penalizes those who defy the norm. Importantly, Manne underscores that misogyny doesn’t necessarily stem from an outright hatred for women. Instead, she defines it as a “deep-seated prejudice against women” (ibid, p. 83). She challenges the prevailing notion that views misogyny merely as individual men’s internal attitudes, proposing a more nuanced understanding of the term. Her core contention challenges the common perception that misogyny is centred on the individual. Instead, she advocates viewing it as an attribute of societal construct or frameworks. In this perspective, misogyny isn’t merely a characteristic of one’s mental makeup but represents a broader societal standard. Manne portrays misogyny as a system that regulates behaviour rather than merely reflecting an individual’s mindset. Essentially, she posits that misogyny extend beyond personal convictions to also encompass actions independent of those beliefs.

Manne points out a common conflation between the term misogyny and sexism, emphasizing that they shouldn't be used as synonyms. She provides distinct definitions for each. In her view, sexism represents an ideology that justifies and normalizes patriarchal dominance. Misogyny however, as described by Mane, acts as a set of enforcement tools, ensuring that women conform to a patriarchal system, particularly by rendering emotional support. In her words,

> Sexist ideology will often consist in assumptions, beliefs, theories, stereotypes, and broader cultural narratives that represent men and women as importantly different in ways that, if true and known to be true, or at least likely, would make rational people more inclined to support and participate in patriarchal social arrangements…..[S]exism and misogyny share a common purpose-to maintain or restore a patriarchal social order. Sexism is hence to bad science as misogyny is to moralism. Sexism wears a lab coat; misogyny goes on witch hunts (ibid, p. 80).

Manne challenges the conventional understanding of misogyny, labelling it as a "naïve conception" (ibid, p. 19). She contested that the traditional definition, which frames misogyny as an intrinsic trait of individuals who despise women primarily because of their gender, minimizes its impact, rendering it an almost non-existent and politically insignificant issue. Contrarily, Manne proposes that misogyny be recognized as a system geared towards controlling social behaviours, operating in tandem with sexism and upholding patriarchal norms (ibid).

To elucidate the facets of misogyny, Manne begins by delineating three specific kinds: domestic violence, sexual assault, and strangulation. Importantly, the instances she references often involve men of considerable influence, including notable figures like U.S. President Donald Trump. Rather than concentrating solely on the deeds of these individuals or questioning their ethical compass, Manne's intention is to spotlight society's inclination to downplay and forgive such indiscretions.

During his election campaign, Trump faced allegations of rape from his ex-wife, while Steve Bannon, the former White Houser chief strategist, was accused of domestic violence and battery by his previous wife back in the 90's. Yet, they aren't the sole figures within the Trump administration who, despite facing such accusations, still

occupied influential roles (ibid, p. 15). Manne highlights these instances to underscore the societal tendency to be lenient or dismissive, particularly when the accused are influential white men, pointing to the pervasive influence of a patriarchal culture.

Highlighting the extent to which misogyny transcends personal psyche to manifest as a societal issue, Manne cites the case of Elliot Rodger. This young man, grappling with sexual frustrations, executed a series of murders in Isla Vista, Santa Barbara CA, after openly sharing a video detailing his intentions. His resentment was rooted in the belief that women didn't value his "chivalrous" gestures, and he perceived his virginity at twenty-two as a collective failure of all women. Instead of pinpointing individual women who might have rebuffed him, he generalized women as a monolithic group. To Rodger, this collective had defied its patriarchal role by not succumbing to his advances, and he believed they deserved retribution for it (ibid, p. 106).

Manne emphasizes that while not every act of violence against women results in death, many such acts carry severe implications. These acts are frequently downplayed and remain undiscussed. She delves deeply into the topic of strangulation, portraying it as an expression of dominance, especially when someone challenges established norms. While the term "choking" is commonly interchanged with "strangulation", Manne suggests this conflation is misguided. She states, "Often referred to as 'chocking', non-fatal manual strangulation is inherently perilous. Complications from the deprivation of oxygen to the brain can lead to fatalities, occurring hours, days, or even weeks after the act (ibid p.1).

Manne posits that strangulation, predominantly executed by men, is an act of asserting dominance. The prevailing patriarchal framework dictates distinct behavioural expectations for both genders. Often, the essence of womanhood is confined to specific roles: women are depicted as caring, nurturing, and as being designated to cater to men's desires. If a woman deviates from these established norms or 'defies' them, she may face consequences. Manne characterizes the western patriarchal construct as a system that enforces discipline, ensuring women confirm to their preordained roles. Furthermore, she contends that most men would vehemently reject the label of 'misogynist" if confronted with it. They may cite connections to women in their lives– be it mothers, sisters, or, like President Trump, daughters–as a defence against such claims. Some might even argue that Trump's decision to appoint Ivanka as his senior

advisor showcases his faith in female judgement, thus negating any suggestions of gender prejudice.

Using Manne's interpretation of misogyny as a product of societal structure rather than an individual's mindset, we can identify numerous examples of misogynistic actions that may not necessarily arise from intentional misogyny. We'll delve into this perspective in the concluding section of this chapter.

### *2.2 Propaganda and Fake News*

Jason Stanley's (2015) exploration of propaganda is instrumental in defining it and understanding its function within a liberal democratic setting. By probing the link between ideology and the claims of propaganda, Stanley distinguishes two types: 'supporting propaganda' and 'undermining propaganda'. He posits that although undermining propaganda strives to represent certain principles, these are overshadowed by the objectives of the propaganda itself, creating a dissonance. This incongruence serves as a veil, masking the discrepancies between ideals and actualities (ibid, p. 52).

Further, Regina Rini's (2017) scrutiny of fake news helps elucidate the interplay between such news and social media platforms. Citing the 2016 U.S. presidential election as a reference point Rini offers a clear definition of fake news (ibid, p. E-43). She delves into the interrelation between messages circulated on social media and the foundational assertions in the philosophy of testimony. Rini perceives the dissemination of news on social media platforms as a distorted version of testimony. A significant aspect of this distortion is the inherent vagueness in the communicator's intentions when testifying on social media, which can lead listeners to unquestioningly accept the shared information (ibid, p. E-46).

Understanding propaganda and fake news through the lens of Jason Stanley and Regina Rini provides an intricate foundation to connect with the broader concepts of sexism and misogyny. Within a society where information is power, the manipulation of this information, whether through propaganda or fake news, directly influences the shaping of societal perceptions, beliefs, and behaviours.

In the context of sexism and misogyny, propaganda and fake news serve as powerful tools to perpetuate, amplify, or even normalize prejudicial attitudes against women. When we consider propaganda's ability to mask discrepancies between ideals

and actualities, as described by Stanley, it's not difficult to see how harmful stereotypes about women can be propagated. For instance, the portrayal of women as inherently emotional or weaker can be bolstered thought propaganda in media, even if the reality differs.

Similarly, Rini's description of fake news circulating on social media as a distorted version of testimony is especially relevant. When unchecked or unverified, stories, images, or quotes that degrade or stereotype women are spread widely, they can subtly shape societal expectations of women, thereby deepening entrenched sexist views. The ease with which false narratives about women can be shared and believed, due to the uncritical acceptance fostered by the ambiguities of social media communication, makes fake news a potent force in sustaining misogynistic beliefs.

For this chapter, the connection between propaganda, fake news, sexism and misogyny is rooted in the idea that these information tools not only reflect but actively mould societal perceptions. By influencing the masses with distorted representations of women, they play a pivotal role in maintaining a patriarchal status quo.

### 2.2.1 Propaganda

In the second chapter of "How Propaganda Works", Jason Stanley (2015) seeks to define propaganda. Stanley begins by challenging the commonly held notion that all propaganda is inherently dishonest and delivered with deceit in mind. Following this line of thought, one might deduce that propaganda is always a deliberate attempt by certain parties to deceive. However, Stanley contends that equating propaganda with insincerity is a reductive approach. This perspective neglects the crucial relationship between propaganda and underlying ideologies, suggesting that there's more to propaganda than mere deceit.

Examining Hitler's propagandistic rhetoric, such as his likening of Jews to maggots, it becomes evident that Hitler genuinely believed in the truth of his statements about Jews. When he equated Jews to maggots, he was conveying his authentic belief that Jews posed a threat to societal health. The notion that propaganda is inherently insincere overlooks instances like this. Hitler's genuine conviction aligned with the sentiments of his audience, taps into what Victor Klemperer (1947) described as the "weakest spot in the cultural thinking of the nation" (Klemperer, 1947, as cited in

Stanley, 2015, p. 45). Klemperer alluded to Hitler's emotional appeals, which, in Klemperer's view, were anchored in "man's intellectual primitiveness" (ibid). Stanley emphasizes that Hitler was not merely deceiving but expressing his genuine beliefs about Jews, drawing on the shared and flawed ideologies of his audience to further his objective.

Unlike what the insincerity condition suggests, most propagandistic claims, according to Stanley, are made by those in the grip of a flawed ideology (ibid, p. 46).

Due to the sincere character of propaganda, the main concern for totalitarian states that openly possess a ministry of propaganda is that their propaganda is not taken seriously (ibid, p .47). In liberal democracy, on the other hand, part of the state propaganda entails the idea that liberal democracy does not allow propaganda as such. For this reason, the main danger that propaganda poses in liberal democracy is that it is not recognized as propaganda, which in turn creates the task to ascertain which claims are in fact propagandistic claims. In other words, propaganda in liberal democracy is characterized by its ability to mask itself. Unlike what Stanley calls the "classical sense of propaganda" as typical to totalitarian states that use propaganda "unabashedly", liberal democracy presents itself as free from propaganda. In other words, if a state supposedly follows democratic ideals but its citizens do not treat each other with equal respect, a gap between "illiberal reality and professed liberal ideals" will appear (ibid, p. 49). To illustrate this, Stanley remarks that "It is not atypical to redefine "democracy" so that it does not include equal respect, but rather market efficiency. It is not atypical to call something that is not a war for freedom at all a "war for freedom" (ibid, p. 50). In other words, the fact that a particular state supposedly follows democratic ideals, but it lacks the core democratic values, such as equal respect, creates an inconsistency between the ideals of democracy, and thus goes against the semantics of the concept and what it entails. Therefore, one would have to redefine the term to avoid this inconsistency. To illustrate this better, Nazi Germany changed the word 'Jew' to not mean a German citizen, and later, a non-human being. This change added a new semantic value to the word Jew, so they could exterminate them.

According to Stanley, the propagandistic use of liberal democratic vocabulary, such as for instance "liberty" or "equality", is aimed at maintaining stability by concealing the gap between the ideals of liberal democracy and its reality. If the ideals of liberal democracy necessarily have to include equal respect and opportunity, but the

reality shows otherwise, a gap between the 'ideal' and 'reality' will appear. In order to avoid mass discontent with the existing gap, a state will therefore have to appeal to propaganda to conceal it (see Stanley's definition below). By covering up the gaps between liberal ideals and reality, failures of democracy are covered up by the very vocabulary of liberalism itself (ibid, p. 51). It is important to note that Stanley considers this cover-up to be essentially an exploitation of the ideal in question. Moreover, the ideals that are exploited by the propaganda of liberal democracy are not necessarily political, since they can also be aesthetic, health-related, or economic. One example of a "vehicle of propaganda" — which is Stanley's term for the mechanism to produce propaganda — that involves the exploitation of aesthetic ideals, is advertising.

Provided Stanley's interest in political propaganda, he restricts his definition of propaganda to entail "a kind of speech that fundamentally involves political, economic, aesthetic, or rational ideals, mobilized for a political purpose" (ibid, p. 52). Propaganda in this sense is necessarily aimed at either *supporting* or *eroding* the ideals that it embodies. Depending on the relationship to its ideals, propaganda as conceived by Stanley can be further divided into to two subtypes. First, there is propaganda that is in service of supporting the ideals that it embodies. Stanley calls this type of propaganda "supporting propaganda", and he defines it as "a contribution to public discourse that is presented as an embodiment of certain ideals yet is of a kind that tends to increase the realization of those very ideals by either emotional or other non-rational means" (ibid, p. 53). Second and opposed to supporting propaganda, Stanley's term for propaganda that is in service of undermining ideals is "undermining propaganda", which is defined as "a contribution to public discourse that is presented as an embodiment of certain ideals yet is of a kind that tends to erode those very ideals". Unlike supporting propaganda, undermining propaganda undermines a political ideal by using it to communicate a message that is inconsistent with it (ibid, p. 56).

Stanley emphasizes that the logic of undermining propaganda relies on an inherent contradiction between its ideal and goal. The contradiction entails the fact that while undermining propaganda appeals to an ideal to draw support, it simultaneously "tends to erode the realization of that ideal" (ibid, p. 53). This is clearly illustrated by a non-political form of undermining propaganda such as advertising, an example of this would be the American 1949 TV commercial for Camel cigarettes. The commercial depicts a doctor smoking Camel, and we are told by the voice-over that "more doctors

smoke Camels than any other cigarette". In this particular case, the ideal of good health as embodied by doctors is put in the service of selling a product that undermines health.

A crucial means by which undermining propaganda is enabled to undermine a political ideal by using it to communicate a message that is inconsistent with it, is the exploitation of flawed ideological belief (Stanley, 2015, p. 57). Not only does undermining propaganda rely on flawed ideological belief in order to erode ideals, it even contributes, Stanley adds, to the very formation of such belief. In turn, flawed ideological belief masks the contradictions of undermining propaganda by means of production of *epistemic obstacles* that prevent from recognizing how propagandistic goals misalign with certain ideals. Consequently, according to Stanley, undermining propaganda is far more complicated than supporting propaganda and should be more thoroughly examined (ibid).

To illustrate this better, Stanley provides several examples of undermining propaganda, which we will look at in no specific order. The first example considered racist ideology, more specifically scientific racism, that was predominant in the first half of the 20th century. According to a medical doctor that published an article on Blacks and drug use in the New York Times in 1914, people of colour, most notably blacks, have a predisposition for narcotics. They are described as "poor, illiterate, and shiftless…[T]he only method to keep him away from the drug is by imprisoning him" (ibid, p. 59). The drug favoured by the blacks according to the medical doctor, is crack cocaine, a cheaper degraded form of the purer cocaine favoured by elites. This, Stanley argues, is a case of flawed ideology of Black exceptionalism, and it plays the role of masking the contradiction ideal of law and order and the unjust sentencing of blacks consuming the cheaper version of the drug preferred by whites. In his own words "The goal of establishing the sentencing disparities is not consistent with law and order, but the ideal used in the service of that goal is law and order" (ibid, p. 60).

Although Stanley does not dwell too much on this first example, it is interesting to notice that the imprisonment disparity he talks about is not a matter of the past. Unlike the explanation for the drug use by blacks employed by the medical doctor in 1914, today the narrative changed. That said, the disparity is just as large and appalling as ever. Crack is used mostly in low-income areas, most notably by blacks. The purer version of this drug known as cocaine is consumed by wealthier individuals, most often by whites. Although it is generally assumed that both ethnicities engage in drug use,

blacks get longer sentences. Consequently, if one is arrested for position of 5 grams of crack, she will get a sentence of a minimum of 5 years. A sentence of five years is also given for possession of cocaine, the difference is that the grammage is of 500 instead of 5 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2002).

A second example of undermining propaganda Stanley gives, is a very actual topic of debate, namely climate change. He uses James Hogan's (2009) book *Climate Cover Up* to illustrate this example. Hogan argues that the American Petroleum Institute assembled a document called "Global Climate Change Action Plan" to 'debunk' the scientific junk that says climate change is real. Not unusual is that the platform used to disseminate these ideas is Fox News, who are notorious for their controversies. This according to Stanley is another instance of undermining propaganda as the anti-climate science movement is clearly in contradiction with the ideals of scientific objectivity.

Stanley's third example looks at some Christian Televangelists that promote something known as "the Prosperity Gospel". As the name of this Gospel suggests, Jesus gives one wealth and prosperity if she accepts Christianity. However, if one reads the Bible, Jesus makes it clear that it is the poor not the wealthy who are blessed, being himself an example of what he preached (Stanley, 2017, p. 62).

### 2.2.2 Fake News

In her article "Fake News and Partisan Epistemology", Regina Rini (2017) delves into an epistemological examination of "fake news" and its interplay in social media. Using the events surrounding the 2016 U.S. presidential election as a backdrop, Rini's exploration begins with the assertion that fake news influenced the decisions of certain voters. This observation prompts her primary inquiry: "[w]hy were people willing to believe easily dis-confirmable, often ridiculous stories?" (ibid, p. E-43).

To characterize "fake news", Rini emphasizes the difference between untruth or deliberate deceit. She posits that "[it] is not merely fake information conveyed by reportage" (ibid, p. E-44). While false data can be an intrinsic part of fake news, it's not the only component. Journalists might unintentionally disseminate incorrect news when they misconstrue the actual events, genuinely believing their reports are accurate. However, the essence of fake news lies in its purposeful deceit (ibid). Further, Rini asserts that the leap from merely incorrect news to fake news is marked by a specific

kind of intentional deception, which isn't the same as everyday falsehoods. Contrasting with typical lies, she notes that the 'news' in 'fake news' suggests a deception aimed at a broader audience rather than just immediate recipient, implying that fake news is designed to be propagated widely (ibid, p. E-44).

While every instance of fake news encompasses some form of deceit, the end goal isn't always deception. In some cases, deception serves as a tool to achieve other objectives. A case in point is the rise of numerous companies that capitalize on disseminating fake news for monetary gains. They employ fake news as click-bait, earning revenue each time someone engages with the content. Rini points out that the true nature of this deception becomes evident when recognizing that the success of these companies hinges on a vast number of individuals being misled into viewing and sharing the deceptive content, suggesting that at least some of them trust the story's veracity (ibid, p. E-45).

Contrasting fake news driven by financial incentives, the fake news observed during the 2016 presidential election seemed to prioritize deception for its own sake. Rini labels this as "pure" fake news, generated by partisans aiming to weaken the adversaries by misleading undecided voters (ibid, p. E-45). For these creators, the goal of fake news wasn't just widespread circulation for clicks, but also to alter perceptions and beliefs. Stemming from this analysis, Rini defines fake news as a story that claims to depict real-world events, often mirroring the style of conventional media reporting, yet is known by its originators to be significantly untrue. Its dual objectives are to achieve broad dissemination and to deceive at least a segment of its readership (ibid). While such misleading stories can be spread through various channels, such as emails or physical posters, Rini places special emphasis on social media due to its apparent pivotal role in the propagation of fake news during the 2016 election.

Rini's exploration of social media is central to her quest to understand why individuals believe in fake news. A key feature that makes social media an effective vehicle for spreading fake news is its dependency on testimonial exchanges. Drawing from contemporary studies on the epistemology of testimony, it's posited that an individual believes a statement based on testimony when she trusts it because another individual has shared that statement with her. Using this testimonial framework, Rini suggests that some social media users are prone to accepting fake news as truth simply because it appears in their feeds, seemingly vouched for by trusted contacts. The

underlying premise here is that people are naturally inclined to trust and believe information shared by those they have faith in (ibid, p. E-46).

While typically trusting a statement because it was relayed by another person is an epistemically sound practice, enabling us to obtain knowledge beyond our direct experiences, it also brings with it the risk of indiscriminately accepting testimonies. This is why the study of testimony in epistemology emphasizes the importance of certain standards, like criteria for identifying and dismissing questionable sources of information. Some of these criteria are based on identity of the person giving the testimony; for example, knowing someone as a salesperson might prompt scepticism. On the other hand, some criteria are based on the content of the testimony itself. Rini points out that it's rational to question or even dismiss a testimony that drastically conflicts with our existing understanding of the world.

Rini's exploration into the epistemology of testimony leads her to describe the dissemination of news on social media as a distorted form of testimony. Unlike conventional testimony, where one believes in the content shared by the testifier, in the case of fake news on social media, belief is often based on seeing a friend share the news. This unique epistemological scenario is highlighted when Rini poses the question: When a friend shares a link to a fake news article without any additional commentary, are they truly endorsing the content of that story (ibid, p. E-47)?

Regarding this query, Rini observes that individuals are often pleased to be perceived as affirming the content of accurate news stories they share (especially if they were the first among their peers to share it. However, when the content becomes controversial, these same individuals frequently claim they didn't intend to assert the story's accuracy. This fluid and sometimes contradictory nature of sharing on social media gives rise to Rini's characterization of it as a 'distorted' form of testimony.

The second factor highlights how some individuals believe testimonies, even when these stories appear outlandishly implausible, seemingly breaching the fundamental norms of trustworthy testimony reception. To emphasize such blatant disregard for these norms, Rini points to a widely circulated fake news story from 2016. This story falsely alleged that a Washington DC pizzeria basement was the center of a child abuse ring, led by a satanic cult that included Hilary Clinton and her top aides. The extent to which some believed this baseless claim was underscored when Edgar Welch,

a twenty-eight-year-old, travelled from North Carolina to Washington, armed with a loaded riffle, intending to personally verify the accusations (ibid, p. E-48).

Rini concludes her analysis of the relationship between fake news and social media by relating the two bent features of social media testimony to each other (ibid). Her suggestion is that people's tendency to disregard the basic epistemological norms of testimony — which results in believing fake news — is the direct result of the instability of testimonial norms on social media. The fact that one person might post a fake news story without believing it, while another person might 'like' it without believing it, shows that the communicative acts performed on the web entail an ambiguity in the speaker's testimonial intentions. This mechanism allows "a ridiculous story to build testimonial momentum to the point of acceptance by more than the furthest fringe" (ibid, p. E-49).

### *2.3 Generating Misogyny*

After examining both Stanley's perspective on propaganda and Rini's insights on fake news, the mechanics behind this spread of false beliefs becomes clearer. While Stanley views propaganda as a sincere, albeit flawed, ideological stance, Rini characterizes fake news as deliberate deceit. Both avenues lead to the propagation of misconceptions. Regardless of Hitler's genuineness when disparaging cultural diversity, or the duplicitous tactics of anti-Hillary Clinton campaigns, both instigated profound misconceptions resulting in catastrophic actions. The nuances of where gendered marketing or pornography stand on the spectrum remains ambiguous. Are the creators of BIC's (2019)[33] "pen for her" consciously perpetuating existing biases about women? Do those producing pornography genuinely think they're representing authentic female sexuality?

What is apparent from the above-mentioned accounts is that both can generate beliefs, and that these beliefs, in return, generate actions. They would not, however, be able to explain misogynistic behaviour without such beliefs.

[33] In 2019, BIC faced criticism for their "BIC for Her" product line, which was deemed sexist by many consumers. The pens, marketed specifically toward women, were criticized for reinforced gender stereotypes trough design and marketing strategies that suggested women needed different writing instruments than men. This misstep highlights the ongoing issue of gender bias in product design and advertising. For more on this see Vinjamuri (2012).

Kate Manne argues that misogynistic behaviour is often not accompanied by the relevant beliefs. Not everyone that is guilty of misogynistic acts is also guilty for having the equivalent thoughts. A lot of times, the people, in our case, men, that were accused of being misogynists, vehemently denied such accusations, because they are genuinely convinced that this could not possibly be the case.

To shed light on this further, consider the case of a man named Adrian, raised in Western Europe. Like many Western Europeans, Adrian resonates with the region's values. Western Europe is often seen as more egalitarian and tolerant compared to other parts of the globe, and Adrian believes he embodies these principles. He doesn't hold the view that a woman's role is limited to domestic chores or that they shouldn't have the right to vote or pursue higher education. He genuinely sees women as intellectual equals. Yet, occasionally, Adrian's actions might suggest a hint of misogyny. He anticipates his wife to iron his shirts and clean up after dinner, not necessarily because he believes in traditional gender roles, but because he perceives these tasks as more "inherent" for women.

Examining past and present media portrayals of women, Adrian's actions become more comprehensible. Most advertisements[34] featuring women often depict them delightfully indulging in tasks like enjoying the scent of laundry detergent, savouring yogurt in a flowery dress, or preparing meals while their husbands enjoy a game of football. Some might assume that such gender-biased commercials belong to an earlier era, but recent ads by brands like BIC and Ford (Stampler, 2013) have not only perpetuated existing stereotypes but, in Ford's case, even seemed to endorse sexual violence[35]. Market segmentation, especially gendered marketing, narrows down the target audience to sell slightly tweaked versions of the same product, such as "shampoos for him and her ". Some products perpetuate biases against not just women but men too. Leveraging stereotypes to enhance product appeal[36], there are now 'man candles' or

[34] See e.g., (Poon, 2021)
[35] The ad in question depicted caricatures of three gagged women in the trunk of a Ford Figo, with a caricature of Silvio Berlusconi, the former Prime Minister of Italy, giving a victory sign from the driver's seat.
[36] For more insights, see Grau and Zotos (2016) and Kniazian (2014).

'mandles'[37] available with scents tittle "carnivore", "surfer-dude", "the biker", and more.

While it's evident that the media can employ both propaganda and fake news to cultivate misogynistic belief, which in turn can lead to misogynistic actions, the puzzle remains: how can someone exhibit such behaviour without consciously subscribing to these beliefs? To unravel this conundrum, I suggest we delve into a social psychological perspective that examines the subconscious drivers of behaviour.

According to Esther K. Papies (2017), "a recurrent problem in behaviour change is the fact that often, intentions are not translated into behaviour, causing the so-called intention-behaviour gap" (ibid, p. 2). To put it differently, an individual might genuinely intend to maintain a healthy lifestyle, fully understanding the hazards of smoking and excessive junk food yet might still indulge in these habits. While the act of smoking or eating unhealthy foods might be driven by pleasure they provide, research suggests that when it comes to social interactions, our actions can be influenced by underlying stereotypes, biases, and aggressive tendencies, even when we consciously aim to be non-aggressive. As Papies points out, the key lies in recognizing the triggers that influence specific behaviours. In social interactions, these triggers often revolve around ingrained stereotypes, biases, and aggressive tendencies. To effectively bridge the disconnect between our intentions and actions, interventions need to address these underlying mechanisms (ibid).

Papies posits that these influential mechanisms can be understood as "situated conceptualizations" that are ingrained in our memory due to consistent exposure in pertinent situations (ibid, p. 3). Crucially, these conceptualizations aren't just derived from our own experiences; they are also shaped by our innate propensity to mimic and internalize the behaviours and experiences of others. This means that even if an individual doesn't personally hold certain racial beliefs, they might still unconsciously recognize and react to specific characteristics in members of out-groups, activating associated stereotypes. This examination on the discrepancy between intention and

[37] The advent of candles marketed specifically to a male demographic, reflects a niche brand strategy. These products aim to masculinize the traditional gender-neutral act of lighting a candle, appealing to stereotypical male interests and olfactory preferences. Various brands have capitalized on this trend tailoring their product lines and marketing efforts to tap into the male consumer market. For examples of brands marketing 'mandles', see ManCan, The Manly Indulgence Line, and Old Factory Candles.

behaviour underscores the possibility that one can exhibit misogynistic behaviours even in the absence of consciously held misogynistic beliefs.

## *2.4 Media and Gender*

### 2.4.1 Film and Television

Using the lens of situated cognition, it's evident how mainstream and social media play a pivotal role in shaping our beliefs and behaviours. The narratives and images perpetuated by the media are frequently skewed by gender biases. Additionally, the sparse representation of women in media perpetuates the notion that men are the " cultural standard" (Wood, 1994, p. 31). The stark disparities in on-screen gender representation become clear when one examines the findings from the Centre for the Study of Women in Television & Film. Over a span of twenty-one years, this organization has scrutinized the portrayal of female characters across prime-time television genres, encompassing dramas, comedies, and reality shows (Lauzen, 2021).

The results reveal that in the 2017-2018 period, a staggering 68% of the programs predominantly showcased male characters, with women only comprising 40% of all speaking roles. Moreover, male characters are typically defined by their occupational status, while female characters are underrepresented in lead roles. The lack of ethnic diversity is another glaring issue in media representation (ibid, p.4).

Examining the data, it becomes evident how societal perceptions of gender roles have been influenced, with men often seen as the standard-bearer and women playing a secondary role. While the representation of female characters in leading or speaking roles is already limited, there's an added layer of scant research regarding the age and physical appearance of these female characters, barring ethnicity. While the concept of "beauty" is subjective and may be challenging to quantify in a study, an analysis of the prevalence of "camera-ready" makeup and wardrobe might reveal and undue emphasis on a female character's physical appearance. However, the media's skewed portrayal doesn't end with the glamorization of women; ageism is another prevalent issue. Young actresses frequently portray characters much older than their actual age, and there appears to be a noticeable dearth of leading roles for women above the age of 40, suggesting an underrepresentation of mature women in media.

In Julia T. Wood's (1994) article titled 'Gendered Media: The Influence of Media o Views of Gender', she posits that "[M]edia has created two images of women: good and bad ones" (ibid, p.33). These contrasting depictions serve to accentuate the different outcomes experienced by these women. According to Wood, the good women are characterized by beauty, a family-centric attitude, and a subordinate nature towards men. On the rare occasions when women are depicted in professional roles, they seldom appear as strong and ambitious figures without also being tethered to conventional notions of femininity (ibid). Wood cites the 80s police drama "Cagney and Lacey" as an illustrative example. Initially conceived by Barbara Avedon and Barbara Corday, the lead characters were envisioned as assertive, seasoned, and independent women dedicated to their profession. However, CBS, which purchased the script, mandated alterations to render these protagonists "gentler" and more traditionally feminine. As Wood highlights, it appears there's an unwritten code: a woman can be portrayed as powerful and successful, but only if she embodies conventional feminine stereotypes– like being submissive, passive, attractive, and having her identity anchored to one or more male figures (ibid).

Contrary to the portrayal of the "good woman" on screen, Wood introduces the concept of the "bad woman". Wood contends that this archetypes is depicted as the wicked counterpart– "the evil sister….the witch, whore, or non-woman, who is represented as hard, cold, aggressive–all of the things a good woman is not supposed to be (ibid). Disney classics such as Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, and The Little Mermaid vividly exemplify this dichotomy. These tales often showcase young, stunning, and notably passive heroines, who become victims to the schemes of envious older women, many of whom wield dark magic (ibid).

Other important features of the representation of female characters in film and television, are, as Wood argues, "the stereotypical images of relationships between men and women" (ibid, p.34). These images reinforce the existing stereotypes about male-female relationships in "four themes" (ibid, p. 33).

The first theme, according to Wood, is a "women's dependence/men's independence", theme observed in the Disney classic The Little Mermaid, where Ariel, the main character, gives up her voice and "her identity as a mermaid to become acceptable to her human lover" (ibid, p. 34).

Another recurring pattern identified by Wood is “men’s authority/women’s incompetence” (ibid, p.35). While this motif frequently emerges in children’s tales, it’s by no means confined to them. Many Disney animations feature a damsel in distress, often side-lined by malevolent figures, who requires rescue. This narrative is not restricted to fairy tales. Romantic comedies like ‘Pretty Woman’, where a prosperous man ‘rescues’ a prostituted woman, also propagate this narrative.

The next motifs that Wood identifies, which perpetuate gender stereotypes, are “women as primary caregivers/men as breadwinners” and “women as victims and sex objects/men as aggressors” (ibid). These themes are as pervasive in cinema as they are in advertising. While we might mock overtly sexist ads from the 50s and the 60s for their blatant gender role assignment, contemporary advertising hasn’t progressed as much as one might think. While the visual aesthetics and product variety have evolved, these underlying narratives echo the past we now deride.

To illustrate this better let us look at examples of these four themes as depicted in modern-day advertisements.

The first theme according to Wood is ‘Women’s dependence/men’s independence’. The best representation of this theme can be seen in a classic Xerox advertisement where an attractive young woman confesses her inability to type or perform her job adequately. However, she emphasizes that even she can operate the new Xerox machine with ease (Xerox company, 1959). Shifting our focus on modern day examples, a similar theme is evident in the “BIC for her” pen advertisement, which I detailed earlier in this discussion.

The second theme Wood calls ‘Men's authority/women’s incompetence’. A prime example of this theme is evident in many car advertisements. While a significant number of car ads feature male protagonists, a few choose to spotlight women. However, these female protagonists are often depicted in a less flattering manner. For instance, in the 2017 Sorento car advertisement, a mother drives her son to his football practice. Ignoring her husband’s ‘helpful’ advice on parking, she eventually parks the car amidst bushes (Kia company, 2017). While the advertisement aims to be humorous, it inadvertently perpetuates traditional gender roles, making light of and undermining women’s competence, thereby reinforcing prevailing biases.

The third theme observed by Wood is ‘Women as primary caregivers/men as breadwinners’. This motif is readily apparent in nearly all commercials related to

cleaning or baby products. Given the extensive number of such advertisements, let's conceptualize an alternative commercial with swapped gender roles. The lack of such advertisements suggest that it is either non-existent or has yet to gain popularity.

To Illustrate this better, Imagine a typical baby food advertisement. It is an early morning, a 'traditional' family of three is in the kitchen. The baby perched in a highchair, relishes a breakfast of fruit puree from our esteemed brand. This time, however, it's the father who's feeding the infant. Clad in his pyjamas with a dishcloth slung over his shoulder to clean the baby post-meal, he's the picture of a hands-on parent. Meanwhile, the mother sits poised at the table, donned in a business suit, engrossed in the morning paper savouring her coffee. The scene insinuates that she's headed to work, while her spouse handles domestic duties. Swap these roles, and you're back to the archetypal baby food commercial. But with this altered narrative, some might view it as a progressive challenge to entrenched gender norms.

The fourth and last theme is 'Women as victims and sex objects/men as aggressors'. While some of the commercials I'll reference may not immediately seem to align with this theme, a closer examination reveals that they indeed communicate a distinctly misogynistic message.

The first example comes from Cartier's perfume advertisement for "Baiser Volé", which translates to "Stolen Kiss". A stolen kiss implies a kiss forced upon someone either unwillingly or unable to reciprocate. Given the current societal awareness around issues like the #MeToo movement, branding a product with the implication of non-consensual intimacy is, at best, tone-deaf. The commercial features the classic narrative of a captivating young woman an equally handsome man, culminating in him 'stealing' a kiss. The advert concludes with an image of a pink bottle accompanied by the words, "An instant when time seems to stand still, sensual and challenging femininity, fragile emotions: Discover Baiser Volé, the new perfume from Cartier". Given the perfume's name, the advertisement's name, the advertisement's portrayal, and description, it appears like a nostalgic nod to bygone eras where women were stereotypically seen as "sensual", "feminine", and emotionally "fragile".

Let us now look at another example. In 2018, during the Football World Cup, international fast-food giant Burger King faced significant backlash for a social media

campaign. Their post[38] claimed they'd give women 3 million Russian rubbles (USD 47.000) and an endless supply of Whoppers if they became pregnant by football players participating in the World Cup. Following the public outrage, Burger King deleted the post and promptly issued an apology.

The gendered depiction of women extends beyond the screen. Many actresses have voiced their frustrations about being asked about their fitness routines during press conferences, while their male counterparts are more often queried about their roles. The media's influence on gender perspectives isn't restricted to just actors or mainstream celebrities.

While there's no universally accepted definition of propaganda, many envision it as an anti-Semitic poster from World War II or the promotion of a political ideology during election campaigns. To solely fault mass media for most gender biases can come off as conspiratorial. If we define propaganda as the dissemination of ideas to sway opinion, then we must ask: who is influencing whom; to what end, and in whose favour?

While Jason Stanley's (2015) primary focus is on political propaganda, especially within a liberal democracy, he doesn't confine the concept of propaganda to just political realm. He even cites advertisements as instances where propaganda manifests. He defines such advertising as a contribution to public discourse that appears to uphold certain ideals, yet promotes a goal detached from those ideals (ibid, p. 56). Stanley exemplifies this with ads featuring fit and healthy individuals consuming unhealthy beverages and foods. He labels this as supportive propaganda. Similarly, I contend that the same operational principle is evident in misogynistic advertisements. An advertisement showcasing a beautiful woman taking pleasure in pleasing her man perpetuates an idealized notion of femininity. However, the underlying objective is simply product promotion. Large corporations act as the influential entities shaping consumer perceptions, adeptly employing supportive propaganda. By tapping into emotions and pre-existing misconceptions, consumers find themselves entangled in a skewed perception of gender roles.

In Noam Chomsky's propaganda model (Herman & Chomsky, 1988), appears that who rules the media, rules the world, and the media is owned not only by the state but also by big corporations. Brands have the luxury of not only advertising their

38 See (Mahdawi, 2018) Get Impregnated by World Cup Stars and Win Free Whoppers, says Burger King, The Guardian.

products during prime time, but also have a saying in what types of shows the channels are airing. There is less racial diversity and representation of sexual minorities on free channels than on subscription-based television such as Netflix.

Given the extensive history of mass media, a wealth of literature exists that delves into the gender disparities it showcases. Social media, emerging from technological advancements, represents, as I will argue, the latest instrument of propaganda.

### 2.4.2 Social Media

Social media encompasses platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter, allowing users to share ideas and information within virtual communities. These platforms not only facilitate the free expression of opinions but also provide avenues for discussions on a wide range of topics, from political debates to promoting products.

As we delve into the workings of propaganda and its techniques, our primary focus will be on advertising, given that this industry frequently leverages stereotypes to persuade consumers to purchase their products.

We have previously examined the distorted representation of women in film and television; highlighting how those responsible for their creation and distribution exploit gender roles and stereotypes to advance their objectives. However, social media, while often criticized for similar issues, is predominantly user driven. Individuals have the autonomy to choose what, when, and how they present themselves online. Over the past decade, there has been a surge in global social media users. While it is predominantly the younger generation that harness this digital marvel, it is increasingly common to see older individuals, institutions, and even high-profile celebrities leveraging these platforms to engage with their followers.

Celebrities like Beyonce and Kim Kardashian are avid users of Instagram, a leading photo and video-sharing platform, boasting followers in the hundreds of millions. Typically, these renowned figures showcase their lavish lifestyles and, in the case of some female celebrities, enhanced images of their already stunning appearances. With the rise of social media, showcasing talents, achievements, and appearances is now

accessible to the public. Anyone can easily access most of these platforms, presenting their idealized selves to the world.

Brands frequently collaborate with everyday individuals who have amassed large followings. Having a substantial following transforms an individual into an "influencer" in social media parlance. While tobacco and alcohol companies are restricted from sponsoring sports events in many regions, they occasionally leverage prominent Instagram profiles for product placements. However, the most sought-after profiles belong to aesthetically pleasing individuals, especially attractive women. Given that beauty-related hashtags are among the most popular, many cosmetic brands partner with individuals with significant reach, elevating them to influencer status within the beauty realm. These influencers often share (often digitally enhanced) images showcasing the brand's makeup products accompanied by enticing captions promoting them. This approach mirrors traditional advertising featuring paid actors. However, by collaborating with "real" individuals, particularly "real women", the promotional message gains added authenticity.

As previously discussed, Papies suggests that situational cues activate situated conceptualizations (Papies, 2017). Essentially, we tend to mimic the behaviours we observe in others. For instance, when someone greets me, based on societal norms and my own experiences, I instinctively know to return the greeting, unless I have specific reasons not to. The shifting trends in colour preferences, with one hue being celebrated one season and dismissed the next, underscores our tendency as social beings to mirror the tastes and behaviours of those around us. If a model is praised for her slender physique and impeccable style, it's highly likely that others will aspire to replicate her look.

Many successful celebrities are hailed as role models for younger generations[39]. However, many of the most popular female celebrities with substantial social media followings are celebrated more for their beauty[40] than their accomplishments. The rise of social media has significantly amplified the demand for plastic surgeries and cosmetic enhancements[41]. Some Instagram influencers even broadcast their procedures, often sponsored by clinics seeking exposure[42]. Such

[39] See e.g., (Menon, Kar, & Padhy, 2021)
[40] See e.g., (Henriques & Patnaik, 2020)
[41] See e.g., (Thawanyarat, et al., 2023)
[42] See e.g., (Hermans, 2023)

portrayals of idealized women, seamlessly fitting into traditional gender roles, are detrimental. They not only impact their followers, predominantly women, by fostering feelings of inadequacy but also perpetuate and potentially intensify both overt and subtle misogynistic views[43].

Revisiting Adrian, our earlier protagonist, remember that he doesn't view himself as prejudiced. Throughout his life, he's encountered and acknowledged the intellectual equality of women, having been around many intelligent women. However, despite this acknowledgment, he still unconsciously expects women to adhere to societal beauty standards. While this may not be a conscious choice on Adrian's part, stemming from societal influences and unconscious biases, it doesn't make his viewpoint any less concerning.

If we define propaganda as the dissemination of ideas and information from a dominant force – in this context, the media – aiming to shape public opinion, then social media aligns well with this definition. It showcases a skewed version of reality, promoting an unattainable and distorted image of female beauty. As observed, this portrayal can foster and reinforce misogynistic perceptions.

### *2.5 Conclusion*

Through an exploration of the intricate nexus between film, television, and social media, it becomes unmistakably clear that our collective perception of reality is often being intricately and subversively moulded. While propaganda and the distortion of truth have historical roots that stretch far back, especially evident in wartime narratives and political regimes, their modern manifestations are both subtler and more pervasive.

Film and television, historically, have been powerful mediums of this influence. They have often been complicit in perpetuating certain stereotypes, especially gender roles, as was evident from the discussions on advertisements and their portrayals. This is not just a representation of societal beliefs but a reinforcement of them, a cycle that keeps such notions deeply embedded in the societal psyche. However, the rise of social media has added a new dimension to this age-old practice of shaping perceptions.

[43] See e.g., (Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019); (Cohen, Newton-John, & Slater, 2017); (Delforterie, Larsen, Bardone-Cone, & Scholte, 2014); (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018)

The democratization of content on social media platforms paradoxically both empowers and entraps. On one hand, it offers individuals the agency to present their narratives; on the other, it amplifies the reach and impact of these distorted realities. When celebrities and influencers, hailed as role models, portray a reality steeped in perfection, they inadvertently set unrealistic standards, further perpetuated by algorithms that echo these ideals. These platforms, designed to be addictive, enhance the frequency and intensity of exposure to such manipulated narratives, making them the newest, most potent tools of propaganda.

Furthermore, Jason Stanley's perspective on propaganda, although primarily anchored in political domains, finds relevance in our discourse. The 'supportive propaganda' that he discusses resonates with the modus operandi of modern misogynistic advertisements, where ideals are dangled in front of the viewer, but with motives that diverge from those ideals. Such propaganda techniques manipulate already existing beliefs and preconceptions, creating a warped prism through which many, like our protagonist Adrian, view the world.

The insidious nature of these mediums, however, lies in their guise of authenticity. While historically, propaganda was often viewed with a lens of scepticism, the blurring lines between reality and distortion in modern platforms make it increasingly challenging to discern fact from fiction. The term 'fake news', once relegated to the confines of political discussions, now seems relevant in even the most personal and intimate spheres of human interaction.

In synthesizing this vast array of observations, it becomes evident that our understanding of the world, more than ever, is being shaped not just by our experiences but by the orchestrated realities presented to us. The onus, thus, is on us as consumers, scholars, and society at large, to cultivate a discerning eye, question the authenticity of what we consume, and work towards a more informed, less manipulated global consciousness.

# Chapter 3 Misogynistic Beliefs and the Music Industry

## Introduction

The previous chapter looked at how the media, a significant tool for mass communication, often utilizes propaganda to further its objectives. It was underscored that some propagated beliefs can be misleading, potentially causing harm. In the context of this work, which centres on gender equality, we'll further explore situations where women predominantly bear the brunt of such misconceptions.

It's common knowledge that the media, in its broadest sense, isn't always a bastion of truth. Many of us rely on specific news outlets, assuming their credibility and often neglecting to scrutinize the information they provide due to the perceived authority of these sources. For instance, an individual not keenly interested in global economics might not take the extra step to validate the accuracy of recent reports on the Zimbabwean crisis. Though misinformation can be perilous in any context, our primary focus here is on misinformation that perpetuates and solidifies incorrect perceptions about women.

While our immediate surroundings and acquaintances significantly shape our beliefs, the media plays an undeniably large role in moulding public opinion. Another powerful medium in this regard is music, which has the prowess to not only disseminate and bolster misconceptions but also sway individual behaviours.

Historically, pop culture and music have been intertwined. Each epoch had its defining musical genres and narrative–from the jazz and swing of the 20s and 30s to the rock and roll and hippie influences of the 50's and 60's. With technological advancements and societal changes, musical preferences evolved.

MTV's emergence in the early 80s revolutionized the entertainment landscape, marking the rise of music videos. This confluence of visuals and sound provided fans a lens through which they perceived music artists, particularly setting expectations around their appearances. Such expectations predominantly impacted women, a group historically subjected to objectification (Lieb 2018, p. 10). While music, through its melodies and lyrics, evokes emotions, it's vital to understand its influence and behaviour. Though many genres have highlighted gender disparities, it's only evident to label music as an important agent of misinformation.

This chapter will argue that mainstream music doesn't merely perpetuate misconceptions and epistemically deficient narratives but acts as a potent propaganda medium.

### *3.1 Comparison between genres*

Social psychologist Sarah Neff (2014) posits that given the ubiquity of music in our daily existence, it's unavoidable that its conveyed messages seep into our subconscious. What heightens concern is the presence of racist or sexist undertones of these messages (ibid, p. 2).

Music is additionally associated with aspects like "subcultures, the reproduction of inequality, globalization, identity formation, and social movements" (Dowd, 2007, as cited in Neff, 2014, p. 4). If music mirrors cultural and political context from which it emerges, then music from a patriarchal society can shape individual identities and perpetuate inequality. If such music carries sexist undertones, it might lead listeners to embrace sexist beliefs.

Much of the research on sexism within musical genres concludes that hip-hop exhibits more sexist tendencies than other styles. However, sexism and violence aren't solely the domain of rap and hip-hop. It's plausible to consider that heavy metal tracks with comparable themes might influence their listeners in a similar manner.

Neff cites research by Wester et al (1997, p. 498) which determined that fans of heavy metal music displayed more impulsive and antisocial behaviours than those who didn't listen to heavy metal. Based on this, Neff suggests that exposure to sexist lyrics might lead individuals to adopt sexist beliefs (Neff, 2014, p. 4).

While heavy metal and hip-hop differ in many ways, it's notable that hip-hop has achieved a more mainstream presence, amplifying its impact. Consequently, a significant portion of literature addressing sexism in music predominantly centres on rap, hip-hop, and R&B genres (ibid, p. 6).

To demonstrate that certain music genres can exhibit greater sexism than others, Neff examined the top ten songs from 2013 across six different genres: rap, hip-hop, country, rock, alternative, and dance (ibid, p. 7).

Neff aimed to identify five specific sexist themes: the depiction of women in conventional gender roles, the representation of women as subordinate to men, the

portrayal of women as mere objects, the characterization of women based on stereotypes, and the depiction of violence directed towards women (ibid, p. 9).

The methodology used involved analysing ten popular songs from six distinct genres, drawing from the U.S. music industry's standard record chart, the Billboard, as a reference. Given that the Billboard maintains a separate list for rap and hip-hop, Neff chose to consider them as two distinct genres for her study.

Having chosen the top ten songs from the six aforementioned genres, Neff then delved into the lyrics, scrutinizing them for indications of the five sexist themes:

1) Depiction of women in customary gender roles (e.g., in domestic settings like the kitchen or attending to children)
2) Representation of women and femininity as being subordinate to men or masculinity (e.g., characterizing women as weak, naïve, or ridiculing romantic notions)
3) Depiction of women as objects, be it sexual or otherwise (e.g., "that ass", "she's all mine")
4) Characterization of women based on cliched stereotypes (e.g., being portrayed as opportunistic and untrustworthy etc.)
5) Depiction of violent actions or coercion directed at women (e.g., hints of sexual aggression, physical harm, or homicide (ibid).

Neff determined from her research that hip-hop, and rap were undeniably the most sexist genres. Furthermore, she found that rock enthusiast gravitates towards songs about surmounting challenges and personal struggles, while country aficionados have a penchant for love songs. The primary narrative in rap and hip-hop revolves around rising above poverty and racial prejudice to achieve success. As Neff puts it "These genres protest 'the system' that discriminates against them and focus on gaining monetary wealth, fame, sexual gratification, and power over others" (ibid, p. 23).

### 3.1.1 Misogynistic Ideology in Gangsta Rap (lyrics)

The current incarnation of rap, which often communicates violent and misogynistic themes, hasn't always been this way. Like all musical genres, it has evolved

over time, reflecting the culture it represents. Emerging in the late 1970s in New York, rap was initially an artistic expression of urban African American youth. Terri M. Adams and Douglas B. Fuller contend that rap gave a voice to the youth frequently sidelined due to their racial and socio-economic backgrounds (Adams & Fuller, 2006, p. 938).

While contemporary rap music is often criticized for its blatant misogynistic themes, it didn't adopt this tone until the late 1980s (ibid, p. 939). Adams & Fuller define misogyny in gangsta rap as "the promotion, glamourisation, support, humorization, justification, or normalization of oppressive ideas about women" (ibid, p. 940). Further, they contend that within this rap subgenre, women are reduced to commodities, primarily seen as objects for male sexual gratification and otherwise considered burdensome. According to Adams & Fuller, this imparts negative perceptions of women to the listeners. As a result, these perceptions validate, perpetuate, and instil ideas, values, beliefs, and stereotypes that diminish women (ibid, p. 940).

To classify a genre as misogynistic rap, Adams & Fuller contend that it must exhibit one or more of the following thematic criteria: a) disparaging remarks about women, especially in a sexual context; b) mentions of violent acts directed at women, notably those of a sexual nature; c) allusions to women as sources of problems for men; e) indications that women are subordinate to men; f) portrayals of women as entities to be utilized and then discarded. In Adams & Fuller's assessment, these themes capture the portrayal of women in such music genres, where they are diminished to less than human status, deemed unworthy of respect, affection, or empathy (ibid).

According to Adams & Fuller, the incorporation of misogynistic elements by certain rap artists appears to be growing in popularity. The intensity of misogyny in their tracks can span from subtle hints to severe denigrations. Even in songs that aren't overtly misogynistic, references to women as "bitches" or "hoes" can still be prevalent (ibid, p. 941).

Adams & Fuller suggest that misogynistic perspectives are rooted more in cultural values than in music itself, given that music simply mirrors societal dynamics and cultural norms. The danger with music that carries misogynistic messages, they assert, is that it can numb listeners to issues like sexual harassment, exploitation, violence against women, and abuse. They argue that such music acts as an ideological prop, reinforcing and justifying the disrespect and debasement of women. (ibid, p. 953).

### 3.1.2 The New Gender Relation in Hip-Hop (music videos)

Given that we exist in a Post-MTV age, merely examining a song's lyrics is insufficient to gauge the potential harm misogyny poses. Modern mainstream music melds both visual and auditory elements. Consequently, a comprehensive examination of gangsta rap music videos becomes imperative. For this purpose, we'll delve into the studies conducted by media sociology experts Melinda C. R. Burgess and Sandra Burpo (2012).

In their study titled "The Effect of Music Videos on College Students' Perceptions of Rape," Burgess and Burpo investigate the impact of sexualized depictions of female artists in music videos on college students' views on date rape. Their approach involved randomly selecting 132 college students to watch music videos that displayed either high or low levels of sexual content and objectification. Subsequently, these students were asked to judge a date rape situation between a young man and woman. The study revealed that the majority of male participants who watched the highly sexualized videos felt less guilt and showed less empathy towards the victim. On the other hand, female participants who watched the same highly sexualized videos were more inclined to blame the female victim for the date rape incident.

## *3.2 Music Videos and Consumerism*

In her article titled "Shake it Baby Shake It: Consumption and the New Gender Relation in Hip Hop," Margaret Hunter (2011) delves into hip-hop's evolving relationship with consumerism and materialism. With hip-hop's recent emphasis on entrepreneurship and branding, Hunter posits that the genre has transitioned into a realm where its experience is largely rooted in consumption rather than creation (ibid, p. 15).

Hunter contends that music videos often revolve around a pornographic aesthetic that she describes as "the mainstreaming of pornography" (ibid, p. 17). What's particularly concerning is the commonplace nature of this phenomenon. Unlike traditional pornography, these music videos permeate everyday spaces like gyms and bars and are routinely viewed and downloaded by millions of young individuals.

Given the widespread accessibility of these 'pornographic' visuals to young adults and teenagers, Hunter posits that music videos shape their understanding of

sexual relationships. Hunter grounds her inquiry on prior studies in the domain, such as the research by Ward et al (2005), which examined the impact of music videos on adolescent behaviour (Hunter, 2011, p. 31).

Ward et al (2005) employed a method where students were shown mainstream commercial music videos that contained prominent stereotyping. Their results indicated that prolonged exposure to sexist music videos reinforced gender role stereotypes. Students with more exposure to such videos were more likely to subscribe to gender-based stereotypes, such as the idea of men having an exaggerated sexual desire and women existing to satisfy that desire.

Hunter centres her study on the commercial dimension of Hip-hop, emphasizing its ubiquity in daily life, which she believes is what makes it potentially harmful. In its nascent stages, Hip-hop was a powerful medium of creativity, unity, and social commentary. However, as Hunter points out, there was a notable shift in the early 90s from an emphasis on cultural creation to one of consumption. This transition was driven by the increasing demand from predominantly white audiences (ibid, p. 16).

Since the inception of MTV in the early 80s, the portrayal of gender stereotypes in music videos has sparked significant discussion, particularly concerning the autonomy women possess in deciding to be depicted in a sexualized and objectified manner. While celebrity culture often hails female sexuality as "empowering," the debate persists: is such empowerment through nudity and objectification a genuine choice made by women, or is it yet another directive from a patriarchal society? (ibid).

The contemporary incarnation of hip-hop heavily emphasizes images of black criminality and hyper-sexuality (Armstrong, 2003, as cited in Hunter, 2011, p. 16). As hip-hop transitioned from its roots of amplifying the voices of marginalized communities into a commercial juggernaut, it now offers more than just music to its consumers. This includes ringtones, magazines, fragrances, footwear, vehicles, clothing lines, alcoholic beverages, and much more. As a result, Hunter posits that rap music is marketing not just songs, sex, or politics but an entire 'lifestyle' (ibid).

The "lifestyle product" is shaped by the myriad of commodities now linked to hip-hop. To mimic the rap lifestyle, which revolves around images of cars, women, drugs, and strip clubs, consumers can purchase various products. This notion of a lifestyle is further cemented through lyrics, music videos, and relentless marketing (ibid).

Mainstream Hip-Hop is driven by commerce and aims for profitability. Its primary intention is to compel listeners to make a purchase. As Hunter describes, the performances and overarching messages are crafted to sway a viewer's actions, from humming the tune and mimicking dance routines to purchasing the song and sharing its video (ibid, p. 18). Music videos essentially serve as commercials for the songs they represent, and a significant element of these commercials are the women who 'embellish' them.

The concept of the male gaze is prevalent in feminist writings and refers to the portrayal of women in visual arts and literature from a male-centric viewpoint. Hunter contends that in the realm of music videos, women are often portrayed in terms of their body parts linked to sexuality. This is particularly evident in rap videos where women are presented as objectified items, often shown with men showering money on their scantily-clad figures (ibid).

The portrayal of women as sexual objects has led to the emergence of a subculture centered on strip clubs and the sex trade. Several prominent tracks in the gangsta rap genre have integrated narratives about women in the role of sex workers. Notably, the hit song "P.I.M.P" by 50 Cent delves into this theme, as indicated by its title, exploring the dynamic between prostitutes and their clients (ibid, p. 17).

According to Roni Sarig (2007), strip clubs hold significant importance in the contemporary hip-hop scene, not just culturally, but economically too. DJs often debut potential rap singles in these venues. If a track gains traction in the strip club environment, it typically progresses to mainstream club rotations and eventually radio broadcasts (Sarig, 2007, as cited by Hunter, 2011, p. 17).

Central to Hunter's exploration is the evolving representation of women within this dynamic music genre. While the '90s saw a rise in successful female rappers such as Queen Latifah and Lauren Hill, their prominence in the current scene has dwindled (ibid). While the spotlight on female black rappers may have dimmed, women haven't faded from the scene. In fact, the presence of female video dancers has been on the rise. In Hunter's words "As video dancers, women of colour are represented as interchangeable bodies instead of active voices. The role of the video dancer has become increasingly important as many mainstream hip-hop magazines such as XXL, King, and Vibe feature favourite dancers and even offer "centrefold" pictures of them similar to traditional pornography magazines (ibid, p. 18).

Hunter posits that three key discourses are influencing the evolution of gender dynamics: (1) the normalization of pornographic culture, (2) the rise of black capitalism and consumerism, and (3) the prevailing colourblind racism in the post-Civil Rights era (ibid).

Firstly, the increasing trend of sexualizing youth culture, heavily propagated by media, is primarily heteronormative and focuses on the perspective of the male viewer. Secondly, the diminishing socioeconomic mobility of the working-class black community has coincided with the rising American emphasis on consumerism. Lastly, while white audiences began to consume these products, they remained detached from the struggles and pain of the black community. Hunter contends that these three societal shifts have influenced the portrayal of black sexuality and gender dynamics in modern mainstream hip-hop (ibid).

The emphasis on consumerism and strip club culture in rap is evident through its music videos, indicating that hip-hop videos aren't merely promotional tools for songs, but also platforms for various product placements. Hunter points out that, much like feature films, rap videos are now teeming with sponsored product placements, from Nike sneakers and Blackberry devices to cars and beyond. A prime illustration of the rising commercialization in rap music is Lil Wayne's music video for his chart-topping "Lollipop." The video, filmed in Las Vegas, features one of the world's largest limousines available for party bookings. Hunter notes that when viewers tune into a music video, they're also exposed to the rapper's preferred clothing brands, shoes, and beverages — items which the artist may be selling or endorsing (ibid, p. 19).

Hunter references Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption to explain the consumption patterns evident in hip-hop. Veblen posited that the upper echelons of society set trends that the lower classes strive to emulate. For these elites, purchasing items with limited practicality at exorbitant prices becomes a means to flaunt their elevated status. Veblen's theory indicates that such ostentatious displays of affluence play a role in demarcating class distinctions. While Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption resonates with the behaviours seen in mainstream hip-hop, there's a notable distinction between the 18th-century elite Veblen referenced and contemporary rappers. Hunter points out that modern-day rappers are often tied to urban and street backgrounds (ibid).

Hunter, much like Neff (2014) employs the Billboard music chart to evaluate top-performing rap singles and their corresponding music videos, placing an emphasis on the videos. As Hunter articulates, “This article only analyses chart-topping, commercially successful rap because it is the most widely viewed and heard…. [l]ooking at mainstream rap also ensures that I am not choosing 'extreme examples,' but rather the most popular trends and patterns” (Hunter, 2011, p. 20).

Hunter identified several consistent themes prevalent in mainstream rap, all of which are linked to consumption, either directly or indirectly. According to Hunter, within this contemporary hip-hop paradigm, gender dynamics are framed through the consumption of luxury brands, including designer clothing, jewellery, footwear, and vehicles. This stems directly from the commercial prominence that hip-hop has achieved. In her words “As hip-hop has become more commercialized and connected to an ever-increasing number of product lines, that pattern has intersected with the way relations between men and women are portrayed in lyrics and music videos” (ibid, p. 21).

In her analysis, Hunter examines rapper T. I.'s song and accompanying music video "Whatever You Like". In the video, T. I. takes on the central role, promising his romantic interest a plethora of luxurious items. While the song may be framed as a romantic gesture, Hunter contends that it essentially portrays a relationship driven by material consumption and power dynamics (ibid, p. 22).

Hunter also points to rapper Kanye West, who during her study was seen as one of the less 'traditional' rappers. Even though he didn't lean as heavily into themes of consumption and gender relations, they were still present in his work. A case in point is his song "Flashing Lights", which, while narrating a love story, intertwines the narrative with their shared affinity for luxury consumption. As Hunter puts it, "Their bond transcends mere affection or attraction; it's rooted in material goods" (ibid, p. 24).

According to Hunter, one of the driving factors behind hip-hop's consumer-driven narratives is the inclusion of product placements and collaborative marketing agreements. Furthermore, the motif of the strip-club and sex work is another prevalent form of consumption explored in hip-hop. Hunter posits that this form of consumption, characterized by men paying women for sexual services, has a transnational dimension. The prevalence of strip club culture in popular consciousness can be attributed in large part to its frequent representation in hip-hop (ibid, p. 25).

Hunter employs the "black sexual politics" framework to understand these evolving sexual dynamics centered around monetary transactions. Within these music videos, men and women of colour are portrayed using extreme stereotypes. Men are depicted as aggressively sexual and prone to violence, while women are reduced to mere objects of male desire. Strip club culture has redefined gender roles in hip-hop videos, notably in the realm of dance. Dance has transitioned from a mutual activity shared by both genders to one where women perform for men, who in response, shower them with money (ibid, p. 26). Hunter posits that this portrayal of dance carries significant economic connotations (ibid, p. 28).

### 3.2.1 Gender Roles in the Music Industry

From the research on sexism in music, it is evident that rap presents significant issues, both in its lyrics and visual representations in music videos. With the limited visibility of female rappers in this genre, primarily appearing as erotic background dancers, it raises questions about a woman's position within the broader music industry. Many argue that it's more challenging for women to gain prominence in genres that don't accentuate their femininity. Essentially, harder genres like gangsta rap and rock are often seen as the domain of men, while the more sensual and softer genres are reserved for women.

Kristen J. Lieb's (2018) book, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry* delves into the gendered landscape of the post-MTV era, highlighting the emergence of today's best-selling female artists. Lieb contends that the music industry is as deeply intertwined with notions of gender, sexuality, and racial norms as it is influenced by profit motives (ibid, p. 11). Her primary objective is to examine the journeys of high-profile female pop artists, understanding their ascent to fame and the secrets behind their enduring success. Her research indicates that the trajectories of male and female musical careers diverge markedly, particularly in the age of MTV and music videos. To that end, Lieb focuses on female pop icons from 1981, when MTV was launched, through to 2018.

Nearly four decades ago, a music channel emerged, reshaping the cultural landscape by pairing visuals with music. This visual shift led audiences to form specific expectations of an artist's appearance. As MTV began to emphasize female beauty and

sexuality, it effectively set a new aesthetic standard for stardom, side-lining many talented artists who didn't fit the mould. Lieb highlights the example of Bonnie Tyler's music video for "Total Eclipse of the Heart" (Tyler, 1983). In the video, Tyler's face is barely discernible, with deliberate editing choices blurring her features whenever she appears on screen. While such tactics were used in Tyler's era, the present-day industry has evolved, with the advent of plastic surgery and photoshop making idealized beauty more attainable and, consequently, more in demand.

Lieb contends that these heightened standards of beauty, allure, youth, and flawlessness further perpetuate the objectification of women, who have historically faced such challenges. However, she posits that there exists a "success formula" which only a select group of successful female artists have managed to harness. This formula involves striking a balance: captivating male audiences with their physical allure, while delivering meaningful lyrical content that resonates with female listeners (Lieb, 2018, p.12).

Beyonce, Fergie, and Nicki Minaj are among the select few who, as Lieb puts it, have masterfully executed this strategy. Their achievements extend beyond just music, branching out into fashion lines, perfumes, and opportunities in TV and film, solidifying their dominance. Yet, this golden formula is essential but not a guarantee for success. Only a handful have managed to ascend the industry's ladder of success, and they often leaned heavily on their sex appeal. As Lieb astutely points out, there's limited room for artists like Kelly Clarkson or Adele who predominantly rely on their vocal prowess to drive record sales (ibid, p. 20).

Advancements in media have led to greater scrutiny of celebrities' careers and personal lives. Cable channels, magazines, and websites showcase these stars continuously. This constant exposure poses the risk of the ever-demanding audience growing tired of these artists if they stagnate. Maintaining youth, beauty, and allure are the enduring attributes of value. Aside from these constants, celebrities must evolve in tandem with the shifting cultural landscape (ibid, p.21).

The growing influence of the media, including MTV, amplified the strength of brands, sparking intense competition among labels. These labels vied to capture the purchasing power of young, trend-conscious viewers by engaging with them wherever they were - be it at home watching MTV, attending live concerts, or in recent times, navigating popular online platforms (ibid, p.20).

According to Lieb, Lady Gaga is a prime example of an artist who achieved success by blending sex appeal with cultural relevance. However, Lieb contends that despite Gaga's iconic declaration of "I am a free bitch," she isn't truly liberated because she adheres to the standard formula for pop stardom. Lieb suggests, while in theory she might approach the music industry on her own terms, if the sole avenue to stardom for female artists emphasizes sex and shock over musical ability, then the idea of artist autonomy becomes almost irrelevant. Within the context set by Lieb, Beyonce's career offers a compelling study. Recognized by both aficionados and critics as a transformative figure in pop music, Beyonce's unique approach intertwines universal stories with cultural resonance, distinguishing her from her peers. However, Lieb posits that Beyonce primarily markets a contemporary rendition of sensual allure, complemented by intricate dance sequences and captivating stage designs (ibid, p.17).

A notable example of Beyonce's branding strategies was her performance under a massive "Feminist" banner at the MTV Music Awards in 2014. The brief six-second display of the poster during a fifteen-minute performance raises questions about its genuine intent or if it was a deliberate move for cultural alignment, as suggested by Lieb. She contends, “having encoded the norms of the industry expertly, Beyonce and her handlers knew how far to push it, and how much to conform” (ibid). Post-2016, Beyonce's brand underwent a transformation, evolving from the 'quintessential seductive deity' persona to that of a socially aware black activist attuned to the turbulent political landscape. This shift proved fruitful, Lieb believes, as Beyonce began to speak for and uplift vast communities historically side-lined in popular culture narratives(ibid, p.18).

Understanding the impact of media influence is complex, and there's no definitive formula to explain its reach. The debate about whether media, including celebrities, can profoundly shape our perceptions, or whether we as an audience not only possess the power to resist such influences but also set the agenda, is ongoing among both scholars and the public. To gain insight into this intricate issue, Lieb proposes using a common framework in sociological cultural analysis known as the cultural diamond. This model allows us to examine the sociological dynamics that affect the creation and perception of female pop stars like Beyonce and the products associated with them (ibid).

The cultural diamond is a framework comprising four interconnected elements: the social world, the cultural object, the creator, and the receiver. Each element is deeply intertwined and continuously influences the others. The social world encompasses all forms of social interactions, including structured institutions like families, schools, and governments, as well as informal social connections. Within this framework, the cultural object refers to the female artist, such as a pop star. The creator in the cultural diamond denotes individuals or groups responsible for crafting and disseminating the symbols and narratives prevalent in society. In the realm of music, 'the creator' encompasses all those who contribute to crafting the image, messages, and narratives of pop stars - this includes producers, publicists, bloggers, and more. Lastly, the receiver in this model symbolizes the audience or those who interpret and respond to these shared symbols and messages (ibid).

Lieb proposes integrating multiple theoretical perspectives to fully grasp the intricate cultural dynamics at play. Within this context, the cultural diamond serves as an overarching framework that encompasses other theories examined in her work. Specifically, she delves into critical theory and symbolic interactionism, two distinct yet valuable lenses to understand how female pop stars are crafted, maintained, and perceived. Critical theory contends that the media, driven by profit motives, wields control over the masses, supplying them with superficial entertainment that perpetuates dominant ideologies (ibid, p.19).

David Grazian (2010) posits that the media, by reinforcing prevailing ideologies, exerts control over and capitalizes on its audiences. Media entities have the power to shape desires, reinforce stereotypes, and influence human perceptions. This capability can also perpetuate societal disparities by continuously promoting demeaning images of women (Grazian, 2010, as cited by Lieb, 2018, p. 19 ).

Another theoretical perspective that Lieb suggests for examining the dynamics of miscommunication is the uses and gratification theory. The methodology consumers employ to interpret messages is intricate and constantly evolves with technological advancements. The conventional model of mass communication encompasses a sender conveying a specific intent, which is then disseminated via a medium to the recipient. The onus subsequently lies on the recipient to decipher the conveyed message's significance. Some communication scholars posit that individuals interpret certain

messages through rational reasoning, while others are processed emotionally[44]. As a result, individuals might either embrace or dismiss gender-biased marketing based on their mode of message interpretation. Therefore, it's essential to engage with media messages critically to sidestep adverse media impacts. The core principle of the uses and gratification theory is that individuals actively choose their media consumption based on their needs, whether it's for simple entertainment, distraction, or solace. They are not compelled to engage with any content against their preferences (ibid, p. 21).

The concept of an artist embodying a brand is gaining traction in scholarly discourse. Artists are positioning themselves as distinct commodities in the competitive realm of culture. Given that celebrities inherently become brands, they undergo 'commodification'. As Lieb articulates, pop stars are crafted not just to maximize earnings but also to strike a chord with their audiences... these celebrities evolve into fluid brands that preserve core narratives yet tailor their expressions through music. Concurrently, the audience, or receivers, endeavour to interpret and derive their own understanding from these cultural presentations (ibid, p. 23).

Celebrity culture adversely affects both the stars and their audiences. While product brands remain relatively stable, celebrities as brands are fluid and ever-changing. Particularly for female pop stars, this fluidity suggests a limited career duration. Therefore, they must capitalize on their status during its peak. Essentially, a female pop star, who leans heavily on her physicality and looks, must quickly navigate and even shape cultural trends, given the fleeting nature of her career (ibid, p. 25).

The post-MTV music era is heavily influenced by gender dynamics. By providing audiences with both auditory and visual content, consumers developed and later standardized expectations for the appearance of female pop stars. This set the stage for heightened pressures on female artists to adhere to specific beauty standards. As a result, a combination of sex appeal, cultural resonance, and relevance emerged as the formula for success in the industry. Such dynamics are particularly detrimental to women, reinforcing historical patterns of objectification. This impact isn't limited to celebrities alone but also affects everyday women who aspire to emulate them.

[44] For discussion on the role of emotions in decision making see e.g., (Lerner, Li, Valdesolo, & Kassam, 2015)

### *3.3 The Epistemic Merit Model*

In her 2002 article titled "Understanding Propaganda: The Epistemic Merit Model and its Application to Art," Sheryl Tuttle Ross introduces a refined model of propaganda, particularly tailored to the realm of art propaganda. Ross contends that many instances of propaganda are disseminated through artistic mediums, such as posters, novels, and films. She believes that existing definitions, as posited by propaganda analysts, fail to encompass the nuances of propaganda when intertwined with art, and thus don't truly reflect our contemporary understanding of the term.

The prevalent perception of propaganda is its role in influencing someone's beliefs. Yet, as Ross points out, such an oversimplified definition can encompass even mundane actions like advising your child to sleep. Labelling propaganda as just an act of persuasion suggests that almost any conversational context can be seen as propagandistic. Ross believes this not only broadens the scope excessively but also dilutes the negative connotation that the term "propaganda" has come to embody in modern times. Alternate definitions of propaganda, like the one suggested by Alfred Lee (1953), provide more specific criteria. According to Lee, propaganda doesn't just encompass persuasion; it also aims to sway the views and actions of a larger audience (Lee 1953, as referenced by Ross, 2002, p. 17). While Ross acknowledges that Lee's definition offers a refinement, she believes it remains too vague because it doesn't specify the nature of the audience that must be influenced for something to be labelled as propaganda.

More contemporary definitions, such as the one put forth by Noam Chomsky, add additional criteria to prior models. These definitions suggest that the persuasion aiming to sway public opinion and actions should originate from a dominant entity, such as a government, institution, or a particular cause. Furthermore, for an act of persuasion to qualify as propaganda, there must be a deliberate intention behind it, signifying a clear aim to persuade. In contrasting Ross' and Stanley's (2017) interpretations of propaganda, both converge on the significance of intentionality. Ross points out that propaganda is defined by conscious intent to persuade, while Stanley also recognises that even sincere efforts can constitute propaganda. Ross' definition mentioned above can be framed within the Sender-Message-Receiver model. Here, the sender is the political organization, institution, or cause, which intentionally conveys a message with

the goal of swaying the beliefs or behaviours of its target audience, known as the receiver (Ross, 2002, p. 18).

Many academics, including Ross, concur that propaganda has a political dimension. However, Ross points out that there's a divergence in opinions on what precisely defines the political sphere. Ross builds her definition of propaganda on prior understandings of the term, and she believes it's essential to break down the inherent conditions it entails. These mandatory conditions are: (1) a deliberate intention to persuade, (2) targeting a significant societal group, and (3) representing a political entity, organization, or cause. However, for Ross, these conditions, while necessary, don't fully capture the negative connotation that the term "propaganda" has taken on over time (ibid, p. 25).

The negative perception of propaganda stems from its association with emotional appeals, deceit, and psychological tactics. Given that propaganda often hinges on manipulating emotions and perceptions, Ross suggests classifying it as "epistemically flawed." She explains that misinformation, weak arguments, unethical directives, and inappropriate metaphors are examples of such flaws. Ross further posits that even a factually accurate statement can be flawed in its epistemic value. For instance, she cites a brand of aspirin claiming its unmatched efficacy. While this may be a truthful statement, it's epistemically misleading since all aspirin brands share the same chemical makeup (ibid, p. 23).

The 'defectiveness' in this message stems from the brand's use of psychological manipulation to promote its product. This kind of manipulation is central to the spread of propaganda. As a result, Ross contends that labelling propaganda as epistemically flawed is most appropriate. Stanley (2017) also characterises propaganda as a “flawed ideological belief” (Stanley 2017, p. 43), where for instance, effective advertising capitalizes on flawed ideologies that link material possessions to aesthetic value (ibid, p. 56). This notion of epistemic flaw serves as the cornerstone of Ross' characterization of propaganda. Recognizing that art frequently serves propagandistic purposes, Ross underscores the need to differentiate between art with political themes and political art that qualifies as propaganda. Ross's epistemic merit model allows for a clear distinction, as it comprises "four essential criteria for identifying propaganda" (ibid). These are: (1) a message with epistemic flaws, (2) delivered with the intent to influence, (3) targeting

the views, feelings, desires, and actions of a notable societal group, and (4) representing a political entity, institution, or motive (ibid, p. 25).

Because art conveys messages through symbols, icons, or metaphors rather than direct arguments, it's essential to understand how these messages can deceive people. The epistemic merit model is particularly valuable in real-world situations as it allows us to identify instances of propaganda "using traditional philosophical tools of epistemic evaluation" (ibid, p. 29).

A prime example of art as propaganda, Ross cites, is the film "Dead Man Walking" directed by Tim Robbins. The movie narrates the fictional tale of a man found guilty of rape and sentenced to death. As he awaits execution, he forges a profound relationship with a nun who visits him in prison to share the teachings of Christ. The culmination of the film showcases the man's execution, with his position on the execution table and the nun's gaze through the window symbolizing Christ's crucifixion for humanity's sins. Tim Robbins, an advocate for human rights, has affirmed that this was the intended message for the audience. This example qualifies as propaganda by satisfying the criteria of Ross' epistemic merit model. Firstly, it is associated with a political objective, namely the campaign against the death penalty. Secondly, it is crafted with the deliberate aim of influencing a significant group of people, in this case, the audience targeted by film director Tim Robbins. Thirdly, according to Ross, it incorporates an epistemically defective message, exemplified by the metaphorical likening of a convicted murder to Christ. Ross argues that "inapt metaphors" of this kind, are a species of epistemically defective messages (ibid, p. 28).

### 3.3.1 Sex, Drugs and Hip-hop

Social psychologist Sarah Neff in her 2014 study, posits that given the ubiquity of music in our daily experiences, the underlying messages within it are bound to seep into our subconscious. The alarm is raised when some of these embedded messages carry undertones of racism or sexism. Rap music, in particular, has been spotlighted for its potentially problematic lyrics and accompanying music videos (ibid, p. 2).

Researchers examining this genre have often employed consistent methodologies, analysing top-ranking songs on the Billboard charts and the most viewed and liked videos on YouTube to identify instances of sexism.

In 2017, the song "Gucci Gang" by rapper Lil Pump was among the top 100 on the Billboard chart and garnered nearly a billion views on YouTube. This track glorifies consumerism, with the rapper mentioning numerous luxury brands throughout the song. Much like other songs in the same genre, it also contains references to drugs and sex workers.

> My bitch love do cocaine, ooh
> I fuck a bitch, I forgot her name
> I can't buy no bitch no wedding ring
> Rather go and buy Balmains, aye
> Gucci gang, Gucci gang, Gucci gang. (Lil Pump, Murray, & Nealy, 2017)

The rapper uses the term 'bitch' to describe his romantic interest(s) and mentions their shared interest in cocaine. Even though he boasts about his ability to purchase whatever he wants, he declines to buy a wedding ring for the woman interested in cocaine, suggesting he can't even remember her name.

In that same year, for only the fourth time in the history of the Billboard Top 100 chart, a female rapper named Cardi B secured a number one single. At first glance, this achievement seems progressive given the past underrepresentation of women in this genre. However, when one considers the prevalent sexist references in her music, this achievement is clouded with concerns. Utilizing gender stereotypes and self-objectification, the female rapper, even with her newfound platform, seemingly continues to play into the male-centric narrative, resembling the background dancers that Neff and others have critiqued in their works.

> Bitch, I'm who they tryna be
> Look, I might just chill in some Bape
> My pussy feel like a lake
> He wanna swim with his face
> I'm like okay
> I'll let him do what he want
> He buy me Yves Saint Laurent (Cardi B, et al., 2017).

The artist's lyrics discuss exchanging intimate acts for luxury items, while other women, derogatorily labelled, envy her lavish lifestyle.

One could claim that openly discussing sexuality is a sign of empowerment, a stance often taken by advocates of sex-positive feminism. Yet, this might reflect the limited options women in the music industry face, or as Gail Dines (2018) describes it, a choice between "fuckability versus invisibility" (Dines, 2018, p. 105).

As Lieb (2018) contends, the blueprint for a female pop star's success is versatile and spans across various genres. This blueprint emphasizes the use of sex appeal, self-objectification, cultural pertinence, and importantly, cultural resonance. According to Lieb, establishing cultural resonance is a fundamental cornerstone for achievement. Simply put, without the audience's endorsement, an artist won't find success. This suggests that the public holds significant sway in determining who they wish to hear and see.

While I concur, that audiences possess the autonomy to select the media they consume, whether it's music, television, or other art forms, I believe this perspective is overly simplistic, presenting a mere illusion of choice. If Lieb's assertion regarding the limited options available to female pop stars holds true, the same can be said for their audience. As a result, if the media is driven by profit and seeks to perpetuate prevailing ideologies, then, despite the perceived autonomy of the audience, they are limited to choosing from what is presented to them. This suggests that given the prevalent framework that glorifies youth, sexuality, and beauty, the media will predominantly capitalize on these very aspects.

Sheryl Tuttle Ross (2002) contends that her definition of propaganda offers a clearer distinction between "political art and political art that qualifies as propaganda". Given its potential to identify propaganda in everyday contexts, I propose we employ her epistemic merit model to assess whether contemporary mainstream music can be categorized as propaganda.

In summary, Ross's epistemic merit model outlines "four essential conditions that qualify something as propaganda" (ibid). These conditions include (1) a message that is epistemically flawed[45], (2) conveyed with an intent to persuade, (3) targeting the

[45] Ross asserts that propaganda does not necessarily entail falsehoods; indeed, truthful statements can be employed within messages that are epistemically defective. This underscores the complexity of propaganda, highlighting that its defining feature is not the veracity of its content, but rather the intent and methodology of its dissemination.

beliefs, opinions, desires, and behaviours of a significant societal group, and (4) representing a political organization, institution, or cause (ibid). Additionally, while Ross believes propaganda has a political nature, she acknowledges the ambiguity surrounding what defines the political domain (ibid).

While some might contend that gender disparities are inherently 'political', I won't press that assertion. To align our discussion with Ross's epistemic merit model, I propose we adopt a distinct definition of propaganda as provided by Richard Allan Nelson (Nelson, 1996). Nelson's interpretation closely mirrors Ross's, with one notable distinction. Whereas Ross posits that the 'sender' of a propaganda message must stem from a political organization, institution, or cause, Nelson expands this by suggesting that influencing beliefs and actions can also serve commercial objectives.

By introducing 'commercial objectives' into the equation, we are now equipped to apply the epistemic merit model to reveal epistemically flawed messages in mainstream music lyrics, such as rap, and suggest that they can be categorized as propaganda.

To undertake this, let's examine each of Ross's conditions for classifying something as propaganda and determine if they can be applied to the mainstream gangsta rap genre, which Hunter (2011) labels as 'commercial'.

The initial criterion for classifying something as propaganda is its conveyance of "an epistemically defective message" (Ross, 2002). In many hip-hop songs, the conveyed message often perpetuates stereotypes about women, their sexuality, and gender roles, frequently casting women as subordinate figures subservient to men.

The second criterion in Ross's framework is the element of persuasion. This persuasive intent is evident in the mainstream music industry's profit-driven motives. The industry aims to influence and captivate its audience by offering them entertainment that reinforces prevailing ideologies.

The third condition outlined by Ross pertains to the influence aimed at shaping the beliefs, desires, and behaviours of a socially significant group. Studies conducted by scholars in sociology and psychology, examining the impact of lyrics and music videos on young adults, have shown that exposure to sexist and violent music and videos can lead to reduced feelings of guilt and empathy among males who view highly sexualized content. Additionally, David Grazian (2010) argues that media industries possess the ability to create desires, perpetuate stereotypes, and shape human cognition, thereby

potentially perpetuating social inequality through the reinforcement of demeaning stereotypes about women.

The fourth and final condition in Ross's framework stipulates that this persuasion must be carried out on behalf of a political organization, institution, or cause. However, I have introduced an extension to this condition based on Nelson's definition of propaganda, suggesting that the persuasion can also serve commercial purposes. Commercial purposes can be attributed either to brands or to artists themselves, who function as brands, seeking to achieve 'commercial' success within the industry.

If we accept the premise put forth by Neff et al which suggests that music, being an integral part of our daily lives, can convey messages that deeply influence our subconscious, especially when those messages are epistemically flawed and potentially harmful. Moreover, if these messages are intentionally crafted for commercial reasons and targeted at a broad audience, it becomes reasonable to categorize certain music genres as forms of propaganda.

### *3.4 Conclusion*

This chapter has delved into the complex and multifaceted relationship between mainstream music, particularly within the hip-hop and rap genres, and the concept of propaganda. Through an exploration of Sheryl Tuttle Ross's epistemic merit model and Richard Allan Nelson's definition of propaganda, we have examined how these frameworks can be applied to contemporary music, specifically gangsta rap, which has often been characterized as 'commercial' in nature.

We have identified four crucial conditions that need to be met for something to be considered propaganda according to Ross's model: an epistemically defective message, the intention to persuade, the targeting of beliefs, desires, and behaviours in a socially significant group, and the endorsement of this persuasion on behalf of a political organization, institution, or cause. With the addition of Nelson's inclusion of commercial purposes, we expanded the definition to encompass instances where music may serve commercial interests.

Applying these conditions to mainstream hip-hop and rap, we found that there is a compelling argument to categorize certain songs and themes within these genres as a form of propaganda. Such music often perpetuates stereotypes about women, engages

in gender ideology that relegates women to secondary roles, and may have the intent to persuade listeners to adopt these beliefs and attitudes. Additionally, the influence of such music on the beliefs and behaviours of a socially significant group, particularly among young adults, is supported by research findings that indicate a desensitization to sexist and violent content.

While this exploration does not assert that all mainstream music within these genres qualifies as propaganda, it highlights the importance of critically examining the messages conveyed through music and the potential impact on listeners. It underscores the need for further research and discourse on the subject, acknowledging the power of music as both an artistic expression and a potentially influential medium for propagating ideas, whether they be political, commercial, or social in nature.

# Chapter 4 The Epistemic Injustice of Mansplaining

## Introduction

In 2014, writer Rebecca Solnit published an essay entitled “Men explaining things to me” in which she illustrates one of the many occurrences in which men explained to her in a condescending fashion. Roughly, the crux of the matter is that men seemingly believe that no matter what a woman says, a man always knows better.

The essay narrates the phenomenon of women being silenced by men, which, as Solnit argues, is an infringement on women’s liberties and as such, can have dangerous consequences.

Shortly after the essay was published, the term “mansplaining” emerged in online conversations, with Rebecca Solnit often recognized for introducing the concept. Interestingly, Solnit never used the term in her own writing, but her description of the experience laid the groundwork for the various interpretations of the term today.

Mansplaining, a fusion of the words ‘man’ and ‘explains’, is a term used by women on social media to characterize instances where men condescendingly explain things to them. Few contemporary colloquialisms have garnered as much attention as mansplaining with its definitions and nuances featured in numerous online dictionaries and reputable media sources.

The coinage of the term and its ensuing usage attracted a fair share of critique. Many viewed it as another coined phrase by feminists, believed to intensify online gender disputes by shutting down conversations rather than promoting reasoned discussions. Some, especially men, appear to have redefined the term to align it with their perspective.

While there’s a diverse range of definitions and interpretations of the phenomenon of mansplaining, the concept has yet to undergo in-depth scrutiny. Present definitions and usages can be challenging because they may not encompass the full breadth of the phenomenon. Specifically, current definitions tend to highlight instances where men incorrectly assume superior knowledge on a topic. This usually manifests as

men offering unsolicited explanations to women who are experts or deeply informed on the matter at hand.

Now although I take most of these occurrences to fall under the umbrella of mansplaining, there are scenarios, as we'll delve into, that elude this definition, particularly when they overlook women who aren't deemed 'experts'.

Historically, women have been relegated to a diminished epistemic standing, leading them to face various forms of verbal subjugation. Given this context, there's an imperative need for terms that encapsulate these specific modes of repression. "Mansplaining" serves as a prime example of verbal oppression with epistemic implications, as it not only mutes women but also perpetuates the underlying belief that their role as epistemic contributors is inferior to men's.

To elaborate on what is wrong with mansplaining epistemically we need to look at Miranda Fricker's (2007) account on epistemic injustice.

Fricker argues that a speaker S is harmed by a hearer H, when the latter does not give her the credibility she deserves, due to a negative identity-prejudicial stereotype he holds about her. This less-than-deserved credibility harms the speaker in her capacity as a knower and hence makes her a victim of epistemic injustice.

Contra Fricker I argue that (i) testimonial injustice does not necessarily have to follow the hearer harms speaker format, and that this type of injustice can happen contrariwise as well. Furthermore (ii) it isn't essential for conscious beliefs to be at play to perpetrate testimonial injustice. If mansplaining results in epistemic harm, its roots can be traced to a distinct kind of epistemic vice, specifically epistemic arrogance. Alessandra Tanesini (2016) explores this phenomenon in depth in her article "Calm Down, Dear: Intellectual Arrogance, Silencing and ignorance."

Tanesini argues that relations of domination mould the psychology of those in dominant groups, making them prone to haughtiness and arrogance. Encountering such behaviour regularly can be both intimidating and demeaning, deeply influencing the psyche of those subjected to it. Specifically, women who repeatedly face this form of arrogance might cultivate epistemic vices such as timidity, servility, and, in some situations, intellectual unawareness (ibid).

Since the phenomenon of mansplaining is predominantly addressed in non-academic sources and has garnered minimal academic scrutiny, some individuals freely reinterpret the term to align with their narratives. Meanwhile, others approach the topic

under the assumption that their audience already possesses a shared understanding of the concept.

Recognizing the term's varied interpretations and applications, this chapter will endeavour to: (i) craft a comprehensive definition that more precisely defines the phenomenon, (ii) make a case that mansplaining represents an instance of epistemic injustice where the speaker diminishes the hearer by assigning to her an inferior epistemic position, and (iii) assert that mansplaining can be viewed as a type of testimonial injustice, derived from epistemic vice.

My analysis will commence by dissecting the term "mansplaining", retracting its origins and understanding its socio-cultural implications through the lens of Rebecca Solnit's article "Men explaining things to me". I will discuss how Solnit's characterization of the phenomenon, which spurred the term's coinage, gave rise to some definitions that, as I will elucidate later, can be deemed problematic. Subsequently, my focus will shift to present a more encompassing portrayal of mansplaining that truly resonates with its multifaceted nature. The subsequent section of the paper will delve into the epistemic challenges associated with mansplaining, drawing from Miranda Fricker's contributions; suggesting that mansplaining qualifies as a unique form of epistemic injustice.

The last part of the paper will reference Alessandra Tanesini's examination of intellectual arrogance, advocating the position that mansplaining, as an epistemic vice, instigates behaviours that are both intimidating and demeaning; detrimentally impacting those subjected to it.

### *4.1 Men explaining things to me*

In her 2008 essay Men Explaining Things to Me, Rebecca Solnit wittily narrates an episode from a social gathering where a self-assured, affluent man presumptuously began enlightening her on the very subject of her own book, oblivious to her expertise.

Solnit underscores a ubiquitous experience many women can relate to– unsolicited explanations from men, often irrespective of their own knowledge of the topic. Drawing from her personal encounters, she remarks, "Men explain things to me, and other women whether or not they know what they are talking about…I love when

people explain things to me, they know and I am interested in but don't yet know; it's when they explain things to me I know and they don't that the conversation goes wrong" (ibid, pp. 4-13).

After the publication of Solnit's essay, the term "mansplaining" began to gain traction on social media, encapsulating the specific male tendency to condescendingly explain things to women who are already well-versed or even experts in the subject. In no time, the digital realm brimmed with anecdotes from women who had faced situations mirroring Solnit's experience. While the term 'mansplaining" has taken on varied nuances and interpretations, a recurring theme in many prominent online examples echoes Solnit's narrative: a man offering explanations of a woman, who is, in fact, an expert in the discussed topic.

A notable instance of mansplaining in the public eye involved NASA astronaut Jessica Meir. While she was on a space mission, a Twitter user took it upon himself to explain elementary scientific facts about her very mission. It was a striking display of audacity, considering Meir's expertise and first-hand experience in space. This case highlighted the extent to which some individuals feel the need to assert their knowledge, even when addressing experts in the field (Perry, 2017).

Another repository showcasing the pervasive nature of mansplaining was the now-inactive blog, "Academic Men Explaining Things to Me". This platform curated a myriad of anecdotes from women in academia who were subjected to explanations by male colleagues or students. These narratives echoed a familiar theme similar to Solnit's experience; female experts being lectured by men operating under the misconception that they possessed superior knowledge. From this, one can infer that mansplaining often manifests as men presumptuously explaining topics to women, despite the women having greater expertise in the manner.

Intuitively this phenomenon seems to represent an injustice that originates from the speaker's flawed attitude. Consequently, any effort to precisely define mansplaining should satisfy two criteria: (i) it must identify the act of explaining as inherently unjust, and (ii) it should pinpoint the problematic nature of the speaker's position that fives rise to such behaviour.

### 4.1.1 Defining Mansplaining

Following from the brief description of the phenomenon we can now attempt to concoct our own definition that has to meet the two requirements mentioned above. Namely, the definition we will bring forth have to recognize that the act of mansplaining is an injustice generated by a speaker that has a faulty attitude.

To reiterate Solnit's description, mansplaining is "when they explain things to me, I know and they don't that the conversation goes wrong" (Solnit, 2008, p. 13) I propose the following definition that seems to best capture Solnit's statement:

*Mansplaining* is the act of unsolicited explanation, delivered condescendingly by a man who mistakenly believes he knows more than a woman on a particular topic, despite the woman being an expert in that field.

This definition appears to align most closely with current usage. However, there are instances that don't quite fit within its parameters. To clarify, let's examine the following examples.

Case 1:

Jana, a professor, is collaborating with her male colleague, Joshua, on a project. Both possess equivalent expertise in their subject. Importantly, Joshua acknowledges Jana's academic prowess and doesn't presume he has an upper hand in knowledge. Yet, he frequently offers her unsolicited, condescending explanations related to their shared work.

While this situation clearly echoes traits of mansplaining, it doesn't align neatly with our initial definition. Although Joshua's behaviour satisfies the criterion of delivering unasked-for explanations, it diverges from the established parameters in a key area: Joshua doesn't harbour misconceptions about Jana's intellectual competencies. Despite this, his actions still appear unjust, as he subjects her to unnecessary elucidations. Consequently, this example falls outside the confines of our present mansplaining definition. Now, let's examine another instance of mansplaining that doesn't align with our proposed definition.

Case 2:

In a team project, Elizabeth seeks John's insights on a specific matter. Rather than directly addressing her query, John veers into a condescending exposition of elementary aspects. Notably, John doesn't regard himself as more knowledgeable than Elizabeth. His demeaning response stems from ingrained biases he holds about women.

Here's how this instance diverges from our definition: John doesn't harbor any misconceptions regarding Elizabeth's expertise, and moreover, she had actually solicited his input. However, his inappropriate response, clearly rooted in his preconceived notions about women, constitutes an injustice. Next, let's consider a third scenario that challenges our initial understanding of mansplaining.

Case 3:

Stella, a freshman in college, seeks clarification on a particular subject during a lecture. Instead of providing a detailed explanation, her professor addresses her query in a patronizing and overly simplistic manner.

This scenario diverges from our definition in these ways: The professor's assumption about Stella's limited understanding is indeed accurate, and furthermore, his explanation was solicited by her. However, as we will explore later, this situation serves as a quintessential instance of mansplaining, especially as it commonly impacts women who are not deemed as experts in a field. Next, we will examine a scenario that ostensibly aligns with our definition of mansplaining but may not exemplify the core essence of the phenomenon. Consider the following case,

Case 4:

George is a first-time father to a toddler. As any good parent he hires the best nanny one could possibly find, Ms. Poppins. Ms Poppins has many degrees on child rearing and child psychology, as well as over 25 years of experience. Hence, she is very knowledgeable on how to care for a toddler. The only knowledge George has on the matter is that he loves his son very much and wants to provide him with the best care and education possible. One day however, George surprises Ms. Poppins doing

something that potentially puts his son in great danger. He condescendingly explains to Ms. Poppins some basic things on child safety. As it happens, regardless of how many degrees and years of expertise Ms. Poppins has, her approach to child rearing includes some very questionable, spartan methods.

Now in this scenario George was warranted to assume that he knows more than Ms. Poppins when it comes to his child's safety. Moreover, him being condescending while giving the 'uncalled for' explanation is understandable given the high stake scenario (the safety of his son). Therefore, although this example fits perfectly the definition of mansplaining we provided earlier, it cannot be considered a case of mansplaining because it isn't motivated in the right way.

Moreover, it's important to note that the frequent misuse of a term can dilute the seriousness of the underlying issue. Hence, there's a pressing need for a well-defined description that 1. Encompasses the full scope of the phenomenon and 2. Excludes misrepresentations or false instances of mansplaining.

From the first three examples provided, it becomes clear that having a false belief on the part of the explainer isn't a necessary or sufficient condition for mansplaining. Likewise, the stipulation that the explanation must be unsolicited isn't always met. These examples underscore that our initial definition of mansplaining doesn't adequately address all its manifestations. To recall, our first definition of mansplaining goes along the following lines:

*Mansplaining* is the act of uncalled for explaining performed in a condescending fashion, by a man holding the false belief that he knows more than a woman on a given subject matter, in which the woman happens to be an expert.

The cases presented above (Case 1, Case 2, and Case 3) reveal limitations in our current understanding of mansplaining. These cases demonstrate that genuine instances of mansplaining can occur without the explainer having a false belief about the explainee's expertise. An act of mansplaining isn't always unsolicited, as demonstrated in cases 2 and 3.

The stipulation that the explainee must be an expert isn't always a necessary or sufficient condition, as shown in case 3, suggesting that mansplaining can target non-

expert women as well. Furthermore, this condition, focusing solely on expert women, unfortunately doesn't fully represent the experiences of many women.

Few women occupy positions of authority or, in this context, positions of expertise. Continually being treated as a subordinate epistemic agent and enduring verbal repression from those in power can lead to the development of intellectual timidity. I will argue later on that mansplaining is an epistemic injustice perpetrated by men against women, stemming from an erroneous attitude.

Drawing inspiration from Rebecca Solnit's portrayal of mansplaining, I endeavoured to formulate a definition that accurately encapsulates this behaviour. However, my initial effort fell short as it proved to be overly restrictive, failing to encompass the wider array of situations where mansplaining can occur.

Using my initial account of the term, I can, at best, describe situations akin to Solnit's, where women with expertise are condescendingly explained things by men who know less. However, as we've discerned, such verbal repression permeates various aspects of life, subjecting women of all expertise levels to its effects.

To fully encapsulate the phenomenon, we require a more comprehensive definition of mansplaining. This refined account should:

(i) Extend beyond instances involving only female experts.

(ii) Not be confined to scenarios where a man possesses a misconceived notion of a woman's knowledge or ignorance.

Not solely apply to unsolicited explanations.

Crucially, this definition should also:

(i) Acknowledge that mansplaining embodies an act of injustice,

(ii) Illuminate the problematic demeanour of the speaker that precipitates this behaviour.

To this end, I propose a new account of mansplaining.

*Mansplaining* stems from a misguided attitude of the (male) explainer, rooted in prejudiced views about the (female) recipient.

This attitude showcases an intellectual vice on the part of the explainer and imposes an epistemic injustice upon the recipient in her capacity as a knower. This revised understanding of mansplaining acknowledges that the behaviour constitutes an epistemic injustice rooted in a problematic attitude of the explainer. It effectively

encompasses all the previously discussed instances of mansplaining by eliminating the limiting stipulations of our initial definition. Specifically, it does away with the assumptions that (i) the explainer must hold a false belief about the explainee's knowledge, (ii) the explanation has to be unrequested, and (iii) the explainee must be an expert in the subject matter.

Recognizing that our revised perspective implies that women subjected to mansplaining experience an epistemic injustice in their role as knowers, it's crucial to understand how mansplaining fits into the broader landscape of epistemic injustice. A deep dive into Miranda Fricker's seminal work on Epistemic Injustice can provide us with valuable insights in this regard.

### 4.1.2 Redefining Mansplaining

Based on Solnit's description of mansplaining, we have tried to come up with a definition that would best capture this occurrence. As we have seen however, our first attempt to define mansplaining failed because it appeared to be too restrictive when considering all possible instances of the phenomenon.

What our original account of the term can do, is at best describe cases such as Solnit's. That is, expert-women being condescendingly explained to, by less knowledgeable men. But, as we have so far seen, verbal repression of this sort, affects all arrays of life, and all women regardless of their level of expertise are exposed to it.

What we need is a better definition to capture the phenomenon in its entirety. This new account needs a broader definition of mansplaining, that will 1) not be exclusive to female experts, 2) not be exclusive to cases in which a man holds a false belief about a female's knowledge or the lack thereof, and 3) not be exclusive to cases in which the explanation is never requested.

More importantly, the definition needs to meet the following requirements: (i) it must recognize that mansplaining is an injustice, and (ii) it must show what is problematic with the attitude of the speaker that generates it.

To this end, I propose a new account of mansplaining:

*Mansplaining* is a speech act of explanation made by a (male) speaker, which is epistemically faulty in that it is based on a prejudicial assumption about the (female)

explainee, that manifests intellectual vice on behalf of the explainer and inflicts epistemic injustice to the explainee in her capacity as a knower.

What this new account of mansplaining does, is recognizes that the act of mansplaining is an epistemic injustice generated by a negative attitude on behalf of the explainer. It also manages to capture all cases of mansplaining discussed above, by removing the unnecessary restrictions imposed by our first definition. Namely that (i) the explainer needs to have a false belief about the explainee's knowledge, (ii) that the explanation has to be uncalled-for, and (iii) that the explainee has to be an expert in a given field.

Given that our new account suggests that the women being mansplained to suffer an epistemic injustice in their capacity as knowers, it is important to see how mansplaining categorizes as an epistemic injustice. To this end, we need to look at Miranda Fricker's ground-breaking work on Epistemic Injustice.

### *4.2 Mansplaining as an Epistemic Injustice*

In her book 'Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing' (2007), Miranda Fricker gives an account on how one can inflict injustice in testimonial exchange. This, as Fricker argues, is a particular form of epistemic injustice, namely testimonial injustice.

Fricker argues that a speaker S is harmed by a hearer H, when the latter does not give her the credibility she deserves, due to a negative identity-prejudicial stereotype he holds about her. This less-than-deserved credibility harms the speaker in her capacity as a knower and hence makes her a victim of testimonial injustice.

Contra Fricker I argue that (i) testimonial injustice does not necessarily have to follow the hearer-harms-speaker format, and that this type of injustice can happen contrariwise as well. And (ii) no conscious beliefs have to be present in order for one to inflict testimonial injustice.

My account of testimonial injustice complies with Fricker's constraints on central forms of injustice. Namely, the victim of testimonial injustice has to be harmed as an epistemic authority, or as a giver of information, the harm has to come in a non-cumulative manner. That is, the hearer is not harmed solely due to an ongoing process

of harm infliction. And last but not least, the harm has to be systematic, which means the speaker (in our case the hearer) is harmed in a non-exhaustive vast array of domains, such as social, political, economic, etc.

A *speaker S* harms a *hearer H*, when the former takes advantage of his position of power or authority to submit the latter to his will.

According to our second account of mansplaining, the speaker harms the hearer in her capacity as a knower, due to a negative identity-prejudice the former holds about her.

*Mansplaining* is a case of testimonial injustice in which the speaker harms the hearer. The injustice is performed in the following way. The hearer is harmed as an epistemic agent when she is being explained how she should act, behave, and speak in a condescending fashion.

The epistemic injustice from mansplaining unfolds as follows: The speaker commits harm when he doesn't afford the hearer the same epistemic regard, he offers himself. This means the mansplainer, by his actions, places the hearer in a position of diminished epistemic status. Notably, the adverse effect of mansplaining isn't reliant on repeated occurrences, even isolated instances can lead to epistemic injustice. Furthermore, the harm inflicted encompasses a broad spectrum of domains and impacts the hearer regardless of whether she is an expert in the subject matter or not.

Fricker bases her argument on the premise that the perpetrator of epistemic injustice harbours a negativity identity-prejudice, rooted in certain beliefs about their victim. However, in contrast to Fricker's stance, I contend that it's possible for someone to commit epistemic injustice even in the absence of such underlying negative beliefs.

Reviewing the second clause, specifically (ii), it's stated that conscious beliefs are not a requirement for one to commit testimonial injustice. Looking at this from Austin's lens, mansplaining can be seen as an illocutionary act. However, examining Jesús Navarro-Reyes' (2014) perspective appears to offer a more suitable explanation for this occurrence[46]. According to Navarro, it's plausible to state that someone performed a certain speech act (like mansplaining) even if they didn't have the standard

[46] For more on illocutionary acts without intention, see (Navarro-Reyes, 2010)

illocutionary intentions associated with that act. This framework can potentially provide a more nuanced understanding of mansplaining as it does not strictly hinge on the presence of explicit intentions.

### 4.2.1 Mansplaining without negative belief

In an earlier chapter, the concept of the intention-behaviour gap was examined. As argued by Esther K. Papies (2017), despite holding genuine intentions, there frequently arises a mismatch between an individual's intended actions and their actual behaviours, culminating in what is labelled the intention-behaviour gap. This means, for instance, that a person might be thoroughly informed about the health hazards of smoking and unhealthy diets, genuinely aspire to good health, yet paradoxically continue to smoke or indulge in junk food (ibid, p.2).

While indulging in smoking and consuming foods deemed unhealthy is driven by hedonic motives, extensive research in interpersonal behaviour reveals that implicit stereotypes, prejudice, and aggressive impulses can shape our actions even when they harbour non-aggressive intentions (ibid, p.3). The underlying cause, according to Papies, lies in the mechanisms that promote specific behaviours. In interpersonal contexts, these mechanisms have been identified as stereotypes, prejudice, and aggressive impulses. Consequently, efforts to bridge the discrepancy between intentions and actual behaviour must address these influencing mechanisms.

According to Papies, these mechanisms are best understood as "situated conceptualizations" which are ingrained in memory through exposure in relevant contexts (ibid). Significantly, these conceptualizations are formed not just from individual experiences, but also from our inherent inclination to intuitively emulate and internalize the behaviours and experience of others. Thus, even in the absence of explicit racial beliefs, recognizing certain traits in members of an out-group can inadvertently activate associated stereotypes. This understanding of the intention-behaviour gap suggests that an individual can indeed commit a misogynistic act without necessarily holding a corresponding misogynistic belief.

When it comes to the phenomenon of mansplaining, an individual can perpetrate an epistemic injustice rooted in a flawed attitude, fuelled by the epistemic

vice of arrogance, even without harbouring the belief that the person they are explaining to is intellectually beneath them.

### *4.3 Intellectual Arrogance*

In her article 'Calm Down, Dear': Intellectual Arrogance, Silencing and Ignorance, Alessandra Tanesini (2016) provides an account of two forms of intellectual arrogance. She argues that these two forms of arrogance lead to both ethical and epistemic harms and can also instigate vices in other individuals.

Tanesini argues that intellectual arrogance exists in two forms, one of interpersonal nature, that she labels haughtiness, and one unsocial which she calls arrogance.

In order to understand how these two forms of arrogance function, it is important to see the account of responsibilities associated with turn-taking and with the making and hearing of an assertion (Tanesini, 2016).

Turn-taking is an important epistemic practice in which the participants are expected to avoid talking at the same time as each other and wait until the speaker has finished talking. Since these expectations are common knowledge; the participants are accountable to each other and therefore have epistemic and ethical responsibilities (ibid). Whenever a speaker violates these mutual expectations, he is held responsible for harming other participants in the conversation. Moreover, when one culpably fails to give the other conversant what she is owed, one shows disrespect toward her so that one wrongs her as well as harms her (ibid, p. 75).

Tanesini describes the lack of respect in at least two ways. The first is the Evaluative sense, by which Tanesini means that one is not treating his conversational partner in a manner that accord with her intellectual worth. And in a recognition sense, by which the author means that an individual does not treat his interlocutor with what is due to any agent qua agent (ibid, p.76). These harms are distinctively epistemic in nature because they impede the harmed individuals to function as epistemic agents.

The second epistemic practice that is at core in any conversation exchange, is asserting. When an assertion is made, the asserter takes two commitments. A primary commitment, known as accountability, and a secondary commitment known as answerability. In Tanesini's words "In making the first commitment the speaker

vouchsafes for the propriety of her assertion, and thereby entitles others to hold her to account if they rely on her assertion and something goes wrong as a result. In making the second commitment, the speaker makes herself answerable to changes raised by others" (ibid, p.77).

After examining the obligations, a speaker undertakes when making an assertion, it's crucial to consider the duties that the audience, or the hearers, owe to the speaker. While their duties might be fewer, they remain significant. The foremost duty of the hearers is to recognize the primary and the secondary commitments made by the speaker. If this recognition fails, the hearer commits an epistemic harm to the speaker by displaying disrespect both in the evaluative and recognition senses. Essentially, the hearer is not valuing the speaker's intellectual worth and is not regarding her as an agent in her own right (ibid, p. 78).

Returning to the two forms of arrogance highlighted by Tanesini, let's delve into their distinct characteristics and the potential risks associated with such behaviours.

Haughtiness according to Tanesini is a form of intellectual arrogance that manifests itself through contempt for others. Some of the characteristics attributed to this form of arrogance are, talking over others, interrupting others, putting others down in public, ignoring or rejecting without reasons what they have said, conveying to one's audience the impression that one thinks one is cleverer or smarter. Although haughtiness is not the same as thinking go oneself to be intellectually superior to others, it is nevertheless disrespectful and, as Tanesini argues, it can foster intellectual timidity and servility in other agents and promotes ignorance by silencing them (ibid, pp. 73-74).

Tanesini uses the word arrogance to refer to cases of intellectual arrogance that are unsocial, that is, it does not concern interpersonal relationships. A characteristic behaviour of an arrogant individual of this sort would be "unwillingness to submit oneself to the norms governing ordinary conversation and rational debate'' (ibid, p. 85). An example of this type of arrogance would be a solitary scientist that is so arrogant about his intellectual capabilities that he does not check his results twice. There are cases, Tanesini argues, that the individual in question is not disillusioned about his mental capacities, but, due to the extreme levels of self-confidence he takes everything that passes through his head as being true, just because he thought of it. Tanesini illustrates this in the umpire example that refuses to explain why he made a certain decision during a game. By being arrogant, Tanesini argues, the arrogant shows

recognition respect toward himself and therefore disables himself from becoming an informant and harms his own ability to function as an epistemic informant (ibid).

Tanesini argues that these two different types of arrogance are different in the sense that one is manifested as disrespect toward the speakers while the other is manifested as an unwillingness to submit oneself to the norms of governing ordinary conversation and rational debate (ibid). That being said, both types of arrogance, which Tanesini deems as vices, are related to each other and often go hand in hand.

So far, we have seen the characteristic behaviours generated by the two types of arrogance. Let us now turn to the long-term consequences these behaviours can cause.

To recap, haughtiness breaks the norm of turn-taking and asserting and wrongs other agents by treating them with disrespect. Now this behaviour causes further dysfunctions to epistemic practices and additional harms to epistemic agents (ibid, p. 73). Therefore, haughtiness is culpably breaking of the norms of turn-taking by locutionary silencing other conversational participants. It is also culpably breaking the norms of asserting and it is illocutionary silencing other informants. As a consequence of this, those harmed by this behaviour will develop two intellectual vices, that of humility and that of servility as result of the systematic infliction of humiliation. They are, as Tanesini argues, obstacles to the generation and dissemination of knowledge.

Silencing is both an active factor and a consequence of these behaviours. We shall return to this in the next chapter.

### 4.3.1 Mansplaing a result of Haughtiness

Tanesini identifies two types of intellectual arrogant behaviours, one of interpersonal nature and one unsocial. I shall focus on the first kind as it better explains the phenomenon this chapter is concerned with, namely, mansplaining.

To recall, Tanesini describes haughtiness as a form of intellectual arrogance that manifests itself through disdain for other people (ibid, p.73).The characteristic behaviour of a haughty individual includes talking over other people, interrupting them, putting them down in public, ignoring or rejecting without holding reasons, conveying to one's audience that one thinks of oneself as being cleverer, smarter or more quick-witted than them. Tanesini argues that this attitude is grounded in the presumption that

one is exempt from the ordinary responsibilities in conversations, and especially in the practice of asserting.

If we look at the David Cameron example Tanesini gave, we can observe that with his statement 'calm down, dear', he exempted himself from the answerability commitment and was talking *ex cathedra.* His conduct matches the characteristic behaviour of a haughty individual. Here's a recount of the incident as presented by Tanesini: In a 2011 House of Commons debate, UK Prime Minister David Cameron's remark to the then Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Angela Eagle telling her to "calm down dear" was perceived as sexist and condescending, implying that her arguments were emotionally charged rather than rational (ibid, p. 71).

There are further harms stemming from a haughty behaviour, according to Tanesini, haughtiness increases the likelihood that those on the receiving end develop the intellectual vice of timidity.

Mansplaining is a distinctive epistemic harm inflicted upon women by men because of their haughty behaviour. When someone assumes a position of power based on their gender and does not make oneself accountable or answerable for his assertions, he inflicts an epistemic harm to his hearers. That said, mansplaining fits the mould of a haughty behaviour.

Consider this scenario: Adrian, a heterosexual man from a big city, is happily married to a woman and has never considered women to be intellectually inferior, including his wife. However, he is puzzled about why his wife doesn't seem to enjoy household tasks, thinking to himself that "this is just how things should be". The media consistently depicts women in certain roles, whether it's in magazines, movies, or online. In Adrian's case, despite not consciously holding stereotypical views about his wife's intellect, he unknowingly engages in mansplaining by questioning why his wife doesn't enjoy household tasks. This questioning implies an assumption about what task a woman should find fulfilling, rooted in societal expectations, and traditional gender roles. Adrian's pondering of "this is just how things should be" reflects a subtle imposition of norms and expectations on his wife, assuming that her preferences should align with a predefined societal role. In essence, even though Adrian may not overtly express a belief in women's intellectual inferiority his behaviour illustrates the underlying attitudes and biases associated with mansplaining. By questioning and pondering his wife's choices based on traditional gender norms, Adrian unintentionally

engages in a form of mansplaining subtly reinforcing societal expectations and potentially disregarding his wife's personal preferences and agency. He may make comments like "I think you'd be happier in a more nurturing profession. Something like teaching or nursing suits women better don't you think?". Or comment on his wife's personal appearance by saying things like "You know, you'd look more put together if you wore more makeup and dressed up a bit. It's important for a woman to present herself well!". These examples illustrate how Adrian, albeit unintentionally, may engage in mansplaining by subtly imposing societal expectations and traditional gender roles on his wife, disregarding her individual preferences, and reinforcing biased norms.

Similar patterns can be seen in the first two examples we addressed earlier in this discussion. In both situations, the mansplainer didn't explicitly think their female counterpart was less intelligent. Still, their underlying attitudes displayed biases against women.

### *4.4 Conclusion*

This chapter developed a novel account of the nature and epistemic normativity of the widespread phenomenon of mansplaining. Although I have shown that the description given by Solnit and the subsequent usage of the term was faulty, I argued that we need labelling this type of verbal repression.

To this end I have first attempted to provide an account of mansplaining that would get the best support from the current usage. I later subjected this definition to a series of examples, that although undeniably cases of mansplaining, failed to meet the criteria imposed by the traditional definition. Consequently, I have argued that we need a broader definition to comprise the phenomenon in its entirety.

To this end, I have introduced two different requirements for our account. Namely that the definition needs to recognize that mansplaining is a case of injustice, and that this injustice stems from a faulty attitude held by the explainer.

I have then moved to show how exactly mansplaining falls under the epistemic injustice umbrella by looking at Miranda Fricker's work on epistemic injustice and argued that mansplaining fits Fricker's formula.

Lastly, I have argued that mansplaining is a faulty attitude held by the explainer because of an epistemic vice called haughtiness and have looked at Tanesini's account on this.

# Chapter 5 Sexism and Conspiracy Theorizing - Revisiting Vice Epistemology

## Introduction

The burgeoning literature on conspiracy theories has garnered diverse perspectives ranging from psychological underpinnings to the socio-political implications of this phenomenon. Notably, Quassim Cassam's Vice Epistemology (2016) and his subsequent book Conspiracy Theories (2019) have been instrumental in shaping contemporary discourses. Cassam's earlier work discusses intellectual character vices such as gullibility, dogmatism, prejudice closed-mindedness, and negligence as impediments to effective inquiry, and correlates these vices with the propensity to endorse conspiracy theories. His later work, however, diverges, from this epistemic approach, positioning conspiracy theories as political propaganda with predominantly ethical and political implications, thereby seemingly relegating intellectual vices to the periphery.

While Cassam's perspective offers valuable insights into conspiracy theorizing, this chapter seeks to offer an alternative lens through which to examine this complex phenomenon. Specifically, I argue for the necessity of considering the intersectionality of sexism and conspiracy theorizing–an area that thus far received insufficient scholarly attention.

The advent and subsequent rise of the Red Pill[47] movement have led to a proliferation of antifeminist discourses on various social media platforms. Efforts to de-

[47] The "Red pill" ideology originated from a metaphor used in the film "The Matrix" (1999). In the film, the main character, Neo, is presented with a choice between a red pill and a blue pill by the rebel leader, Morpheus. The blue pill would allow Neo to continue living in a simulated reality, ignorant but content, while the red pill would wake him up to the harsh, complex reality outside the simulation.
Over time, this metaphor has been co-opted by various online communities, including those in the men's rights movement and the broader "manosphere". These groups use "red pill" as a term to refer to a set of beliefs that, they claim, reveal the 'truth' about society's power structures, especially those involving gender. They contend that society is skewed against men, in favor of women, and that mainstream understandings of sexism, feminism, and gender equality are misconstrued or deceptive.

platforms such accounts have inadvertently fostered the propagation of conspiracy theories positing attempts to suppress the 'truth'.

While this paper acknowledges the significance of Cassam's definition of conspiracy theories, I wish to diverge from his standpoint on two primary aspects. Firstly, I challenge the notion that conspiracy theories are inherently political[48]. The demarcation between political activism and engagement in antifeminist discourse remains nebulous at best. Thus, labelling all conspiracy theories as political may overlook the complexity and nuance of these beliefs.

Secondly, I propose that the propensity towards conspiracy theorizing often results from flawed reasoning, indicating a deeper epistemic issue. Therefore, the chapter revisits and amplifies the role of intellectual vices, arguing that they offer a more comprehensive explanation for the attraction towards conspiracy theories than political motivations alone[49]. By integrating Cassam's vice epistemology with the exploration of sexism in conspiracy theorizing, this paper hopes to enrich our understanding of the myriad of factors contributing to the persistence and proliferation of conspiracy theories.

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Critics of "red pill" ideology argue that it often relies on a simplistic and distorted understanding of social dynamics, and that it can foster misogyny, resentment, and harmful behavior. Many worry that it contributes to the spread of misinformation, radicalization, and harmful attitudes towards women.
Importantly, the "red pill" metaphor has also been adopted by various other online subcultures, each with its own unique set of beliefs about what the "truth" revealed by the red pill is. As a result, what exactly "red pill ideology" refers to can vary greatly depending on the context.
In the context of conspiracy theories, taking the "red pill" often refers to the acceptance of a contrarian narrative that is believed to reveal the true nature of a vast and deceptive conspiracy, similar to the mindset captured by the term "epistemic insouciance" as described by Quassim Cassam. The acceptance of such contrarian narratives can be driven by various factors, including pre-existing beliefs, biases, and political or social contexts.

[48] Cassam does explore a broad range of conspiracy theories including non-political ones such as those concerning extra-terrestrial life. However, for the purpose of this discussion, my attention is mainly centered on those theories that have a socio-political element, because they offer the clearest example of how these concepts intersect. These socio-political conspiracy theories often reflect underlying biases, prejudices, and societal structures, providing a fertile ground to examine how sexism and epistemic vice can fuel the adoption and propagation of these theories. They are also highly impactful, as they can influence political behaviour, stoke social tensions, and perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Thus, while non-political conspiracy theories offer their own interesting points of examination, they fall outside the scope if this discussion.

[49] Cassam views Conspiracy Theories as political propaganda, used strategically to advance specific political goals. This perspective frames Conspiracy Theories as tools within the political arena, often manipulated by those in power for ideological gain. In contrast, my stance suggests that intellectual vices, like dogmatism, close-mindedness, prejudice, and propensity for simplistic explanations, play a more significant role in why people are attracted to Conspiracy Theories. This approach shifts the focus from external political manipulation to internal cognitive biases and shortcomings in reasoning, offering a different angle on why Conspiracy Theories gain traction among individuals. In essence, Cassam's view is that individuals are drawn to CT due to underlying political biases, such as racism. In contrast, my perspective suggests that the attraction to Conspiracy Theories is rooted in flawed reasoning, where racism is seen as an intellectual vice or a defect in one's thought process rather than primarily a political stance.

The organization of the rest of the paper is as follows. In the first section, I will delve into Cassam's definition of conspiracy theories as well as ensuing explanation of the phenomenon. This comprehensive presentation will ensure a solid foundation for the arguments that follow.

Following this, the second section will offer a critical review of the existing literature on intellectual vices. In this process, I will lean heavily on Cassam's (2019) perspective on epistemic vices, focusing particularly on the roles they play in engendering conspiracy theorizing. This section aims to provide a deeper understanding of the intellectual character vices that Cassam elucidates, thus setting the state for the application in the context of conspiracy theories and sexism.

In the subsequent section, I will shift the focus to sexism as it is defined by Kate Manne (2018) and explore its potential influence on conspiracy theories. This section will primarily involve a dissection of Manne's definition, as well as an exploration if how it may intersect with concepts previously discussed, to produce the unique environment in which conspiracy theories thrive.

The final section of the paper seeks to exploit the potential weaknesses of Cassam's explanation of conspiracy theories. Here, I will present a cogent argument stating that the allure of conspiracy theories must be primarily understood through the lens of vice epistemology, with political motivations being of secondary importance. The goal is to substantiate the argument that a reorientation of focus towards intellectual vices and sexism can offer a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of why conspiracy theories continue to be enticing to many. In presenting this argument, this paper aspires to prompt a reconceptualization of we understand and address the widespread propagation of conspiracy theories in the modern era.

### *5.1 Cassam's Framework: Defining Conspiracy Theories*

In the probing exploration of conspiracy theories in Quassim Cassam's 2016 book of the same name, the focus has shifted from the intellectual character of conspiracy theorists[50] to the political and ethical considerations embedded within the

[50] For the purpose of this paper, I employ the terms "conspiracy theory"/" conspiracy theorists" in lower case letters. This is a deliberate choice made to differentiate between the generic understanding of

theories themselves. As our understanding of the conspiracy theories matures, the paramount realization is that these theories are not merely intellectual exercises, but rather potent tools of political propaganda. This shift in perspective entails a complex transfiguration of how we approach conspiracy theories, and more significantly how we respond to them.

Conspiracy theories, as traditionally understood, necessitate the existence of a clandestine group seeking to cause harm or violate legal norms[51]. However, the conspiracy theories that spur public debates transcend ordinary conspiracies, embodying extraordinary characteristics that distinguish them from typical narratives of collusion and secrecy. Hence, we can identify these extraordinary theories as 'Conspiracy Theories' and their proponents as 'Conspiracy Theorists'. In Cassam's own words:

> A Conspiracy Theory isn't just a theory about a conspiracy. There is more to it than that. A Conspiracy Theorist, again with a capital C and a capital T, is a person who is 'into' Conspiracy Theories, that is, unusually fascinated by them and more willing than most to believe them. We are all conspiracy theorists—we all believe that people sometimes get together in secret to do bad things—but we are not all Conspiracy Theorists (ibid, p. 6).

Cassam articulates five salient features inherent in Conspiracy Theories: they are speculative, contrarian, esoteric, amateurish, and premodern. These qualities result in a fundamental issue—Conspiracy Theories are implausible by design. If not to disseminate the truth, one might ask, what purpose do Conspiracy Theories serve? And why does their propagation persist despite the unlikelihood of their veracity? The answer, according to Cassam, lies in their foundational role as a form of political propaganda (ibid, p. 7).

Conspiracy Theories function as vehicles to advance political or ideological objectives. Holocaust denial theories, for instance, serve to propagate right-wing anti-

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conspiracy theories and Quassim Cassam's specific, rebranded definition of "Conspiracy Theories" as articulated in his later works. By using lower case letters, I aim to reflect the broad and diverse nature of conspiracy theories prior to Cassam's precise and characterization.

[51] This definition of conspiracy theories is arguably inadequate, as Cassam will elucidate. Not all conspiracy theories are devised with the intent to harm or breach legal norms, nor are they exclusively political in nature. For instance, theories surrounding the moon landing, the existence of the Loch Ness Monster, or the supposed faked death of Elvis Presley do not align with the aforementioned criteria.

Semitism. Regardless of a theorist's sincerity in their beliefs, these theories constitute propaganda, as their primary purpose is to manipulate public opinion in favour of a specific ideological direction (ibid, p.10). Consequently, we must understand the political ramifications and motivations behind these theories before examining the intellectual traits of their proponents.

By design, Conspiracy Theories are speculative and contrarian, posing alternative explanations to accepted narratives and frequently rejecting established authority. They often challenge the status quo, providing unusual interpretations of events, and are primarily driven by amateurs, many of whom crave academic validation despite eschewing mainstream academia. Furthermore, these theories often embody a premodern worldview, suggesting that complex events are under the control of a secretive elite, imbuing these occurrences with deeper, often sinister, meanings. In his words:

One special feature of Conspiracy Theories that makes them different from other accounts of conspiracies is that they are speculative. By speculative I mean that they are based on conjuncture rather than knowledge, educated (or not so educated) guesswork rather than solid evidence. After all, if a conspiracy has been successful, then it won't have left behind evidence of a conspiracy. So, the only way to uncover a conspiracy is by focusing on odd clues or anomalies that give the game away. Even clever conspirators make mistakes. Some things don't quite fit, and that is the Conspiracy Theorist's best hope. It's all about connecting the dots (ibid, p. 16).

Quassim Cassam's use of Operation Northwoods as an example highlights the important distinction between a documented conspiracy and a Conspiracy Theory. Operation Northwoods, planned by General Lyman Lemnitzer in 1962, was indeed a proposed conspiracy, which aimed to manipulate public sentiment and provide a pretext for an invasion of Cuba. The plot involved launching terrorist attacks on the U.S. mainland, then falsely blaming these attacks on Cuba. This plan, however shocking, is not a Conspiracy Theory, but an actual, documented historical event supported by unambiguous documentary evidence. The critical difference between Operation Northwoods and a conspiracy theory lies in the nature and quality of evidence supporting each. While a genuine conspiracy such as Operation Northwoods is supported by concrete, verifiable evidence, a conspiracy theory often relies on

speculation, conjecture, and misinformation. Moreover, conspiracy theories often resist falsification; that is, believers tend to maintain their beliefs despite contrary evidence or lack of support, which is a key characteristic of many conspiracy theories (ibid. p.17).

By pointing to Operation Northwoods, Cassam illuminates the complex and intricate dynamics of what counts as a conspiracy and what is often dismissed as a conspiracy theory. It's an important reminder that while actual conspiracies do occur, not all claims of conspiracy meet the burden of proof required to elevate them beyond the realm of speculation and into accepted fact. Further, it highlights the need to critically evaluate the evidence supporting any claims of conspiracy, to avoid falling into the trap of unfounded belief—a form of epistemic vice. This serves as a clear example of the careful discernment required when navigating the often-blurry line between real conspiracies and baseless conspiracy theories.

Another characteristic of conspiracy theories in Cassam's analysis, is their inherent contrarianism. Contrarianism is the tendency to reject or resist the consensus or popular opinion in favour of alternative, often controversial, viewpoints. Conspiracy theories often embody this element of contrarianism as they usually propose explanations for events or situations that go against the mainstream, accepted narratives (ibid, p. 19).

Conspiracy theories thrive on the idea of possessing secret or insider knowledge that the majority are not privy to or have been deceived about. This creates a sense of exclusivity and superiority among believers, often fostering a distrust of official sources and mainstream media. Conspiracy theories are therefore not just alternate explanations; they are defiant rejections of mainstream understanding "They see the official view as part of the establishment's attempt to cover up the very conspiracy the Conspiracy Theorists is trying to expose. The thing that Conspiracy Theories are contrary to is appearances or the obvious explanation of events (ibid).

> The government agents who supposedly brought down the twin towers on 9/11 wouldn't have done a very good job if they hadn't made it look like Al Qaeda did it. So, blaming 9/11 on the government is tantamount to saying that there is a fundamental mismatch between how things look and how things are (ibid, p. 20).

A third special feature of Conspiracy Theories according to Cassam, is that Conspiracy theories are esoteric. They often involve interpretations that go beyond mainstream narratives and can be complex and intricate, often referring to hidden powers or influences at work that the public is not aware of. The esoteric nature of conspiracy theories contributes to their appeal to some people. The idea of possessing hidden or secret knowledge can be enticing and empowering, even when such knowledge is not based on factual evidence or rigorous reasoning. The sense of being part of an enlightened or awoken minority can foster a sense of specialness or superiority, providing a psychological boost that further solidifies attachment to these esoteric beliefs. As Cassam puts it "Once the obvious is ruled out, and the far from obvious is ruled in, the Conspiracy Theorist's imagination can and usually does run wild" (ibid, p. 22). An example Cassam gives is the theory that Kennedy was not shot by Harvey Lee Oswald but by Oswald's doppelganger. The theory posits a more complicated plot behind the assassination, typically involving a vast and powerful organization or government entity, rather than a single disturbed individual (ibid, p. 23).

A fourth special feature of Conspiracy Theories is that they are "by and large, amateurish" (ibid, p. 23). Possessing a degree in a relevant field does not necessarily grant one's views greater validity, especially when those views diverge significantly from consensus within the scientific community.

Scientific understanding is built on rigorous methodologies, peer-reviewed studies, and a collective interpretation of data and evidence. It is the consistent findings and consensus across numerous studies and experts that give weight to mainstream scientific theories. In contrast, conspiracy theories often disregard the scientific method, cherry-pick evidence, and reject the consensus without providing robust counterevidence. They also frequently rely on confirmation bias, seeking out information that supports their viewpoint while dismissing or ignoring contradicting evidence.

A fifth feature that makes Conspiracy Theories special in the way Cassam intended them to be, is that Conspiracy Theories are "premodern" (ibid, p.26). Conspiracy Theories tend to present a worldview where seemingly complex or random events are orchestrated by a small, covert group, thus infusing these events with a simplistic and unambiguous sense of meaning and order. This belief harks back to

premodern times, where the complexities of the natural and social world were often attributed to the direct actions of gods, spirits, or other supernatural entities.

Not all conspiracy theorists necessarily believe in the theories they propagate. Some individuals understand the financial potential and allure that sensational and controversial ideas can have. This aspect is heightened in our current age of digital and social media, where sensational content often garners more attention, and subsequently more revenue.

These individuals can monetize conspiracy theories through a variety of means, such as by driving traffic to their websites filled with advertisements, selling books and merchandise related to the theories, or asking for direct donations from their audience under the guise of funding their "research" or "exposés" (ibid, p. 34).

Furthermore, peddling conspiracy theories can also lead to increased public visibility for these individuals, which can be leveraged into lucrative speaking engagements, media appearances, and other income-generating opportunities. In this sense, these conspiracy theorists can be seen as entrepreneurs capitalizing on the human fascination with the mysterious and the forbidden.[52]

This perspective, however, does not align with modern understandings of complex systems, whether they are social, political or economic. These systems are influenced by numerous interrelated factors and actors, and their outcomes are often uncertain, unpredictable, and difficult to control. The premodern worldview encapsulated in conspiracy theories thus represents a fundamental misunderstanding or oversimplification of how these systems functions.

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[52] An example Cassam gives is Alex Jones. Alex Jones, a prominent American conspiracy theorist, radio show host, and filmmaker, has indeed capitalized on the marketing and promotion of conspiracy theories. Through his media platform, Infowars, Jones has disseminated numerous unfounded conspiracy theories and controversial claims that have attracted a significant following. Monetizing through several channels, Jones uses his radio show, websites, and social media platforms to reach his audience. This audience is then marketed a variety of products, ranging from survivalist gear to health supplements, which are often advertised within the context of the conspiracy theories he propagates. For example, amidst the theories of global catastrophe, government corruption, and societal collapse, Jones sells survival gear, water filtration systems, and long-term food storage solutions. Alongside health-related conspiracy theories, Jones markets a wide range of dietary supplements and health products, claiming they are essential to maintain health in a world supposedly full of threats. However, his methods and the content he shares have been widely criticized and have resulted in several legal challenges. He's been accused of disseminating harmful misinformation, inciting fear and paranoia, and exploiting public trust and fear for personal gain. Notably, tech companies like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter have taken steps to ban Jones from their platforms for violating community guidelines related to hate speech and harassment. He continues to face lawsuits related to his promotion of unfounded conspiracy theories, particularly around tragic events like the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting.

In terms of sexism and epistemic vice, the premodern view can also serve as a fertile ground for their propagation. It often creates a simplistic binary of good versus evil, us versus them, or men versus women. This can perpetuate harmful stereotypes, including sexists one, and encourage closed-mindedness, dogmatism and other epistemic vices.

This exploration also necessitates a differentiation between producers and consumers of Conspiracy Theories. While producers often formulate these theories with political or financial motivations, consumers engage with them actively and perpetuate their spread, often because the theories resonate with their ideological commitments. Thus, the relationship between Conspiracy Theories and their consumers is not merely one of belief, but also of ideology (ibid, p. 35).

Cassam argues that political marginalization is a key determinant of conspiracy-mindedness. People who perceive themselves as socially disadvantaged, who experience feelings of hopelessness to the extent of contemplating suicide, who suffer from sleep issues, and who feel unsupported in crisis situations, are more likely to embrace conspiracy theories (ibid, p. 56).

This line of thinking aligns with the broader concept of Fricker's (2007) 'epistemic injustice' – referring to a wrong done to someone in their capacity as a knower. People who are politically marginalized may feel that their experiences and perspectives are not taken seriously or are outright dismissed. This experience of epistemic injustice might then drive them towards conspiracy theories, which offer alternative narratives that acknowledge and seemingly validate their marginalized status. However, the link between conspiracy-mindedness and political marginalization also suggests a cyclical, self-reinforcing dynamic. Conspiracy theories can further entrench feelings of marginalization and mistrust, driving believers further away from mainstream sources of information and causing further social isolation. The impact of this isolation is not only epistemic – affecting what people know or believe – but also emotional and social, exacerbating feelings of disenfranchisement and loneliness.

Understanding this interplay between political marginalization and conspiracy-mindedness is essential for addressing the widespread belief in conspiracy theories. Efforts to debunk conspiracy theories must go hand in hand with initiatives to address the broader social conditions that make such theories appealing in the first place. This

includes addressing political marginalization and ensuring that all voices are heard and valued in public discourse.[53]

Marginalization could also be seen as a contributing factor to why some men are attracted to the Red Pill ideology. This ideology, often associated with online communities such as Men's Rights Activists (MRAs), the Manosphere, the pick-up artist (PUA) community, and Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW)[54], presents itself as a source of enlightening "truth" about gender dynamics, often promoting narratives of male victimhood and female manipulation.

In societies where conventional masculinity is defined by power, control, and economic success, men who feel marginalized, whether socially, economically, or romantically, might be drawn to Red Pill thinking as a means of explaining their perceived disadvantages. They might see it as a revelation or awakening, a way to understand and navigate a world they feel has not accorded them the status or opportunities they believe they deserve.

Feeling marginalized or disempowered can breed resentment and anger, feelings which are often manipulated and intensified by Red Pill communities through their propagation of conspiratorial and sexist ideologies. Such ideologies can provide a convenient scapegoat, laying blame on women, feminism, or societal changes, rather than addressing the complex interplay of social, economic, and personal factors that might contribute to these feelings of marginalization.

While this doesn't excuse the misogyny and harmful behaviours that can be perpetuated under the banner of the Red Pill, it does emphasize the importance of addressing feelings of marginalization and disempowerment. There is a need in the creation of healthier, more inclusive understandings of masculinity, provide support for men facing economic or social challenges, and promote open dialogue about gender dynamics that doesn't resort to antagonism or conspiracy.

In analysing the psychological components of conspiracy belief, the concept of cognitive biases emerges. These include, but are not limited to, the intentionality bias

[53] To explore the link between conspiracy beliefs and political marginalization, see Uscinski et al's (2022) analysis of psychological traits and political worldviews, and Imhoff et al's (2022) study on conspiracy mentality's relationship with political orientation and control deprivation.

[54] MGTOW is a mostly online community and social movement centered around the idea that men should prioritize their own well-being and personal sovereignty over societal expectations, particularly those related to relationships with women and marriage. See e.g., (Jones, Trott, & Wright, 2020).

(attributing events to deliberate intent), confirmation bias (favouring information that validates existing beliefs), and proportionality bias (assuming significant events have equally significant causes). Although Cassam acknowledges that these biases might partly account for why some people accept Conspiracy Theories, he contends that all individuals are susceptible to these biases. Despite this universal susceptibility, not everyone subscribes to Conspiracy Theories. Thus, in Cassam's view, these biases on their own cannot provide a complete explanation as to why certain individuals are drawn towards Conspiracy Theories, while others remain immune.

### 5.1.1 Epistemic Vices: Their Influence on Conspiracy-Mindedness

Scholars have long analysed conspiracy theories, with recent research concentrating on individuals who adhere to either particular conspiracy beliefs or a broader conspiratorial mindset. Uscinski (2018) cautions that this shifted focus is not without its risks (ibid, p. 233).

He underscores the possible advantages and drawbacks of the prevailing scholarly approach. Uscinski observes that the prevailing focus is predominantly on understanding how to convince individuals to abandon their conspiracy theories. While he acknowledges the scholarly value in comprehending why people maintain specific beliefs and identifying information that could alter these beliefs, Uscinski expresses concern. He contends that in the quest to find ways to eliminate conspiracy theories, social scientists may unintentionally be equipping the influential with enhanced means to suppress opposition. He emphasizes that conspiracy theories, often regarded by social scientists as mere misperceptions or erroneous beliefs, serve a more significant role as instruments of dissent employed by marginalized groups to counterbalance power. In his words "To rid people of their conspiracy theories is to therefore rid them of a form of political dissent" (ibid, p. 234).

Uscinski thus posits that while conspiracy theories should be approached with caution, they should not be outrightly dismissed as incorrect or false. He underscores their distinctive epistemological characteristics that protect them from being easily disproven. Further, Uscinski advocates for the recognition of the essential role of conspiracy theories in society's healthy operation. He asserts that they contribute

significantly to counterbalancing power concentrations, thereby promoting equilibrium within society (ibid).

Uscinski puts forth specific definitions for both conspiracy and conspiracy theory. In his words

> By conspiracy, I refer to a secret arrangement by a group of powerful people to usurp political or economic power, violate established rights, hoard vital secrets, or unlawfully alter government institutions (Uscinski and Parent 2014: 31, as cited in Uscinski 2018). Conspiracies are real and happen with regularity; Watergate and Iran-Contra are examples.
>
> By conspiracy theory, I mean an explanation of historical, ongoing, or future events that cites as a main causal factor a group of powerful persons, the conspirators, acting in secret for their own benefit against the common good. This definition excludes theories positing benevolent actors toiling away in secret for the good of all mankind (i.e., doctors working in secret to save humanity from the scourge of cancer). Such theories seem to be the product of a very different set of factors and are rare compared to those positing an enemy (ibid)

Conspiracy theories stand as unique entities within the realm of epistemology due to their non-falsifiable nature. The challenge lies in conclusively proving the absence of a concealed, intricate plot. However, this characteristic does not automatically validate every conspiracy theory simply because it is often impossible to prove the contrary. It also does not mean that the evidence presented by conspiracy theorists in support of their theories cannot be challenged or discounted. Acknowledging the potential truth in conspiracy theories, Uscinski advises against categorizing them strictly as true or false. He advocates for an approach that evaluates conspiracy theories based on the extent of verifiable evidence backing them, regarding them as more or less dubious based on this evaluation.

When it comes to the relationship between social media and conspiracy theories Enders et al (2021) posit that although social media has a propensity to disseminate conspiracy theories and certain misinformation, this type of information is

most likely to morph into beliefs for individuals who are already inclined towards conspiracy-based explanations for notable events.

The dominant narrative concerning social media's impact on conspiracy theory and misinformation beliefs hinges on two premises: first, that such beliefs are on the rise, and second, that social media use is a driving force behind this surge (ibid, p. 783). Enders et al. address the second premise, arguing that a crucial element is often overlooked: individual-level predispositions are essential, and sometimes adequate, for forming opinions. In light of related social scientific theories on opinion formation, the connection between social media use and beliefs in specific conspiracy theories and misinformation likely depends on psychological predispositions that prompt individuals to seek and embrace such content. Consequently, Enders et al. concentrate on one such critical predisposition for adopting conspiracy theories: conspiracy thinking. In their words "Conspiracy thinking is a latent predisposition to interpret events and circumstances as the product of malevolent conspiracies, a tendency to impose a conspiratorial narrative on salient affairs" (ibid, p. 785).

Individuals generally perceive their own groups and identities as ethical, virtuous, and positive, while out-groups are frequently seen as embodying opposing characteristics. This dichotomy fosters a readiness to accept conspiracy theories about out-groups rather than in-groups, as well as conspiracies that echo the statements of in-group leaders and information sources (Uscinski & Enders, 2023).

In relation to the manosphere[55], a loose online network of websites, forums, and communities that propagate ideologies about masculinity, which often include anti-feminist, misogynistic, and, in some instances, extremist narratives. this psychological

[55] The term "Manosphere" refers to an informal network of websites, blogs, and online forums that focus on issues related to men and masculinity. This term is broad and encompasses various groups and ideologies, including Men's Rights Activists (MRAs), Involuntary Celibates (Incels), Pick-Up Artists (PUAs), and those following the Red Pill philosophy, among others. While there is considerable diversity within the Manosphere, many of these groups share some common themes. For instance, they often express dissatisfaction with contemporary gender norms, especially those seen as disadvantaging men or favouring women. They also frequently criticize feminism and advocate for men's rights in areas such as family law, education, and domestic abuse. However, some parts of the Manosphere are associated with promoting misogynistic views, sexism, and toxic masculinity. They can sometimes foster resentment towards women, and their discourse can involve elements of conspiracy theories, particularly related to perceived shifts in societal power dynamics favouring women or disenfranchising men. As with any ideology or movement, it's important to remember that not everyone within these groups holds the same beliefs or attitudes. However, the negative and harmful aspects of the Manosphere have drawn significant attention and criticism. As such, it has become a subject of study in fields such as gender studies and sociology, which seek to understand the cultural, social, and psychological dynamics at play.

tendency to view in-groups positively and out-groups negatively is particularly pronounced.

Members of the manosphere often view their own group as moral and virtuous, believing that they are advocating for men's rights and addressing issues that men face in society. Conversely, they perceive out-groups, particularly feminists and women, as embodying the opposite qualities, often portraying them as conspirators seeking to undermine men's rights and status in society. This predisposition to accept conspiracy theories about out-groups is evident in the manosphere's frequent dissemination and acceptance of unfounded theories about women and feminists, reinforcing the in-group's cohesion and further alienating them from the out-groups they oppose.

This dynamic underscores the importance of understanding the role of in-group and out-group perceptions in the acceptance and propagation of conspiracy theories within communities like the manosphere. The inclination to accept conspiracy theories that vilify out-groups and affirm in-group narratives can perpetuate division, hostility, and misinformation, exacerbating the challenges of addressing the real issues faced by each group.

In his 2016 article "Vice Epistemology", Quassim Cassam addresses the potentially negative impact of intellectual character vices on effective inquiry. Cassam defines these vices as deeply rooted habits or character traits that hinder objective thinking and lead individuals to accept or entertain beliefs that are questionable or outright false. These vices he focuses on, namely gullibility, dogmatism, prejudice, close-mindedness, and negligence, represent cognitive barriers that can obstruct open, rational thought processes and the evaluation of evidence (ibid, p. 159).

Cassam takes an innovative approach by linking these intellectual vices to a specific field of social psychology that investigates belief in conspiracy theories. Cassam suggests that a propensity for conspiracy theories is a character trait, underpinned by a particular cognitive style that aligns with what Swami et al (2011) term 'conspiracist ideation' (Swami et al, 2011, as cited by Cassam 2016, p. 171). He presents a compelling argument that those who regularly subscribe to conspiracy theories exhibit a tendency to think in conspiracist terms, demonstrating a unique cognitive style that can be seen as an intellectual vice.

Cassam's exploration of intellectual vices in relation to conspiracy theories is particularly intriguing because it suggests that these vices are not merely incidental to

conspiracy-mindedness but might be its essential characteristics. He ventures that these vices, in fact, could be perverted forms of corresponding intellectual virtues, leading to a misunderstanding or misuse of otherwise beneficial cognitive traits. For example, healthy scepticism could morph into dogmatism, open-mindedness into gullibility, and so on (ibid, p. 172).

Though his in-depth discussion of gullibility, dogmatism, prejudice, closed-mindedness, and negligence, Cassam highlights how each vice can hinder inquiry and rational thinking. Gullibility, as defined by Cassam, can lead to acceptance of false beliefs, ignoring alternative viewpoints or evidence. Prejudice is about having biased preconceptions that could lead to disregarding evidence that challenges these biases. Closed-mindedness involves a resistance to new ideas or evidence that might challenge one's beliefs. Lastly, negligence points to a lack of diligence in inquiry, which could lead to missing crucial evidence or not fully considering alternative viewpoints (ibid, p. 165).

### 5.1.2 The dangers of Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy Theories pose a significant challenge to democratic societies. They are characterized by a deep scepticism of official narratives and a belief in hidden forces controlling major events. While these ideas can potentially serve as a check on power, their tendency towards misinformation and their disregard for evidence-based reasoning often render them harmful to individuals and societies.

Cassam (2019) provides a poignant example of this harm in the case of JFK, the film by Oliver Stone. The movie lionizes Jim Garrison, a figure who sought to expose an alleged conspiracy behind the assassination of President Kennedy. Yet, historical evidence indicates that Garrison's methods involved coercion, bribery, and misuse of power, leading to unwarranted harm to individuals such as Clay Shaw, whom Garrison accused of involvement in the assassination. Shaw's trial and subsequent acquittal highlighted the flimsiness of Garrison's claims, but not before Shaw's reputation and life were irrevocably damaged (ibid, p. 67)

Conspiracy theories often substitute nuanced understanding with seductive, simplistic narratives. They can lead to the ruin of innocent lives, as demonstrated by Shaw's case, and foster widespread societal mistrust.

Moreover, they are impediments to knowledge. By championing unverifiable claims and discrediting established facts, they hinder our ability to discern truth and act accordingly.

The intellectual harms of conspiracy theories are inextricably linked to their societal harms. By undermining the principles of evidence-based reasoning, they promote a worldview that is detached from reality and ripe for exploitation. For a democratic society to thrive, it's crucial to address these challenges.

### 5.1.3 Propaganda and Conspiracy Theories

From Jason Stanley's perspective, propaganda isn't inherently deceptive, as it's often fuelled by deeply held beliefs that align with a specific ideology. While there may not be a deliberate intention to deceive, the ideology could potentially be flawed or misguided, leading to the propagation of harmful or false ideas. This can take the form of supporting propaganda, which furthers the realization of its ideals, or undermining propaganda, which contradicts its stated ideals. This undermining is made possible by exploiting flawed ideological beliefs. Moreover, Stanley points out that propaganda can hide itself, especially in liberal democracies that do not see themselves as propagandistic.

On the other hand, conspiracy theories typically involve speculative ideas about covert actions or plots by powerful entities. Unlike propaganda, which often comes from a place of deeply held and ideologically based beliefs, conspiracy theories often hinge on distrust, scepticism, and a perception of secret, malign forces at work.

When comparing propaganda, as defined by Stanley, to conspiracy theories, there are several key differences:

1) Sincerity vs Insincerity: Stanley argues that propaganda can be sincerely believed by those who propagate it. On the other hand, conspiracy theories often involve a perception of hidden, deceptive forces at work, suggesting a lack of sincerity on the part of those supposedly involved in the conspiracy.

2) Ideology vs Skepticism: Propaganda is often grounded in a particular ideology, whereas conspiracy theories tend to revolve around skepticism or distrust of established narratives or entities.

3) Influence vs Investigation: Propaganda is typically designed to influence the public and sway opinions towards a particular ideology or belief system. Conspiracy theories, by contrast, often claim to 'uncover' or 'expose' hidden truths or plots, positioning themselves as alternative explanations to mainstream narratives.

4) Supporting vs Undermining Propaganda: Stanley's classification of propaganda into supporting and undermining types doesn't necessarily have a parallel in conspiracy theories. While some conspiracy theories might support or undermine specific ideologies or worldviews, they're not typically classified in this way.

However, it's important to note that these distinctions are not absolute. Propaganda and conspiracy theories can intersect and influence each other. For example, a piece of propaganda might promote a conspiracy theory if it aligns with its ideological goals, or a conspiracy theory might incorporate elements of propaganda to make its narrative more compelling or persuasive.

## 5.2 Interplay of Sexism and Epistemic Vice, and their Influence on Conspiracy Theories

In what follows, I intend to shift my focus towards the involvement of sexism in the propagation of conspiracy theories. This is an area that is frequently overlooked yet plays a significant role in shaping the context and acceptance of such theories. To be clear, my purpose here is not to challenge or dispute Cassam's definition of conspiracy theories or to diminish their potential implications. On the contrary, I align with Cassam's perspective and agree that conspiracy theories often carry strong political ramifications.

The interplay of sexism, epistemic vice, and their influence on conspiracy theories is a complex dynamic that can contribute significantly to the persistence and popularity of such theories.

Sexism, as an epistemic vice in the framework of Alessandra Tanesini's internalist account, may be understood as a certain kind of self-regarding attitude—one that fuels beliefs about superiority or entitlement based on gender. Tanesini's view can accommodate the idea that such a self-regarding belief, if wildly inaccurate or morally repugnant, can be an epistemic vice if it corrupts one's intellectual conduct. This stance can illuminate the ways in which sexist attitudes may distort one's grasp of reality and thus fuel belief in conspiracy theories.

Sexism can create fertile ground for conspiracy theories by tapping into long-standing biases and prejudiced beliefs. These biased beliefs often operate as background beliefs, influencing our interpretation and assessment of new evidence. When sexism intertwines with these background beliefs, it can shape the narrative of conspiracy theories and fuel their perpetuation. For example, conspiracy theories that cast women in leadership positions as nefarious actors exploit sexist prejudices, painting these women as threats to societal order or traditional gender norms. This sexism-infused narrative finds resonance with individuals already predisposed to sexist beliefs, leading to the acceptance and propagation of these conspiracy theories.

Epistemic vices, which refer to character traits, attitudes, or thinking styles that obstruct the acquisition, retention, or transmission of knowledge, also play a significant role in the context of conspiracy theories. Traits such as intellectual arrogance, closed-mindedness, and gullibility can exacerbate the adoption and spread of conspiracy theories. Individuals displaying these epistemic vices may disregard evidence contradicting the conspiracy theory, selectively focus on information that supports their views, or uncritically accept the theory without adequate scrutiny.

In the interplay between sexism, epistemic vices, and conspiracy theories, these elements can mutually reinforce each other, creating a resilient structure of belief resistant to counterevidence. For instance, an individual with sexist beliefs (rooted in prejudice) may exhibit closed-mindedness (an epistemic vice) towards evidence contradicting a conspiracy theory that aligns with their prejudiced view.

The "red pill" ideology, often associated with manosphere[56] communities, presents an example of this interplay. This ideology promotes the belief that society is

biased towards women, disadvantaging men—a narrative built on a foundational sexism. Adherents, exhibiting the epistemic vice of closed-mindedness, often dismiss any contradicting evidence as manipulation or deception.

Thus, understanding the interplay of sexism and epistemic vices is crucial to comprehending how and why certain conspiracy theories take hold and persist. It highlights the need to address not only the factual inaccuracies of these theories but also the underlying prejudices and epistemic vices that facilitate their acceptance and propagation.

### 5.2.1 Patriarchy, Misogyny, and Sexism: Disentangling Concepts in Kate Manne's Down Girl

In the realm of Western patriarchy as discussed by Kate Manne's seminal work *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny,* the system operates as a punishing mechanism where women who abide by societal norms are rewarded, and those who rebel are subjected to punishment. Manne asserts that being a misogynist does not necessarily equate to harbouring explicit hatred towards women. Instead, she frames misogyny as "the entrenched prejudice against women" (Manne, 2018, p. 83), suggesting that it's a much more complex and pervasive issue than a personal antipathy held by individual men.

Central to Manne's argument is the notion that misogyny is not merely a characteristic of individuals but should be understood as an attribute of the social environment or structure. In her view, misogyny functions as a form of social control rather than a personal belief or mental state, making it an integral aspect of our societal dynamic rather than simply an individual's prejudice.

A significant contribution made by Manne is her delineation of misogyny from sexism. Despite the frequent mistaken use of these terms interchangeably, Manne differentiates them quite explicitly. In her understanding, sexism is an ideological apparatus that seeks to rationalize and naturalize patriarchal order. On the other hand, misogyny serves as the enforcement mechanism, or tool, that endures women's compliance to the patriarchal order through the provision of emotional labour.

Manne argues against the conventional definition of misogyny, deeming it oversimplified and naïve. She posits that misogyny should be viewed as a system of

social control that operates in service of sexism and patriarchy, rather than a merely personal and individual dislike of women.

In illustrating her arguments, Manne presents instances of domestic violence, sexual assault, and strangulation, often involving men in positions of power. These examples aim to demonstrate not just actions of individuals, but society's readiness to accept and forgive their transgressions, thereby reflecting the deep-seated and systemic nature of misogyny in our patriarchal culture.

Through examples such as the case of Elliot Rodger, Manne pushes the understanding of misogyny beyond the confines of individual psychology, depicting it as a widespread societal issue. Rodger's indiscriminate anger towards women as a collective entity, rather than specific individuals, underscores the systemic nature of misogyny and its power to incite violence.

Manne further explores the implications of violent acts against women, particularly strangulation, which is frequently used as a form of asserting dominance when women refuse to conform to patriarchal expectations. These acts of violence underscore Manne's assertion of misogyny as a systemic tool to punish and control women who step outside their prescribed roles within a patriarchal society.

Finally, viewing misogyny as an environmental characteristic rather than a matter of individual psychology, as Manne proposes, allows us to recognize misogynistic acts even in the absence of explicit misogynistic intent. This nuanced understanding highlights the pervasive presence of misogyny within societal structures and behaviours, offering a more comprehensive insight into the systemic nature of misogyny and the ways it is perpetuated in our society.

To further examine and understand the intricacies of conspiracies theories, I propose employing Kate Manne's distinction between sexism and misogyny. By applying these definitions to the exploration of conspiracy theories, we can unravel the intertwined threads of sexism- as an ideology justifying patriarchy-and misogyny-as a tool for enforcing patriarchy.

Conspiracy theories often involve power dynamics, secrecy, and the perceived threats to established norms. Similarly, sexism, as Manne defined it, operates as an ideology that reinforces and perpetuates established patriarchal norms, positioning it as a potential underpinning of many conspiracy theories. Sexist beliefs, couched within

conspiracy narratives, can serve to justify the status quo and delegitimize challenges to patriarchal structures.

Misogyny, acting as a tool enforcing patriarchal norms, finds its function echoed in conspiracy theories. These theories often seek to punish or undermine individuals or groups perceived to be disrupting established order, in much the same way that Manne's concept of misogyny punishes women for deviating from patriarchal norms.

By integrating Manne's framework into my analysis of conspiracy theories, I can dissect how sexism and misogyny contribute to the formation, dissemination, and appeal of these theories. The intersectional approach allows for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the sociocultural dynamics at play in the phenomenon of conspiracy theories.

### 5.2.2 The Underappreciated Role of Sexism in Conspiracy Theories

Poor political decision is often the result of deficient reasoning and misguided judgement. As a case in point, consider Cassam's example of far-right voters who select their preferred political party based on a shared ideology[57]. According to my interpretation, such a decision-making is primarily indicative of a flaw in reasoning; the political dimension of the decision is secondary.

The formation of erroneous political beliefs or the adherence to certain political ideologies often stems from flawed reasoning processes, rather than political affiliations leading to faulty reasoning. In the realm of conspiracy theories and misinformation, individuals often gravitate towards beliefs that align with their existing worldviews, but this alignment isn't necessarily determined by their political ideologies. Instead, it's typically driven by cognitive biases[58] and errors in critical thinking, such as confirmation bias, cognitive dissonance, or the Dunning-Kruger effect.[59]

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[57] Cassam acknowledges the existence of conspiracy theories among left-wing voters who align with their chosen political party based on shared ideology. However, it is noted that a significant number of conspiracy theories tend to exhibit a right-wing political orientation. Therefore, in line with Cassam's classification, I will draw upon his examples, which predominantly center around right-wing conspiracy theories.

[58] For discussion on the role of cognitive bias on decision making see e.g., (Arceneaux, 2012); (Paulus, de Vries, Janssen, & Van de Walle, 2022).

[59] See e.g., (Ehrlinger, Johnson, Banner, Dunning, & Kruger, 2008)

For instance, if someone is predisposed to distrust authority, they might be more likely to believe in conspiracy theories that depict the government or other powerful entities as nefarious and deceptive. Their political beliefs might reflect this distrust, but the underlying issue is the flawed reasoning (i.e., the tendency to distrust authority without sufficient evidence or despite contradictory evidence) that preceded and shaped these political beliefs.

Consequently, I believe that by examining the influence of sexism on the development and propagation of conspiracy theories, we might gain a more comprehensive understanding of how these theories take root and spread in societies.

In the underbelly of the internet, there exists a parallel universe that is often overlooked in mainstream conversations about conspiracy theories. This is the manosphere. The spectrum of individuals involved in these communities is vast, ranging from the innocuously curious to the potentially dangerous. One extreme end of the spectrum is represented by the involuntary celibates, or "incels"[60], who are known for their violent resentment towards women and have been implicated in organized acts of terror.

While it's important to clarify that not all content found within the manosphere can be deemed harmful or hateful, it cannot be overlooked that certain strains of thought propagated in these communities perpetuate harmful stereotypes about women, often positioning them as scapegoats for a wide range of issues faced by men and boys. Concepts such as the "red pill" ideology[61]— the belief that men are oppressed by societal expectations and that feminism is an attempt to further subjugate them— are

[60] "Incel" is short for "involuntary celibate," a term adopted by some people, primarily men, who feel unable to find romantic or sexual relationships despite wanting them. Incels form part of the broader "manosphere," but have distinctive beliefs that set them apart. They are characterized by feelings of anger, frustration, and sadness, often directing these negative emotions towards women and more successful men. Incel terrorism refers to violent acts committed in the name of the incel ideology. Incels believe that they are persecuted and marginalized by society, leading some individuals to commit acts of violence as a form of revenge or protest.
One notable example of incel terrorism is the 2014 Isla Vista killings in California, where the perpetrator, Elliot Rodger, killed six people and injured fourteen others before killing himself. Rodger was found to have been a part of online incel communities and had left behind a manifesto detailing his sexual frustration and hatred towards women and sexually successful men. Another high-profile case occurred in 2018 in Toronto, Canada, when a man drove a van into a crowd, killing 10 people and injuring 16. Before the attack, the perpetrator had posted on Facebook praising Elliot Rodger and referencing an "Incel Rebellion". The increasing incidence of incel terrorism has led to greater scrutiny of online spaces where such ideologies are spread, and efforts by law enforcement and intelligence agencies to treat this form of violent misogyny as a form of terrorism.

commonplace. However, the idea that women are plotting to take over the world is absent in these theories, as the argument is often framed that women lack the intellectual capability to orchestrate such a plan.

These men view feminism as a malicious societal force. In their eyes, feminism exists to make men subservient thereby making them easy targets for manipulation by the Establishment or "the Matrix"[62].

Many terror attacks rooted in racial hatred have been inspired by Renaud Camus' concept of "The Great Replacement"[63] which posits that the white race is under threat of extinction due to the lower reproduction rates among white women compared to non-white women. Therefore, they perceive a dual threat emerging from feminism and the perceived weakening of men, which in their view, paves the way for the domination of other races.

These narratives might not be classified as conspiracy theories in the traditional sense, however they also disseminate detrimental and unfounded beliefs. Moreover, they demonstrate the role that sexism plays in shaping these harmful ideologies, and how it can amplify the real-world consequences of these conspiracy theories.

Cassam's understanding of conspiracy theories does not disagree with this observation, but it does not fully encompass it either. His interpretation focuses primarily on the political implications of conspiracy theories and neglects the underlying epistemic vices, which may arguably be the root cause. As stated earlier, poor political decisions are often a product of reactionary ideology, rather than politics itself.

The intertwining of sexism with conspiracy-mindedness suggests a potential blind spot in Cassam's analysis, which merits further exploration. By recognizing the role of sexism in fostering these theories, we may gain a deeper understanding of their attraction and influence, particularly in online spaces that propagate harmful ideologies about gender.

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[62] In the context of the manosphere, the "Matrix" refers to what is perceived by its members as a societal system that is stacked against men. This system is believed to be heavily influenced by feminism and 'gynocentric' values, which, according to the manosphere's beliefs, marginalize and oppress men while privileging women.

[63] The Great Replacement theory is a right-wing conspiracy theory that posits the white, Christian population of Western countries is being deliberately replaced by non-white, non-Christian immigrants, often with the suggestion that this is orchestrated by a shadowy elite or cabal. This theory is rooted in racial and ethnic anxieties and is frequently used to stoke fear and resentment against immigrants, refugees, and racial and religious minorities. The Great Replacement theory has found a receptive audience among far-right groups and individuals, and it has been cited as motivating factor in several violent attacks, including the 2019 Christchurch Mosque shootings in New Zealand.

Moreover, I think it is essential to augment Cassam's features that characterize Conspiracy Theories with an additional significant attribute: nostalgia or more specifically idealizing yesteryears. This inclusion would facilitate a more profound understanding of how sexism interplays within Conspiracy Theories.

This aspect of romanticizing the past tends to underscore the longing for a period where roles were supposedly clear-cut and defined, a time where societal norms, particularly gender norms, were less complex. It also promotes an idyllic and often oversimplified vision of the past, a time when 'men were men, and women were women', as often discussed in manosphere dialogues. This lens proves crucial in deciphering how sexism manifests and functions within conspiracy theories. In the context of changing society where traditional gender roles are being questioned and redefined, this longing for a 'simpler past' can often intertwine with conspirational thinking, thereby promoting a sexist narrative.

This tendency to view the past through an overly positive lens can foster a nostalgia for traditional gender roles and power dynamics, contributing to sexist attitudes and beliefs.

Within the manosphere, this nostalgia often takes the form of longing for a time when men were seen as dominant and women as submissive, conforming to stereotypical roles. These communities often bemoan perceived threats to 'masculinity,' seeing social progress in gender equality as a zero-sum game that undermines their status. This narrative serves to fuel resentment and resistance to social change.

Moreover, the romanticization of the past is also a common feature in many conspiracy theories. Conspiratorial narratives often hinge on the idea that a once 'ideal state' has been corrupted or undermined by hidden forces, with the implication that revealing or resisting the conspiracy can restore the 'natural order'. The narrative structure of conspiracy theories inherently lends itself to this kind of nostalgic thinking.

For example, conspiracy theories such as the 'Great Replacement' theory, popular in far-right circles, hinge on the belief that an idealized past is being threatened by modern changes, often blaming these changes on marginalized or minority groups.

In both cases, romanticizing the past can serve as a cognitive shortcut to understanding complex social changes, reinforcing existing prejudices and resisting efforts to promote greater equality and inclusivity. The intersections of these attitudes in the context of sexism and conspiracy theories underpin the importance of addressing

them in a comprehensive manner, taking into account the complex ways in which they interact and reinforce one another.

Consequently, integrating the factor of nostalgia or the idealization of the past as a key feature in understanding the connection between sexism and Conspiracy Theories offers a more comprehensive and nuanced view of their development and the underlying ideologies driving them.

### 5.2.3 The role of Social-Media and the Manosphere

#### *5.2.3.1 The Red Pill*

According to Shawn P. Van Valkenburgh (2021), the Red Pill constructs women as exchangeable commodities by promoting a culture of misogyny and sexism. Van Valkenburg argues that The Red Pill's ideology is based on the belief that women are inherently inferior to men and that they exist primarily to serve men's sexual desires.

Often presented under the guise of self-help and empowerment for young boys and men, the red pill ideology, however, masks a more insidious reality. As Van Valkenburgh argues, "The Red Pill, an online forum wherein heterosexual men attempt to improve their seduction skills by discussing evolutionary psychology and economic theories" (ibid, p. 85). The Red Pill promotes the idea that women can be quantified and exchanged like commodities, and that their value is determined by their physical appearance and sexual availability.

Van Valkenburgh argues that this construction of women as commodities reinforces hegemonic masculinity's prescriptive emotional walls and an inherent desire for connection. By treating women as objects to be traded, the Red Pill simplifies the conflict between dominant masculinity and the need for emotional connection. Unsurprisingly, this construction of women as commodities has a negative implication for both masculinity and feminism (ibid, p. 98).

In her paper "The Ideology of Incels: Misogyny and Victimhood as Justification for Political Violence", Shannon Zimmerman (2022) takes a deep dive into the world of 'involuntary celibates' (incels), a group that has largely evolved online. Incels express profound resentment towards women, blaming them for their own perceived inability to form romantic or sexual relationships. Zimmerman sheds light on

the misogyny at the core of this ideology, connecting it to a broader sense of victimhood and the justification of political violence. In her words:

> Incels have embraced their victimhood as a core part of their narrative. They see themselves as triply victimized, first by genetics[64], then by women who rejected them and lastly, by the society for its indifferences towards their plight. As Elliot Rodger[65] lamented "All I ever wanted was to love women and in turn to be loved back by them. Their behaviour towards me has only earned my hatred, and rightfully so! I am a true victim of this" (ibid, p. 6).

Zimmerman's analysis adds a new perspective to Quassim Cassam's assertion that political marginalisation is a significant factor contributing to the appeal of conspiracy theories. In "Conspiracy Theories" (2019), Cassam identifies a set of traits common amongst individuals who are drawn to conspiracy theories, including a feeling of being on the periphery of society and a sense of social discontentment.

As Zimmerman's research indicates, the incel community exhibits many of these traits, utilizing a pervasive sense of marginalisation and victimhood to justify their ideology and violent actions. This fusion of marginalisation, sexism, and conspiracy theories is further seen in the broader manosphere – a network of websites, forums, and online communities promoting masculinity, opposition to feminism, and related ideologies. The manosphere plays a key role in propagating sexist conspiracy theories and facilitating the growth of communities like incels.

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[64] Incels often lament about what they perceive as an unfair "genetic lottery", which they believe has left them disadvantaged in terms of physical attractiveness, height, body shape, or other characteristics. They often blame these perceived genetic shortcomings for their inability to form romantic or sexual relationships, arguing that societal standards of beauty or attractiveness are rigid and heavily favor those with certain genetic traits.
This preoccupation with genetics can lead to a sense of fatalism and resentment within the incel community. It fosters a belief system that views their situation as unchangeable and predetermined, which can perpetuate feelings of hopelessness, anger, and self-loathing. Some incels may even espouse eugenicist views, suggesting that those with "inferior" genetics should not reproduce.

[65] Elliot Rodger was a 22-year-old man who, in 2014, killed six people and injured fourteen others in Isla Vista, California, before taking his own life. The attack was premeditated, and Rodger left behind a lengthy manifesto and several YouTube videos detailing his motives. He expressed anger, jealousy, and resentment towards women, whom he felt had rejected him, and men, whom he saw as sexually successful.
Rodger's actions and writings have since become infamous within the incel community. He is sometimes referred to as the "Supreme Gentleman" in these circles and is idolized by some for his violent response to his perceived social and sexual isolation. His actions are seen by many as an extreme manifestation of the anger, misogyny, and entitlement that can be fostered within incel communities.

Among these theories is the "Great Replacement", a baseless narrative asserting a deliberate effort by a nebulous elite to replace the white, Christian population in Western nations with non-white, non-Christian immigrants. These narratives, based in racial anxieties and sexism, prey on feelings of marginalisation and fear, in the process becoming an integral part of the incel and wider manopshere ideology.

The terminology employed by Incels to classify themselves and other forms the basis of their primary narrative: that society operates as a sexual bazaar, with an individual's worth tethered to unalterable genetic variables. In this perspective, where their position is unchangeable, the Incel philosophy proposes several tactics for Incels to navigate within the prevailing "gynocracy"[66].

#### *5.2.3.2 Social-Media and Conspiracy Theories*

In 'The Relationship Between Social Media Use and Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation', Enders et al examine the significant role individual predispositions, such as political partisanship and ideological self-identification, play in shaping beliefs about conspiracy theories. "Conspiracy thinking" is defined as a mindset that is inclined towards the belief in conspiracy theories and find a robust correlation between this mindset and the total number of conspiracy beliefs held by an individual.

Furthermore, the impact of social media use on fostering conspiracy beliefs is explored. The findings suggest a potent interaction between conspiracy thinking and frequency of social media usage, demonstrating a significantly amplified effect within this intersection. Specifically, Enders et al observe that social media use translates more prominently into belief adoption for those already predisposed to conspiratorial explanations. In contrast, for those exhibiting low levels of conspiracy thinking, the relationship between social media use and conspiracy beliefs is markedly weaker, suggesting a conditional dependency between these factors (ibid).

Consequently, the study illuminated the multifaceted way through which social media can propagate conspiracy theories and misinformation. While it is recognized that dubious ideas can proliferate rapidly on these platforms, circumventing censors and

[66] "Gynocracy" or "Gynarchy" is a term used by certain subgroups on the internet, particularly within the manosphere, to describe a societal structure that they perceive as being dominated or controlled by women. The term is often used in derogatory or critical way and reflects the belief that men are unfairly disadvantaged or oppressed in contemporary society.

leveraging promotional algorithms, the research underscores how the relationship between social media use and conspiracy beliefs is contingent on other individual-level predispositions. Particularly, the research highlights the intensifying effect of conspiracy thinking on this association, thereby proposing a nuanced perspective on the dynamics between social media usage and the cultivation of conspiracy beliefs.

### *5.3 Epistemic Vices*

Prejudice, defined as the tendency to adhere to beliefs based on pre-existing biases or notions, poses a significant obstacle to efficient inquiry. It could potentially lead to the disregard of evidence that contradicts our biases. It's important to note that these biases can exist and often do, independent of any political implications. Quassim Cassam, in his 2019 work, posits that while all of us are susceptible to cognitive biases and epistemic vices, not all fall into the trap of Conspiracy Theories. Thus, neither cognitive biases nor epistemic vices can be solely held accountable for individuals succumbing to Conspiracy Theories. According to Cassam, the true culprit lies within the realms of ideology and politics.

However, I find myself in disagreement with Cassam in two key aspects. Firstly, even though anyone can fall victim to an epistemic vice such as prejudice, an epistemically responsible individual will strive to correct this judgment error. Moreover, the frequency and intensity of prejudice matter. Occasional prejudicial thoughts and strong, persistent prejudice are poles apart. For instance, harbouring stereotypes like "Austrians are good at yodelling" is significantly different from possessing intense sexist or racial prejudices and basing subsequent opinions on these prejudices.

Secondly, and this is something I've mentioned before, political ideology is a subsequent reason for conspiracy theories, with epistemic malfunction taking precedence. If I vote for a far-right party because they've managed to convince me that immigrants are the root of all evil, the primary flaw lies in my judgment. The political ideology that promotes this conspiracy theory merely latches on to the existing epistemic vice, serving to strengthen and perpetuate it.

In the realm of conspiracy theories, individual predispositions, including epistemic vices such as prejudice, play a crucial role in shaping the belief in these theories. Understanding the nature of these predispositions and the ways they manifest

can provide us with critical insights into the phenomenon of conspiracy theories and help devise strategies to combat their spread. In our efforts to dismantle these conspiracy theories, it is essential that we first recognize and address these deep-seated biases and prejudices.

In the discourse of conspiracy theories, a crucial but frequently ignored element is the presence of prejudice. Prejudice plays a prominent role in the origination, development, and perpetuation of conspiracy theories. In fact, the amalgamation of conspiracy theories with prejudice creates an ideological potent brew that can manipulate social and political realities to an alarming extent.

Prejudice and conspiracy theories share a symbiotic relationship, feeding off each other. For many conspiracy theories, at the root of this dynamic relationship is the human tendency to stereotype and to group individuals based on cultural, ethnic, religious or other identity markers[67]. These categorizations, often based on inaccurate or oversimplified notions, give rise to beliefs that are impervious to counterarguments and factual evidence. The othering process, an integral part of prejudice, sets a fertile ground for the birth and propagation of conspiracy theories.

From an historical perspective, the linkage of conspiracy theories to prejudice is clearly evident. For instance, one of the oldest conspiracy theories, the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion", was a vile anti-Semitic fabrication that accused Jews of planning world domination (ibid, p. 13). This fictitious narrative fuelled anti-Semitism and played a pivotal role in the Holocaust. Similar threads of prejudice exist in more modern conspiracy theories. Claims of a supposed 'New World Order', or allegations that certain racial or religious groups are plotting to undermine national sovereignty, are rooted in prejudice and fear of the 'other'.

The role of prejudice in conspiracy theories can be further examined under the lens of social psychology. The anxiety-uncertainty hypothesis posits that in times of social or personal uncertainty, people become more prone to prejudice and conspiracy thinking. This hypothesis is substantiated by various studies that suggest a strong correlation between perceived threat, negative attitudes towards outgroups, and belief in conspiracy theories.

[67] One notable deviation from this pattern is found in anti-vaxxers; those who subscribe to these conspiracy theories may not necessarily harbor racist or sexist beliefs.

Prejudice, in this context, becomes a tool that provides a semblance of certainty and control. By blaming an outgroup for societal woes or personal failures, an individual or group can abdicate responsibility and maintain a positive self-image. The narrative provided by the conspiracy theory serves as a comfortable refuge from the complexity and ambiguity of the real world. The scapegoated outgroup, on the other hand, bears the brunt of this projection.

Moreover, conspiracy theories provide a platform for prejudiced individuals to express their biased beliefs under the guise of scepticism or the pursuit of 'hidden truths'. Such platforms often attract like-minded individuals, leading to the creation of echo chambers that reinforce prejudiced beliefs and conspiracy theories.

However, it is essential to note that the relationship between prejudice and conspiracy theories is not a one-way street. While prejudice can fuel conspiracy theories, these theories can, in turn, amplify and reinforce prejudicial beliefs. This feedback loop is self-sustaining and can have a detrimental impact on societal harmony, perpetuating stereotypes, and fostering discrimination and hatred.

Prejudice plays a substantial role in the formation and propagation of conspiracy theories. It can both stimulate the genesis of these theories and amplify their dissemination, as prejudice often guides the selection and interpretation of information. Here's how:

In-group Bias and Out-group Derogation: Prejudiced individuals tend to show strong in-group favouritism and out-group derogation. This dichotomy leads them to readily accept narratives where their in-group is victimized by an out-group. Therefore, conspiracy theories often demonize out-groups (be they ethnic, religious, or political), attributing them malevolent intentions and vast conspiratorial powers. Conspiracy theories thus provide an intellectual framework that justifies pre-existing biases and stereotypes (Everett, Faber, & Crockett, 2015).

Stereotyping and Worldview Defence: Stereotypes, as a form of prejudice, offer simplified views of the world, reducing its complexity and providing cognitive shortcuts. Conspiracy theories, likewise, propose simplistic explanations to complex societal phenomena, reinforcing stereotypical beliefs about certain groups. For individuals with prejudiced worldviews, conspiracy theories may serve as a means to defend their perspectives and rationalize their biases (Major, Kaiser, O'Brien, & McCoy, 2007).

Anxiety, Threat, and Scapegoating: Prejudice often arises from anxiety and perceived threats to social identity. Conspiracy theories, appealing to these emotions, can reinforce prejudice by providing scapegoats that embody these fears and anxieties. The vilified out-groups in conspiracy theories often mirror societal prejudices, further entrenching discriminatory beliefs (Inzlicht, Tullett, & Gutsell, 2012)

Cognitive Closure[68] and Certainty: Both prejudice and conspiracy thinking arise from a need for cognitive closure and certainty. Prejudiced individuals often resist changing their views, preferring stability and consistency in their beliefs. Similarly, conspiracy theories offer definite answers and targets of blame, reinforcing this desire for certainty.

Selective Information Processing[69]: Prejudice can lead to selective information processing, where individuals are more likely to accept, remember, and share information that aligns with their biases. Similarly, conspiracy theories are often supported by cherry-picked evidence while ignoring contradictory information. This selective processing and sharing of information can spread conspiracy theories within prejudiced communities.

Prejudice and conspiracy thinking share many cognitive processes and emotional appeals. The interplay between these two factors can lead to a reinforcing cycle, where prejudice encourages conspiracy thinking, which in turn amplifies prejudice. It's a challenging cycle to break, requiring comprehensive strategies that address both cognitive processes and societal factors.

The psychological process of scapegoating[70], often spurred by feelings of social isolation and marginalisation, can help us understand the dynamics present within many conspiracy theories, particularly those emerging from the manosphere.

For individuals feeling socially isolated and marginalized, the world can seem unfair and hostile. In this context, there is a tendency to seek a cause or a blameable entity for their misfortunes, which often morphs into a scapegoat. Scapegoating is a psychological mechanism that allows individuals to externalize their frustrations, fears, and insecurities onto a 'guilty' party, thereby providing a simple explanation for complex personal and societal problems (Glick, 2008).

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[68] See e.g., (Kossowska, Szumowska, Dragon, Jaśko, & Kruglanski), (Jaume, Schetsche, Roca , & Quattrocchi, 2022)
[69] See e.g., (Oakes & Turner, 1990)
[70] See e.g., (Rothschild, Landau, Sullivan, & Keefer, 2012)

In the manosphere, a digital community characterized by its male-centric perspectives and often accused of promoting misogyny, this scapegoating frequently falls on women and feminist movements. Men involved in this community, particularly those identifying as "incels" (involuntarily celibate), often view their perceived marginalisation and failures in romantic or sexual relationships as being directly caused by women, feminism, or a societal system they believe to be rigged against 'average' men. This belief system can be reinforced and amplified within the echo chambers of the manosphere, where shared grievances and conspiracy theories can create a toxic culture of victimhood and blame. The external world, the 'Establishment,' or the 'Matrix'71 are seen as oppressors, with women frequently becoming the scapegoats for their misfortunes (Horta Ribeiro, et al., 2020). In this way, the interaction of social isolation, marginalization, and the tendency to scapegoat contributes significantly to the formation of conspiracy theories in the manosphere. Such theories can further fuel misogyny and sexism, exacerbating the gender divide and often leading to harmful actions both online and offline. The influence of these conspiracy theories and the impact they have on the real world, particularly on young, impressionable men, cannot be underestimated.

"The Epistemology of Prejudice" by Endre Begby (Begby, 2013) provides a compelling exploration of the nature and tenacity of prejudice and its relationship to belief systems, including conspiracy theories. Begby challenges the commonly held belief that prejudice necessarily involves epistemic culpability, positing instead that they typically constitute a type of generic judgment. These generic judgments, which often find root in our subconscious mind as background beliefs, exert a tremendous influence on how we assess and interpret new evidence. This insidious nature makes prejudices both difficult to identify and challenging to debunk. They remain imperceptible to introspective examination and are resistant to empirical counterevidence. An individual harbouring prejudiced beliefs can, for instance, maintain these beliefs even when presented with evidence that contradicts them (ibid).

The prejudiced mind's ability to disregard, subsume, or reinterpret contradictory evidence showcases the power of these generic judgments. This further

complicates the task of combating prejudice since they do not function as simple universal generalizations but rather present a more nuanced worldview. This nuanced worldview, particularly in its ability to incorporate or disregard counterevidence, can be especially problematic in the context of conspiracy theories.

Prejudiced beliefs, acting as background beliefs, can significantly colour the interpretation of new evidence. For instance, an individual with sexist biases may be more likely to accept a conspiracy theory that undermines or villainizes a figure who challenges traditional gender norms. They could interpret any evidence contradicting the conspiracy theory as part of the 'cover-up,' thus further entrenching their beliefs.

The "red pill" ideology offers a stark example of such prejudices in action. Here, adherents believe they have accessed a truth that the broader society denies or misrepresents. Their beliefs are fortified against contradictory evidence, often seen as attempts to maintain the status quo, leading to a form of intellectual insularity that can be challenging to penetrate. Therefore, Begby's work underscores the importance of understanding the nature of prejudice and the critical role it can play in the formation and perpetuation of conspiracy theories.

Beyond the quintet of defining features of Conspiracy Theories as outlined by Cassam, I have proposed a sixth. Here's how they all interconnect:

1) Speculative: Conspiracy theories are generally based on conjecture rather than solid evidence. They propose an alternative narrative without direct or substantial proof.

2) Esoteric: These theories often rely on the notion that the truth is available only to a select few, while the majority are deceived.

3) Premodern: Conspiracy theories lean towards a premodern worldview, believing in a clear delineation between good and evil, and that complex events can be controlled by small, secretive groups.

4) Amateurish: Conspiracy theories are often propagated by non-experts who disregard or misinterpret established knowledge and consensus.

5) Contrarian: By nature, conspiracy theories are counter to widely accepted beliefs or understandings, going against the mainstream narrative.

6) Romanticization of the Past: Many conspiracies theories hinge on the belief that the past was somehow better or purer, and that current societal issues have arisen from deviation from this ideal state. This belief, often rooted in a selective or biased understanding of history, can fuel narratives that seek to restore a perceived lost golden age, further stoking discontent and divisiveness.[72]

This sixth characteristic I propose highlights how nostalgia and a selective view of history can become a powerful tool in the propagation of conspiracy theories, offering an idealized past as a counterpoint to a supposedly degraded present. It's indeed a critical angle to consider in understanding the persistence and allure of conspiracy theories.

The phenomenon of collective nostalgia, or what is often referred to as romanticising the past and 'rosy retrospection,' holds a significant position in conspiracy thinking, particularly as it relates to sexism. This sixth feature, absent in Cassam's original outline, becomes essential in providing a more comprehensive understanding of the gendered aspects of conspiracy theories.

Rosy retrospection manifests itself in the romanticization and glorification of traditional gender roles and dynamics. It paints an image of a 'golden age' in which men were traditionally masculine, and women were traditionally feminine, reflecting an often-exaggerated version of the mid-20th-century Western nuclear family model. Within this fantasy, men held power, while women were submissive, adhering strictly to domestic roles. This simplified and idealized image of the past is then juxtaposed against modern-day gender equality advances, casting them as disruptions to a 'natural' and 'proper' order.

This line of thinking is particularly prevalent within communities like the manosphere, a loose collection of online forums and spaces dedicated to men's issues. A key focus within these spaces is a perceived 'crisis' of masculinity, where members express discontent towards feminist movements, the perceived emasculation of men, and the supposed erosion of traditional gender roles. This sentiment is based on a nostalgic longing for a time when 'men were men and women were women,' reflecting the romanticization of the past.

[72] For more discussion on collective nostalgia see e.g., (Lammers, 2023), (van Prooijen, Rosema, Chemke-Dreyfus, Trikaliti, & Hormigo, 2022)

In these circles, conspiracy theories find fertile ground, often as a means of explaining contemporary socio-political realities that do not align with their nostalgic worldview. For example, the widespread belief in theories of orchestrated societal emasculation by 'feminist elites' can be understood as an attempt to reconcile the romanticized past with the present.

Furthermore, the romanticizing of the past also provides a platform for attributing blame or responsibility for perceived societal 'ills.' Women, particularly feminists, are often scapegoated as the cause of men's issues, as they are seen as the drivers of change away from the idealized past. This scapegoating solidifies the link between sexism and conspiracy thinking. Women become the conspirators in these narratives, further demonized by attributions of sinister motives or actions against men.

In the manosphere, this often results in a reactionary backlash against women and feminism, with red pill ideology and involuntary celibacy (incel) ideologies offering archetypal examples. Such ideologies can perpetuate harmful narratives and, in extreme cases, have been linked to acts of violence.

The romanticization of the past is a critical feature in understanding how sexism plays a role in conspiracy thinking. It offers an explanatory framework for the perceived societal shifts away from a nostalgically idealized past, often manifesting in harmful conspiracy theories that vilify women and undermine progress towards gender equality.

### *5.4 Conclusion*

The exploration of the world of conspiracy theories reveals a landscape where the boundaries between individual judgment and political ideologies often blur. Yet, upon closer examination, we uncover an essential understanding - the role of 'epistemic vice' as a forerunner to the political influence in the adoption of conspiracy theories. Seeing the phenomenon of conspiracy theories through the lens of 'epistemic vice' reveals how individual predispositions pave the path to conspiracy beliefs, even before political ideologies come into the picture.

Epistemic vices, as traits, attitudes, or habits that systematically obstruct the acquisition of knowledge, play a vital role in shaping an individual's perception of reality. These vices, including intellectual arrogance, closed-mindedness, and prejudice,

prominently contribute to the belief in conspiracy theories. When individuals armed with these vices encounter information, they tend to interpret selectively and reinforce their existing beliefs, thus creating a cognitive trap that fosters conspiratorial thinking.

These epistemic vices thrive within the online ecosystem, amplified by algorithms that reflect and magnify entrenched beliefs. The pervasive nature of social media platforms facilitates the rapid dissemination of conspiracy theories, feeding on the cognitive biases of its users. For those predisposed by their epistemic vices, social media becomes a fertile ground for conspiratorial beliefs.

However, the narrative of conspiracy theories is not purely a result of epistemic vice. Politics, with its inherent divisiveness, provides a compelling narrative for conspiracy theories. Yet, political ideologies appear to intensify these vices' effect rather than acting as the primary driving force. This highlights that political alignment often follows the establishment of an individual's susceptibility to conspiracy thinking, primarily guided by their epistemic vices.

A clear understanding of this dynamic is seen in the anti-feminist narratives proliferating within certain online communities, such as the 'manosphere.' Here, the epistemic vice of prejudice against women prepares the ground for conspiracy beliefs, depicting women as threats to male identity. Politics enter the scene later, providing a context for these conspiracy theories and reinforcing the biased views.

Using Kate Manne's (2018) concepts of sexism and misogyny, we see that sexism serves as an ideological justification for patriarchy, while misogyny acts as an enforcement mechanism for patriarchal norms. The anti-feminist conspiracy theories reflect these dynamics, with sexism providing the ideological background and misogyny acting as the tool to maintain these beliefs.

This intertwining of epistemic vice and politics is also evident in racially charged conspiracy theories. Racial prejudice, an epistemic vice, primes individuals to accept racially inspired conspiracy theories, often fuelled by political ideologies that emphasize racial divisions.

In conclusion, this chapter posits that the attraction towards conspiracy theories is primarily an error in judgment, underpinned by epistemic vices. While politics play a role in shaping the narrative of conspiracy theories, they often trail behind the establishment of an individual's susceptibility to such theories, guided by their epistemic vices. Recognizing this allows us to tackle the issue at its root, promoting epistemic

virtues to encourage critical thinking and counter the proliferation of conspiracy theories.

# Chapter 6 The Manosphere, Epistemic Paternalism, and the Case for No-Platforming

## Introduction

The advent of social media has revolutionized the way information is disseminated and consumed, creating new platforms for dialogue, debate, and unfortunately, the spread of harmful content. With the rise of the #metoo movement, much attention has been given to the phenomena of misogyny and sexism alike. It comes as a surprise, however, that while these two phenomena have been so closely scrutinized, little to no discussion has focused on the manosphere, the birthplace of much of today's online misogyny. This chapter delves into the complex dynamics of social media and the pervasive influence of the manosphere, a loosely defined network of websites and online communities promoting various forms of masculinity, men's rights, and anti-feminism. I will argue that in the context of the manosphere, certain forms of epistemic paternalism are not only warranted but essential. More specifically, I will elucidate the interrelations between the manosphere and misogynist political violence and provide a justification for no-platforming on social media. I shall use Neil Levy's (2019) account on no-platforming as a foil for my own views. I agree with Levy that no-platforming is justified on the basis that the groups that the far-right attacks are among the most vulnerable already and have a right not to be subjected to further attack and further exclusion. Bad speech, or speech that is misleading or false, can generate misleading higher-order evidence that can be harmful to the audience. But I disagree with him in two crucial points: First, his account on no-platforming is too narrow, because Levy holds a standard view on what a platform is, namely a stage in a university context. Second, Levy posits that higher order evidence of a person's expertise is typically conferred by their association with reputable sources, such as speaking at a prestigious university, or publishing in a well-known newspaper. Contrary to Levy, I propose that social media platforms can also bestow a similar level of credibility, providing higher order evidence of someone's expertise. This suggests that the endorsements and recognition gained through widespread social media engagement can be just as indicative of a person's expert status as traditional forms of accreditation. The content

that spreads like wildfire is generally consumed by people that consider expertise in the traditional sense (i.e., reputable news outlets and academia) as fake government propaganda, and so they get their higher-order evidence from an influencer's massive following and epistemic echo-chambers. I will argue that the type of speech present in the manosphere is not only hate speech, but also dangerous speech. The danger is twofold. The first danger represents cases in which the targets of the speech (i.e., women) can become victims of political violence[73]. The second danger is of the epistemic kind. Consumers of this misogynistic content are being misled by false information concerning women and gender roles. I will also try to address the worry that epistemic paternalism infantilizes the audience and interferes with an individual's inquiry or belief formation, as well as the fear that epistemic paternalism in the form of no-platforming can give too much power to those who are in control of said platforms (i.e., the government, big tech etc).

The organization of the rest of the paper is as follows. Part one of the paper will offer a landscape of the manosphere and the dangers it poses. It will look at cross-field research on the different types of groups present in the manosphere, their grievances and their vernacular. It will also investigate Kate Manne's (2018) account of misogyny in order to better understand the role of misogyny in the manosphere. Part two presents Levy's account and argue that his account is too narrow to fit instances of no-platforming on social media. Part three introduces and begins to defend a justification for no-platforming.

### *6.1 The Manosphere and social media*

The advent of social media has revolutionized the way information is disseminated, creating platforms for dialogue and debate, but also for the spread of harmful content. One such harmful content that has gained prominence in the digital age is the manosphere, a loosely defined network of websites and online communities promoting various forms of masculinity, men's rights, and anti-feminism.

The manosphere encompasses a range of groups and ideologies, including Men's Rights Activists (MRA's), Men Going their Own Way (MGTOW), Pick-Up

[73] For an in-depth analysis of gendered political violence, see Bardall et al (2019), which provides a comprehensive examination of the ways in which political violence targets women differently.

Artists (PUA's) and Involuntary Celibates (Incels). These groups often share a common narrative of male victimhood, blaming feminism and women for men's perceived loss of status and power.

Social media platforms have played a crucial role in the proliferation of the manosphere. They provide a space where these ideologies can be shared, discussed, and amplified. The anonymity and reach of social media have allowed the manosphere to grow and influence a wider audience. This influence, as we shall see, comes with consequences. Social media influencers, individuals who have amassed large online followings and can shape attitudes and behaviours through their posts and videos, have emerged as significant players in this new media landscape.

The manosphere includes websites such as A Voice for Men (AVfM) and Return of Kings (ROK), as well as online platforms like Reddit and 4chan. These communities perpetuate content that is characterized by verbal abuse against women, criticism of movements like #metoo, and praise for patriarchal values (Dickel & Evolvi, 2023). The manosphere is not an ideologically homogenous bloc, accommodating much infighting between Christian and atheist, homophobic and pro-gay, and pro- and anti-MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way) and PUA (Pick up Artists) elements. However, what unites these multiple masculinities is a common preoccupation with male hegemony as it relates to heterosexual gender relations, whether that relationship is one of wishful identification with or strategic disavowal of the alpha male ideal (Ging, 2019). The manosphere's ideologies and discourses are disseminated through social media, where they can reach a wide audience. The subreddit r/TheRedPill (r/TRP), for example, uses Evolutionary Psychology (EP) to justify a denial of emotional yearning and constructs sexuality according to market logics (Van Valkenburgh, 2021). The Incel (Involuntary Celibate) community, on the other hand, uses violence as a political tool, advocating for a rebellion or uprising against their perceived oppressors (Zimmerman, 2022).The language used within the manosphere also plays a significant role in its ideologies. The term "misandry", for instance, is used to construct their identity as fundamentally oppositional to feminism and reinforce binary gender systems. It is used to characterize and dismiss feminists and issues that men's rights activists deem too radical (Marwick & Caplan, 2018). The influence of the manosphere on social media is significant. Its narratives and ideologies are spread across various platforms, reaching a wide audience. The affordances of the Internet contribute to the spread of hate speech,

and the manosphere mirrors networked feminism in trying to connect and mobilize members of different groups (Dickel & Evolvi, 2023). However, the potential offline impacts of such discourses cannot be ignored. The manosphere's ideologies can influence society at large, and its narratives can lead to real-world violence. To understand this better, let us look at the main subgroups of the manosphere.

1: The Incel Community

Involuntary celibates, or "incels," are a group within the manosphere that consists of men who believe they are unable to find a romantic or sexual partner despite desiring one. The incel community is known for its misogynistic rhetoric and its members' tendency to blame women for their perceived sexual failures.

One of the most infamous instances of dangerous speech within the incel community was the aforementioned case of Elliot Rodger, who in 2014 killed six people and injured fourteen others in Isla Vista, California. Before the attack, Rodger posted a manifesto online in which he expressed his hatred for women and his frustration over his perceived sexual and social rejection. Rodger has since been hailed as a hero in some corners of the incel community, with some members referring to the anniversary of the attack as "Saint Elliot's Day" (Marwick & Caplan, 2018).

This case illustrates the potential for dangerous speech within the manosphere to incite real-world violence. It also highlights the harm inflicted on the targets of this speech, in this case, women, who are dehumanized and blamed for the perceived grievances of incel community members.

Moreover, on incel's easily accessible website, while actively planning an act of terror is prohibited, rejoicing and celebrating acts of terrors committed by other incels is permitted and encouraged.

2: The Men's Rights Activists (MRAs)

Men's Rights Activists (MRAs) are another group within the manosphere. They argue that men are oppressed and disadvantaged by modern society and feminism. While some of their concerns, such as the high rate of male suicide and issues with child custody, are legitimate, the rhetoric within the MRA community often veers into misogyny and hate speech.

For example, the website "A Voice for Men," one of the most prominent MRA websites, has been known to publish articles that demean and dehumanize women, often blaming them for the perceived disadvantages faced by men. The website has also been criticized for doxing - the practice of publishing private or identifying information about individuals on the internet, typically with malicious intent - women they perceive as enemies (Ging, 2019). This case demonstrates the harm inflicted on the targets of hate speech within the manosphere, particularly women who are singled out and targeted for harassment. It also illustrates the potential harm to consumers of this content, who are exposed to and may internalize misogynistic narratives.

3: The Pick-Up Artist (PUA) Community

The Pick-Up Artist (PUA) community is a part of the manosphere that focuses on strategies and techniques for attracting and seducing women. While not as overtly violent as the incel community or as politically motivated as the MRAs, the PUA community nonetheless propagates harmful narratives about women and gender relations.

PUA rhetoric often objectifies women and reduces them to targets to be conquered. This dehumanization of women can contribute to harmful attitudes and behaviors, such as sexual harassment and assault. For example, Julien Blanc, a self-proclaimed pick-up artist, was widely criticized for a series of videos in which he advocated for abusive tactics to attract women, including choking and emotional manipulation (Bates, 2020). This case illustrates the potential harm to both the targets and consumers of PUA content. Women are objectified and dehumanized, while men are taught to view women as targets to be conquered rather than as individuals deserving of respect.

In conclusion, these case studies from the manosphere illustrate the pervasive presence of hate speech and dangerous speech within these communities. They underscore the potential harm inflicted on both the targets of this speech, primarily women, and the consumers of this content, who are exposed to and may internalize harmful narratives about women and gender relations.

The incel community, with its narratives of male victimhood and its tendency to blame women for perceived sexual failures, provides a stark example of the potential for dangerous speech within the manosphere to incite real-world violence. The Men's

Rights Activists, with their anti-feminist rhetoric and practices such as doxing, illustrate the harm inflicted on the targets of hate speech within the manosphere. Finally, the Pick-Up Artist community, with its objectification of women and promotion of manipulative tactics, demonstrates the potential harm to both the targets and consumers of this content. These case studies underscore the need for a broader approach to tackling the issue of harmful content within the manosphere.

### 6.1.1 Understanding the Appeal of the Manosphere

The gym, or more broadly, physical fitness and bodybuilding, plays a significant role in the Manosphere. The gym is often seen as a space where men can reclaim a sense of traditional masculinity that they perceive as being eroded in contemporary society.[74]

In the manosphere, physical strength and muscularity are often equated with masculinity and power. The gym becomes a space where men can work to achieve these ideals, and where they can find a sense of community with others who share similar goals. It is not uncommon for discussions in these online communities to revolve around workout routines, diet plans, and progress photos.

However, the emphasis on physical fitness can also contribute to harmful and unrealistic body standards. It can lead to a culture of toxic masculinity, where worth is determined by physical prowess and appearance. This can result in negative body image, overtraining, and the use performance-enhancing substances.

Moreover, the gym culture in the Manosphere an also contribute to a sense of exclusion and superiority. Those who do not or cannot conform to these physical ideals may be marginalized or ridiculed. Thus, while the gym can be a space for empowerment and community, it can also reinforce harmful norms and attitudes. Furthermore, the lifestyle of these self-proclaimed alpha-males that boast their riches and physical appearance online is very appealing to young men.[75]

[74] See e.g., (Johansson, 1996); (Lamarche, Gammage, & Ozimok, 2018)

[75] For additional insights into the role of gym culture within the manosphere, see Sugiura (2021) and Johansson (1996). These works delve into the intricate dynamics of masculinity as expressed and reinforced in gym environments.

The use of evolutionary psychology to justify misogyny is a contentious issue that has been debated in various academic circles. Evolutionary psychology, as a field, seeks to understand human behaviour and cognition through the lens of evolutionary processes. It posits that many of our behaviours and attitudes are the result of adaptations that were beneficial for our ancestors' survival and reproduction. However, this perspective can be misused to justify harmful attitudes and behaviours, including misogyny.

Some individuals and groups have used evolutionary psychology to justify misogynistic attitudes, arguing that men's dominance over women is a natural outcome of evolutionary processes. They argue that men are naturally more aggressive, competitive, and sexually driven than women due to evolutionary pressures, and that these traits justify male dominance and female subordination.

However, these arguments are fundamentally flawed. Firstly, they often rely on a simplistic and deterministic understanding of evolution, ignoring the subtlety and diversity of human behaviours and societies. They also overlook the fact that our behaviours are influenced by a combination of genetic, environmental, and cultural factors, not just evolutionary pressures.

Secondly, these arguments often involve a misinterpretation or misuse of evolutionary psychology. While evolutionary psychology can help us understand why certain behaviours and attitudes might have been adaptive in our ancestral environments, it does not provide moral or ethical justifications for these behaviours in the present. Just because a behaviour might have been adaptive in the past does not mean it is desirable or acceptable today. Hence, many evolutionary psychologists have argued against the misuse of their field to justify misogyny. They point out that evolutionary psychology is a descriptive science, not a prescriptive one. It seeks to explain why certain behaviours and attitudes exist, not to endorse or justify them (Bachaud & Johns, 2023).

While evolutionary psychology can provide valuable insights into human behaviour, it should not be used to justify harmful attitudes or behaviours such as misogyny. Misogyny is a social issue that needs to be addressed through education, social change, and legal measures, not justified through misinterpretations of science.

Jordan Peterson, a Canadian psychologist and professor of psychology, has become a controversial figure in recent years due to his views on various social and

political issues. His rise to prominence began with his opposition to Canada's Bill C-16, which added gender identity and gender expression to the list of protected grounds under the Canadian Human Rights Act. Peterson argued that the bill infringed upon free speech rights by compelling individuals to use preferred gender pronouns. This stance was met with significant backlash from those who viewed it as a refusal to respect individuals' gender identities.

Peterson's views on gender and identity politics have been widely criticized as being regressive and harmful. He has been accused of misrepresenting the aims and methods of contemporary feminism, and of promoting a form of masculinity that is traditionalist and patriarchal. His work often draws on evolutionary psychology to argue for biological differences between men and women, which critics argue can be used to justify existing social hierarchies and gender inequalities. He often relies on statistics and scientific research to support his views. In his words

Boys are suffering, in the modern world. They are more disobedient — negatively — or more independent — positively — than girls, and they suffer for this, throughout their pre-university educational career. They are less agreeable (agreeableness being a personality trait associated with compassion, empathy and avoidance of conflict) and less susceptible to anxiety and depression, at least after both sexes hit puberty. Boys' interests tilt towards things; girls' interests tilt towards people. Strikingly, these differences, strongly influenced by biological factors, are most pronounced in the Scandinavian societies where gender-equality has been pushed hardest: this is the opposite of what would be expected by those who insist, ever more loudly, that gender is a social construct. It isn't. This isn't a debate. The data are in (Peterson, 2018, as cited by Illing, 2018).

Furthermore, Peterson's views on political correctness, identity politics, and social justice have been characterized as part of a broader backlash against progressive social change. He has been associated with the "Intellectual Dark Web", a loosely affiliated group of academics and media personalities who present themselves as a counter to a perceived liberal orthodoxy in academia and the media. Critics argue that this stance can serve to legitimize extremist views by presenting them as merely a counter to political correctness (K. Manne, personal communication, June 6, 2018).

Peterson's influence extends beyond academia into popular culture, where he has a significant following. His (2018) self-help book, "12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos", has been a bestseller and has resonated with many, particularly young men. However, critics argue that the individualistic focus of his self-help advice can divert attention away from structural and societal issues that contribute to individual hardships.

While Peterson has a substantial following and has been influential in certain circles, his views on gender, identity politics, and social justice have been widely criticized. His work is seen by many as contributing to a backlash against progressive social change and as potentially legitimizing harmful social attitudes and norms.

Another way of understanding the rise of misogynistic spaces online is seeing it as an anti-feminist backlash. This backlash is a multifaceted phenomenon that has emerged in response to the advancements of feminist movements. It is characterized by a resistance to the progress made in gender equality and a desire to maintain or return to traditional gender roles and norms. This backlash has manifested itself in various forms, ranging from microaggressions[76] to overt acts of violence and discrimination against women.

The appeal of conspiracy theories is a complex phenomenon that has been the subject of extensive research across various disciplines. Conspiracy theories, which often propose that events are the result of secret, malevolent plots by powerful groups, can be seen as a response to feelings of powerlessness, uncertainty, and a perceived lack of control. They provide simple explanations for complex events, allowing individuals to make sense of the world and affirm their beliefs and values.

The appeal of conspiracy theories is not limited to any particular demographic or political group. They are found across the political spectrum, in different cultures, and among people of varying education levels. However, research suggests that they are particularly appealing to individuals who feel marginalized or threatened, and who are dissatisfied with the status quo.

One of the key factors that make conspiracy theories appealing is their ability to provide simple explanations for complex events. They offer a clear narrative that

[76] In this text, the term ‘microaggression’ specifically refers to subtle, often indirect or unintentional discriminatory actions and comments that occur in online spaces. Unlike over acts of violence against women, which are explicit, direct, and intentionally harmful, online microaggressions are typically brief, commonplace and not always immediately recognized as aggressive. They often stem from ingrained biases and can contribute to a hostile environment. For further exploration of online microaggressions see for example Harmer & Southern (2021).

identifies a villain and a victim, and they provide a sense of certainty in an uncertain world. This can be particularly appealing in times of crisis or change, when people are looking for answers and reassurance.

Another factor that contributes to the appeal of conspiracy theories is their ability to affirm individuals' pre-existing beliefs and values. Conspiracy theories often reflect and reinforce individuals' worldviews, and they can serve as a form of identity expression. For example, individuals who are distrustful of authority or who have anti-establishment views may be drawn to conspiracy theories that portray powerful institutions as corrupt or deceitful.

The social aspect of conspiracy theories also contributes to their appeal. Sharing conspiracy theories can foster a sense of community and belonging among individuals who feel marginalized or misunderstood. It can also serve as a form of social critique, allowing individuals to express dissent and challenge dominant narratives.

### 6.1.2 Misogynist Political Violence and the Manosphere

The Manosphere, an online subculture focusing on issues of men's rights and masculinity, has been increasingly associated with political violence. This connection is not surprising given the Manosphere's frequent espousal of anti-feminist, misogynistic, and extremist ideologies. The Manosphere's discourse often revolves around perceived threats to traditional masculinity and male power, leading to a narrative of victimhood and retaliation that can fuel violent actions.

The Manosphere's political violence can take various forms, from online harassment and doxing[77] to physical violence and mass shootings. For instance, several high-profile cases of mass violence, such as the 2014 Isla Vista killings in California, have been linked to individuals deeply involved in Manosphere communities. The perpetrators often express sentiments of male victimhood, entitlement, and rage against women and society that echo the rhetoric found in these online spaces.

[77] Short of “dropping documents”, is a form of online harassment where individuals share private or personal information about someone without their consent. This can include information such as real names, addresses, phone numbers, email addresses, and workplace information. The intent behind doxing is typically malicious, aiming to intimidate, harass, or bring real-world harm to the person being doxed. It is a serious invasion of privacy and can lead to a range of negative consequences, including identity theft, physical harm, or unwanted contact from strangers. In many places, doxing is considered illegal and is treated as a punishable offense.

The Manosphere's political violence is also tied to broader socio-political trends. The rise of right-wing populism, white nationalism, and anti-feminist backlash in recent years has created a fertile ground for the Manosphere's ideologies to thrive and translate into real-world violence. These ideologies often intersect, leading to a complex web of hate and extremism that fuels political violence.

Moreover, the Manosphere's political violence is not just a domestic issue but a global one. The Manosphere is part of a transnational network of right-wing extremism, with connections to similar movements in Europe and elsewhere. This global reach amplifies the potential impact and danger of the Manosphere's political violence.

Thus, the Manosphere's political violence is a significant and growing threat that requires urgent attention. Understanding the dynamics of this online subculture and its links to real-world violence is crucial for developing effective strategies to counteract its harmful impact. This involves not only law enforcement and policy responses but also broader societal efforts to challenge toxic masculinity and promote gender equality.

While some argue that the manosphere provides a necessary platform for men to discuss issues that are unique to their gender, others contend that the rhetoric used within these communities often crosses the line into hate speech. However, a closer examination reveals that the speech within the manosphere is not just hate speech, but also dangerous speech, posing two types of danger: physical violence and epistemic harm.

The manosphere is a complex network of websites, blogs, and online forums where men's rights activists (MRAs), incels (involuntary celibates), pick-up artists (PUAs), and others discuss issues related to gender, society, and masculinity. The language used within these communities often includes misogynistic and anti-feminist rhetoric, which can be classified as hate speech. However, the danger posed by the manosphere extends beyond hate speech.

The first type of danger posed by the manosphere is the potential for physical violence. Some communities within the manosphere have been linked to acts of violence, with individuals citing manosphere rhetoric as inspiration for their actions. For instance, similarly to Elliot Rodger, Alek Minassian, who drove a van into a crowd in Toronto in 2018, killing ten people, identified as an incel, a group that is part of the manosphere.

The internet has made it incredibly easy to access a wide range of content, including that of the incel (involuntary celibate) community. Incel websites and forums are readily accessible to anyone with an internet connection, often requiring no more than a simple search and a few clicks to enter. These sites are not typically hidden on the dark web, but exist on the surface web, making them easily discoverable through search engines.

Many incel communities exist on mainstream platforms like Reddit, 4chan, and others, although some have been banned due to violations of hate speech policies. However, when one platform shuts down an incel community, it often quickly re-emerges elsewhere. There are also dedicated incel websites that serve as gathering places for the community.

While some incel websites may require users to create an account to post content or interact with other users, viewing the content is usually unrestricted. This ease of access means that anyone, including impressionable young men who are the primary demographic of the incel community, can easily stumble upon these sites and be exposed to their often misogynistic and violent ideologies. The accessibility of incel websites is alarmingly easy, contributing to the spread and influence of their harmful ideologies.

The second type of danger is epistemic harm. By this I mean the hearer, or consumer of this type of content acquiring fake information and shaping his beliefs accordingly. The manosphere, with its anti-feminist and misogynistic rhetoric, can distort individuals' understanding of gender relations and societal norms. This can lead to a skewed perception of reality, which can be harmful in various ways. For instance, it can lead to the devaluation of women's contributions to society, the normalization of violence against women, and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes about both men and women.

The manosphere's use of language and rhetoric plays a significant role in the propagation of dangerous speech. The communities within the manosphere often use specific jargon and coded language, which can serve to normalize and legitimize harmful beliefs and attitudes. For example, terms like "misandry" are frequently used to dismiss feminist perspectives and to portray men as victims of societal discrimination.

In conclusion, the manosphere poses a significant danger through its propagation of dangerous speech. This danger manifests in two ways: the potential for

physical violence and the infliction of epistemic harm. It is therefore crucial to monitor and address the discourse within these communities to mitigate these risks.

### 6.1.3 Misogyny Terrorism

Misogynistic terrorism, a term that has gained traction in recent years, refers to acts of violence committed predominantly by men who harbour intense resentment or hatred towards women. This form of terrorism, often fuelled by anti-feminist conspiracy theories and ideologies, has found a breeding ground in online communities such as the manosphere.

The manosphere, a network of websites, blogs, and forums dedicated to issues related to men and masculinity, has been identified as a hotbed for the propagation of misogynistic ideologies. These ideologies often manifest in the form of conspiracy theories that paint feminism as a malicious plot to undermine men's rights and establish female dominance. Such narratives serve to legitimize misogynistic attitudes and actions, and in extreme cases, can inspire acts of violence against women.

In her study "Misogynistic terrorism: it has always been here," Caron E. Gentry (2022) explores the underpinning element of misogyny in far-right terrorist violence in the United States. She argues that misogyny, often overlooked in mainstream Terrorism Studies, plays a significant role in fuelling such violence.

The Incel movement, marked by its members' deep-seated resentment towards women, has been linked to several acts of violence. The manifesto titled "The Incel Rebellion," for instance, reflects the intense hatred and sense of victimhood that can drive such acts of violence.

Addressing the issue of misogynistic terrorism requires a multi-pronged approach. This includes promoting digital literacy and critical thinking skills to help individuals evaluate the information they encounter online, implementing effective moderation policies on online platforms to curb the spread of hate speech and misinformation, and fostering a societal culture that challenges misogynistic attitudes and promotes gender equality.

In conclusion, misogynistic terrorism, fuelled by anti-feminist conspiracy theories and ideologies propagated within the manosphere, represents a significant threat to societal safety and gender equality. By understanding the mechanisms through

which these ideologies are spread and reinforced, we can develop more effective strategies to counter them and promote a more inclusive and respectful discourse on gender issues.

### 6.1.4 The Logic of Misogyny

In order to understand misogyny and its appeal for the members of the manosphere, it is useful to look at Kate Manne's account. In her 2018 book *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, Kate Manne talks about western patriarchy as a punitive system, relying on current events and popular culture in the western world – a world, where compliant women are praised, and disobedient ones are punished. Manne argues that one does not have to hate women per se to be a misogynist, according to her, misogyny is "the entrenched prejudice against women" (ibid, p. 83). Manne deems the general belief that misogyny is a matter of the internal attitudes of individual men as an oversimplified moral psychology and offers an ameliorative account of the term.

Her central argument focuses on debunking the myth that misogyny focuses on the agent and proposes to see it rather as a property of environment or social structure. According to Manne, misogyny is not a property of an individual's psychology but rather a social norm. Misogyny here is presented more as a system of social control or behaviour rather than someone's state of mind. In other words, misogyny is not only about beliefs but also about behaviour without beliefs.

Although misogyny and sexism are often used interchangeably, Manne argues that this should not be the case, and offers a definition for both terms explaining the difference between the two. According to Manne, sexism is an ideology and serves to rationalize and naturalize the patriarchal order. Misogyny on the other hand, as Manne argues, is a series of enforcement mechanisms that ensures women will abide to this patriarchal order by providing emotional labour. In her words

Sexist ideology will often consist in assumptions, beliefs, theories, stereotypes, and broader cultural narratives that represent men and women as importantly different in ways that, if true and known to be true, or at least likely, would make rational people more inclined to support and participate in patriarchal social arrangements…..[S]exism and misogyny share a common purpose-to maintain or restore a patriarchal social order (Manne 2018, p.80).

Firstly, Manne argues that the classical definition of misogyny is a "naive conception" (Manne, 2018). The definition as Manne sees it is "… is primarily a property of individual misogynists who are proper to hate women qua women, that is, because of their gender, either universally or at least very generally…this naive conception of misogyny is not helping its victims…. It makes misogyny a virtually non-existent and politically marginal phenomenon." (p.19). Instead, Manne argues, misogyny should be viewed as a system of social control and in the service of sexism and patriarchy (Manne, 2018).

To better illustrate instances of misogyny, Manne starts her book by giving examples of what she defines as three types of misogyny, namely: domestic violence, sexual assault and strangulation. Moreover, the cases she uses as an example of all these instances of misogyny, involve men in a position of power, including the president of United States, Donald Trump. The reason behind showcasing these cases is not necessarily to shed light on these men's actions or to question their moral responsibility per se, but to show how society as a whole is ready to accept and forgive their "mishaps".

Amid his election campaign, Trump was accused by his ex-wife of rape, and Steve Bannon, former White House chief strategist, faced accusation of domestic violence and battery by his former wife in the 90's. They, however, are not the only men under the Trump administration publicly known to have been accused of these kinds of misdemeanours and yet find themselves in a position of power. Manne made use of these examples to show how society can be sympathetic and turn a blind eye when the people facing such accusations are white powerful men, simply because we live in a patriarchal culture.

Although, as Manne argues, not all acts of violence towards women are fatal, most of them can have serious consequences especially since they are being treated as less serious than they are and are often, not talked about. She talks at length about strangulation, which she describes as an attempt to show dominance or control particularly when someone steps out of line. Choking, Manne argues, is used as a synonym for strangulation, and as we shall further see, this should not be the case. In her words "Often called "choking", non-fatal manual strangulation is inherently dangerous. It can lead to death, hours, day, even weeks afterwards due to complications from the brain being deprived of oxygen" (p.1).

According to Manne, men are the ones performing the act of strangulation as a way of establishing dominance even when a woman disagrees with them in a way that is epistemically ambiguous. The patriarchal society we live in is teaching certain norms of behaviour for both genders. Men tend to refer to a woman's inherent nature. Women then, are supposed to serve in a particular kind of sense. They are presented as being nurturing and carrying and ready to meet men's needs. If those needs aren't met or if she "steps out of line" there are persecutions she should face. Manne describes the western patriarchal society we live in as a punitive system that can put women to their assigned place. She also argues that most men will bluntly deny being misogynists if ever accused of that. After all, most are somehow related to one or several women, be it their mother, sister or, as in the case of President Trump, a daughter. Many will even argue that Donald Trump is far from having any kinds of gender biases, after all, he named Ivanka his senior advisor, that can only mean he trusts a woman's judgements, doesn't it?

If we take Manne's construe of misogyny and see it as a property of environment rather than one individual's psychology, we can see many instances of misogynistic acts, without misogynistic intention. We will take a more in depth look at this in the last part of this chapter.

### 6.1.5 Fake News and social media

Rini's (2017) article "Fake News and Partisan Epistemology" provides an epistemological analysis of the concept "fake news" and its relationship to social media. Using the 2016 U.S. presidential election as a case study, Rini takes her point of departure in the observation that fake news affected the choices of some individual voters. This leads her to formulate the guiding question for her analysis: "why were people willing to believe easily dis-confirmable, often ridiculous, stories?" (ibid, p. E-43).

In order to define fake news, Rini draws a distinction between falsity and deception, which allows her to assert that "fake news is not merely false information conveyed by reportage" (ibid, p. E-44). While misleading information is certainly a necessary condition for fake news, it is not a sufficient one. Journalists can report false news because they misinterpret the actual situation, thus mistakenly believing that they

are reporting on an actual situation. As opposed to false news, fake news relies on intentional deception (ibid). Moreover, Rini claims that the transition from false news to fake news is established by a particular type of intentional deception, one that is not identical with lying as we do it in daily life. Unlike with lying, "the 'news' part of 'fake news' implies that the deception is intended for an audience larger than the immediate recipient; fake news is meant to be shared and shared again" (ibid, p. E-44).

Although all fake news involve some kind of deception, not all kinds of fake news use deception as a goal. There are instances in which the role of deception in fake news is a means rather than an end. An illustration of this is provided by the recent upsurge of countless companies specialized in spreading fake news for financial purposes. These companies use fake news as click-bait, generating capital every time somebody clicks on the story. According to Rini, the role of deception here becomes clear when we consider that the technique used by such companies only works when many people is tricked into reading and spreading the fake news story in question, which presumably requires that some of them believe the story (ibid, p. E-45).

Unlike the kind of fake news that uses deception to gather capital, fake news as made manifest in the 2016 presidential election relied on deception as an end in itself. This "pure" fake news, as Rini calls it, was generated by partisans who "try to erode their opponents' support by tricking persuadable voters. […] For these creators, fake news needs to travel widely not only to generate clicks, but also to change epistemic states" (ibid). From this analysis, Rini draws the following definition of fake news: "A fake news story is one that purports to describe events in the real world, typically by mimicking the conventions of traditional media reportage, yet is known by its creators to be significantly false and is transmitted with the two goals of being widely re-transmitted and of deceiving at least some of its audience" (ibid). Although this transmitting and re-transmitting of fake news can be done by such means as email chains and posters on streetlamps, Rini is particularly interested in social media, because she recognizes "a strong contingent relationship between fake news and social media, especially in the 2016 election" (ibid, p. E-48).

Rini's analysis of social media is quintessential to her attempt to provide an epistemological account of why people believe fake news. The main characteristic that renders social media particularly fit for a successful transmission of fake news is the former's reliance on testimony. As research in epistemology of testimony in recent

decades suggests, “a person counts as believing a proposition on the basis of testimony when she believes it because the proposition was presented to her by another person” (ibid, p. E-46). This principle in epistemology of testimony allows Rini to assert that some people on social media “believe fake news because it is presented to them via testimony, and like most of us they typically accept testimony from others […]. Fake news stories turn up in their social media feeds, evidently endorsed by people whom they trust (to some degree), and it’s natural to believe what trusted friends tell you” (ibid). While believing a proposition because the proposition was presented by another person is typically “an epistemically virtuous practice” that allows us to gather knowledge that we cannot gather on our own, its flipside entails the uncritical acceptance of testimony (ibid). For this reason, epistemology of testimony stresses the necessity of epistemological norms, such as “norms for blocking the acceptance of suspect cases” (ibid). Some of those norms are concerned with the identity of the speaker or testifier, others are content-related. Thus, when dealing with somebody who, for instance, is trying to sell us something, our knowledge of the speaker’s identity as ‘a salesman’ should trigger us to block an uncritical acceptance of the speaker’s testimony. As regards epistemological norms concerning testimonial content, Rini notes that “it is reasonable to suspend confidence in a piece of testimony if it is radically at odds with what you already know about how the world works” (ibid).

These crucial points in the epistemology of testimony lead Rini to characterize the transmission of news in social media as a bent form of testimony. Unlike typical forms of testimony, believing fake news spread through social media does not rely on believing assertions — the content of the testifier’s testimony — but rather believing a news shared on social media by a friend. The atypical epistemological character of this situation becomes clear when we consider Rini’s question as to whether or not a friend, in posting a link to a fake news story without further comment, is indeed asserting the content of that story (ibid).

With respect to that question, Rini notes that “people are happy to be understood as asserting the contents of shared news stories that turn out accurate (especially if they ‘scooped’ their friends) but insist that they meant no such assertion when trouble emerges” (ibid, p. E-48). This ambiguous testimonial character of social media sharing is the first reason to call social media a ‘bent’ form of testimony.

The second reason entails the fact that some people accept a testimony despite the fact that "many fake news stories are ridiculous, seemingly violating a basic content-related norm of responsible testimony-reception" (ibid).

Rini concludes her analysis of the relationship between fake news and social media by relating the two bent features of social media testimony to each other (ibid, p. E-49). Her suggestion is that people's tendency to disregard the basic epistemological norms of testimony — which results in believing fake news — is the direct result of the instability of testimonial norms on social media. The fact that one person might post a fake news story without believing it, while another person might 'like' it without believing it, shows that the communicative acts performed on the web entail an ambiguity in the speaker's testimonial intentions. This mechanism allows "a ridiculous story to build testimonial momentum to the point of acceptance by more than the furthest fringe" (ibid).

### *6.2 The Case for No-Platforming*

The concept of no-platforming, in its narrowest sense, refers to the refusal or attempted refusal of a platform to hate speech, particularly speech from the anti-democratic far right. Originally, this practice was justified on the basis that those who aim to destroy democratic institutions do not have a right to access these institutions. However, in the age of illiberal democracy, this justification has less bite since the far right often argues that democratic institutions are compatible with its goals. Today, the targets of no-platforming campaigns are broader than they once were. Speakers are often no-platformed on the grounds that their claims constitute hate speech, and hate speech is harmful (Levy N. , 2019).

The platform being denied when someone is no platformed, as the term is standardly used, is usually the stage in a university context. However, Levy (2019) uses "no-platforming" more broadly, to refer to two other platforms from which people might be barred. However, as I will further argue, I think that Levy's account is not broad enough. First, people may be prevented from expressing certain views online. Comments on articles in online newspapers, or on blogposts, might be pre-moderated or deleted if they cross a line into what is seen as being hate speech. Second, there may be campaigns that aim at excluding certain people or certain views from being expressed

in the opinion pages of newspapers, in interviews with media organisations, and so on. This, too, is naturally seen as a kind of (attempted) no-platforming.

Levy's usage of “no-platforming” is broad not only in the range of platforms he has in mind, but also in the range of opinions. In a narrow sense of the term, no-platforming targets hate speech. However, Levy has in mind not only or even mainly, hate speech, but unreasonable minority views about matters of great public interest. Paradigm cases include, beyond hate speech, the expression of climate change scepticism or of a purported link between vaccines and autism.

The proponents of no-platforming often argue that the speech harms some or all the audience. In Levy’s words “those directly targeted by hate speech, or speech that questions their right to belong (or even to exist) are usually held to be the primary victims..[t]he harms referenced are of three different kinds: feelings of isolation and depression; harms to the functioning and academic performance of their targets, for example through the mechanism of stereotype threat; and harms to the dignity and equal standing of members of targeted groups” (ibid, p. 488).

If supporters of no-platforming appeal to these epistemic considerations, they, in effect, endorse epistemic paternalism. This means they support managing a person’s access to knowledge and information without needed that person’s consent, all in the name of enhancing that individual’s understanding and knowledge. Supporting epistemic paternalism, as no-platforming advocates do, can imply that they agree with the infantilization of the audience. In Levy’s words “Nevertheless, intellectual autonomy is not a good we can jettison without qualms. If we can defend no-platforming without flirting with the infantilization of the audience or disrespect for its intelligence we ought to do so, and if we can avoid appealing to controversial psychological research, so much the better” (ibid, p. 491).

Firstly, no-platforming can serve as a tool for maintaining rigorous disciplinary standards within academic and intellectual spaces. As R. Simpson and A. Srinivasan argue in their (2018) work "No Platforming," universities, for instance, have content-based restrictions on speech that are not seen as an affront to a liberal conception of academic freedom. Instead, these restrictions are seen to protect the rights of academics to determine which views and speakers have sufficient disciplinary credentials to receive a hearing in academic contexts. In this sense, no-platforming can be seen as a

mechanism to uphold the integrity of academic discourse by denying attention and credibility to speakers who fall short of these standards.

Secondly, no-platforming can serve to prevent the spread of harmful or misleading information. In the context of the digital age, where misinformation can spread rapidly and widely, no-platforming can act as a form of epistemic gatekeeping, ensuring that only reliable and accurate information is disseminated to the public. This is particularly important in areas such as public health, where the spread of misinformation can have serious real-world consequences.

Thirdly, no-platforming can contribute to the creation of safer and more inclusive spaces. By denying a platform to individuals or groups who espouse hate speech or discriminatory views, no-platforming can help to create environments where all individuals feel safe and respected. This can, in turn, promote a more diverse and inclusive discourse, as individuals who might otherwise feel marginalized or silenced feel more comfortable expressing their views.

However, it is important to note that no-platforming is not without its challenges and potential drawbacks. As Uwe Peters and Nikolaj Nottelmann point out in "Weighing the costs: the epistemic dilemma of no-platforming," (2021) no-platforming can pose an epistemic dilemma, as it involves a difficult choice between two equally undesirable options. On the one hand, no-platforming can help to prevent the spread of harmful or misleading information. On the other hand, it can also potentially limit the diversity of views and perspectives that are heard, thereby potentially stifling intellectual growth and discovery.

In conclusion, while no-platforming is a complex and contentious issue, it can offer several epistemic benefits, including maintaining disciplinary standards, preventing the spread of misinformation, and promoting safer and more inclusive spaces. However, these benefits must be carefully weighed against the potential drawbacks, and the practice of no-platforming must be applied judiciously and responsibly.

### 6.2.1 Epistemic Echo Chambers and Intellectual Autonomy

Epistemic echo chambers represent a significant challenge to the free exchange of ideas and the pursuit of truth in contemporary society. These echo chambers, often

facilitated by digital platforms and social media, create environments where individuals are exposed primarily, if not exclusively, to viewpoints that align with their own. This lack of ideological diversity can lead to a distorted understanding of reality, reinforce biases, and stifle intellectual growth.

Yuval Avnur (2020) argues that online platforms are understandably anticipated to exhibit various levels and types of bias. A widespread concern is that numerous individuals obtain their news from sources that share similar perspectives, primarily through social media news feeds and online filters. By primarily accessing news and viewpoints from such like-minded sources, individuals unwittingly fortify their existing opinions and isolate themselves from contrasting perspectives.

Therefore, an epistemic echo chamber is a social context where the information, beliefs, and ideas that circulate reinforce the pre-existing views of those within the chamber. This reinforcement occurs because dissenting opinions are either absent, marginalized, or discredited without thorough examination.

One of the primary concerns with epistemic echo chambers is their potential to distort the truth. When individuals are only exposed to a narrow range of viewpoints, they may come to believe that their perspective is the only valid or widely accepted one. This can lead to a skewed perception of reality, where misinformation can proliferate, and critical thinking can be undermined.

Moreover, echo chambers can reinforce and exacerbate biases such as the confirmation bias. As such, echo chambers can make individuals more entrenched in their views. This entrenchment can make it difficult for individuals to consider alternative perspectives, even when presented with compelling evidence or arguments.

Echo chambers can also stifle intellectual growth. The free exchange of ideas, including exposure to dissenting opinions, is crucial for learning and intellectual development. By limiting this exchange, echo chambers can hinder individuals' ability to broaden their understanding, question their assumptions, and develop more nuanced views. However, it's important to note that not all echo chambers are equally problematic. Some may serve as supportive communities where marginalized voices can express themselves freely and find validation. The key is to ensure that these spaces also encourage critical thinking and exposure to a range of perspectives.

Addressing the challenge of epistemic echo chambers requires both individual and societal action. Individuals need to be aware of the risk of echo chambers and make

conscious efforts to seek out diverse sources of information. Educational institutions can play a role by teaching critical thinking skills and promoting media literacy.

On a societal level, platform providers and policymakers need to consider how to design digital spaces that encourage exposure to diverse viewpoints while also preventing the spread of harmful misinformation. This is a complex challenge that requires careful consideration of the balance between free speech, truth, and the potential for harm.

While epistemic echo chambers pose significant challenges to the pursuit of truth and intellectual growth, they also highlight the importance of critical thinking, media literacy, and exposure to diverse viewpoints. By recognizing and addressing these challenges, we can work towards a more informed and open society.

The concept of epistemic echo chambers is particularly relevant when examining online communities such as the manosphere. The manosphere, a network of websites and forums dedicated to issues related to men and masculinity, often presents a skewed perspective on gender dynamics, largely due to its insular nature and the prevalence of anti-feminist narratives. This can lead to the creation of epistemic echo chambers, where certain beliefs and ideas are reinforced while opposing viewpoints are marginalized or outright dismissed.

In the context of the manosphere, these echo chambers can contribute to the spread of harmful ideologies and misinformation. For instance, the study "#TeamAlienadas: Anti-feminist ideologic work in the Spanish manosphere" by Silvia Díaz Fernández, Elisa García Mingo, and Anita Fuentes, explores a group of women within the Spanish manosphere who use the hashtag #TeamAlienadas (2023). The authors argue that this group produces an "affective anti-feminist ideology" that legitimizes men's claims of victimhood under feminism and constructs women as caretakers of men. This ideology, underpinned by a postfeminist sense-making, mobilizes ideas of empowerment to delegitimize feminism and aims to dismantle feminist politics in ways that could lead to accentuated female subjugation to patriarchy. This is a clear example of how an epistemic echo chamber can distort understanding and perpetuate harmful beliefs.

The existence of such echo chambers within the manosphere can make it challenging for individuals within these communities to critically evaluate the information they encounter. This is because the information that circulates within these

echo chambers often confirms pre-existing biases and beliefs, a phenomenon known as confirmation bias. As a result, individuals within these communities may become more entrenched in their views, making it difficult for them to consider alternative perspectives.

Addressing the issue of epistemic echo chambers within the manosphere requires a multifaceted approach. On an individual level, it involves promoting critical thinking and media literacy skills to help individuals evaluate the information they encounter. On a societal level, it involves creating digital spaces that encourage exposure to diverse viewpoints and prevent the spread of harmful misinformation. This is a complex challenge that requires careful consideration of the balance between free speech, truth, and the potential for harm.

In conclusion, while the manosphere provides a space for discussions about men and masculinity, the prevalence of epistemic echo chambers within this community can contribute to the spread of harmful ideologies and misinformation. By recognizing and addressing these challenges, we can work towards a more informed and open society.

### 6.2.2 Justifying Epistemic Paternalism

In his work *Justifying Epistemic Paternalism: A defence* Kristoffer Ahlstrom-Vij (2013) delves into the concept of epistemic paternalism, a term that refers to the intervention in the epistemic affairs of others without their consent, for their own epistemic good. Ahlstrom-Vij's exploration of this concept is particularly relevant in the context of the manosphere, where certain narratives and ideologies can lead to the formation of echo chambers and the propagation of harmful beliefs. In his words

An epistemically paternalistic practice is justified if, (*a*) a case can be made that available evidence indicates that it is highly likely that everyone interfered with in the relevant manner is or will be made epistemically better off for being inter- fered with thus, compared to relevant alternative practices, and (*b*) the epistemic reasons we have for instituting the relevant practice are aligned with our non-epistemic reasons on the issue (ibid, p. 134).

In the context of the manosphere, this is particularly relevant. The narratives propagated within these communities often hold certain beliefs as truths, which are then used to justify harmful ideologies and actions. In the realm of the manosphere, Alhstrom's justification condition for epistemically paternalistic practices can be particularly salient. The condition suggests that such practices are justified if there is strong evidence that everyone affected is likely to be epistemically better off, and if the epistemic reasons for implementing the practice align with our non-epistemic reasons. Within the manosphere, prevalent narratives often elevate certain assertions to the status of truth, which can then be leveraged to endorse and perpetuate harmful ideologies and behaviors. Applying Alhstrom's condition would require a careful assessment of whether the dissemination and enforcement of these narratives genuinely improve the epistemic standing of the individuals within these communities, and whether they serve broader, ethically sound purposes.

### 6.2.3 Concerns about Epistemic Paternalism

The epistemic importance of open speech is a cornerstone of democratic societies and intellectual growth. It is through the free exchange of ideas that knowledge is created, tested, and refined. Open speech allows for the exploration of diverse perspectives, fostering a robust marketplace of ideas where truth is not dictated but discovered through rigorous debate and discussion.[78]

Open speech is essential for the pursuit of truth. It allows for the expression of dissenting opinions and challenges to prevailing norms, which are vital for intellectual progress. Without the ability to question and critique, knowledge would stagnate, and society would be deprived of the benefits of innovation and critical thinking.

Moreover, open speech encourages intellectual humility. It reminds us that our understanding of the world is always evolving and that we should be open to changing our minds in the face of compelling evidence or persuasive arguments. This humility is crucial for the advancement of knowledge, as it allows us to question our assumptions and consider alternative perspectives.

[78] See e.g., (Strossen, 2021)

However, the value of open speech is not just about the pursuit of truth. It is also about the development of individual autonomy and the promotion of social cohesion. By allowing individuals to express their thoughts and beliefs, open speech supports personal growth and self-understanding. It enables individuals to articulate their identities, values, and aspirations, contributing to a sense of self-determination and personal agency.

At the same time, open speech can promote social cohesion by providing a platform for dialogue and mutual understanding. It allows for the airing of grievances, the negotiation of differences, and the building of consensus. While open speech can sometimes lead to conflict and disagreement, it also provides the tools for resolving these disputes through dialogue rather than violence.

However, the epistemic benefits of open speech are not without their challenges. The freedom of speech can be misused to spread misinformation, incite violence, or harm others. Therefore, it is crucial to balance the right to open speech with the need to protect individuals and communities from harm. This requires careful consideration of the context in which speech occurs and the potential consequences of that speech.

Open speech plays a vital role in the creation and dissemination of knowledge. It fosters intellectual growth, encourages the pursuit of truth, and promotes social cohesion. However, the epistemic benefits of open speech must be balanced with the need to prevent harm, requiring ongoing dialogue and careful consideration of the ethical implications of free expression.

Epistemic paternalism, the management of an agent's epistemic environment without or regardless of her consent to promote her epistemic welfare, has been a subject of intense debate. Critics argue that it infantilizes the audience and gives too much power to platform controllers. However, a careful examination of these criticisms and the potential ways to address them can provide a more nuanced perspective on this controversial issue.

The criticism that epistemic paternalism infantilizes the audience is rooted in the idea that it undermines intellectual autonomy. Critics argue that by managing an individual's epistemic environment, we are treating them as if they lack the capacity to make rational decisions for themselves. This perspective, however, overlooks the complex nature of knowledge acquisition and the role of platform controllers in shaping

this process. This dissertation presents numerous instances were ‘freedom of speech’ has resulted in grave consequences.

In many instances, the audience relies on various proxies for expertise to assess credentials. These proxies include a record of publication in peer-reviewed journals, the possession of a PhD from a reputable institution, the receipt of prizes, and so on. Publication in the mainstream media and invitations to speak at universities and similarly respectable institutions also figure among the proxies for expertise and representativeness we utilize. These institutions play the explicit or de facto role of certifying expertise, and therefore both the claim to credibility and the claim to representativeness are bolstered by the very fact of invitation.

An offer of a platform is a signal that those who issue the invitation consider the person worthy of a respectful hearing. It is a signal that the inviters consider the speaker sufficiently expert, or sufficiently representative of expertise to have an opinion on that topic that should be taken into consideration. It is therefore also a signal that the speaker’s dissent cannot be explained away as incompetence or insincerity. Because it certifies we cannot dismiss their dissent on these grounds, the signal increases its epistemic significance, and thereby increases the pressure to conciliate.

The criticism that epistemic paternalism gives too much power to platform controllers is also worth examining. It is true that platform controllers have a significant influence on the information that is disseminated and the voices that are heard. However, this power is not inherently problematic. It becomes an issue when it is used irresponsibly or without transparency.

To address these concerns, it is crucial to establish clear guidelines and accountability mechanisms for platform controllers. They should be transparent about their decision-making processes and be held accountable for their actions. Furthermore, they should strive to provide a diverse range of perspectives and encourage critical thinking among their audience.

Moreover, it is important to recognize that epistemic paternalism does not necessarily lead to the infantilization of the audience. Rather, it can be seen as a form of guidance that helps individuals navigate the complex and often confusing landscape of information. It is not about making decisions for individuals, but about providing them with the tools and resources they need to make informed decisions for themselves and help them grow.

In the context of the manosphere and the broader discussion on epistemic paternalism, the findings of Bail et al (2018) offer valuable insights. The study underscores the complexity of addressing harmful ideologies on social media platforms. It suggests that simply exposing individuals to opposing views, a strategy often proposed as a solution to online echo chambers, may not only be ineffective but could potentially exacerbate the problem. This is particularly relevant when considering the manosphere, where exposure to opposing feminist views could potentially intensify the existing misogynistic ideologies.

The study also highlights the importance of understanding the nuances of different political and ideological groups when attempting to mitigate the spread of harmful content. The finding that backfire effects were more likely to occur among conservatives than liberals suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach to no-platforming or other forms of epistemic paternalism may not be effective. Instead, strategies may need to be tailored to the specific characteristics and sensitivities of different ideological groups (ibid, p. 9217).

This further underscores the need for platform controllers to exercise their power responsibly and transparently. It is not enough to simply limit the spread of harmful content or expose users to a diversity of views. Instead, platform controllers must strive to understand the complexities of the ideologies they are dealing with and develop nuanced strategies that take these complexities into account. This may involve a combination of no-platforming, promoting critical thinking, and providing resources for users to navigate the complex landscape of online information.

In conclusion, while the criticisms of epistemic paternalism are valid, they can be addressed through transparency, accountability, and a commitment to promoting critical thinking. Rather than viewing epistemic paternalism as a threat to intellectual autonomy, we can see it as a tool that can enhance our ability to engage with information in a thoughtful and informed manner.

### *6.3 Justifying No-Platforming in Cases of Networked Misogyny*

Networked misogyny refers to the systemic and coordinated acts of sexism and misogyny that occur within online networks. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent

in online spaces like the manosphere, where anti-feminist sentiments are amplified and disseminated across various platforms (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2015).

In the context of the manosphere, networked misogyny often manifests as coordinated attacks against women and feminists, the propagation of misogynistic ideologies, and the creation of echo chambers that reinforce these harmful beliefs. For instance, the study by Valerie Dickel on the #MeToo debate within the manosphere reveals how these online spaces frame the movement as a ploy by women to destroy men and claim power for themselves. This narrative is then disseminated across the network, reinforcing misogynistic beliefs and further marginalizing women's voices.

However, networked misogyny is not confined to the manosphere. It can also be found in other online spaces and can intersect with other forms of discrimination, such as racism and homophobia. For example, Ergin Bulut and Başak Can's (2023) study on networked misogyny against women journalists in Turkey shows how this form of violence is interconnected with nationalism, class, and anti-Western sentiments, and is used as a tool by authoritarian regimes to target women's intellectual labour and public visibility.

In essence, networked misogyny is a complex and pervasive issue that extends beyond the digital realm. It is deeply intertwined with broader societal structures and ideologies and poses a significant threat to gender equality and women's rights. Therefore, efforts to combat networked misogyny must not only focus on moderating online content but also on challenging the underlying societal norms and structures that enable this form of violence.

The paper "No-Platforming and Higher-Order Evidence, or Anti-Anti-No-Platforming" by Neil Levy presents a detailed argument on the concept of no-platforming, particularly in the context of higher-order evidence.

Levy broadens the definition of "no-platforming" to include not just the refusal of a platform to hate speech, but also the prevention of expressing certain views online or in media outlets. He focuses on unreasonable minority views about matters of great public interest, such as climate change scepticism or the purported link between vaccines and autism.

Levy discusses the epistemic defence of no-platforming, which challenges the naïve understanding of reasoning by open speech advocates. Moreover, there is psychological evidence suggesting that speech can cause beliefs in ways that bypass

reasoning capacities, leading to the development of false explicit beliefs or implicit biases. However, he acknowledges that this defence implies a form of epistemic paternalism, which may be seen as infantilizing the audience.

Levy argues that no-platforming can be justified out of respect for people's intellectual capacities and autonomous reasoning. He compares no-platforming to refraining from lying to people, as both actions aim to avoid deceiving them. He emphasizes that no-platforming is not about suppressing evidence, but about preventing the generation of misleading higher-order evidence.

Levy discusses how an invitation to speak at a reputable institution confers credibility on the invitee and generates higher-order evidence in favour of their claims. He argues that while first-order evidence can be rebutted, higher-order evidence is much harder to rebut. The only way to rebut the higher-order evidence is to undermine the credibility of the speaker, which is not the kind of argument that defenders of open speech advocate.

Levy concludes that while he has not definitively answered whether no-platforming is justifiable, he has presented a powerful consideration in favour of no-platforming some speakers on some occasions. He emphasizes that this is only one consideration among others, and that there are multiple competing considerations to consider.

Although I agree with Levy's central claim, I find his account too narrow. Here's how I see it.

The standard view of a platform usually involves an academic context or a highly reputable news outlet or channel. However, as we already saw, most members of the manosphere are precisely the type of people that consume a different type of information and trust different type of sources. For them, Jordan Peterson being denied speaking at a university further confirms their belief that the government is trying to keep shut a whistle-blower[79]. They get their higher order evidence from Peterson's online presence and massive following. While Peterson's views may appear prima facie mild to some, he became a spokesperson for men's rights activism for a reason. He has voiced his scepticism on several feminist issues which gained him a massive number of

[79] For more discussion on the whistle-blower protection history see e.g., (Vandekerckhove, 2016) and (Latan, Chiappetta Jabbour, Ali, Lopes de Sousa Jabbour, & Vo-Thanh , 2023).

admirers within the manosphere.[80] Dinesh Joseph D'Souza serves as another illustrative case of non-traditional platforms establishing credibility outside of academia or mainstream media. Commonly recognised within right-wing circles, D'Souza's influence is amplified through social media and other digital platforms rather than through universities or established news outlets. For his followers, D'Souza's assertions are validated not by scholarly credentials but by his online engagements and the resonance of his message with a particular audience. His ability to bypass traditional validation mechanisms reflects a broader shift in how certain groups perceive and endorse expertise, especially within ideologically driven communities. This shift emphasises the role of alternative media in shaping public discourse, particularly among those who feel disenfranchised by mainstream narratives.

Although one may argue that Peterson does not use hate or dangerous speech, other members of the manosphere do.

In recent years, YouTube[81] has been actively collaborating with scientists and researchers to address the issue of hate speech on its platform. One such initiative is the development of machine learning algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI) systems to detect and remove hate speech content. For instance, a study by Noman Ashraf et al (2021) proposed a methodology for the detection of religion-based hate videos on YouTube using data mining techniques and supervised learning algorithms.

Another project, known as "Hate busters", is a web application that actively reports YouTube hate speech[82]. It uses a classifier trained on human-annotated data to score potentially hateful comments on YouTube videos and presents those with the highest probability of being hate speech to users. The application also employs gamification elements to drive user engagement.

Moreover, YouTube has also been working on creating datasets for hate speech detection. For example, an English YouTube dataset was manually annotated for hate speech types and targets, which was used to train a classification model for hate speech types of detection.

[80] Peterson has frequently appeared on various media platforms to discuss topics including the gender pay gap, asserting his belief that it is a myth. He presents his arguments based on various factors, suggesting that the observed pay disparities are not necessarily a direct result of gender discrimination (J. Peterson, personal communication, 16 January 2018)
[81] See e.g., (Yesilada & Lewandowsky, 2023)
[82] See e.g., (Anagnostou, Mollas, & Tsoumakas, 2018)

These collaborations signify YouTube's commitment to combating hate speech. However, the effectiveness of these measures is contingent on continuous refinement and adaptation to the evolving nature of online hate speech. It also underscores the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in addressing complex societal issues like hate speech (Ashraf, et al., 2021)

YouTube demonetizes the use of racial slurs but there is no demonetization or no-platforming for the use of misogynistic slurs. There are countless channels with a predominantly male following where they rarely refer to women as women. They are self-proclaimed warriors against political correctness and white liberal snowflakes. Statistically, their following is made up of young men (Thomas & Balint, 2022). The comments under videos they post often reflect a disturbing trend of sexism and misogyny, with users frequently resorting to derogatory language and offensive slurs. These comments can range from subtle microaggressions to blatant hate speech, often targeting women's appearances, abilities, and roles in society.

Research has shown that these comments can have harmful effects, perpetuating gender stereotypes and contributing to a hostile online environment for women. They can also normalize sexist attitudes, making them seem acceptable or even humorous to some other users (Paciello, D'Errico, Saleri, & Lamponi, 2021).

This type of content/speech is harmful in two ways. First, it has an immediate harm for the targeted victim (i.e., the women targeted). Secondly, this type of content is also harmful for the audience.

If no-platforming is acceptable in cases of hate speech and bad speech, then these accounts should be de-platformed. Individuals targeted by hate speech often experience emotional distress, anxiety, and depression. The constant exposure to derogatory and offensive language can negatively affect their mental health and self-esteem. Secondly, hate speech can contribute to social division and conflict. As research shows, it can normalize prejudice and discrimination, making them seem acceptable or even justified.

### *6.4 Conclusion*

In conclusion, the exploration of various themes such as the Manosphere, anti-feminist narratives, epistemic echo chambers, conspiracy theories, misogyny terrorism,

epistemic paternalism, and the impact of platforms like YouTube on young men, has provided a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics at play in contemporary society. These themes intersect in various ways, highlighting the multifaceted nature of the issues at hand.

The Manosphere, with its distinct subcultures such as Alphas, Betas, and Incels, presents a unique lens through which to view contemporary masculinity. The narratives and ideologies propagated within this online space often challenge feminist principles and can contribute to the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes and attitudes. This is further complicated by the use of platforms like YouTube, which can amplify these narratives and influence impressionable young men.

The concept of epistemic echo chambers, where individuals are exposed primarily to information that confirms their existing beliefs, is particularly relevant in the context of the Manosphere and online platforms. These echo chambers can reinforce harmful ideologies and contribute to the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories.

The issue of misogyny terrorism, where acts of violence are motivated by hatred towards women, is a stark reminder of the real-world consequences of these online narratives. It underscores the importance of addressing these issues and promoting healthier, more respectful attitudes towards women.

The discussion on epistemic paternalism, the idea that it can be morally permissible to interfere with someone's belief-forming practices for their own epistemic good, raises important questions about the role of censorship and moderation in online spaces. While it can be used to prevent the spread of harmful misinformation, it also raises concerns about freedom of speech and intellectual autonomy.

Lastly, the scepticism towards government, often fuelled by misinformation and conspiracy theories, highlights the challenges faced in maintaining public trust in institutions. It underscores the need for transparency, accountability, and effective communication in government operations.

# Chapter 7 Unveiling Silence: Patriarchy, Privilege, and Epistemic Injustice

## Introduction

Silencing is a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon that has been the subject of extensive scholarly investigation. While much has been written about its social, cultural, and political implications, there remains a significant gap in our understanding of its epistemic and psychological dimensions. This chapter aims to address this lacuna by offering a critical examination of Sanford Goldberg's recent account of the normativity of silence, while also exploring the psychological ramifications of the phenomenon of silencing, particularly as they relate to marginalized communities.

Goldberg's (2020) work serves as a seminal point of departure for this inquiry. He introduces the concept of "No Silent Rejection" (NSR), positing that in the context of a conversation, an audience's silence is generally interpreted as acceptance of the speaker's assertion. This, Goldberg argues, forms the basis of a social epistemic norm that governs conversational interactions. However, this norm is not without its critics. Concerns have been raised about the potential for NSR to be weaponized by those in positions of authority to further marginalize and oppress already disadvantaged groups. Goldberg attempts to counter this criticism by making the entitlement to expect no silent rejection defeasible under certain conditions. He contends that it is not the practice itself that is flawed, but its improper use, and further argues that the victim of silencing[83] is, to some extent, complicit in her own oppression by remaining silent.

While Goldberg's account offers valuable insights into the phenomenon of silencing, it is my contention that it falls short in several key areas. First, it fails to adequately address the epistemic value of NSR. If a practice disproportionately benefits privileged members of society while enabling the oppression of marginalized epistemic agents, its value as a tool for the dissemination and acquisition of knowledge becomes highly questionable. Second, Goldberg's account is insufficiently nuanced in its

[83] Within a patriarchal framework, a principle suggesting that an audience's silence equates to agreement with the speaker can act as a mechanism of silencing, particularly for marginalized groups who may not have the opportunity or feel empowered to voice dissent.

treatment of the psychological impact of silencing. By attributing a degree of complicity to the victim, it overlooks the complex psychological mechanisms that may underlie an individual's decision to remain silent, such as fear of retribution, internalized oppression, or a diminished sense of self-efficacy.

This chapter will argue that any comprehensive understanding of silencing must consider its psychological dimensions. Drawing on the work of Kate Manne (2020) and her exploration of “male privilege", I will examine how patriarchal social structures contribute to the phenomenon of silencing, not just as external constraints but also as internalized psychological barriers. I will also incorporate insights from clinical psychology to explore how experiences of silencing can lead to adverse mental health outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and a diminished sense of agency.

Moreover, I will argue that the phenomenon of silencing is intrinsically linked to the broader social and epistemic structures of patriarchy. It serves as a tool wielded by these oppressive systems to maintain the subordination of disadvantaged groups. In doing so, I will challenge Goldberg's notion that the practice of NSR is neutral and can be made 'safe' through defeasibility conditions. I will argue that given the pervasiveness of patriarchal norms, identifying 'safe' conditions for NSR is not just challenging but may be fundamentally impossible. Goldberg interprets the illocutionary act of silence as signalling agreement, yet this is not necessarily the case. Silence can be multifaceted and does not always imply consent, especially within the dynamics of power and subordination characteristics of the patriarchal system.

To substantiate these claims, I will employ a multi-disciplinary approach that draws on philosophy, social epistemology, and psychology. The first section of the paper will provide a detailed critique of Goldberg's account, highlighting its epistemic and psychological shortcomings. The second section will present an alternative framework for understanding silencing, one that incorporates both epistemic and psychological considerations. The third section will offer a case-based analysis to demonstrate the real-world implications of these theoretical constructs.

This paper aims to contribute to the ongoing scholarly discourse on silencing by offering a more nuanced, multi-dimensional perspective. It challenges existing epistemic frameworks, introduces psychological considerations into the debate, and argues for a more integrated, holistic understanding of how and why silencing occurs.

By doing so, it hopes to lay the groundwork for more effective interventions aimed at mitigating the harmful effects of this pervasive social phenomenon.

### *7.1 Arrogance, Silence and Silencing*

Goldberg's (2020) account of silencing is tightly connected with the role of silence in conversation. He argues that the practice of remaining silent in the face of a mutually observed assertion can help explain and address the phenomenon of silencing (Goldberg, 2020, p. 160). To better understand how this works, Goldberg's argument needs unpacking.

Even though there are numerous discussions concerning the norms of assertion as well as the discussion of the norms governing the uptake of assertion, the normative dimension of the uptake of uptake has remained grossly undertheorized (ibid, p.152). By uptake of uptake, we understand "[O]ur verdicts about whether an assertion was accepted in cases in which the audience did not explicitly indicate doing so" (ibid). Consequently, Goldberg takes the uptake of uptake to be another form of conversational pressure. The pressure in question lies on the audience witnessing a publicly made assertion to voice their doubts and/or disagreements if they are to have any. Failure to do so can epistemically harm both, the speaker, and other members of the audience, by leading them to believe that the silent subject has accepted the assertion when she has not. Since conversations are rational activities, and since we are entitled to expect cooperation in conversation [84], we are entitled to expect no silent rejection. To this end, Goldberg proposes that No Silent Rejection, or NSR, become a norm governing the public expression of uptake.

To develop and defend NSR, Goldberg makes two important claims. The first one is a normative claim. In his words "Under conditions of cooperation, silent rejection is normatively marked–with the result that conversational participants enjoy a (defeasible) entitlement to expect that audiences *not* be silent in rejection of a mutually observed assertion" (ibid, p.159). The second is an empirical claim. It is a familiar fact that people will often regard a hearer's silence as indicating acceptance. This

[84] Goldberg relies on Paul Grice's (1991) cooperative principles.

interpretation Goldberg dubs the 'assent interpretation'[85]. The assent interpretation is highly psychological salient, socially salient, and normatively salient. To show this, Goldberg underscores evidence that supports the hypotheses of psychological and social salience of the assent interpretation.

A proof that the assent interpretation is psychologically salient is the fact that when witnessing a subject's silence in the face of a mutually observed assertion, the speaker and other members of the audience will make inference to the best explanation of that silence. The best explanation in this case, is that the silent subject has accepted the assertion. This indicates that silence can have at best the perlocutionary effect of generating belief of agreement. Biases often lead audiences to misjudge illocutionary force, as seen when assertive speech is interpreted differently based on the speaker's gender. One of the historical pieces of evidence attesting to the psychological and social salience of the assent interpretation is the fact that this interpretation comes across as proverb worthy. There appear to be a good deal of proverbs and maxims on silence being interpreted as acceptance. Moreover, there is historical evidence attesting to the fact that the assent interpretation is mentioned in several famous historical speeches referring to silence signalling acceptance (e.g., Doctor Martin Luther King, Thomas Jefferson, etc.). This all goes to show that the assent interpretation is a familiar social practice that has been employed by many different cultures in many different time periods.

Unsurprisingly, there were several worries regarding the NSR norm Goldberg is proposing. Most notably, Rae Langton (2007) and Alessandra Tanesini (2016) expressed their concern regarding this practice.[86] Given that we live in a community where certain members of the group are often oppressed, this norm can be used against them (i.e., their silence can be interpreted as acceptance even though they rejected the claim). Goldberg argues that this worry can be met because the entitlement to expect no silent rejection is defeasible when there are other (more appropriate) explanations for someone's silence. The entitlement is defeated when the conversation is either a *non-conversation*, or there are other *outweighing explanations*. An example of a *non-conversation* would be a situation in which an audience is coerced into a conversation.

[85] Although Goldberg (2020) begins by introducing the terms 'assent', 'acceptance', and 'non-rejection' as expressing different attitudes, one of his central claims is that there is a connection between silence and acceptance. For the sake of brevity, I will be using both 'assent' and 'acceptance' interchangeably (Goldberg, 2020, p.153).

[86] Rae Langton (2007) and Alessandra Tanesini (2016) have both expressed their worries regarding the interpretation of silence as indicating assent.

*Outweighing explanations* on the other hand, are cases in which an audience has practical reasons for not speaking out, such as being afraid of her vindictive boss (Goldberg, 2020, p.176).

Although according to Goldberg the entitlement to expect no silent rejection is an epistemic good, under conditions of oppression this practice can have undesirable consequences. Given that we live in a system in which countless forms of oppression prevail, it becomes clear that the hypothesis that we are entitled to expect no silent rejection can be used by those with authority. However, Goldberg insists that it is not the practice that is at fault but the inappropriate participation in it. Moreover, the entitlement to expect no silent rejection can help us both, explain and address the phenomenon of silencing. To do that, Goldberg uses Tanesini's account of silencing which he attempts to ameliorate. All of this will need further unpacking.

In her seminal article (2016) on Intellectual Arrogance, Alessandra Tanesini examines the harms of arrogance. These harms are most often met in conversational contexts with one phenomenon standing out particularly; Tanesini dubs it 'arrogance-induced' silencing. Her central argument is the following: An arrogant individual can *locutionary* or *illocutionary* silence a member of an oppressed group making her either avoid speaking out of practical considerations, or, if she does make herself be heard, her assertion can misfire due to lack of uptake (Tanesini, 2016, p.88). When this happens, the silenced subject suffers an epistemic injustice that can have further implications. When one is subjected to this kind of a discriminatory treatment systematically, one can develop the vice of servility. By contrast, illocutionary silencing occurs when a speaker's assertion backfires due to lack of uptake. Since regular humiliation by being put-down and taunted is part of the picture, the recipients of this treatment will become discouraged from making future efforts. Consequently, illocutionary silencing may induce timidity in its targets and/or trigger in the silenced individual's intellectual servility. When one is excessively deferent to the views held by others, one becomes servile. In her words.

These individuals may bite their tongues unless what they think coincides with powerful views. Over time, one may expect that, because of cognitive dissonance, such individuals may stop biting their tongues and simply defer to the opinions of others. When they do so they have become servile (ibid, p.90).

Silence may at best create a perlocutionary effect where others perceive it as agreement. However, biases can cause a misjudgement of the illocutionary force behind a speech act, leading to different interpretations of the same speech act based on the speaker's gender, such as deeming women's assertiveness as anger while viewing men's similar speech as confident. This also extends to silence being misconstrued as acceptance due to such biases.

When the victim of systematic silencing realizes that there is a conflict between her beliefs and the beliefs of those who silence her, she is likely to experience cognitive dissonance. To relieve this feeling of unease, she will conclude that it is best to defer to the opinions of those in authority (i.e., those who silence her), and as a result she becomes servile.

Goldberg argues that Tanesini's account[87] has lacunae, and her account of servility needs to be revised. He argues that what Tanesini's account is missing is the way the victim of silencing defends herself (Goldberg, 2020, p. 193). By remaining silent the victim reinforces the belief that her being silenced was warranted, and so becomes complicit in her very oppression.

Goldberg argues that Tanesini's account faces doxastic voluntarism because it implies that the silenced subjects can choose what to believe. To reiterate, on Tanesini's construal when one is systematically silenced, she will try to alleviate the cognitive dissonance she is experiencing, by deferring to her oppressors. This suggests that the victims appear to choose their beliefs based on what suits them. However, because we can't control what we believe, the idea of being able to fully choose our beliefs is false. Maintaining beliefs that contrast with those of a surrounding group can create substantial unease. This arises from the tension between expressing personal convictions and adhering to the group's norms. Such cognitive dissonance adds to the intricacies of belief formation and expression.

To avoid doxastic voluntarism, Goldberg proposes an alternative explanation to how the transition to servility occurs. This explanation also involves another objection to Tanesini's account, namely how the silenced party defends herself. According to Goldberg, the transition to servility occurs when the victim of silencing gets *higher*

[87] Although Tanesini (2016) differentiates between several types of arrogance, from my understanding Goldberg refers to the interpersonal kind of arrogance. An individual that has this kind of arrogance, believes he is intellectually superior to others.

*order evidence* from the silence of those around her. When seeing others silent in the face of a mutually observed assertion, she concludes that what was asserted is true, and so she assents to it. This way, her differing to what was asserted was not based on a pragmatic choice, but on the higher evidence she received. Having said that, she does not know the reasoning behind other audience's silence. Their silence may well be linked to the fact that they are locutionary silenced and decided not to voice their disagreement. Here is where Goldberg argues that the victim's defence to being silenced can backfire: First, by remaining silent the victim is rendered complicit. Second, by remaining silent she allows other members of the audience to falsely interpret her silence as implying assent.

To illustrate this better Goldberg offers the following example. In a community very similar to ours, the assent interpretation is psychologically and socially salient. All members of the community are familiar with it and practice it regularly. Now suppose further that the members of this community are not aware of the phenomenon of silencing. Given that they know the assent interpretation is psychologically and socially salient, but they are not aware of the phenomenon of silencing, under oppressive circumstances, the silence of the members of oppressed groups will be interpreted as acceptance. The arrogant individuals silencing their victims are oblivious of their actions because they simply do not know that silencing as a phenomenon exists. And the victims of silencing, equally ignorant of this phenomenon, participate in their silencing.

This way, Goldberg argues, silencing is harming its victims twice. The first time the victim is being harmed by being silenced, the second time she is being harmed by having her silence interpreted as acceptance and rendering her complicit in her own oppression.

Goldberg concludes by emphasizing that NSR is an epistemic good. Participants in a conversation should be able to signal their acceptance by remaining silent. Since silence in the face of a mutually observed assertion is recognized as assenting to what was said, the audience is under a normative pressure to voice their doubts and/or disagreement were they to have any. By the same token, speakers enjoy a default entitlement to expect no silent rejection. This entitlement is however defeasible in the face of oppressive conditions. This goes to prove that it is not the practice itself,

but the improper use that renders it dangerous. All that is needed is that we uncover when the conditions are oppressive.

### 7.1.1 No NSR

Goldberg's concept of "No Silent Rejection" (NSR) posits that silence in a conversation is a form of acceptance, and thus, the entitlement to expect no silent rejection is an epistemic good. This entitlement, according to Goldberg, serves two primary functions: a) it allows the audience to signal their acceptance by remaining silent, and b) it enables speakers to interpret the silence of others as acceptance. Goldberg argues that this norm is universally familiar and thus serves as an epistemic good that can help explain and address the phenomenon of silencing.

My first objection to Goldberg's account is that it is, at best, trivial. The claim that NSR is an epistemic good rest on the assumption that silence is universally interpreted as acceptance. This universal claim ignores the nuanced ways in which silence is employed and interpreted across different cultures, social settings, and power dynamics. Moreover, the idea that a norm governing "the public expression of uptake" is necessary to facilitate conversation seems to be an overreach. Conversational norms are often tacit and context-dependent, and the imposition of a universal norm like NSR could stifle the richness and complexity of human communication.

More critically, I argue that Goldberg's NSR can be potentially dangerous, especially when applied within the context of systemic inequalities and power imbalances. By establishing a norm where silence is interpreted as acceptance, NSR risks reinforcing existing power structures. In a patriarchal society, for example, women and other marginalized groups may remain silent not out of acceptance but due to fear, coercion, or systemic oppression. In such cases, the NSR norm would not only fail to address the issue of silencing but could exacerbate it by providing a veneer of epistemic legitimacy to the oppressive status quo.

Goldberg's assertion that NSR is an epistemic good is problematic for another reason: it assumes that what he terms epistemic goods are value-neutral and universally applicable. However, if a so-called epistemic good disproportionately benefits those in positions of power while further marginalizing oppressed groups, its epistemic value must be critically examined. A norm that facilitates conversation among privileged

groups but silences or marginalizes others cannot be uncritically accepted as an epistemic good.

While Goldberg's NSR may offer a structured approach to understanding conversational norms, its universal application is both trivial and potentially dangerous. It overlooks the complex interplay of power, culture, and social context in the interpretation of silence and, in doing so, risks perpetuating systemic inequalities. Therefore, the claim that NSR is an epistemic good that can help us understand and address silencing needs to be rigorously scrutinized.

### 7.1.2 The epistemic value of NSR

Against the first claim I argue that it is not clear how NSR is epistemically valuable. If it benefits privileged members of society while enabling the oppression of marginalized epistemic agents, what cognitive successes can we reap from this norm?

Goldberg's concept of NSR posits that in a discourse, one should not silently reject or ignore the claims or arguments presented by others. While this norm is often lauded for its potential to foster open dialogue and collective knowledge, its epistemic value is far from clear-cut. However, its benefits are skewed toward privileged members of society, thereby enabling the systemic oppression of marginalized epistemic agents.

Goldberg argues that by engaging with differing viewpoints, rather than silently rejecting them, we can arrive at a more nuanced understanding of complex issues. However, the assumptions fail to account for the social dynamics that often shape epistemic exchanges.

Epistemic practices do not occur in a vacuum; they are deeply embedded within social, cultural, and institutional contexts that are often characterized by power imbalances. These imbalances can manifest in various forms, such as gender, race, class, or educational background, and they significantly influence who gets to speak, who is listened to, and whose knowledge is deemed valuable.

In a society where epistemic practices are already skewed in favour of the privileged, NSR can serve as a tool that further amplifies these existing inequalities. For instance, in academic settings, the voices of scholars from prestigious institutions might be given undue weight, thereby silencing or marginalizing scholars from less privileged

backgrounds. Similarly, in public discourse, the voices of marginalized communities are often drowned out by those who already hold social, economic, or political power.

For marginalized epistemic agents, the mandate of NSR can be particularly oppressive. The expectations to openly engage with every viewpoint can be emotionally and intellectually taxing, especially when those viewpoints are rooted in systemic individuals to further scrutiny, ridicule, or even harassment, thereby perpetuating a cycle of epistemic injustice.

Given these considerations, the cognitive gains achieved through NSR, while present, are not only redistricted but also tainted by ethical and epistemic shortcomings. If a norm serves to perpetuate existing inequalities and enables oppression of marginalized epistemic agents, its utility in fostering collective knowledge becomes highly questionable. Therefore, the continued application of NSR must be scrutinized, especially given its potential misuse in reinforcing systemic disparities.

While the concept of "No Silent Rejection" may appear to be a noble ideal in the pursuit of knowledge, its practical implications reveal a darker side. By disproportionately benefiting privileged members of society and enabling the systemic oppression of marginalized voices, NSR fails to meet the criteria for genuine epistemic value. Therefore, any cognitive successes attributed to this norm must be critically evaluated considering these ethical and societal considerations.

### 7.1.3 Explaining and Addressing silencing

To explain silencing, Goldberg suggested appealing to NSR. This implies that silencing is caused by conversational silence under oppressive conditions. If my understanding of Goldberg's hypothesis is correct, and the only way the phenomenon of silencing obtains is through silence under oppressive circumstance, we get the following formula:

NSR + Oppressive Circumstance = Silencing

This however implies that silencing can happen involuntarily. It seems as if perpetrators of silencing can make 'an honest mistake' when interpreting an audience's silence as acceptance what was asserted. Consequently, this suggest that if we wouldn't have the practice of silent acceptance, we wouldn't have silencing.

What I believe happens, is that arrogant individuals silence their victims because they are aware of the position they hold in society. While I agree with Goldberg that it is not the practice but its improper use that is dangerous, given that we do live in a community where oppressive conditions prevail, it is best not to rely on practices that run the risk of being misapplied. By the same token, while NSR is not the cause of silencing, it can be used as a tool to further oppress marginalized groups.

My view of interpreting silence as acceptance is extremely sensitive to context. Therefore, we should prefer a norm that favours silent rejection instead. We will therefore have a silent rejection (SR) norm that is defeated in certain contexts where assenting silently to an assertion is necessary (examples include, but are not limited to, courtrooms, or other official institutions).

Goldberg also makes the promise that NSR can address silencing. To this end, what needs to be done is make clear when conditions are oppressive. The problem with this strategy, is that as I previously argued, we live in a patriarchal society. This by default implies that oppressive conditions prevail, and they are not so easy to discern. What I believe needs to be done instead is begin with the idea that conditions are always oppressive. By doing that, we can start analysing silence in conversation on a case-by-case basis.

### 7.1.4 Unlikely Participation

My second objection is against Goldberg's claim that the victim contributes to her oppression. To reiterate, on Goldberg's view, silencing can cause a double harm. Firstly, it harms its victim by silencing her, secondly by making the victim (involuntarily) participate in her oppression. I will argue that this treatment is beset by two main problems.

The first problem is shifting the blame from the perpetrator to the victim. From my understanding, the arrogant individual is portrayed as being oblivious to the harms he is producing. This in turn involuntarily disculpates him.

The oblivious person in Goldberg's "community" example, is an arrogant individual who is familiar with the practice of no silent rejection. He is however unaware that silencing as a phenomenon exists. Consequently, he obliviously harms his victims by interpreting their silence as meaning acceptance.

If this is the case, it seems as if the oblivious arrogant individual is guilty not only of the harm caused by silencing his audience, but also of *epistemic laziness* (Medina, 2013, p.33). Medina uses the concept of epistemic laziness to talk about the lack of curiosity of privileged members of a given group. It appears focusing on certain practices while ignoring others is cherry picking. The oblivious arrogant individual is (conveniently) aware that he is entitled to expect no silent rejection, but (conveniently) unaware there might be underlying causes for someone to avoid contradicting him.

Moreover, Goldberg relies on Tanesini's account of arrogance, to describe the individuals that silence others. On Tanesini's construal, what makes one arrogant, is the belief that others are intellectually inferior to them. Now, our oblivious individual at very least believes he is superior. What I believe happens is that the oblivious arrogant individual is 'resisting to evidence' (Simion, 2023). He has evidence of the power he has over others by silencing them, so regardless of his familiarity or lack thereof with the phenomenon of silence, he is guilty of testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007, p. 4).

Goldberg however blames this 'obliviousness' on the community's unfamiliarity with the phenomenon of silencing. They simply do not know what silencing is nor when it obtains. In his words "Such people will be oblivious to reasons that ought to prompt them, in particular contexts in which circumstances are oppressive for individual silence members, to doubt their propriety of relying on the presumption that audience silence implies acceptance" (Goldberg, 2020, p. 194).

He strengthens his argument by providing empirical evidence to show that there is a reason why individuals appeal to NSR. NSR, as Goldberg states, is a well-known practice, employed by many different communities in different time periods. One of the example Goldberg provides, is a passage from Plato's Cratylus dialogue, in which Socrates tell Cratylus that 'I shall assume that your silence gives assent' (as quoted by (Goldberg, 2020, p. 169). Another example is a list of proverbs in at least ten languages, that are teaching that silence signifies assent.

However, there is also an equally big number of maxims concerning silence and women. An example would be an old Hebrew proverb "Silence is a woman's best garment". A similar proverb is found in Latin: "Silence is the greatest ornament in a woman". While these proverbs might not be as frequently used or quoted, women are still oppressed and silenced, which raises the question: Why are members of the community described by Goldberg more aware of certain practices rather than others?

In my view, the arrogant individual is indeed aware of an entitlement. But the entitlement he is aware of is not the same Goldberg has in mind. The arrogant individual is *entitled* in Kate Manne's sense of the word (2020). It is not NSR that gives him the entitlement to expect no silent rejection, it is the entitlement he receives by default for being born a male in a patriarchal society. I will elaborate more on this in the final section.

The second problem in Goldberg's treatment of silencing is his claim that the victim participates in her oppression. He uses Alessandra Tanesini's account of arrogance but argues that the transition to servility she describes, implies doxastic voluntarism.

Recall, on Tanesini's construal one a subject is systematically silenced she will become discouraged from making future efforts. Consequently, silencing may induce in the silenced individual's intellectual servility. When the victim of systemic silencing realizes that there is a conflict between her beliefs and the beliefs of those who silence her, she is likely to experience cognitive dissonance. To relieve this feeling of unease, she will conclude that it is best to defer to the opinions of those in authority (i.e., those who silence her), and as a result she becomes servile.

Goldberg proposes a different explanation of the victim's transition to servility. This explanation, he claims, will avoid doxastic voluntarism, and will also spell out the victim's involvement in her own oppression. In his view, the transition occurs when an observer of a mutually observed assertion, witnesses other members of the audience remain silent. Because she is aware of the practice of silent acceptance and NSR respectively, the observer forms the belief that others have assented to the assertion, and she should follow through. Note however that the observer does not know the real reason behind the audience's silence. As far as she is concerned, they are silent because they have accepted the assertion. On this construal, the victim did not *choose* what to believe, like Tanesini's pragmatic accounts suggest. She received *higher order evidence* from the silence of others that the best thing to do is to assent to the mutually observed assertion. Moreover, the silent members of the audience might have silently rejected the assertion due to an outweighing explanation, such as being afraid to speak up. In this way they are unwillingly contributing to their own oppression by allowing their silence to be interpreted as assent.

Against Goldberg's claim that the victim of silencing unwillingly contributes to her oppression, I argue that this implies that the victim is self-silencing. By this, we understand that she has a choice. Consequently, if this is true of locutionary silencing, the same can be said about illocutionary silencing (i.e., cases in which a subject's assertion backfires due to lack of uptake). Explaining consent, for example, seems an impossible task when one's words are not taken seriously. This begs the question? If one is illocutionary silenced while trying to explain consent, is she also unwillingly participating in her oppression? The obvious answer to this appears to be no, as Goldberg has not established that the victim of silencing is involved in her abuse.

Against Goldberg I argued that his construal of the phenomenon of silencing faces several setbacks. Two of the main claims I oppose are (1) NSR's capability of explaining and addressing silencing, and (2) The victim of silencing is an unwilling contributor to her own oppression.

In the following section I will offer my own account of the phenomenon of silencing. In my view silencing is a tool used by privileged members of a community to further oppress marginalized people. Their actions are enabled by the system we live in, namely, the patriarchy.

### 7.1.5 The Psychological Impact of Silencing

In the realm of interpersonal relationships and social dynamics, the act of silencing—whether overt or covert—serves as a powerful tool for exerting control and maintaining social hierarchies. While the immediate effects of being silenced may seem straightforward, such as the suppression of voice and agency, the long-term psychological ramifications are often insidious and far-reaching. Silencing can manifest in various forms, from overt acts like censorship and verbal intimidation to more subtle, psychological tactics like gaslighting and emotional manipulation. Regardless of its form, the impact of silencing extends beyond the immediate moment, infiltrating the psyche and shaping the emotional landscape of the silenced individual.

Psychological safety refers to an environment where people feel comfortable speaking up and expressing themselves without fear (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). A clear precursor of silencing is the lack of psychological safety. Lack of psychological safety leads to the suppression of voices. The psychological toll of being silenced can be

profound, affecting self-esteem, self-efficacy, and even one's sense of reality. Over time, the silenced individual may internalize these experiences, leading to a diminished sense of self-worth and a skewed self-concept. This internalization can manifest as anxiety, depression, and in extreme cases, a sense of learned helplessness that permeates various aspects of life. Moreover, the act of silencing can disrupt the formation of a coherent self-narrative, making it difficult for individuals to make sense of their experiences and their place in the world.

Understanding the psychological impact of silencing is not just an academic exercise; it is a societal imperative. As we navigate complex social issues that often involve power dynamics—be it in the family, workplace, or broader community—acknowledging and addressing the psychological effects of silencing becomes crucial for fostering mental well-being and social justice.

This introduction aims to set the stage for a deeper exploration into the multifaceted psychological consequences of silencing, a topic that remains as relevant as ever in our increasingly interconnected and polarized world.

#### *7.1.5.1 Gaslighting*

Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation that seeks to make the victim doubt their own perceptions, memories, or judgements. The term originates from the 1938 play "Gas Light" by Patrick Hamilton, in which a husband manipulates his wife into believing she is losing her sanity. Here's how gaslighting can serve as a mechanism for silencing. In relationships or workplaces, individuals may be made to question their own reality or judgments through manipulative tactics. This form of psychological abuse can silence the victim by making them doubt their own experiences and perceptions.

In his 2019 paper "Epistemic dimensions of gaslighting: peer-disagreement, self-trust, and epistemic injustice" Andrew Spear delves into the concept of gaslighting, focusing on its epistemic dimensions. The paper argues against the prevalent view that gaslighting is purely a form of manipulation devoid of epistemic elements. It discusses how gaslighting involves undermining the victim's self-trust and conception of themselves as an independent locus of judgment and deliberation. Spears extends Miranda Fricker's Epistemic Injustice framework to analyse gaslighting. One of Spears' key contributions is his counterargument to the prevalent view that gaslighting is solely

a form of emotional or psychological manipulation. Spears argues that this perspective is reductionist and overlooks the epistemic dimensions that are crucial for understanding the victim's experience. By doing so, he challenges existing analyses, particularly those by Kate Abramson, which focus on the gaslighter's manipulative strategies and moral wrongness but neglect epistemic aspects.

Spears introduces the concept of 'epistemic self-trust', which refers to an individual's trust in their own cognitive faculties and judgment. Gaslighting, he argues, undermines this self-trust by making the victim question their own perceptions, memories, or judgment. This is not merely a psychological effect but an epistemic one, as it directly impacts the victim's ability to function as a knower. The concept of 'epistemic self-trust' introduced by Spears is pivotal (ibid, p. 10). It goes beyond the idea of self-confidence or self-esteem to touch upon the very autonomy of the individual as a rational agent. When this self-trust is eroded, the individual is not just emotionally or psychologically harmed but is also rendered epistemically vulnerable. They are, in a sense, alienated from their own cognitive faculties, which is a profound form of disempowerment.

Moreover, Spears explores the concept of peer-disagreement in the context of gaslighting (ibid, p. 20). He argues that gaslighting can be seen as a form of forced peer-disagreement where the gaslighter imposes their perspective onto the victim, thereby undermining the victim's epistemic self-trust. This is a form of epistemic injustice because it wrongs the victim in their capacity as a knower.

#### *7.1.5.2 Gaslighting and Silencing*

Epistemic silencing refers to the systematic undermining of an individual's capacity to contribute to shared knowledge. This can manifest in various forms, such as testimonial injustice, where an individual's testimony is discredited due to prejudicial beliefs, or hermeneutical injustice, where an individual lacks the conceptual tools to articulate their experiences. The essence of epistemic silencing lies in the deprivation of one's epistemic agency, rendering them voiceless in the collective pursuit of knowledge.

Gaslighting, on the other hand, is a manipulative tactic employed to make an individual doubt their own perceptions, memories, or judgements. While the psychological dimensions of gaslighting have been extensively studied, its epistemic dimensions, such as the erosion of epistemic self-trust, have only recently gained

scholarly attention. Gaslighting serves as a mechanism to undermine an individual's epistemic autonomy, making them question their own cognitive faculties.

The intersection between epistemic silencing and gaslighting[88] can be conceptualized as a nexus of epistemic injustice, where the victim is doubly marginalized, first by being silenced and then by being made to doubt their own capacity to know. This creates a vicious circle where the victim, already silenced, becomes even more susceptible to gaslighting, which in turn exacerbates their epistemic silencing.

In cases where the victim anticipates testimonial injustice, they may engage in 'testimonial smothering', a form of self-silencing to avoid further harm. This self-imposed silence makes them more vulnerable to gaslighting, as they are already conditioned to doubt the validity of their own voice.

Gaslighting directly attacks the victim's epistemic self-trust, making them less likely to speak out and more likely to internalize the gaslighter's false narrative. This further perpetuates epistemic silencing.

Both epistemic silencing and gaslighting are exacerbated by systemic social and cultural factors, such as patriarchy and/or racial discrimination, which already predispose certain groups to epistemic marginalization.

The ethical implications of this nexus are profound. it calls for a revaluation for our collective epistemic practices and the power dynamics embedded within them. Addressing this intersection is not just an academic endeavour but a societal imperative, as it has real-world consequences on the well-being and autonomy of marginalized individuals. To understand better how gaslighting works, let us look at the following scenario:

> Case 1
>
> Michelle and Gaston have been in a relationship for a year. Michelle has always been an outspoken and confident individual, but she starts to notice a pattern of behaviour from Gaston that begins to undermine her self-assurance. Whenever Michelle brings up concerns about their relationship, Gaston dismisses her worries as "overthinking" or "being too emotional".
>
> Over time, Gaston's dismissals escalate into more overt forms of gaslighting. For example, when Michelle finds messages on Gaston's phone

[88] For more on gaslighting see, for example Bailey (2020).

that make her uncomfortable, Gaston insists that she's "misinterpreting" the texts and that her "jealousy is clouding her judgment". Gaston even goes as far as to say, " you have a vivid imagination, you are making things up in your head".

Simultaneously, Michelle experiences epistemic silencing. Her concerns and feelings are not just dismissed but also delegitimize. Gaston's behaviour sends the message that Michelle's perception and interpretations are unreliable, effectively silencing her. She starts to doubt her own experience and judgements, leading her to withhold her opinions and concerns, thereby engaging in what Dotson (2011, p. 237) describes as testimonial smothering.

In this scenario, gaslighting serves as a mechanism that perpetuates epistemic silencing. Michelle, already silenced by Gaston's dismissals, becomes even more susceptible to gaslighting. The gaslighting further erodes her epistemic self-trust, making her less likely to speak out and more likely to internalize Gaston's false narrative. This creates a vicious circle where Michelle is both gaslit and epistemically silenced, each reinforcing the other.

Michelle's experience is not just psychological but also epistemic. She is wronged in her capacity as a knower, as described by (Fricker, 2007, p. 44). Her ability to trust her own cognitive faculties is compromised, and she becomes less capable of participating in the shared pursuit of knowledge, it's within her relationship or in broader social contexts. This example illustrates the intricate relationship between gaslighting and epistemic silencing. It shows how gaslighting can serve as a powerful tool for enforcing epistemic silencing, creating a cycle that is difficult to break. Understanding this intersection is crucial for recognising the multi-dimensional harms inflicted on victims and for developing strategies to empower them to reclaim their voice and epistemic agency.

#### *7.1.5.3 Stereotype Threat*

Stereotype threat, a term coined by Steele and Aronson (1995) in their seminal paper "Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans", refers to the psychological burden that individuals experience when they are at risk of conforming negative stereotypes about their social group. On the other hand, epistemic

silencing involves the systematic undermining of an individual's capacity to contribute to shared knowledge. Members of a marginalized group may internalize stereotypes about their group, leading them to underperform in certain situations. This can silence them by making them feel as though they don't have the right or the ability to speak up or perform well (ibid, p. 797).

Stereotype threat can lead to self-silencing. Individuals, fearing the confirmation of stereotypes, may choose not to contribute to discussions, thereby perpetuating their own epistemic silencing.

Stereotype threat can also contribute to a credibility deficit (Fricker, 2007, p. 17). When individuals from marginalized groups speak, they are often not taken seriously due to existing stereotypes, further exacerbating their epistemic silencing.

Stereotype threat can also lead to the internalization of stereotypes, as discussed by (Schmader & Johns, 2003). The phenomenon of internalized stereotypes refers to the process by which individuals come to accept and incorporate negative stereotypes about their own social group into their self-concept. Schmader and Johns (ibid) have shown that stereotype threat not only affects immediate performance but can also have long-term cognitive impacts, such as reducing working memory capacity. This is a significant finding because working memory is crucial for complex cognitive tasks, including problem-solving and decision-making.

The internalization of stereotypes can lead to an erosion of self-trust. Self-trust is an essential component of epistemic agency as it enables individuals to rely on their own cognitive faculties for knowledge acquisition and decision-making. When individuals internalize negative stereotypes, they may begin to doubt their own abilities and judgments, thereby undermining self-trust (Jones, 2012).

The erosion of self-trust has significant epistemic consequences. It can lead to what Kristie Dotson (2011) describes as "testimonial quieting" (ibid, p. 242). This is where the speaker loses confidence in the value of their own testimony and becomes less likely to share their knowledge and experience. This is a form of self-imposed epistemic silencing, which can have a ripple effect on both individual and collective epistemology.

The internalization of stereotypes is not just an individual phenomenon but is shaped by broader social and psychological mechanisms. Stereotype threat is often perpetuated by societal norms and institutions. This systemic perpetuation makes it

challenging to combat the internalization of stereotypes and its epistemic consequences. To illustrate this better consider the following example:

Case 2

Lizzie is an undergraduate student majoring in computer science, a field that is predominantly male. She has always been passionate about technology and has excelled in her studies. However, she starts to notice that her contributions in class discussions are often overlooked or dismissed by her classmates and even her professors. Aware of the stereotype that women are not as competent in STEM fields as men, Lizzie starts to feel pressure from the stereotype threat, as described by Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson (1995). She becomes anxious about confirming this stereotype, which affects her performance in class. She hesitates to answer questions, even when she knows the answers, for fear of getting them wrong and reinforcing the stereotype.

Simultaneously, Lizzie experiences epistemic silencing. When she does muster the courage to speak up, her ideas are often dismissed or attributed to luck rather than skill. This sends a clear message that her contributions are not valued, effectively silencing her. She starts to doubt her own capabilities and becomes less likely to participate in discussions.

In this scenario, stereotype threat serves as a mechanism that perpetuates epistemic silencing. Lizzie, already silenced by the dismissive attitudes of her peers and professors, becomes even more susceptible to the effects of stereotype threat. The stereotype threat further erodes her self-trust, making her less likely to speak out and more likely to internalize the negative stereotypes about women in STEM.

The impact on Lizzie is both psychological and epistemic. She experiences a decline in academic performance, consistent with the findings of Spencer et al (1999). More importantly, she is wronged in her capacity as a knower. Her ability to contribute to the collective pursuit of knowledge is compromised, affecting not just her academic experience but also her future career prospects.

Lizzie's experience illustrates the intricate relationship between stereotype threat and epistemic silencing. It shows how stereotype threat can serve as a powerful tool for enforcing epistemic silencing.

#### *7.1.5.4 Emotional Blackmail*

Emotional blackmail is a form of psychological manipulation where one person seeks to control another by using guilt, fear, and obligation as leverage. The term was popularized by psychotherapist Susan Forward in her 1997 book "Emotional blackmail: Saying the right thing". Emotional blackmail often involves explicit or implicit threats, aimed at making the victim comply with the blackmailer's wishes.

In familial or romantic relationships, one party may use guilt or emotional manipulation to silence the other. For example, a parent might say, "if you loved me, you wouldn't bring this up", effectively silencing their child's concerns.

The relationship between epistemic silencing and emotional blackmail is a complex and nuanced one, deserving scholarly attention. Both phenomena operate in the realm of interpersonal relationships and power dynamics, but they manifest in different ways and have different implications for the victim's epistemic agency.

Emotional blackmail can serve as a powerful tool for epistemic silencing by delegitimizing the victim's testimony. For example, a person engaging in emotional blackmail might say, "if you really loved me, you wouldn't question me". This statement not only manipulates the victim emotionally but also undermines their epistemic agency by suggesting that their questions or concerns are invalid.

Emotional blackmail often involves making the victim doubt their own perceptions and judgment. Phrases like "you're too sensitive" or "you're overreacting" are common tactics. This erosion of self-trust is a form of epistemic injustice, as it undermines the victim's confidence in their own cognitive faculties.

Emotional blackmail can also involve coercive control, where the blackmailer restricts the victim's ability to acquire and disseminate information. This can manifest as isolating the victim from friends and family or controlling their access to information, thereby silencing them epistemically. To illustrate this better, consider the following example:

> Case 3
>
> Natasha and Alex have been in a relationship for several years. Natasha has always been a confident and independent person, but she starts to notice a pattern of behaviour from Alex that undermines her self-assurance. Whenever

Natasha brings up concerns about their relationship or questions Alex's actions, he responds with statements like, "if you really loved me, you wouldn't question me", or "you're too sensitive; you're making a big deal out of nothing".

Alex's responses are classic examples of emotional blackmail. He uses guilt ("If you really loved me….") and manipulation ("You're too sensitive") to control Natasha's behaviour and silence her concerns. The implicit threat here is that questioning him or expressing her concerns would prove that she doesn't love him or that she's emotionally unstable.

Alongside the emotional blackmail, Natasha experiences epistemic silencing. Her concerns and questions are not just dismissed but also delegitimize. Alex's behaviour sends the message that Natasha's perceptions and interpretations are unreliable, effectively silencing her. She starts to doubt her own experience and judgements, leading her to withhold her opinions and concerns, thereby engaging in "testimonial smothering" (Dotson 2011, p. 244).

In this scenario, emotional blackmail serves as a mechanism that perpetuates epistemic silencing. Natasha, already silenced by Alex's dismissals, becomes even more susceptible to emotional blackmail. The emotional blackmail further erodes her epistemic self-trust, making her less likely to speak out and more likely to internalize Alex's false narrative.

#### *7.1.5.5 Impostor Syndrome*

Imposter syndrome refers to the psychological phenomenon where individuals doubt their accomplishments and have a persistent, internalized fear of being exposed as a "fraud". This term was first coined by psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzane Imes in their 1978 paper "The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention (Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice). Imposter syndrome is prevalent in various settings, including academia, the workplace, social interactions, and it disproportionately affects individuals of marginalized groups.

Individuals may feel like they are not deserving of their position or achievements, leading them to remain silent in situations where they have valuable contributions to make. This self-imposed silencing can limit their career growth and personal development.

When individuals are afflicted with imposter syndrome, they often engage in self-silencing to avoid the perceived risk of exposure as a "fraud". This is a form of "testimonial smothering" (Dotson, 2011, p. 344) where individuals withhold their own testimony because they anticipate it will not be received credibly. The act of self-silencing is not merely a passive withdrawal but an active form of epistemic self-harm. It perpetuates a vicious cycle where the individual becomes both the agent and the victim of their own epistemic silencing.

Imposter syndrome can lead to a significant erosion of self-trust, which is a cornerstone of epistemic agency. Karen Jones (2002) in "The Politics of Credibility" elaborates on the importance of self-trust in the epistemic domain. When individuals suffer from imposter syndrome, they begin to doubt not just their accomplishments but also their cognitive faculties. This doubt spirals into a form of epistemic self-distrust, where individuals question their own ability to accurately perceive, interpret, and analyse information.

The credibility deficit induced by imposter syndrome has both individual and social dimensions. On the individual level, the hesitancy and qualifiers that often accompany the speech of someone suffering from imposter syndrome can be self-sabotaging. They signal to others a lack of confidence, which can be interpreted as a lack of competence, thereby reinforcing the stereotype that led to the imposter feelings in the first place. On the social level, this credibility deficit can be exacerbated by existing biases and stereotypes, as discussed by Fricker (2007, p. 57). For example, a woman in a male-dominated field may already be facing a credibility deficit due to gender bias; when imposter syndrome is added to the mix, the credibility deficit can become even more pronounced. To understand this better, let us look at the following example:

Case 4

Sofia has recently been promoted to a managerial position in her tech company. Despite her qualifications and years of experience, she can't shake the feeling that she doesn't deserve her new role. She's aware that she's one of the few women in a leadership position in her company, and she feels an immense pressure to perform exceptionally well to prove that she belongs there.

> Sofia constantly doubts her accomplishments and fears that her colleagues will discover she's not as competent as they think. This is a classic manifestation of imposter syndrome. She hesitates to voice her opinions in meetings, worried that her ideas will be dismissed or, worse, expose her as a "fraud."
>
> Alongside imposter syndrome, Sofia experiences epistemic silencing. When she does gather the courage to contribute, her ideas are often met with scepticism or are attributed to her team's efforts rather than her own leadership. This sends a clear message that her contributions are not valued, effectively silencing her. She starts to doubt her own capabilities and becomes less likely to participate in discussions, a phenomenon akin to what Kristie Dotson (2011, p. 244) terms "testimonial smothering."

In this scenario, imposter syndrome serves as a mechanism that perpetuates epistemic silencing. Sofia, already silenced by the dismissive attitudes of her colleagues, becomes even more susceptible to the effects of imposter syndrome. The imposter syndrome further erodes her epistemic self-trust, making her less likely to speak out and more likely to internalize the negative stereotypes about women in tech.

The impact on Sofia is both psychological and epistemic. She experiences a decline in job performance and job satisfaction, consistent with the findings of research on imposter syndrome and workplace outcomes. More importantly, she is wronged in her capacity as a knower, a form of epistemic injustice as described by Miranda Fricker (2007, p.1). Her ability to contribute to the collective pursuit of knowledge is compromised, affecting not just her professional experience but also her future career prospects.

Sofia's experience illustrates the intricate relationship between imposter syndrome and epistemic silencing. It shows how imposter syndrome can serve as a powerful tool for enforcing epistemic silencing, creating a cycle that is difficult to break. Understanding this intersection is crucial for recognizing the multi-dimensional harms inflicted on victims and for developing strategies to empower them to reclaim their voice and epistemic agency.

#### *7.1.5.6 Victim blaming*

Victim-blaming is a psychological and social phenomenon where the victims of a crime, accident, or any form of mistreatment are held partially or entirely responsible for the events that led to their victimization. This often manifests in questions or statements that suggest the victim should have done something differently to prevent the event, thereby shifting the focus and blame away from the perpetrator. In the context of NSR I suggested earlier that the concept inadvertently engages in victim-blaming. Goldberg (2020) suggests that by remaining silent, the victim is complicit in their own oppression. This shifts the responsibility from the perpetrator, who is enforcing the silencing, to the victim, who is being silenced (ibid, p. 164).

In cases of sexual assault or domestic violence, victims are often blamed for the actions of their perpetrators. This can silence them from reporting the crime or seeking help, perpetuating a cycle of abuse. To illustrate this better, consider the following example:

> Case 5
>
> Anna is a junior employee at a tech company. During a team meeting, her manager, Dan, proposes a new project strategy that Anna believes is flawed and could lead to failure. However, she notices that her senior colleagues seem to be nodding in agreement. Feeling intimidated and fearing repercussions for dissent, Anna chooses to remain silent.
>
> According to Goldberg's concept of "No Silent Rejection" (NSR), Anna's silence would be interpreted as agreement or acceptance of Dan's proposal. Dan and the rest of the team would proceed under the assumption that everyone, including Anna, is on board with the new strategy.
>
> Later, when the project fails, Dan might learn that Anna had reservations. According to the logic of NSR, Anna could be criticized for not voicing her concerns. She might hear comments like, "Why didn't you say something earlier? Your silence was misleading". This shifts the blame from Dan, who proposes the flawed strategy, to Anna, who felt she couldn't speak up.

This scenario illustrates the potential pitfalls of NSR and how it can engage in a form of victim-blaming. Anna's silence is not merely a personal choice but is influenced by the power dynamics and fear of repercussions in her workplace. Blaming her for the project's failure because she didn't voice her disagreement ignores these systemic issues and puts the onus on the victim, Anna, rather than the perpetrator of the flawed system.

By applying NSR in such a context, the norm could serve to perpetuate existing power imbalances and make it even more difficult for marginalized or less powerful individuals to speak up. Therefore, while NSR aims to foster clear communication, its application needs to be more nuanced to account for situations where silence is not a sign of agreement but a symptom of a larger, systemic issue.

#### *7.1.5.7 Microaggressions*

Microaggressions and epistemic silencing are both phenomena that operate in the realm of interpersonal relationships and social dynamics, but they manifest in distinct ways and have unique implications for an individual's epistemic agency.

Microaggressions are subtle, often unintentional, discriminatory comments or behaviours that target individuals based on their membership in a marginalized group. Coined by psychiatrist Dr. Chester M. Pierce in the 1970's, the term has gained traction in social psychology. They often involve implicit devaluation of the target's identity and experiences. For example, a comment like " You speak English very well for an immigrant" subtly undermines the individual's competence and belonging. This implicit devaluation can extend to the epistemic domain, making the individual less likely to be taken seriously when they offer testimony or insights.

Microaggressions can also marginalize the lived experiences of individuals, thereby limiting their epistemic resources. For instance, a woman in a STEM field might hear comments like "You're not like other women", which not only stereotype her but also marginalize her unique experience and perspectives. This can lead to hermeneutical gaps where her experiences are not adequately understood or articulated.

Microaggressions often serve to normalize exclusionary practices. When microaggressions are pervasive and unchallenged, they can create an environment where only certain voices are expected to contribute, thereby silencing others.

To illustrate this better let us explore a hypothetical scenario involving Stella, a woman of colour working in a predominantly white corporate environment. This example will illustrate how microaggressions can contribute to epistemic silencing.

Case 6

Stella is a highly qualified marketing executive who has recently joined a new company. She's excited about bringing fresh perspective to her team but quickly notices that her ideas are not given the same weight as those of her white male colleagues.

During team meetings, Stella experiences various microaggressions. For example, when she suggests a new marketing strategy, one of her colleagues says, "That's an interesting approach, but let's stick to what we know works". Another colleague occasionally interrupts her, subtly implying that what she's saying isn't valuable. These are microaggressions that serve to underline her professional standing and reinforce racial and gender stereotypes.

Stella starts to notice that her ideas are consistently overlooked and dismissed. This is a form of epistemic silencing, where her contributions to the collective knowledge of the team are marginalized. She begins to doubt her own expertise and becomes hesitant to share her ideas in future meetings.

In this scenario, the microaggressions Stella experiences serve as mechanisms that perpetuate epistemic silencing. The subtle undermining of her ideas and the interruptions during meetings contribute to an environment where her epistemic contributions are devalued. This erodes her self-trust and makes her less likely to participate in discussions, thereby reinforcing the cycle of epistemic silencing.

The impact on Stella is both professional and epistemic. Her career growth might be stunted and her ability to contribute meaningfully to projects is compromised. Moreover, the team loses out on her unique perspectives, which could have been valuable in developing more innovative and inclusive strategies.

#### *7.1.5.8 Code-switching*

Code-switching[89] refers to the practice of alternating between different languages, dialects or styles of speech depending on the social context. This is often done to fit into a particular social or professional environment. While code-switching can be a valuable skill that allows for greater adaptability and communication, it can also be a response to systemic pressures to conform to dominant cultural norms. When individuals engage in code-switching to fit into dominant cultural norms, they may suppress aspects of their identity, including their unique perspectives and ways of knowing. This can be a form of self-imposed epistemic silencing, where individuals feel compelled to conform at the expense of their authentic selves. Code-switching often involves a cognitive load, as individuals must constantly monitor their language and behaviour to fit into different contexts. This cognitive load can limit their ability to fully engage in epistemic practices, such as critical thinking and active participation in discussions. The need to code-switch often arises from systemic inequalities that privilege certain languages, dialects, or style of communication over others. This can lead to the marginalization of individuals who do not conform to these norms, effectively silencing their contributions.

Members of minority groups often feel the need to alter their behaviour, appearance, or speech to fit into dominant cultural norms. This can be a form of silencing as it suppresses authentic self-expression. To illustrate this better let's, explore a hypothetical scenario involving Shanonn, a young woman from a working-class background who has recently started working at a prestigious law firm.

> Case 7
>
> Shannon is excited about her new job but quickly realizes that the corporate culture is vastly different from what she's used to. She notices that her colleagues speak in a formal, jargon-heavy manner and that they often discuss cultural or social events she's not familiar with. Feeling out of place, Shannon starts to code-switch to fit in.

[89] Code-switching, while not exclusively related to gender, often impacts women, particularly in professional environments where they may adjust their speech to conform to dominant norms or styles, often dictated by male-centric cultural standards. For more on this, see for example, Crumb et al (2023) and Panhwar (2018).

Shannon begins to alter her speech patterns, avoiding her natural dialect and adopting the formal language she hears around her. She also starts reading up on cultural events and social topics that she thinks her colleagues will discuss, even though these aren't areas she's naturally interested in. She does this to blend in and to avoid standing out as someone who "doesn't belong".

As Shannon engages in code-switching, she finds that she's less and less likely to speak up during meetings and offer her unique perspective. She fears that her ideas, framed in her natural dialect or based on her own experience and interests, won't be taken seriously. This is a form of epistemic silencing; her contributions to the collective knowledge of the team are marginalized. She starts to doubt her own expertise and becomes hesitant to share her ideas.

In this context, Shannon's act of code-switching becomes a reinforcing factor for her epistemic silencing. The mental effort required to continually adapt her language and behaviour to a different cultural setting restricts her capacity to fully participate in intellectual exchanges and offer her distinct viewpoints. This diminishes her self-confidence and discourages her from engaging in discussions, thereby perpetuating a cycle of epistemic marginalization.

The repercussions for Shannon are twofold: they affect her professionally and epistemically. her career advancements could be hindered, and her meaningful contributions to projects are undermined. Additionally, the team misses out on her unique insights, which could have enriched their approach to more inclusive and creative solutions.

Shannon's situation exemplifies the intricate interplay between code-switching and epistemic silencing. Her need to code-switch serves as a nuanced but impactful force that exacerbates her epistemic marginalization, thus sustaining both social and knowledge-based disparities. Grasping this nuanced relationship is essential for identifying the various forms of harm that individuals like Shannon endure and for formulating approaches to help them regain both their voice and their role as contributors to collective knowledge.

#### *7.1.5.9 Workplace bullying*

Workplace bullying refers to the repeated, harmful behaviour directed at employees, often manifesting as verbal abuse, humiliation, intimidation, or the undermining of work performance. It creates a toxic environment that can have severe psychological and professional consequences for the victims. The constant belittling and undermining can lead to a significant erosion of self-trust, a key component of epistemic agency. Workplace bullying often leads to social isolation, as colleagues lay avoid associating with the victim to steer clear of the bully. This isolation can further exacerbate epistemic silencing, as the victim may be excluded from important discussions and decision-making processes. To illustrate this better, let us look at the following example:

> Case 8
>
> Laura is happy to start her new job and is eager to contribute her expertise to the team. However, she soon finds herself the target of workplace bullying by a senior colleague, Mark, who consistently undermines her during team meetings and belittles her contributions. Mark often interrupts Laura when she's speaking, dismisses her ideas without consideration, and sometimes even mocks her in front of colleagues. He also spread rumours about her lack of competence, further isolating her within the team.
>
> As a result of Mark's actions, Laura starts to doubt her own abilities and becomes increasingly hesitant to share her ideas and insights during meetings. This is a form of epistemic silencing; her contributions to the collective knowledge of the team are marginalized.

In this context, Mark's bullying acts as a catalyst that intensifies Laura's experience of epistemic silencing. His relentless disparagement and undermining chip away at her self-confidence, discouraging her from actively participating in team discussions and sharing her specialized knowledge. This creates a vicious cycle of epistemic exclusion, where Laura's contributions are systematically side-lined in crucial dialogues.

The fallout for Laura spans both her professional trajectory and her epistemic contributions. Her career advancement is at risk, and her capacity to make meaningful contributions to the team's projects are undermined. Additionally, the team misses the opportunity to benefit from her unique skills set and insights, which could have been instrumental in fostering innovation and resolving complex issues.

Laura's situation serves as a poignant illustration of the intricate relationship between workplace bullying and epistemic silencing. The bullying she endures from Mark serves as a nuanced but impactful mechanism that deepens her epistemic marginalization, thus sustaining both social and epistemic inequalities.

### 7.1.6 Patriarchal Structures as a Cause of Silencing

The concept of patriarchy, a social system in which men hold primary power and predominate in roles of leadership, has been extensively studied for its role in perpetuating various forms of inequality. However, one of its less explored but equally insidious effects is its contribution to epistemic silencing— the suppression or devaluation of knowledge, perspectives, and voices, particularly those of marginalized groups.

In a patriarchal system, the epistemic framework is inherently skewed to favour the perspectives, experiences, and voices of men, particularly those who belong to other privileged groups (e.g., white, heterosexual men). This epistemic bias manifests in various ways— from the kinds of questions that are considered "worth asking" in academic and public discourse, to the ways in which knowledge is validated and disseminated. Women and other marginalized groups often find their contributions dismissed, trivialized, or altogether ignored, a phenomenon that can be described as epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007, p. 1).

The patriarchal system not only dictates who gets to speak but also influences who is considered a 'credible' or 'legitimate' knower. In such a system, the knowledge and experiences of women and marginalized groups are often subjected to higher levels of scrutiny and scepticism, requiring them to provide excessive levels of evidence or justification for their claims. This creates an environment where these groups are systematically disadvantaged in epistemic practices, leading to their silencing.

Moreover, patriarchy employs various mechanisms to maintain this epistemic hierarchy. One such mechanism is 'mansplaining,' where men explain things to women in a condescending or patronizing manner, implicitly (or explicitly) suggesting that the woman's own understanding or perspective is flawed or irrelevant. Another is the phenomenon of 'gaslighting,' a form of psychological manipulation aimed at making someone doubt their own experiences or perceptions, thereby eroding their epistemic self-trust.

The impact of this epistemic silencing extends beyond individual interactions and permeates institutional practices and policies. For example, academic disciplines that are traditionally considered 'feminine' (e.g., nursing, social work) are often deemed less rigorous or valuable than those that are male dominated (e.g., physics, engineering). This devaluation serves to reinforce the patriarchal epistemic hierarchy, further marginalizing the contributions of those who are already disadvantaged.

The Patriarchy serves as a powerful engine for epistemic silencing, systematically marginalizing the voices and contributions of women and other disadvantaged groups. To dismantle this form of epistemic injustice, it is crucial to interrogate and challenge the patriarchal structures that underpin our epistemic practices, both at the individual and institutional levels. This involves not only amplifying the voices of marginalized groups but also critically examining the ways in which epistemic authority is allocated and exercised.

Goldberg's (2020) concept of "No Silent Rejection" (NSR) posits that conversational silence should be interpreted as acceptance of a given assertion, thereby facilitating the flow of conversation and the exchange of knowledge. While this concept may have epistemic value in an idealized, equitable society, its application becomes problematic within the context of a patriarchal system.

In a patriarchal society, power dynamics are skewed in favour of men, particularly those who also belong to other privileged groups (e.g., white, heterosexual men). These dynamics permeate all aspects of life, including epistemic exchanges. The entitlement to expect no silent rejection, as proposed by Goldberg, assumes a level playing field where all conversational participants have equal power to assert, question, and remain silent. However, this is far from the reality in patriarchal settings (ibid).

Women and other marginalized groups often find themselves in situations where speaking out or challenging dominant views can result in various forms of

backlash, from subtle microaggressions to overt acts of discrimination or violence. In such contexts, silence may not signify agreement but could be a survival tactic or a form of resistance. The NSR norm, therefore, risks reinforcing existing power hierarchies by legitimizing the dominant group's interpretations of silence while ignoring the complex reasons that might compel marginalized individuals to remain silent.

Furthermore, Goldberg's NSR does not account for the systemic factors that contribute to silencing. In a patriarchal society, institutions and cultural norms often implicitly or explicitly support the silencing of marginalized voices. For example, workplaces that do not take women's contributions seriously, or legal systems that express doubt or distrust towards of women's narratives, contribute to a culture where women and other marginalized groups are silenced. The NSR norm, in such a context, becomes another tool for the privileged to enforce their epistemic authority.

Goldberg argues that the NSR norm is defeasible under certain conditions, such as when the conversation is not genuinely cooperative or when there is an "outweighing explanation" for rejecting an assertion. However, determining these conditions is itself fraught with difficulties in a patriarchal society.

While Goldberg's NSR principle holds theoretical epistemic value, its practical application in a real-world patriarchal context presents significant challenges. NSR does not fully consider the nuanced power dynamics that often dictate who can speak and be heard. This oversight means that, without careful implementation, NSR could inadvertently reinforce the very systems of oppression it seeks to dismantle. The actual labour lies in adapting NSR to address and navigate these systemic inequalities, a task this chapter has endeavoured to outline and explore.

In a patriarchal society, men often enjoy a range of privileges that are systematically denied to women and other marginalized genders. These privileges can manifest in various forms, including economic, social, and psychological advantages. For instance, men are often paid more for the same work, a phenomenon well-documented in the gender pay gap literature (Blau & Kahn, 2017). They are also more likely to be promoted to leadership positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007).[90]

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Socially, men often face less scrutiny and judgment for their actions and choices. For example, they are less likely to be criticized for balancing a career with family life, a freedom not equally afforded to women (Williams, 2000). Men also benefit from the "old boys' network," an informal system of relationships and favours that can significantly influence career advancement (Kanter, 1977).[91]

Psychologically, men are often raised to be more confident and assertive, traits that are valued in many professional and social settings. This psychological conditioning starts early in life and is reinforced by societal norms and media portrayals.

Moreover, men are less likely to face systemic forms of discrimination and violence, such as sexual harassment and assault, which further perpetuates their social and economic advantages (MacKinnon & Emerson, 1979).

However, it's crucial to note that not all men experience these privileges to the same extent, as factors like race, class, and sexual orientation can intersect to create more complex systems of advantage and disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1989).

The privileges that men enjoy in a patriarchal society are multi-faceted and deeply ingrained in various social, economic, and psychological structures. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive understanding of how privilege operates and is maintained.[92]

#### *7.1.6.1 Manne: Silencing*

In her seminal work on misogyny (Manne, 2018) Kate Manne talks about the notion of "eating her words" as a gender-specific form of silencing. This conceptual framework is an extension of her broader discourse on misogyny, which she delineates as the systemic enforcement of patriarchal norms and expectations. Manne posits that "eating her words" encapsulates the instances in which women, either through coercion or social conditioning, are compelled to withdraw or recant their statements, assertions,

[91] Socially, men often face less scrutiny and judgment for their actions and choices. For example, they are less likely to be criticized for balancing a career with family life, a freedom not equally afforded to women (Williams, 2000). Men also benefit from the "old boys' network," an informal system of relationships and favours that can significantly influence career advancement (Kanter, 1977).

[92] However, it's crucial to note that not all men experience these privileges to the same extent, as factors like race, class, and sexual orientation can intersect to create more complex systems of advantage and disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1989)

or viewpoints, especially those that contest the male hegemony or disrupt established norms. In her words

> You can train her not to say "strangle" but rather "choke", or better yet "grab", or best of all nothing. It was nothing; nothing happened. When he boasts of grabbing women's genitals, it becomes "locker room talk", as if that was sufficient to silence comment. In consequence, for many people, it effectively became so. His ex-wife had testified to his raping her. This was "old news and it never happened," according to his spokesperson. And it was, according to his lawyer, Michael Cohen, "not the word you're trying to make it into." Ivana Trump had "felt raped emotionally…. She was not referring to it as a criminal matter, and not in the literal sense, though there's many literal senses to the word.". (ibid, p. 5)

The potency of "eating her words" as a silencing tactic extends beyond the mere act of verbal retraction. It also imposes a psychological burden on women, engendering a formal form of internalized oppression. When a woman is made to "eat her words", she not only experiences immediate silencing but also internalizes a broader societal message that her voice lacks, the value, credibility, or authority attributed to her male counterparts. This internalization can manifest in various psychological detriments, including diminished sense of self-worth, decreased self-efficacy, and a hesitance to engage in future discourses, thereby perpetuating a cyclical pattern of silence and disempowerment.

Moreover, the concept illuminates the structural underpinnings that facilitate the specific form of silencing. It is not solely the actions of individual men that perpetuate this phenomenon; rather, it is also the institutional frameworks and cultural mores that either implicitly or explicitly endorse the marginalization of women's voices. For instance, organizational cultures that trivialize women's contributions or judicial systems that exhibit scepticism towards women's narratives contribute to the perpetuation of women "eating their words".

Recognising "eating her words" as a distinct form of silencing is imperative for addressing the structural inequities that sustain gender inequality. If necessitates a multi-dimensional strategy that encompasses the revaluation of societal norms, the reform of

institutional practices, and the empowerment of women to reclaim their discursive space.

## 4. Conclusion

This chapter has undertaken a rigorous examination of the phenomenon of silencing, scrutinizing it through an interdisciplinary lens that encompasses epistemic, psychological, and socio-political dimensions. The analysis has been particularly critical of Sanford Goldberg's "No Silent Rejection" (NSR) framework, interrogating its epistemic utility and its applicability in contexts marked by systemic inequalities.

The first point of critique against Goldberg's NSR is its epistemic triviality. While Goldberg posits NSR as an epistemic good that can facilitate conversational cooperation, this paper has argued that the norm is neither universally beneficial nor unproblematic. In a society stratified along lines of gender, race, and other social categories, the entitlement to expect no silent rejection can serve as a tool for dominant groups to further marginalize and silence oppressed individuals. Thus, the epistemic value of NSR is called into question, particularly when it is deployed in contexts that are already fraught with power imbalances.

Secondly, this paper has extended the discourse on silencing beyond the epistemic realm to consider its psychological implications. Drawing upon the philosophical contributions of Kate Manne and empirical insights from psychology, it has been argued that silencing is not merely an epistemic harm but also a form of psychological violence. The act of silencing can have profound repercussions on an individual's mental well-being, self-efficacy, and overall psychological health. This adds another layer of complexity to the issue, necessitating a more holistic approach to understanding and addressing silencing.

In synthesizing these critiques and insights, this paper posits that any comprehensive understanding of silencing must be intersectional and multidimensional, considering its epistemic, psychological, and systemic roots—particularly in patriarchal societies. It calls for an integrated approach that not only challenges existing epistemic norms but also addresses the systemic and psychological factors that perpetuate silencing.

The scholarly landscape on silencing is still evolving, and this chapter aims to contribute to that ongoing dialogue. While it has laid down some foundational critiques

and proposed alternative frameworks, the work is far from exhaustive. Future research should continue to explore the intricate dynamics of silencing, particularly in how it intersects with other forms of oppression and marginalization. Moreover, empirical studies could provide valuable data on the psychological impacts of silencing, thereby enriching our theoretical understandings.

## Conclusion

The present work analysed the epistemic dimension of harm inflicted by speakers upon hearers. The investigation has been grounded in a detailed and critical analysis of various dimensions of speech acts, elucidating the mechanisms through which they can perpetrate epistemic injustice. The categorization of harm into quantitative and qualitative epistemic deprivation has provided a structured framework for understanding the multifaceted ways in which speakers can unjustly impact hearers in their capacity as knowers.

This thesis aimed to delineate not only the various forms of epistemic injustice that hearers experience from speakers, but also to elucidate the processes though which these injustices are generated and disseminated.

It has also attempted to provide a comprehensive exploration of various realms, including the pornography industry, media, music industry, and the pervasive issue of mansplaining, to shed light on the intricate ways in which epistemic injustice is perpetrated.

The initial chapters delved into the epistemic harms associated with pornography and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes, emphasizing the importance of focusing on consumers.

The research conducted provides a comprehensive analysis of the debates surrounding pornography. It scrutinizes perspectives from multiple facets: the anti-pornography feminist viewpoint, the pro-pornography feminist stance, and concerns that censorship or prohibition of pornography could precipitate a cascade of further restrictions, thereby undermining the principle of freedom of speech. The exploration of these diverse positions contributes to a multifaceted understanding of the issues at hand, highlighting the complexities and the multifarious concerns involved in the discourse on pornography.

I have argued that even in scenarios where no direct harm occurs during production, the consumption of such material can still perpetuate and exacerbate harmful stereotypes and biases against women.

The subsequent chapters provided a thorough analysis of the process of belief formation based on false information disseminated in the media and the mechanisms through which media influences public opinion. It explored the propagation and

dissemination of misogyny, offering a more inclusive perspective on mansplaining and examining the various dimensions in which women's credibility and intellectual capacity are unjustly diminished.

In the second chapter, the exploration of the impact of misinformation and deceptive narratives disseminated through various media channels on public perception and understanding is undertaken. This exploration delineates how such misinformation can pervasively distort public perception, leading to the broad spread of false beliefs.

The analysis includes a detailed examination of the mechanisms by which media sways public opinion, potentially leading to a systemic devaluation of credible sources and information. The scrutiny extends to the impact of these distorted beliefs on multiple societal dimensions, including public discourse among others.

The thesis further delves into the realm of conspiracy theories, particularly those intertwined with sexism and misogyny within the manosphere, and the role of the internet and the manosphere in the amplification of misogyny and sexism. It advocates for the consideration of no-platforming as a viable response to instances of hate speech and other forms of dangerous communication.

In the second chapter, a more profound exploration into instances of qualitative epistemic deprivation is conducted, offering an extensive analysis of the belief formation process based on the false information spread in the media. This chapter investigates how misinformation and deceptive narratives in diverse media forms can warp public perception and understanding, leading to the broad dissemination of false beliefs. The analysis includes an examination of the mechanisms through which media sways public opinion, and how this can lead to a systemic degradation of credible sources and information. The chapter also examines the impact of these distorted beliefs on various societal aspects, including public discourse, among others. By unravelling the complex web of media influence on public beliefs, this chapter aims to highlight the pervasive issue of qualitative epistemic deprivation, underscoring the critical need for media literacy and solid mechanisms to counter the spread of misinformation.

The beginning of the chapter involves an examination of the system that has historically provided a conducive environment for the growth of misogyny: patriarchy. A comprehensive exploration of Kate Manne's account of misogyny is undertaken, outlining its differences from sexism. This exploration forms the foundation for understanding the entrenched roots of misogyny within societal structures.

Subsequently, the discussion transitions to the mechanisms through which misogyny is spread and disseminated. Insights are drawn from Jason Stanley's account of propaganda, offering a perspective through which to observe the spread of misogynistic beliefs and attitudes. This is complemented by an exploration of Regina Rini's account of fake news, further shedding light on the avenues through which misinformation and biased narratives infiltrate society.

In the third chapter, attention is redirected towards the music industry and its role in the propagation of prejudicial attitudes towards women. A detailed analysis of the most popular songs across various genres is conducted to illuminate the extensive presence of prejudiced attitudes within the musical domain.

The discussion is grounded on the assertion that the extensive reach and relatively mild reputation of music and music videos, compared to pornography, potentially have a more substantial impact on their audience. This impact is manifested in the shaping and reinforcement of perceptions and attitudes towards women, further perpetuating detrimental stereotypes and biases.

The fourth chapter addresses a notable example of quantitative epistemic deprivation, specifically mansplaining. The discussion begins by examining current definitions and arguing for their expansion. Traditional definitions of mansplaining, as introduced by Rebecca Solnit, describe it as an unsolicited, condescending explanation given by a man to a knowledgeable woman. This chapter advocates for a more inclusive definition that encompasses various situations that may not strictly fit the traditional description but still retain the core characteristics of mansplaining.

For instance, in cases where a woman, lacking expertise in a specific field, requests an explanation from a knowledgeable man, a condescending response based on assumptions of her intellectual inferiority due to her gender should also qualify as mansplaining. This broader definition recognizes the variety of contexts in which mansplaining can occur, emphasizing the fundamental problem of undermining women's epistemic authority based on biased assumptions regarding their intellectual abilities.

The fifth chapter navigates the domain of conspiracy theories, especially those interwoven with sexism and misogyny within the manosphere, adhering to the framework outlined by Quassim Cassam. He identifies five main traits of conspiracy theories including their speculative aspect, esotericism, premodernism, amateurishness,

and contrarian viewpoint. This chapter introduces a sixth characteristic: the romanticization of the past, to provide a more in-depth insight into the intersection between conspiracy theories and misogynistic and sexist ideologies.

The emphasis on a glorified past plays a crucial role in understanding why individuals with sexist and misogynistic perspectives often utilize rhetoric focused on collective nostalgia and propagate incorrect beliefs about women. This chapter posits that this additional feature is essential for a more thorough comprehension of conspiracy theories related to misogyny and sexism. It sheds light on the appeal of these theories for individuals embedded in misogynistic ideologies, offering an understanding of the mechanisms that continue these detrimental beliefs.

In Chapter 6, the analysis transitions to scrutinize the role of the internet and the manosphere in intensifying misogyny and sexism. The chapter asserts that these platforms have markedly augmented the prevalence of misogynistic and sexist ideologies, offering a venue where such detrimental beliefs are not merely exchanged but also bolstered and normalized.

Acknowledging the extensive and intensifying nature of this issue, along with the palpable threats it poses, the chapter advocates for the contemplation of no-platforming as a feasible response to episodes of hate speech and other forms of perilous communication. It will probe into the ethical dimensions of no-platforming, addressing potential apprehensions and opposition related to free speech and censorship. The chapter will argue for the primacy of safeguarding vulnerable individuals and communities from the damage inflicted by hate speech and hazardous discourse, a concern that supersedes the potential negatives of no-platforming.

In the discourse on no-platforming, engagement with Neil Levy's perspective will occur as a counterpoint to my own position. While agreement with Levy on the justification of no-platforming is present, especially emphasizing the rights of vulnerable groups to be protected from additional assaults and exclusion, divergence from his stance occurs on two notable aspects.

Firstly, it is argued that Levy's conceptualization of no-platforming is unduly restrictive. His definition of a platform is limited to conventional venues such as university contexts. This confinement neglects the extensive and influential domain of social media and other online platforms that hold a crucial role in disseminating information and moulding public opinion in contemporary society.

In the final chapter, the thesis addresses Sanford Goldberg's exploration of silencing, offering a critique of his "No Silent Rejection" concept and arguing for the fundamental impossibility of identifying 'safe' conditions for NSR given the ubiquity of patriarchal norms. It emphasizes the necessity of considering the psychological aspects of silencing and explores how patriarchal structures contribute to both external and internal silencing.

By integrating insights from various disciplines including philosophy, social epistemology, and psychology, this thesis attempts to contribute to the ongoing scholarly discourse on epistemic injustice by offering a more nuanced, multi-dimensional perspective. It challenges existing epistemic frameworks, introduces psychological considerations into the debate, and argues for a more integrated, holistic understanding of how and why epistemic injustice occurs.

The exploration of different forms of media, including pornography and music, offered insights into the pervasive and insidious ways in which epistemic injustice is propagated in contemporary society. The discussion on the internet and the manosphere highlighted the amplification of these issues in the digital age, underscoring the urgency of addressing them.

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