**‘I mean, in my opinion, I have it the worst, because I am white. I am male. I am heterosexual’: questioning the inclusivity of reconfigured hegemonic masculinities in a UK student online culture**

### **Abstract**

While early explorations of hegemonic masculinity theory (Connell, 1987), focused on the hierarchical relationship between hegemonic masculinities and non-hegemonic gendered identities, others have critiqued this dualistic framework arguing that it does not explore the interconnections and relationships between these social groups (Demetriou, 2001). In this paper, we critically examine how these gendered hierarchies and relations manifest between students at a university in North West England in and through forms of online harassment, using data collected from a large-scale study (N = 810) conducted in this institutional context. Key findings indicate that despite claims that young masculinities are becoming more ‘inclusive’ of other gendered identities (Anderson and McCormack, 2018), some subjects subordinate them in and through gendered and sexualized forms of online harassment or are complicit in these practices. Male respondents are more likely than any other gendered group to use ‘free speech’ discourses to legitimate harassment directed at transgendered and cis-female subjects. Some white, heterosexual males, who occupy a dominant position in Britain’s gendered and racial social order, appropriate discourses historically used by non-hegemonic subjects to challenge power inequities, including those of identity politics, to claim they are ‘victims’ within this society. We argue that these new emerging forms of reconfigured hegemonic masculinity, which can mask patriarchal hierarchies, complicate claims young masculinities are more inclusive. We suggest more research is needed to better understand these practices, their relationship to alt-right influencers and men’s rights activists, and their implications for digital hegemonic masculinities at the local level of UK university campuses.

Key words: hegemonic masculinity, feminism, transphobia, online harassment, , inclusive masculinity

### **Introduction**

In recent years, there have been debates about the relationship between long-established gendered hierarchies,young men, and their masculinised practices on university campuses in Anglo-American societies. Anderson (2009) argues that forms of ‘orthodox’ masculinity, which asserts itself by dominating and subordinating women and other non-hegemonic gendered subjects, including gay men, have now lost their dominance in university settings in the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States. He claims that ‘orthodox’ masculinity is now seen as retrograde and undesirable by young men who have constructed a form of masculinity that is socially inclusive, stating that ‘inclusive masculinities are increasingly dominating university settings, and that the homophobia, misogyny, violence and homosocial separation associated with orthodox masculinity is increasingly unfashionable’ (Anderson, 2009, p. 153). In recent years, others have elaborated on Anderson’s theory of inclusive masculinity, to argue that toxic social practices associated with hegemonic forms of masculinity (Connell, 1987), which include sexism, misogyny and homophobia, no longer dominate social spaces, including schools (McCormack and Anderson, 2010), workplaces (Roberts, 2013) and university campuses (McCormack, 2012).

However, other studies have revealed that discriminatory practices, such as sexism, misogyny and transphobia, continue to dominate UK universities (Stonewall, 2018; NUS, 2014; UUK, 2016). Storrie and Rohleder (2018) found that transgender students in UK universities often encountered stigma and discrimination in these institutional contexts. Recent research indicates that women in UK universities were more likely to experience unwanted advances or forms of sexual harassment than men; 49% of women said they had been touched inappropriately compared to 3% of men (Brook, 2019). In recent years, there have been high-profile cases of online sexual harassment in UK universities, including one where male students were found to be members of a misogynistic and sexually abusive group chat that called for female students on the university campus to be raped (The Guardian, 2019).

However, UK university student’s experiences of, and attitudes to, gendered and sexualised forms of online harassment, including those that target women, remain under-researched (Myers and Cowie, 2017; Anderson and McCormack, 2018). There is little locally specific statistical data about the prevalence of online gendered and sexual harassment among students in UK universities. In addition, prevalence statistics that consider any other gender, other than male and female, are scarce. Storrie and Rodleder (2018) have called for further research to understand the experiences of transgender students at UK universities and their peer’s attitudes to discriminatory practices that target this demographic. To address these gaps, this paper draws on empirical data from a large-scale study (N = 810) conducted on a university campus in North West England. It critically examines and theorises the locally specific way gendered hierarchies and relations operate in student’s peer-to-peer interactions in, and through, gendered and sexualized forms of online harassment, with a particular focus on the role that hegemonic masculinities play within these contexts. In the following, we provide a brief overview of hegemonic masculinity theory, including critiques of its conceptual frameworks, to highlight our key theoretical focus for the paper.

#### Hegemonic masculinity theory

Connell’s (1987) theory of hegemonic masculinity critically examines how gendered power systems and inequalities in patriarchal societies are socially produced. Within this theoretical framework, gender is conceptualised not as a predetermined or natural fact, but as a system of power that is produced through a hierarchical gendered order; an ‘historically constructed pattern of power relations between men and women and definitions of femininity and masculinity’ (Connell,1987, pp. 98–99). This historically constructed pattern of power relations position male subjects, who are perceived to embody hegemonic forms of masculinity, at the top of a gendered hierarchy, which enables them to maintain a collectively dominant social position over non-hegemonic gendered identities, including females. Connell ([1995] 2005, p. 77) indicates that hegemonic masculinity is produced through a ‘configuration of gender practice’. Configurations of gender practice work to continually produce and reproduce gender hierarchies and relations in the social interactions, relationships and practices of everyday life.

These configurations of gender practices enact and reify culturally dominant forms of masculinity, which are situationally, geographically and temporally specific, while subordinating females and devaluing what is regarded as feminine (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 848) note ‘[g]ender is always relational, and patterns of masculinity are socially defined in contradistinction from some model (whether real or imaginary) of femininity’. Hegemonic masculinity is produced in these relational practices, which position masculinised gendered groups by subordinating those identified as female.For instance, these gendered hierarchies can operate in and through social practices, such as subordinating and sexually objectifying women. However,while early explorations of hegemonic masculinity theory focused on the hierarchical relationship between males and females, these power relations have often been neglected in further study (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

Male subjects are not uniformly positioned in this gendered hierarchy. Connell (1987) posits four ways in which men are differently positioned within it: hegemonic, complicit, subordinated, and marginalized. The first position ‘hegemonic’ refers to a culturally dominant form or accepted male ideal. In contemporary Anglo-American societies, the most culturally dominant and idealized construction of masculinity is white, heterosexual, male, middle-class, physically and socially powerful (cf. Connell 1987; Kimmel, 2017). Individual male subjects inscribed within these social contexts hierarchically rank themselves and others in relation to this ‘ideal type’.

A ‘complicit’ masculinity is performed by men who may not explicitly enact its practices, but yet do not challenge them; ‘marginalised’ masculinities describe those men who cannot access or attain the culturally dominant and idealised constructions of hegemonic masculinity, but may still subscribe to and/or enact its practices. ‘Subordinated’ masculinities are occupied by male subjects who are positioned at the bottom of the gender hierarchy, including gay men, as their same sex attraction does not conform to the heterosexual practices associated with hegemonic masculinity. Male subjects have differential access to power and privilege within this gendered order, which is often structured by their social demarcations, including their race, ethnicity and sexuality. However, while male subjects have differential access to power and privilege within hegemonic masculinity’s gendered order, they all benefit in some way from it by virtue of their gendered identity; what Connell ([1995] 2005, p. 79) refers to as the ‘patriarchal dividend’.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity has been widely used and debated, and over the years refined by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), who have acknowledged that aspects of this theoretical framework require further development, including the mechanics of the gender hierarchy, specifically the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and femininity. In addition, others have critiqued aspects of this theory, including Demetriou (2001) who has argued that the dualistic paradigm of hegemonic and non-hegemonic gendered identities is poorly theorised and does not account for the relations and interconnections between these forms.

Demetriou (2001) developed the concept of ‘dialectical pragmatism’ to address this issue by theorizing how hegemonic masculinities appropriate elements of subordinated and marginalized gendered identities to maintain patriarchal gendered systems of power. He argues that aspects of subordinate gendered groups can be integrated into the dominant group as part of ‘a constant process of negotiation, translation, hybridization, and reconfiguration’ (p. 355). He points out that these processes often change in a very deceptive way to conceal gendered systems of power ‘through the transformation of what appears counter-hegemonic and progressive into an instrument of backwardness and patriarchal reproduction’ (p. 355), which presents a non-dualistic understanding of masculine power and practice. Within these contexts, dominant masculinity does not simply adapt to changing historical conditions (Connell 1987; 1995), but rather is ‘capable of reconfiguring itself and adapting to the specificities of new historical conjunctures’ (Demetriou 2001, 355).

In this paper, we draw on these theoretical frameworks to critically examine how dominant forms of masculinity reproduce and conceal themselves by reconfiguring and adapting to the specificities of a particular social context, namely online interactions between university students in contemporary England. We draw on empirical data taken from a larger study, which critically examined student’s experiences of, and attitudes to online harassment, including gendered and sexualised forms, in their digitized peer-to-peer interactions on a university campus. A key theoretical aim of this analysis, is to explore what the data can tell us about the mechanics of gender hierarchies (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) and the relationship and interconnections between hegemonic masculinities and non-hegemonic gender identities in these online spaces. Informed by Couldry’s (2012) approach to media sociology, we seek to critically examine how gendered social processes are ‘enacted through media-related practices’ (p. 44), particularly those in online spaces. By so doing, we seek to use our key research findings to empirically and theoretically build on understandings of how dominant forms of masculinity operate and conceal themselves in digitised spaces.

### **Research methodology**

To address these research concerns, a mixed methodology was employed, which combined an online survey with in-depth interviews to collect relevant data from students on a university campus in the North-West of England, the name of which we do not disclose to give respondents an added layer of anonymity. In the survey, we collected data from respondents about their perceptions, experiences of, and attitudes to online harassment in their peer-to-peer interactions on the university campus. Within the context of the survey, online harassment was defined ‘as threats or other offensive *unwanted* behaviours targeted directly at *others* through new technology channels (e.g. Internet, text messaging) or posted online for others to see *that is likely to cause them harm, unintentionally or otherwise*’ (Jones et. al. (2013, p. 54; our adaption in italics). Thus, we recognise the multiple forms online harassment can take, which include hate speech based on gender or minority group identity, spreading malicious rumours, sending abusive direct messages and unsolicited sexual images.

The survey began by asking respondents, who were all aged over 18 years, to provide their demographic characteristics. Survey respondents were asked to respond to various scenarios representing different forms of online harassment in ways that aimed to determine their perceived prevalence between students on the university campus. Thereafter, the survey measured respondent’s attitudes to reporting different forms of online harassment observed and/or experienced in their peer groups. The online survey was sent to 8000 students, who were all aged 18 years or over, with a return sample of 795 students. The sample was representative of the student population with a confidence limit of 95% and confidence interval of 4.

In-depth interviews were conducted with students (n = 15) who had experienced and/or observed online harassment in their peer groups, which provided rich data about their subjective perceptions of, and attitudes to these practices. Research participants were from diverse social backgrounds and included students studying at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. Empirical data emerging from the mixed research methodology, was analysed thematically, using codes generated from the relevant literature and those that emerged during the research process. All research data was collected and analysed from May 2018 to March 2019.

As researchers, we are grounded in feminist and queer approaches to analysing social science data. However, we do not claim to represent the views of all the communities we encountered in this research, but instead have sought to ensure that a diversity of voices of those we engaged with, can be heard. In what follows, we focus on presenting key research findings that are relevant to the gendered and sexualised nature of online harassment and consider what this data can tell us about how gendered hierarchies and relations operate in digitised interactions between students on a university campus and the various ways hegemonic masculinity functions in these digitised spaces. This data is organised under the following themes: the gendered nature of online harassment; women and online sexual harassment; non-consensual sharing of sexual images; attitudes to reporting online gendered harassment; online harassment and freedom of speech; freedom of speech as a masculinised discourse; and male victimhood.

#### The gendered nature of online harassment

Our findings indicate that online harassment disproportionately affects some gendered groups more than others. 7.9% more female respondents, than male, reported that they have experienced online harassment in interactions with their student peers (n = 620). 25.9%% of female respondents reported that they have personally experienced online harassment and 7.1% thought they may have. This compares to 18% of male respondents who report that they have experienced online harassment and 3.3% who think they may have. In addition, our data shows that a higher number of respondents identifying as transgender or non-binary gender (n = 28), reported that they have personally experienced online harassment, than those identifying as male or female. Nearly two thirds of respondents identifying as transgender or non-binary gender (70.9%), report that they have experienced online harassment (54.2%) or may have been subjected to it (16.7%) (p = 0.000).[[1]](#footnote-1)

While some have indicated that there is a lack of consensus about what gendered groups are most affected by online harassment in student populations (Zalaquett and Chatters, 2014), key findings in this study indicate that non-hegemonic gendered groups, namely those who identify as women and transgender, are more likely to experience online harassment in their peer-to-peer interactions on the university campus. Thus, in these digitised spaces, self-identified male respondents are less likely to be subjected to online harassment. These differences suggest that broader gendered power systems are being reproduced in these contexts. Indeed, previous UK based research shows non-hegemonic social groups, including women and transgender people, are more likely to be subjected to harassment on university campuses than men (Stonewall, 2018; NUS, 2010). We will now discuss how these gendered forms of harassment in student’s online interactions manifest in and through reiterative social practices, including online sexual harassment, and the demographic groups most affected by these practices.

*Women and online sexual harassment*

Our survey findings indicate that unwanted sexualisation, that is, when a person receives unwanted sexual messages, images and requests, is perceived to be a common practice between students, and women are more likely to be the target of this type of sexual harassment. These findings are based on responses to online scenarios representing different forms of online sexual harassment, including sexual ‘jokes’. For example, when presented with an online scenario that described a student posting a joke with a sexual innuendo about a female student, which made them feel uncomfortable, 4.16% of all respondents to this scenario (n = 481) reported that they had experienced this, 9.77% had observed this, 8.73% knew of a peer who had experienced this and 15.80% had heard of this happening to a fellow student[[2]](#footnote-2).

When presented with a similar scenario that described a student posting a joke with a sexual innuendo about a male student, only 2.48% of respondents (n = 484) reported that they had experienced this type of harassment, while 4.96% had observed it, 4.55% had heard of it happening, 10.75% knew of it happening in their peer interactions. These findings indicate that respondents are more likely to personally experience, observe, know or hear of fellow female students being subjected to sexual ‘jokes’ that involve sexual innuendos, than male students, within this online student community.

We were able to corroborate these findings and explore them in greater depth, through qualitative data. In interviews with young female students (aged between 18 – 25), they often spoke about receiving comments with sexual innuendos and being subjected to unwanted sexualisation, in their digitised interactions. In the following interview extract, a young woman describes receiving unwanted sexual comments from men she does not know on social media in response to photographs she posted of herself online, which are not sexually suggestive, provocative or explicit:

I’ve had people post comments about photos I’ve posted…and they’ve said things like …oh, amazing tits and I don’t know who they are…and it sort of ruins that picture…so it was just a picture I posted of me and my dog (Interviewee: white, English, female, heterosexual)

In this extract, this participant speaks about receiving unwanted comments about her body, which objectify her using sexually lewd language about her body parts, namely her breasts ‘amazing tits’ – reducing her to a sexed ‘object’ (Powell & Henry, 2017, p. 63). Other female participants spoke about receiving similar unwanted sexualized comments from men when they post non-sexual photos of themselves online, such as ‘nice boobs’, ‘great rack’ and ‘hot body’, which were often followed by requests to meet up for sex.

Studies have critically examined how the specific features or affordances of online technologies, reify and facilitate the sexual objectification of women by men. For instance, Rodriquez and Hernandez (2018) critically examine how online technologies enable young men across the United States to create ‘virtual linkages’ (p. 1) that enable them to collectively participate in the sexual objectification of women, which involves making ‘lewd and sexual’ comments about them (p. 6). Men who engage in the sexual objectification of women in online spaces, including those in this study, are enacting ‘hegemonic masculinity’ – a gendered system of power that dominates and subordinates women, tacitly or otherwise (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

#### Non-consensual sharing of sexual imagery

This study has also found that gendered power dynamics operate in and through reiterative visual practices, which include the non-consensual sharing of sexual imagery in respondent’s peer-to-peer online interactions. These findings emerged from our qualitative interviews and campus wide survey. For example, when presented with an online scenario which described a student posting images, without permission, of a fellow student involved in sexual activity, 1.65% of all respondents (n = 483), indicated that they had experienced this practice, 4.55% knew of a peer who had experienced it, 6.21% had observed it, 10% reported that they had heard about it happening to a fellow student.

The non-consensual sharing of sexual imagery was also a dominant theme in our qualitative interviews with young female students*.* One female participant described receiving a ‘dick pic’ when she posted a non-sexual image of herself online:

I post pictures of my cats on *Instagram* and stuff and you’ll get a message from someone with an explicit picture from guys of their privates…..and I never asked for that (Interviewee: white, English, female)

In this extract, the female respondent clearly indicates that the sexually explicit ‘picture’ or photograph she received is unsolicited. She states, ‘I’ve never asked for that’, which suggests she recognises this practice as a form of harassment and holds the sender accountable for his actions. Paasonen et. al. (2019, p. 2) considers unsolicited dick pics or ‘harassing dicks’ as ‘instruments for phallic power’ in young people’s heterosexual exchanges, which can have adverse effects on those subjected to them, including feelings of horror, fear and disgust (see also Waling & Pym, 2017). Within these intersubjective contexts, unsolicited ‘dick pics’ can be recognised as practices that work to reify hegemonic masculinity in digitised spaces, by enabling males, whether intentionally or not, to exert their gendered and sexual dominance over young females, which negatively impacts on them.

Research suggests young men often share naked selfies to seek feelings of empowerment or explore risk-taking (Hart, 2017) and those who send unsolicited photos of their penis to females often do not view these practices as harassment, but rather hope that they will elicit sexual interest or at least reciprocal photo exchange (Salter, 2016). Female participants in this study indicated that they had become accustomed to unknown male online users, who send them unsolicited ‘dick pics’, asking them to ‘send nudes’, that is, photographs of themselves partially or fully clothed. None of these participants indicated that they agreed to do this and they were acutely aware of how these images could be used if they did share them with their young male peers, such as being shared in masculinized spaces on the university campus and beyond, without their consent.

The practice by which young males in the UK solicit and share sexual images of females in digital spaces can start at school level. Ringrose et. al. (2013) explored sexting practices between young people at two secondary schools in the UK and found that boys solicited ‘nude’ images from girls and showed them, without consent, to their male peer groups as evidence of their heterosexual proficiency. In these contexts, sexual images from their female peers operate as a form of currency or social and cultural capital (Dobson, 2018) for young males. In recent years, there have been reports of these practices among young adult males on UK university campuses, which include the non-consensual sharing of sexual images of a Black female that was accompanied by racist commentary, among male students in a *WhatsApp* chat group (Long and Soen, 2018) for the purposes of ‘entertainment’ (see also The Guardian, 2019). These practices, which involve male subjects at school and university level, reproduce gendered hierarchiesnot only between males and females but also between males, by enabling the male sender to gain social and cultural capital over his peers (Connell, 1987). These intragender power dynamics and intergender hierarchies in the broader socio-cultural context can be seen to play a role in the non-consensual sharing of sexual images of females among youth cultures in the UK and the process of by which male subjects become engaged in these practices.

Thus far, quantitative and qualitative data emerging from this study has revealed that gendered power hierarchies are operating in student’s peer-to-peer interactions through online forms of harassment that disproportionally affect women and transgendered groups, who are more likely to personally experience these practices than male subjects. In the next section of the paper, we turn to respondent’s attitudes to reporting gendered forms of online harassment to authorities on the university campus if they observe specific incidents and consider what they reveal about gendered hierarchies and relations within the student population.

#### Attitudes to reporting online gendered harassment

One of the key aims of this study was to explore student’s attitudes to reporting, particularly whether they would view specific forms of gendered and sexualised online harassment as serious enough to the university and/or the student’s union. To address these research concerns via our survey, we presented respondents with a range of scenarios representing different forms of online harassment, including those that are gendered and sexualised, and asked them to indicate whether they would want to report specific incidents or not. Respondents were presented with a Likert scale of answer options, which enabled them to select an appropriate response and indicate their reasons for selecting it.[[3]](#footnote-3) They also had the option of writing a free text response.

There were gendered differences in respondent’s attitudes to reporting some forms of gendered online harassment. Male respondents were less likely than other gendered groups to want to report specific forms of gendered online harassment, including practices that target fellow female students. For example, when presented with an online scenario that asked how they would respond if they observed a fellow student posting abusive comments to a female student, after she posted comments about her interest in feminism and gender equality, male respondents were more likely than females to not want to report this form of harassment to the university and/or student’s union. 39.7% of all male respondents would report versus 53.2% of all female respondents (n = 455) (p = 0.0001).[[4]](#footnote-4)  By indicating that they would not want to intervene if they observed fellow students sending abusive online comments to a female student because she expressed her support for feminism online, these respondents are complicit with hegemonic masculinity – a system of power that subordinates women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), with male respondents more likely to engage in this practice.

When asked why they would not want to report this form of gendered harassment, 13.19% of respondents indicated that they believed in ‘freedom of speech’: this finding is significant as it represents the second highest number of respondents who selected this response option to explain why they would not want to report a specific form of online harassment to the university and/or student’s union (see table in appendix 2). This accounted for 17.3% of male respondents answering the survey versus 3.6% of all female respondents (p = 0.001). Thus, male respondents are more likely than females to use ‘free speech’ discourses to explain why they would not want to report a fellow student posting abusive comments to a female student after she expressed her interest in feminism and gender equality in an online space.

#### Online harassment and freedom of speech

In recent years, the relationship between online forms of harassment, such as anti-feminist rhetoric, and freedom of speech has been critically examined. Studies indicate that some free speech advocates assert the civil libertarian nature of online communication is a ‘free-for-all’ where all forms of speech should be tolerated (Mkono, 2015), which has been used to justify a particularly toxic brand of anti-feminism in digitised spaces and beyond (Stern, 2019). For example, alt-right influencer Milo Yiannopoulos, who advocates for ‘free speech’, has claimed that ‘feminism is cancer’ in his online *YouTube* videos (The Guardian, 2017). Jordan Peterson, another leading alt-right influencer, also lectures on the virulence of feminism and the importance of protecting free speech through videos posted to his 1.5 million *YouTube* followers (Stern, 2019). Misogynistic comments and anti-feminist rhetoric has now become so pervasive in mainstream digitized spaces they are often perceived to be the norm (Jane, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2016).

In this socio-political context, women who identify as feminists and/or who express their support for feminism online, are increasingly receiving high levels of abusive comments, including those from the ‘alt-right’ and men’s rights activists who justify their behaviour using ‘free speech’ rhetoric (Siapera, 2019). As previously indicated, a significant minority of male respondents (17.3%) in this study indicated that they would not want to report forms of online abuse directed at female students who expressed their support for feminism because they believed in ‘freedom of speech’, which suggests they may have been influenced by these discursive practices. While this is not a direct form of abuse, failure to challenge online abuse directed at women, ultimately enables these practices to continue, and thus represents a form of complicit hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Similar complicit behaviours were observed among research participants when they were asked how they would want to respond to online forms of harassment directed at transgendered subjects. For example, in our campus-wide survey, participants were asked how they would want to respond to different forms of online transphobia, including intentional ‘mis-gendering’, which involved observing a fellow student repeatedly use the incorrect gender pronoun for a transgender student online, even after correction. 47.03% of respondents (n = 455) indicated that they would want to report the university and/or the student’s union. Male respondents were much less likely than females to want to report this form of online abuse to the university and/or the student’s union (40.33% male respondents versus 60.43% of those who identified as female). Freedom of speech was also selected as a reason why some would not want to report this form of harassment by a minority of respondents (7.25%). This was the third most likely form of online harassment that respondents would not want to report because they believed in freedom of speech. The majority of those selecting this response were male (9.1% of all male respondents versus 1.4% of all females) (P = 0.000).

#### Freedom of speech as a masculinised discourse

Qualitative data collected through free text responses to our survey suggests that some male respondents who chose this response option may be influenced by masculinised discourses in the broader socio-cultural context. For example, several male respondents to our campus wide survey expressed strong views against using specific gendered pronouns for transgendered individuals, which they argued was a ‘free speech’ issue. A sample response is featured below:

Although I am not transphobic and take no issue with the trans community, I think that demanding people use certain pronouns is not acceptable. Requesting that someone use a pronoun is potentially the beginning of a movement that dictates the speech of others and infringes on freedom of speech (Survey respondent: white, English, male, heterosexual)

This respondent initially attempts to make himself appear progressive*,*by claiming that ‘he is not transphobic’ and ‘has no issue with the trans community’, but then proceeds to voice his objections to using specific gendered pronouns for a transgendered individual, which would work to invalidate their gendered self-identification. He goes on to claim that asking individuals to use specific gendered pronouns for transgendered individuals, could be the ‘beginning of a movement’, which ‘dictates the speech of others and infringes on freedom of speech’. Similar views are voiced by the following male participant:

I strongly disagree with forcing the use of pronouns on people, like with the bill C-16 in Canada. Free speech is very important and really there should be no law that forces speech upon people (survey respondent: white, English, male, heterosexual)

This respondent objects to using gendered pronouns for transgendered individuals using discursive strategies employed by high profile figures championed by the alt-right. For example, he refers to legislation in a Canadian context, C-16, a bill in the Canadian Parliament prohibiting discrimination on the basis of gender identity and expression, which has been critiqued by Jordan Peterson, a Canadian psychologist who made headlines in 2016 by announcing his opposition to it (Stossel, 2018). Peterson claims this legislation would obligate him to use alternative gender pronouns, which amounted to ‘compelled speech’. Some have argued that such discourses seek to critique, undermine and oppose transgender rights as they challenge normative beliefs about masculine and feminine gendered identities as distinct and separate (Stern, 2019), which, in turn, uphold hegemonic forms of masculinity in Anglo-American societies and enable them to dominate non-hegemonic genders. By challenging these gendered hierarchies, transgendered identities disrupt this gendered order, which part explains why the ‘misgendering’ online scenario in our survey provoked a backlash from several male respondents: no other gendered group responded in this way.

These responses all shared a number of characteristics. They are written by research respondents who identify as male, white, English and heterosexual. By virtue of their race, gender and sexual orientation, these respondents represent the most culturally dominant and idealised construction of masculinity and thus they occupy the most powerful position within hegemonic masculinity’s gendered hierarchy in Britain (cf. Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). By objecting to using specific gender pronouns for transgendered individuals, these respondents devalue and delegitimise the rights of transgender people to self-designate their own gendered identity (Equality Act, 2010). By opposing transgender rights, these discursive practices maintain the logic of a male/female binary gendered system which ultimately privileges heterosexuality. Privileging heterosexuality reinforces gender binaries between male and female subjects, which can be conceptualised as a form of indirect homophobia, in the sense that it constitutes heterosexuality as the ‘superior’ and ‘natural’ sexual order and thus devalues other sexual orientations. Therefore, while some argue that heteronormativity is different to homophobia (Anderson and McCormack, 2018), we argue that they are inextricably linked.

However, respondents within this study did not express their support for discriminatory practices, such as transphobia, using rhetoric that is explicitly transphobic, but instead justify their viewpoints using the democratic principle of ‘free speech’, which has historically been associated with progressive politics. By so doing, they distance themselves from toxic practices associated with hegemonic masculinity, like queerphobia and transphobia, while still enacting its gendered hierarchies. Thus, these practices represent a form of ‘dialectical pragmatism’ (Demetriou, 2001), in that they reveal how hegemonic masculinities appropriate discursive practices associated with progressive forms of politics, in this case, the democratic principle of free speech - often used by marginalised groups to ensure their voices are heard - in hybridised ways that work to reproduce and conceal patriarchal systems of power.

#### Male victimhood

Tropes of victimhood were another rhetorical strategy appropriated by some male respondents to reproduce and conceal patriarchal systems of power, often tacitly. These discursive practices are expressed by a male respondent in the following extract:

men are pressured daily into not being honest about being victims in society, …men are more likely to be physically threatened, called offensive names or be purposefully embarrassed (Interviewee: white, English, male, heterosexual)

By virtue of his self-identifications (white, male, and heterosexual), this respondent occupies a dominant position in hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) and its racial and gendered hierarchy, which operate in British society. However, by claiming that male subjects are ‘victims’ in society, he attempts to align himself with progressive identity politics that have historically represented subordinated identities, complicating the orthodox alignment between his gendered body and hegemonic masculinity (see Ging, 2019). In recent years, these discursive practices have been deployed by alt-right political groups who constitute white males as victims of discrimination in politically correct Anglo-American societies (Kimmel, 2017). Similar rhetorical strategies are expressed by another respondent, in the following extract.

Because we’re living in a sad, a strict PC life now. I mean, in my opinion, I have it the worst, because I am white. I am male. I am heterosexual…..because if you are homosexual…you have these like cards that can, you know, that you can say more stuff (Interviewee: white, male, heterosexual)

In this extract, this respondent claims that men like himself, who are white, male and heterosexual, are victims of a P.C. that is, a politically correct society. By self-positioning himself as a victim of political correctness, this respondent strategically distances himself from hegemonic masculinity, by claiming he occupies a subordinated identity within British society. By so doing, he attempts to align himself with progressive gender identity agendas, though he as a male subject benefits from the ‘patriarchal dividend’ (Connell, [1995] 2005, p. 79). These discursive practices work to reproduce and conceal hegemonic forms of masculinity, which reify racialised, gendered and sexualized hierarchies in British society, tacitly or otherwise.

### **Conclusions**

This paper has critically examined the locally specific way gendered hierarchies and relations manifest between students on a university campus in England, in and through their experiences of, and their responses to different forms of online harassment. Key findings indicate that these gender hierarchies and relations are maintained through particular configurations of practice, which feature many of the ‘traditional’ variants of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987). For instance, this study has revealed that male subjects in the student population are less likely than females and transgendered respondents to be subjected to online harassment, which reflects and reifies gendered hierarchies in the broader social context (Powell & Henry, 2017). Some male subjects, whether intentionally or not, are engaged in these practices, such as sending unsolicited comments, sexual ‘jokes’, messages and ‘dick pics’ to females, which can work to exert their gendered and sexual dominance over these gendered subjects. These findings indicate there is little doubt Connell’s (1987) original conception of a hegemonic masculinity, which is characterised by expressions of dominance over women, remains intact. Thus, despite some empirical research highlighting ‘inclusive’ masculine social practices through a reduction in homophobia and an embrace of ‘softer’ behaviours deemed feminine (Anderson and McCormack, 2018), we see practices of hegemonic masculinity that subordinate women and are complicit in ignoring transphobia, a form of indirect homophobia, by discursively constituting heterosexuality as a ‘superior’ or ‘natural’ gendered order.

Moreover, this study has pointed to a hybrid form of hegemonic masculinity coalescing within the online student population, where digitized versions of toxic masculinity, feed into a reification of ‘traditional’ forms of hegemonic masculinity. These hybrid variants of hegemonic masculinity do not operate by using extreme expressions of sexism, misogyny and transphobia to establish male hegemony in the online spaces, but rather appropriate discourses that have historically been aligned with progressive forms of politics, including the democratic principle of free speech. For instance, key findings indicate that respondents who identify as male are significantly more likely than any other gendered group to use ‘free speech’ discourses, to explain why they would not want to intervene if they observe incidents of online harassment directed at female students who identify as feminists and/or transgender, in their online interactions. Their lack of intervention represents a complicit form of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), which does not actively express sexist, misogynistic or transphobic rhetoric, but yet does not wish to challenge it if observed in digitised spaces.

While this study has focused on exploring how hegemonic masculinities manifest in online interactions between university students in England, we suggest it is possible to see discursive ripples from the global online sphere in these digitised spaces, particularly those of alt-right influencers and men’s rights activists, who champion free speech discourses and claims of male victimhood. These discourses were deployed by research participants who identify as male, white, English and heterosexual, and thus occupy the most culturally dominant and idealized constructions of masculinity in Britain (Connell, 1995). The manner in which these participants enacted these politicised discursive practices in our locally specific study demonstrates the converging intersections between local, regional, and global configurations of hegemonic masculinity in practice (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) in transnational digitised spaces. More research is needed to more accurately gauge how men’s rights activists and the alt-right are influencing UK university student’s experiences, perceptions of and attitudes to online practices that constitute forms of harassment, and how they might operate in the continued hybridisation of hegemonic masculinities in digital spaces.

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1. Pearson’s Chi-Square test was used to test for statistical significance of cross tabulated data. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A full table of results for survey questions related to student’s experiences of sexualized forms of online harassment can be viewed in appendix 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A table showing all the Likert options given to students and their willingness to report a range of scenarios, can be seen in appendix 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. These findings allow for gender bias of the sample surveyed (63% of whom were male), by viewing the response to the question as a percentage of all the male respondents who answered the survey. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)