Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine (2025), **42**, 327–328
doi:10.1017/ipm.2025.10081

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Letter to the Editor

Adolescence, the manosphere and psychiatry

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In March 2025, Netflix debuted Adolescence to critical acclaim. The miniseries follows the fictional events surrounding a teenage boy being radicalised online and killing a 13-year-old schoolgirl. The show focuses a spotlight on the online world of the 'manosphere', with its associated subcultural language such as the '80/20 rule' (the suggestion that 80% of women are attracted to 20% of men) and 'redpilling' (a reference to the Matrix movie, where men become aware of and deconstruct the supposed controlling influence of women). Adolescence exposes a subculture that encourages bitterness and violence in impressionable boys and young men who are emboldened to engage in acts of violence towards women. From the perspective of the father, played by Stephen Graham, the show also speaks to the fears of parents who have little understanding of the toxicity of the online world their children are navigating. The show's writers and directors adeptly highlight themes of masculinity, domestic and gender-based violence as well as the inability of the school system and mental health services to deal with it. Adolescence presents a clear message that too many young men are being sold the idea of masculinity as a tool for violence, with everyone paying the price.

Violence against women promoted by online movements is a global phenomenon (Barker 2019). While the loudest voices from the manosphere are from the United States, the show offers a uniquely British lens of the resulting violence, with the series being created in response to the murders of Ava White and Elianne Andam, aged 12 and 15 respectively (Hogan 2025). Many countries, including Ireland, appear to be experiencing a unique expression of toxic masculinity and its reflection in the online manosphere.

The most prominent Irish example is the 2018 sexual assault and murder of Ana Kriégel in west Dublin (Gallagher 2019). Two boys, known only to the public as Boy B and Boy A, were charged with murder and murder with aggravated sexual assault respectively. Ana was lured to a discrete location by the boys and died from multiple injuries inflicted upon her. While this case preceded the rise of recent key figures within the 'manosphere', one of the boys allegedly exhibited increasingly disturbing online behaviour in the lead up to the crime, including researching child and animal pornography. A 2021 study of sexual harassment among adolescents undertaken by the Rape Crisis Network Ireland demonstrates that a key environmental process/social predictor of perpetration is media exposure (Mears 2021). The rise in media "where a large proportion of content objectifies women and girls" reinforces patriarchal norms and creates conflict around consent.

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Cite this article: Murphy S, Roddy DW, and Skelton C. (2025) Adolescence, the manosphere and psychiatry. *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine* **42**: 327–328, https://doi.org/10.1017/ipm.2025.10081

Ireland has historically and contemporaneously failed in adequately punishing and reporting sexual crimes or supporting victims including, state-led protection of perpetrators and institutions as well as the Courts lacking understanding of how the trauma effects victims (Ring 2017). The number of female rape victims in Ireland is almost treble that of the EU average (understanding that this could be in part due to differing legal definitions of rape between countries) and reports of rape have risen from over 400 a year in 2014 to over 800 a year in 2024 (European Data Journalism Network - EDJNet 2024). While it is difficult to quantify those who have died by femicide in Ireland due to no exact definition in the legal system, the rates reported to the Office of the State Pathologist have risen from 1 in 5 to 3 in 10 homicides between 2021 and 2023 (Mcgoldrick et al. 2024). Additionally, in 2023 the Women's Aid Annual Impact Report noted the highest disclosures of domestic abuse against women and children (40,048) in the organisation's 50 year history, with a noted increase in physical violence (up by 74%) and economic abuse (up 87%) compared to 2022 (Women's Aid 2024). Violence against women remains an issue of historic and growing concern in Ireland.

While 'manosphere' content may be the most contemporary manifestation of violent misogynistic ideology, it has not sprung de novo. Rather, it has evolved from deeply entrenched attitudes toward women found in long-established pillars of society such as the Catholic church, sporting organisations (Keenan 2015) and, unfortunately, medical professionals (Earner-Byrne 2022) and psychiatry (Walsh 2022). Irish masculinity has been shaped into toxic moulds for years. However, the current shaping of young minds is being delivered on a digital platform at a rate and intensity that no church or sporting organisation could ever hope to rival. Susceptible young males can be exposed to near-constant content with a seductive binary anti-female/pro-male rhetoric.

Psychiatry may reflect on this growing phenomenon among young men. A few clicks can bring any user directly to anti-women discourse. Amplification of these ideas through algorithms allows influencers to control a receptive space that normalises toxic behaviours rewarded by the 'manosphere'. This broadly connected community includes groups such as involuntary celibates (incels) and Pick-up Artists (Botto and Gottzén 2024). These online interactions can prime feelings of rejection, vulnerability and low self-esteem, with contradictory solutions of community, empowerment and violence (Botto and Gottzén 2024) that can confuse a developing mind. As a profession, we need to remember that these feelings may mimic, mask or precipitate symptoms of mental illness, including anxiety, depression and psychosis. Conversely, young men with psychiatric disorders or neurodevelopmental conditions (e.g. depression, autistic spectrum disorder) may have a

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https://doi.org/10.1017/ipm.2025.10081 Published online by Cambridge University Press

vulnerability to the simplistic solutions offered online. As in the miniseries, the unique codified nomenclature of the online manosphere is often used as metaphorical dog whistles to gauge a listener's position. Awareness of this may facilitate mental health professionals in assessing risk in young men. Finally, the links between early online radicalisation, adolescent personality development and violent behaviour towards women need to be untangled through research of this emerging phenomenon.

Financial support. This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interests. All authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Ethical standard. This research did not require IRB approval. Informed consent for patient information to be published in this article was not obtained due to no patient participation. This research did not involve the use of animals.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/ipm.2025.10081 Published online by Cambridge University Press