

NOT ALL DEAD WHITE MEN

**NOT ALL
DEAD
WHITE
MEN**

Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age

**DONNA
ZUCKERBERG**

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INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2016, posters for the white nationalist group Identity Evropa began to appear on college campuses in the United States. The posters featured black-and-white photographs of statues, most of which were either ancient, such as the Apollo Belvedere, or obviously classicizing, such as Nicolas Coustou's 1696 statue of Julius Caesar.¹ Overlaid on these images were generic, seemingly inoffensive slogans such as "Protect Our Heritage" and "Our Future Belongs to Us." The posters caused a wave of outrage and were quickly removed, although they remained available for sale on the Identity Evropa website under the heading "Epic Posters" for nearly a year.

This use of classical imagery to promote a white nationalist agenda is far from an isolated occurrence. In fact, the Identity Evropa posters are unusual not for what they depict but, rather, for having an actual physical presence. In the less tangible world of the internet, far-right communities ideologically aligned with Identity Evropa have increasingly been using artifacts, texts, and historic figures evocative of ancient Greece and Rome to lend cultural weight to their reactionary vision of ideal white masculinity.

These online communities go by many names—the Alt-Right, the manosphere, Men Going Their Own Way, pickup artists—and exist under the larger umbrella of what is known as the Red Pill, a group of men connected by common resentments against women, immigrants, people of color, and the liberal elite. The name, adopted from the film *The Matrix*, encapsulates the idea that society is

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unfair to men—heterosexual white men in particular—and is designed to favor women. The Red Pill finds its primary online home on the subreddit *r/theredpill*, a forum on the social media platform Reddit dedicated to discussion of Red Pill ideas. Its influence and reach, however, extend far beyond that home: men in Red Pill communities—on Reddit and elsewhere online—share articles, memes, and news stories to incite one another’s anger. That anger then occasionally finds outlets in what are sometimes called troll storms: a hurricane of digital abuse aimed at those with the misfortune to attract attention.

The Red Pill community has an odd and uncomfortable relationship with social media: its members exhibit widespread disdain for every major social media platform, but they also use those platforms as major modes of communication and object vociferously when members of the community are banned from social media sites. James “Roissy” Weidmann, writer of the popular blog *Chateau Heartiste*, calls Twitter “Twater,” and *Return of Kings*, a popular blog within the manosphere community, frequently publishes articles arguing that Twitter’s censorship of conservative personalities such as Milo Yiannopoulos will lead to its eventual bankruptcy. Many members of the community have a presence on both Twitter and Gab, a less restrictive Twitter clone, and some factions of the community have relocated from the barely policed news aggregator Reddit to its even less restrictive counterpart Voat. Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook (and my older brother), is frequently mocked as “Mark Cuckerberg” or “Zuck the Cuck,” epithets based on the term *cuck*, a particularly significant form of insult within the Red Pill derived from the term *cuckold*.

I understand what it feels like to have an ambivalent relationship with social media. I moved to Silicon Valley in 2012, when my husband accepted a job at a social media marketing company that was later acquired by Google. All three of my siblings have worked in social media, and so have many people in my social circle. Because

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I know so many people working in the technology industry, I hear a great deal about the power of technology to connect the world and build communities. But when people with similar interests are connected, some of the strengthened communities will inevitably be those bound by shared hatreds and prejudices. The communities studied in this book are a perfect example. Social media has led to an unprecedented democratization of information, but it has also created the opportunity for men with antifeminist ideas to broadcast their views to more people than ever before—and to spread conspiracy theories, lies, and misinformation. Social media has elevated misogyny to entirely new levels of violence and virulence.

Anyone today who does not intend to become a digital hermit is guaranteed to encounter these men online. Those inevitable encounters will be less traumatic and shocking to those who are prepared and able to recognize the strategies they use to attack their targets—including how they use Greek and Roman antiquity to bolster their credibility.

The Red Pill community is by no means unique in its attraction to ancient Greece and Rome. Political and social movements have long appropriated the history, literature, and myth of the ancient world to their advantage. Borrowing the symbols of these cultures, as the Nazi Party did in the 1940s, can be a powerful declaration that you are the inheritor of Western culture and civilization.² The men of the Red Pill have adapted this strategy for the digital age. They have turned the ancient world into a meme: an image of an ancient statue or monument becomes an endlessly replicable and malleable shorthand for projecting their ideology and sending it into the world.

Classics is not the only field of inquiry these men use to justify their views. They are particularly interested in the histories of Great Britain, Germany, and Russia, especially the medieval period, and they also compose and cite articles about evolutionary psychology, philosophy, biology, and economics. The Greek and Roman Classics,

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nonetheless, hold particular cultural significance for them. By turning frequently to authors such as Marcus Aurelius and Ovid, they attempt to perpetuate the idea that white men are the guardians of intellectual authority, especially when such authority is perceived to be under threat from women and people of color. They claim that the ancient world and, by extension, the study of the ancient world are under attack by the “politically correct establishment” and “social justice warriors” in US classrooms. As colleges move to replace some of the dead white men of the literary canon with writers who are not dead, not white, and not men, the living white men of the Red Pill have appeared as the self-appointed guardians and defenders of the cultural legacy of Western civilization.

Red Pill engagement with the Classics would be concerning even if it were simply a matter of a few internet trolls writing for an audience of a few hundred thousand more internet trolls. These men, no matter how small their numbers, have a disproportionately loud presence in the online discourse about sex and gender, and it would be necessary to explore how they use antiquity to construct their authority. Unfortunately, however, the far-right abuse of Classics extends beyond just a few online publications and subreddits.

The election of President Donald Trump in 2016 empowered these online communities to be even more outspoken about their ideology. As one manosphere thought-leader wrote, “His presence [in office] automatically legitimizes masculine behaviors that were previously labeled sexist and misogynist”—but, of even greater concern, it also put a few men who share those ideas into positions of power near the president.³ Steve Bannon, the former White House chief strategist and, earlier, the executive chair of the far-right website *Breitbart News* (which he once famously called “the platform for the Alt-Right”), is a lover of the Classics; one screenwriter who worked with Bannon—on a hip-hop version of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*—recalls that “he was always quoting [Marcus] Aurelius.”⁴ And Michael Anton, a national security official in the Trump

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administration, wrote essays in *The Claremont Review* and other websites during the election under the pseudonym Publius Decius Mus, after a fourth-century BCE Roman consul.⁵ Those essays would end up providing an intellectual foundation for Trumpism, which Anton defined in his essay “The Flight 93 Election” as “secure borders, economic nationalism, and America-first foreign policy.”⁶ Those who frequent Red Pill message boards have embraced these two men as heroes.

It would be an exaggeration to say that the men of the Red Pill community are writing national policy. However, on some level, they seem to *believe* they are influencing policy, and that belief has empowered them. Their numbers are also swelling: as of this writing, the subreddit r/theredpill has over 230,000 subscribers, up from 138,000 at the beginning of 2016. The members of this growing community are more confident than ever that their gender- and race-based politics are validated both by science and by the Western tradition, and they believe that highly placed members of the Trump administration agree with them.

This book is about how the men of the Red Pill use the literature and history of ancient Greece and Rome to promote patriarchal and white supremacist ideology. My goal is to lay bare the mechanics of this appropriation: to show how classical antiquity informs the Red Pill worldview and how these men weaponize Greece and Rome in service of their agenda. Anybody who has an interest in the Classics or social justice should not ignore this trend, which has the potential to reshape what ancient Greece and Rome mean in the twenty-first century while simultaneously promoting dangerous and discriminatory views about gender and race.

I have decided to focus primarily on the gender politics rather than the racial politics of Red Pill communities for two reasons.

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First, the gender politics are generally more coherent throughout the Red Pill, with a shared interest in policing the sexuality and reproduction of young women (particularly young white women), whereas outright white supremacy is a more hotly contested issue within the community.⁷ Second, the use of the ancient world to understand gender and sex is bidirectional: the men of the manosphere see their own misogyny reflected back at them, theorized, and celebrated in ancient literature. White supremacy is less easy to retroject onto the ancient world, which had no meaningful concept of biological race, as many scholars have shown.⁸ But although whiteness is not a meaningful concept to apply to antiquity, that conceptual lacuna has not stopped the Alt-Right from using ancient Greece and Rome to fabricate a cohesive transhistorical “white” identity and a continuity of “European” or “Western” civilization for themselves. It has, however, kept them from using ancient literature to help them theorize whiteness, as the manosphere has done with masculinity, and thus their discourse about ancient race is necessarily more superficial.⁹

This book is written for people who have an interest in Classics but have not studied it extensively. It does not, therefore, contain an extensive social history about the lives of women in ancient Greece and Rome. I provide context for the ancient texts and historical figures under discussion throughout, as well as some basic background in Chapter 4 on sexual violence in the ancient world. For readers interested in learning more about women in antiquity, I offer suggestions for further reading in the endnotes. I also do not focus on the history of aggrieved masculinity in America, as social historians such as Michael Kimmel have done. The problems faced by men in America—the problems the Red Pill community points to as proof that we live in a gynocentric society—have deep historical roots; however, the Red Pill represents a new, dangerous phase of American masculinity in the internet age.¹⁰

Introduction

Although my focus in this book is on the use of classical antiquity in the Red Pill community, this relatively narrow topic can provide a path into a deeper understanding of the Red Pill community as a whole. In researching this book, I spent years reading articles, posts, and comment sections on Red Pill websites large and small, on a range of topics from professional success to personal fitness to relationship advice. I have drawn my examples primarily from the most read sites and most influential thought leaders within the Red Pill—the writers with many followers and the articles with many comments.

The first chapter of this book describes the various factions within the Red Pill in greater detail and explains why the ancient world holds such appeal for them. Despite the movement's apparent disorganization and undertheorized positions, I argue that we would be wise to pay attention to them rather than dismissing them as an impotent fringe movement. The need to take the Red Pill seriously is especially urgent for feminists who use the internet and social media for personal and professional communications. As soon as a woman self-identifies online as a feminist, she is likely to find herself in a hailstorm of abusive tweets and emails from the men who frequent Red Pill websites. Understanding their ideology and tactics for online intimidation can help lessen the impact of that abuse.

In Chapter 2, I explore the fascination with ancient Stoicism displayed on Red Pill websites, which frequently discuss Stoic ideas and texts. In particular, writers use Stoicism to justify their belief that women and people of color are not just angrier and more emotional than men, but morally inferior as well. The growing community of Stoicism enthusiasts outside of the Red Pill, I argue, should not simply dismiss this use of the philosophy; instead, it should seek to understand how Stoicism's tenets can lend themselves to the perpetuation of systemic injustice.

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Chapter 3 examines one particular faction of the manosphere: the community of pickup artists who claim the Roman poet Ovid as the first person to write a seduction manual. The *Ars Amatoria*, written over two thousand years ago, is a fascinating and contradictory work that has puzzled Latin scholars with its playful tone and apparent justifications for sexual assault. Reading Ovid alongside the advice of pickup artists offers us insight into seduction methodology in both ancient and modern times: both rely on the ideas that women's boundaries are permeable and consent is a flexible concept.

While the third chapter focuses on the sexual politics of the Red Pill in the contemporary world, the fourth and final chapter addresses how ancient literature informs their *aspirational* sexual politics: how, in their ideal world, men and women would interact. This ideal patriarchy draws heavily on ancient models of marriage and family to promote a world in which women have no decision-making power outside of the home. This chapter also addresses the Red Pill fixation with false rape allegations, one of the most popular topics on many Red Pill fora and their ultimate proof that we live in a society where women have more privilege than men. I use the myth of Phaedra and Hippolytus, an ancient example of a false allegation with disastrous consequences, to show that, because there was anxiety about false allegations in the deeply patriarchal ancient world as well, the Red Pill use of the trope is actually a tool for misdirection. These men not only wish to prevent false allegations from occurring; they also wish to resurrect a world where female consent to sexual activity is as negligible a concern as it was in the ancient world.

As Angela Nagle argues in her 2017 book *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*, far-right internet subcultures are powered by a politics of transgression.¹¹ It is perhaps ironic that the ancient Greek and

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Roman Classics, with all of their considerable, well-recognized cultural capital, have been embraced so vocally by a fundamentally countercultural movement. The men of the Red Pill use their vision of an idealized version of Western civilization and its past to critique our own society and inspire change, and they often rhetorically position this strategy as the natural, obvious way to understand what classical antiquity means in the present day. But by analyzing and deconstructing this Red Pill enthusiasm for ancient Greece and Rome, I hope to articulate a different vision for a feminist, radical place that classical antiquity can occupy in contemporary political discourse.

As classical scholars have become aware of the Far Right's appropriation of antiquity, some have responded by suggesting that we should focus on pointing out how inexpert these appropriations tend to be and how little actual knowledge of ancient Greece and Rome they reveal.¹² But while Red Pill references to the Classics are often inaccurate, confounding, or lacking in nuance, they can be dangerous nevertheless. Even the most elementary errors still leverage the ancient world to promote reactionary ideas about gender and race. I do not, therefore, devote too much energy to correcting flawed Red Pill classical interpretations. I do occasionally point out the most blatant errors in order to avoid perpetuating misinformation about the classical world, but identifying such errors is far from an end in itself. By focusing on the Red Pill community's flawed understanding of ancient Greece and Rome, scholars may miss opportunities to engage with the deeper ideological purpose of classical appropriation.

Marcus Aurelius, one of the Red Pill community's favorite ancient writers, once wrote, "It's ridiculous to try to escape other

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people's flaws and not your own—to try the impossible rather than the possible” (*Meditations* 7.71). We cannot stop these men from using and abusing the history and literature of the ancient world in service of a patriarchal, white nationalist agenda. But by revealing how this self-mythologizing works, we can develop strategies for counteracting its pernicious influence.

ARMS AND THE MANOSPHERE

You may not have heard of the manosphere or the Red Pill before reading this book. If, however, you spend any time on the internet, you probably know the men who constitute these far-right, antifeminist online groups. These men are the ones coordinating attacks to send death and rape threats to outspoken feminists. They are a significant part of why the comments section in many online mainstream media articles is nearly unreadable. They believe it is their right and duty to invade feminist spaces. They are convinced that sexism—attitudes and behavior that foster discrimination against women and perpetuate gender-based stereotypes—is really a form of enlightenment and that they are the only logical people on the internet. Since some of these men are skilled at deploying emotional abuse tactics, they succeed surprisingly often at convincing people that their worldview has a rational basis.

These online communities connect a large group of cisgender men—that is, men whose identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth—united by the belief that masculine cisgender men are discriminated against by our feminized (“gynocentric”) society and must support each other. A few self-reported surveys within the community suggest that more than three quarters of these men are white, heterosexual, politically conservative, have no strong religious affiliation, and are between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five.¹ Although there are similar men’s movements in other countries, as well as similar far-right nationalist groups, these

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men are resolutely focused on the concerns of men in the United States.²

Instead of seeing themselves as part of the nation's most affluent and powerful demographic, the predominantly white heterosexual men of the Red Pill believe they need solidarity with each other because the idea of white male supremacy is an illusion maintained to ensure they remain oppressed. Although they concede that many of the most powerful people in the world are men—and are happy to use that as evidence that men are intellectually superior and more naturally suited to dominance and leadership than women are—they believe that the “myth of male privilege” is a manifestation of “the apex fallacy”: the tendency to judge the status of an entire group based on a few outstanding members. Just as liberals would argue that the election of a black President does not mean racism is no longer a concern, these men argue that the fact that every commander-in-chief of the United States has been male does not signify that men are not in a relatively disadvantaged position in our society.

Some of their evidence that men in the United States are in unfavorable circumstances is compelling. Men are more likely than women to be victims of violence. Men represent more than 90 percent of the prison inmate population. In this country, and in almost every developed nation across the world, men commit suicide at a rate almost three times that of women. The vast majority of people killed in the workplace are men. Female students outnumber male students in primary, secondary, and college classes. And, unlike men, women are almost never falsely accused of rape or forced to pay child support for children over whom they have no parental rights.

If the men on Red Pill message boards truly focused on finding solutions to these problems or understanding their complex underlying causes, I would not have written this book. Unfortunately, instead of looking for answers, they prefer to “fight the cultural narrative.” According to the Red Pill, the rise of feminism and

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progressivism is both the cause of the problems plaguing men and, through the “cultural narrative” they generate, the reason those problems are not taken seriously. They “fight” this narrative by looking for scapegoats: corporate America, liberals, immigrants, and—most of all—women, whom they harass and abuse both on-line and in person. The Red Pill community appears to embody toxic masculinity, which psychiatrist Terry Kupers, an expert on mental health in prisons, defines as “the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence.”³

Indeed, the concept of an overarching narrative is central to how they construct their identity. Many men in the Red Pill describe a conversion process of discovering how unfair the world truly is to men, often called “swallowing the red pill”—a reference to the famous scene in the film *The Matrix* (1999) in which Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) offers Neo (Keanu Reeves) a choice to return to blissful ignorance or learn the truth about their reality. Morpheus tells Neo, “You take the blue pill—the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill—you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes. Remember: all I’m offering is the truth.”⁴ One of the largest fora for the men studied in this book is a community called “The Red Pill” (often shortened to TRP) on Reddit. As of this writing, the subreddit *r/theredpill* has over 230,000 members and *r/mensrights* over 160,000, although it is safe to guess that many users subscribe to both subreddits. There are also dozens of related subreddits, such as *r/pussyassdenied*, a community of 160,000 subscribers dedicated to promoting what they perceive as true gender equality by dismantling “female privilege.”

It has been suggested to me that I too might want to create my own terminology for the Red Pill factions in this book rather than use the many difficult-to-keep-track-of acronyms and terms they adopt as their identity.⁵ There are obvious advantages to this tactic.

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It would have allowed me to be clearer and more systematic, since the emic terms are both confusing and plentiful. It would also avoid the risk of appearing to validate or normalize these groups by accepting them on their own terms—an argument many use when maintaining that the group calling itself the Alt-Right should instead be referred to as neo-Nazis or white nationalists. I have chosen to use primarily the internally approved self-designations, although I provide a glossary in the back of the book to help the reader keep track of the many acronyms that populate the Red Pill, because in this case, emic terminology highlights how these men construct online identities through ideology and community.⁶ Being part of the Alt-Right is as much about being part of a specific movement and moment as it is about a philosophical alignment with white supremacy.⁷ Identifying these movements and moments by the terms they themselves use is a crucial part of understanding why the Red Pill community resonates with so many men.

In this chapter, I will map out the contours of the Red Pill community and its various subgroups. By identifying what each of these internal factions is trying to achieve and how they operate, we can better understand why they feel compelled to position themselves as the inheritors of the classical tradition and how the ancient world validates one of their most cherished, deeply held beliefs: that all women throughout history share distinct, immutable qualities that make them promiscuous, deceitful, and manipulative.

Ingredients in the Red Pill

While trolls have been part of the internet landscape for decades, the Red Pill community as it exists today seems to have coalesced around 2012. It began as a group of websites with a self-conscious focus on men's issues, including the subreddit founded in 2012 by Robert Fisher—later a Republican politician—called *r/theredpill*.⁸ Internet sexism predates that period, but the Red Pill represents a

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new phase in online misogyny. Its members not only mock and belittle women; they also believe that in our society, men are oppressed by women. Early Red Pill blogs and fora, including the currently defunct site The Spearhead, started as places for like-minded men to discuss the problems men face in the United States today—false rape allegations, fathers’ rights, the unfairness of the dating market. Within a few years, however, the community began to split into distinct, adversarial units.

Because the Red Pill is dominated by men and often acts as a woman-free “safe space,” one of the terms used to describe it is the *manosphere*, a play on the word *blogosphere*. Those who write about digital culture have used this designation in the past five years or so to signify a loose network of online fora, websites, and social media accounts connected by little other than a shared hatred of feminism. Some of the men who write for these sites self-identify as part of the manosphere, and the term is widely used on the popular blog *Return of Kings*, but others within the community use the term only with irony (and, typically, quotation marks). The term *manosphere* encompasses several of the subgroups mentioned below that focus primarily on gender and sex, and my focus throughout the book will be on the men in these communities. Other groups mentioned are more strongly motivated by concerns of race and ethnicity, and so the term *manosphere* may not apply to them, even though these groups are still vocally antifeminist and deeply concerned with policing female—particularly white female—behavior.

The term *men’s rights activists* (MRAs) is sometimes used synecdochically to describe all the members of the manosphere, but that usage is not quite accurate. Men’s rights activists are only one subset of a highly fragmented community whose factions can be extremely hostile to each other. Paul Elam, a sixty-year-old former substance-abuse counselor and one of the most visible members of the community, has denied that the manosphere as a collective group exists at all: “The very expression, man-o-sphere, implicitly paints an

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image of connectivity; of shared purpose and identity. Aside from distaste for feminism, which anyone capable of critical thought will share, there is no real or abiding connection; no universality or even commonality, and that lacking manifests in how we tear ourselves, and each other, down, and always have.”⁹ The deliberate understatement “distaste for feminism” masks the vehemently antifeminist ideology that unites the manosphere’s hundreds of thousands of members, but Elam’s assessment of the division within the community is accurate.

The primary goal of men’s rights activists is the elimination of laws and social norms that they see as fundamentally oppressive to men. These include divorce, child support, and custody laws; routine male circumcision, which they believe is genital mutilation; and the extension of default credibility to women who claim to have been sexually assaulted. Because dismantling oppressive social norms is also a feminist concern, and because these men tend to use slightly less inflammatory rhetoric than other Red Pill subgroups, they have become the most mainstream segment of the community. Their preferred term for themselves is actually not *men’s rights activists*, a term often used in a derogatory manner by critics, but rather *men’s human rights advocates (MHRAs)*, and they think of themselves as humanists or egalitarians. Their main internet hub is the website *A Voice for Men*, founded by Elam. Elam’s experiences with multiple divorces and child support payments for a daughter whose paternity he doubted opened his eyes to how unfairly fathers are supposedly treated. The news website *Vox* wrote of him, “If men’s rights activism has a Gloria Steinem, a kind of central activist figurehead, it is Paul Elam.”¹⁰ The comparison between Elam and Steinem hints at a larger similarity between feminism and “meninism”: like feminists, the men of the manosphere identify structural modes of gender-based discrimination, but their causal explanations differ from feminist interpretations. For example, they see custody laws as overwhelmingly unfair to men because we live in a gynocentric society, while feminists see custody laws as

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reflecting a deeper problem of gender normativity and biological essentialism that forces women to perform the overwhelming majority of childcare duties.¹¹

The men's human rights movement (MHRM) is more inclusive than the rest of the manosphere. Many other factions of the manosphere are male-only spaces, but MHRAs embrace and provide a platform for anyone who supports the mission of identifying and combating misandry, including women and gay men.¹² Women who support the movement are sometimes known within the community as *honey badgers* or *feMRAs*, and they produce a significant portion of the content on A Voice for Men.¹³ As far as racial diversity is concerned, in 2015 A Voice for Men did a reader survey and found that 76 percent of respondents identified their race as Caucasian—lower than the manosphere as a whole, but still well above the national average.¹⁴

The factions within the Red Pill are often hostile to each other, but the animosity between the MHRM and the pickup artist (PUA) community is particularly acute. Pickup artists focus their energy on perfecting techniques for seducing women. To them, the art of seduction is about far more than knowing a few good opening lines. They believe the pickup artist understands both the true nature of women and how they are conditioned to act by society, and that he can exploit that knowledge to make himself attractive to them. This quality is known as *having game*. Members of the men's rights movement see pickup artists as participating in and contributing to gynocentrism; by placing so much value on women as sex objects, they inadvertently afford women power over men. Pickup artists, meanwhile, believe that sexual success is a key element of being a true alpha male, and they believe those in the men's rights movement channel their sexual frustration into social activism because they are unable to convince women to sleep with them.

The seduction community's online presence is spread over several individual blogs run by successful pickup artists with dedicated followers and large internet fora for sharing tips and posting "field

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