Addressing the impact of
Masculinity Influencers on Teenage Boys

A guide for schools, teachers and parents/guardians

DCU

Ollscoil Chathair
Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been a significant rise in the number of young people in Ireland, UK and elsewhere engaging with online influencers[1], including those who post motivational health and fitness videos on social media. Online influencers can have a positive impact on their followers by providing them with information (albeit of varying degrees of accuracy), entertainment and opportunities for learning and skill development. However, teachers and parents/guardians in Ireland, UK and elsewhere have become increasingly concerned about how young people, particularly teenage boys[2], are engaging with online 'masculinity influencers' who post content on social media platforms on issues relating to men and masculinity, some of which promotes harmful ideologies, attitudes and behaviours, including restrictive and oppressive forms of masculinity that are predicted on sexual and gender-based abuse, harassment and violence (e.g. Baker et. al., 2024; Ging et. al., 2024; Wescott et. al., 2024) (see figures 1-13). The discriminatory, hateful and often violent language of these online masculinity influencers is feeding a culture of prejudice, sexism and hate among children and young people (Weale, 2023; Wescott et al., 2024), which presents serious safeguarding concerns for schools, teachers and parents/guardians that urgently needs to be addressed.

This resource aims to provide schools, teachers and educators with guidance on how to address the impact of these online masculinity influencers on young people, particularly teenage boys (aged 13-18), via educational interventions and initiatives, which include having critical discussions with them about this topic. Although this information may not be directly actionable for parents considering one-on-one discussions about this topic with their child, the overall guidance may still be helpful for those preparing for such discussions. Critically, the guidance outlined in this resource recognises that the harmful ideologies, attitudes and behaviours promoted by online masculinity influencers are part of a broader network or 'ecosystem' of spaces in our society and culture that have historically maintained and reproduced gendered power dynamics and inequalities (see figure 14). In other words, they are not online only phenomena, but are rather current manifestations of these gendered dynamics and inequalities, which

change over time. Therefore, discussions about specific online masculinity influencers in this resource should be taken as a proxy for similar content that may arise in our society and culture in the future. Moreover, this resource cautions against attributing the harms associated with online masculinity influencers solely to digital technologies and social media in discussions with young people about this topic. Instead, it advocates a balanced approach to these discussions, which acknowledges the potential harms and positive benefits of social media in ways that aim to support young people in safely navigating these spaces.

This guidance comprises three main sections:

- First, it provides introductory information about online masculinity influencers who promote harmful ideologies, attitudes and behaviours, the 'ecosystem' that underpins and supports them and the impact they are having on children and young people from all gendered backgrounds, including teenage boys, which is based on secondary research.

- Second, it identifies the implications this research has for understanding and responding to the impact these online masculinity influencers are having on children and young people, particularly teenage boys, via educational interventions.

- Third, it presents practical guidance to schools, teachers and educators on how to facilitate critical discussions about online masculinity influencers with teenage boys, which may also be helpful for parents/guardians who are preparing to have such discussions with their child/children. Guidelines on how schools can build a culture that promotes healthy, respectful and equitable online and offline relationships, which challenge and change the harmful cultures that underpin and support online masculinity influencers, are also explored.

This resource makes reference to discriminatory and hateful language, including gender-based discrimination (e.g. sexism, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia) and sexual and gender-based abuse, harassment and violence, which some may find distressing.

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1   Online influencers are individual internet users who have developed a sizeable community of followers on social media platforms, like *YouTube*, *Instagram* and *TikTok*, through content production and distribution, social interactions and personal appearances on these digitised spaces, which have the ability to influence others.

2   This resource primarily focuses on how schools, teachers and parents/guardians can engage teenage boys (aged 13-18 yrs), particularly those who identify as cis-gender and heterosexual, in critical discussions about online 'masculinity influencers', as this demographic group is often their target audience. However, issues explored within this resource may also be relevant to teenagers and young people from other gendered backgrounds.

Part 1

Online masculinity influencers - what is being promoted?

Online masculinity influencers post content on social media platforms on issues relating to men and masculinity, some of which promote harmful attitudes and behaviours, including regressive forms of masculinity that are predicated on sexual and gender-based abuse, harassment and violence (Baker, et. al., 2019; McCashin, 2024). Some masculinity influencers have gained significant followings on social media. For example, Andrew Tate has amassed several million followers on *YouTube*, *Instagram*, *Twitter* and *TikTok*, where videos of him have been watched 11.6 billion times (Das, 2022). His social media content ranges from general motivational videos to explicitly harmful content that is misogynistic, homophobic, sexist and conspiratory (The Man Cave, 2023). Tate, who is currently facing allegations of abuse, rape, and human trafficking of women (Williamson & Wright, 2023), has been banned from *Facebook*, *TikTok*, *Instagram* and *YouTube* for his misogynistic comments, which include comparing women to dogs, saying women should not be allowed to drive, claiming that men have 'authority' over their female partners and that women rape victims should 'bear some responsibility' for being raped (Will, 2023). Violent misogynistic rhetoric has been promoted by other online masculinity influencers, including Robertas Ziogelis, who has posted videos on social media where he talks about dominating women and having 'rough sex' with them, such as putting his hand around their throats (Howard, 2023) (see figure 7). Hannah Pearl Davis is another influencer who uses social media to spread men's rights and anti-women messages. For instance, she has previously posted content on social media platforms that defend men for leaving women because they are not sleeping with them (Horowitz, 2023).

These online masculinity influencers post content on social media that promotes rigid and oppressive views about what it means to be a 'successful' man, which they often associate with wealth and material possessions e.g. such as cars, watches and clothes (see figures 10, 11). These representations of masculinity can be harmful for boys and men as they can lead them to believe that they must acquire wealth and material possessions in order to be successful, and if they do not, they will be seen as a failure. In addition, some masculinity influencers, like Andrew Tate, argue that 'school is a waste of time' (see figure 5), which could adversely affect how boys perceive and engage with schooling in ways that could negatively affect their educational attainment and career prospects.

Such online masculinity influencers promote other forms of masculinity, which can have an adverse effect on boys and men. For example, influencers like Andrew Tate, Myron Gaines and Mike Thurston, promote the idea that young men should manifest specific masculine ideals, such as strength, toughness and physicality, through a muscular physique via fitness and weight training videos they post online (see figures 6, 12). This online content reifies deeply entrenched ideas about masculine aesthetics, which can have a negative impact on the mental health of boys who are not able to achieve this physical ideal, as it implies that their worth is very closely tied to, if not wholly dependent upon, their physical appearance (Carter, 2024). Moreover, online influencers, like Andrew Tate, often argue that the ability to fight is key to proving one's masculinity, which consolidates entrenched ideas about masculinity that correlate it with physical aggression.

Figure 1: Andrew Tate on *YouTube*:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8X3XfO03pg

Figure 2: Andrew Tate on *YouTube*:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHgPiudyMyw

Within these online influencer cultures, other regressive ideas about masculinity are promoted, such as the idea that 'real men' must not show emotion or vulnerability, which advocates emotional stoicism. For instance, Andrew Tate, has denied the existence of mental health struggles, such as depression (see figure 3), suggesting that boys should not dwell on their feelings but should rather overcome and suppress them through stoicism and willpower (Baker et al., 2024) (see figure 1). Advocating emotional stoicism and emotional suppression can be harmful for boys as these practices can play a role in depression and suicide among men (Cleary, 2019). Online masculinity influencers can also promote other harmful ideologies, such as the belief that heterosexuality is the only acceptable sexual orientation for men, which bolsters homophobia (Haslop et al., 2024).

The discriminatory and hateful content of these masculinity influencers can be tied to the worldview of the 'manosphere' – a network of online communities that focus on issues relating to men and masculinity, like fitness and health, dating, relationships, divorce, father's rights, which often promote anti-feminism, misogyny and transphobia via online content (Ging, 2019) (see figure 8). Manosphere content often centres around gendered disinformation and conspiracy theories, which are divisive and polarising, such as the idea that men's rights have supposedly been 'eroded' as a result of feminism. This conspiracy theory blames the issues and challenges men face on the increasing social, economic and political success experienced by women. This 'zero-sum' claim posits that the empowerment of women must necessarily equate to the disempowerment of men, which reifies

misogyny by feeding hostility and resentment against women. Some influencers within the manosphere claim that important issues that relate to men and masculinity (e.g. misandry) are 'cancelled' by mainstream society. Manosphere influencers claim that the solution to these perceived societal problems is a return to patriarchal society, where men occupy the most powerful position in the gendered hierarchy and all other gendered groups are subservient to them (Dickel & Evolvi, 2023).

Disrespectful, discriminatory and hateful language

Online masculinity influencers often use disrespectful, discriminatory and hateful language in their online posts, including slang terms, phrases or acronyms. While this lexicon can change over time, it is useful for those involved in teaching and caring for children and young people to be familiar with some key terms that are currently in use so that they can recognise them and understand their meaning and significance. Therefore, we have provided a list of some of these terms below. This is not a comprehensive list of words that feature in these online cultures, but rather is an indication of some of the key terms currently used.

- **Alpha male:** This term is often used to describe and idealise a man who is socially and sexually dominant in his relationships with women. Becoming an 'alpha male' is an aspirational goal for many men who engage with manosphere content.

Figure 3: Andrew Tate Tweet.

Figure 4: Andrew Tate on *YouTube*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UTUHCEHx6yY

- **AWALT:** This is an acronym for 'All women are like that' used within manosphere communities to describe women in derogatory terms (e.g. vain, promiscuous, emotional, irrational, and motivated by financial gain).

- **Beta male:** This is a pejorative term used to insult a man who is perceived to be effeminate, weak, passive, subservient, and sexually unsuccessful.

- **MMAS:** This is an acronym for 'Make me a sandwich', which is directed at girls and women to devalue and belittle them.

- **Normie:** A term used to describe someone who is not part of the incel or manosphere subculture and therefore is perceived to be 'normal' or 'normie'.

- **Simp:** This is a pejorative term used to describe a man who is perceived to behave in a 'subservient' way to a woman in order to win her attention and affection, often sexual. It can be used to criticise a man for being respectful, or supportive of women.

- **Sigma male:** A hypermasculine male, like the alpha male, who is less concerned with social norms and is considered to be a 'lone wolf'.

- **Soyboy:** A pejorative term used to describe men who are perceived to be 'effeminate' and lacking masculine qualities, frequently used against men who support gender equality and feminism. The term 'soy boy' is also racialised in that it relies heavily on European colonial-era stereotypes of so-called 'effeminate' plant eating (e.g. soya food products) within Asian cultures.

Figure 5: Andrew Tate on *YouTube*:
https://www.youtube.com/shorts/uPAbzPEacSA

Figure 6: Andrew Tate and Mike Thurston on *YouTube*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ylz-J22wVxY

Figure 8: Post from Fresh&Fit Podcast on X.

- **THOT:** This is an acronym for 'that hoe over there', which is a misogynistic term used to describe women who are perceived to be promiscuous.

- **The Red Pill:** Also known by the acronym 'TRP', appropriated from the film, 'The Matrix', is a community of men within the manosphere who believe that society is unfair to men, particularly white, heterosexual men, and is designed to advantage women.

- **304:** A term used to describe a woman who is perceived to be 'promiscuous'. When the numbers '304' are typed into a calculator then turned upside down, the symbols resemble the word 'hoe'.

This language is playing a role in creating a culture that legitimates and normalises discriminatory beliefs, hatred and violence towards specific social groups, particularly girls, women, gay men, gender diverse people and trans communities.[3] Critically, the ideologies, attitudes and behaviours promoted by online masculinity influencers are part of a broader 'ecosystem' of spaces in our society and culture that maintain and reproduce gendered power dynamics and inequalities (see figure 14), which long precede social media. They can be seen as products of cultures, which uphold restrictive forms of masculinity

Figure 7: Robertas Ziogelis 'Fitntoxic' content on *TikTok***.**

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3   This resource does make some references to gendered binaries (e.g. girls and boys; women and men), which is language often used by online masculinity influencers. This does not intend to lend credibility to their ideologies or the idea of a gender binary, or to exclude trans, intersex and non-binary people, rather it is to acknowledge that this is the language often used within these online influencer cultures and the broader social context, which we must recognise in order to resist, disrupt and dismantle it.
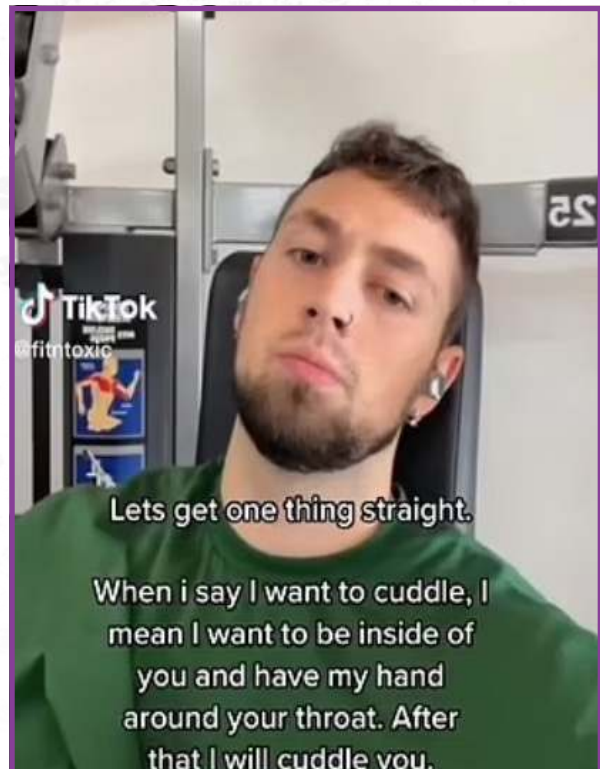

Figure 10: Andrew Tate on *YouTube***:**
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HDL_Y04pSsA

Figure 11: Andrew Tate on *YouTube***:**
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ou8w5S39nu4

Figure 9: Andrew Tate on *TikTok*.

The impact of online masculinity influencers

Studies have found that misogynist content produced by online masculinity influencers is negatively influencing how boys perceive and relate to girl students and women teachers in Ireland, the UK and Australia (e.g. Weale, 2023; Roberts & Wescott, 2024). In addition, others have observed how boy students are drawing upon the sexist and misogynistic rhetoric of online masculinity influencers, like Andrew Tate, such as talking about 'men being better than women' (Fazackerley, 2023), making derogatory remarks about women 'belonging in the kitchen' and sexually objectifying girls' and women's appearance (King, 2023; Wescott et al., 2024). These incidents are occurring in pedagogic spaces where the sexual abuse and harassment of girls is often prevalent and normalised within children's and young people's peer groups (RCNI, 2021; see also Ofsted, 2021). Women teachers have reported that online misogynistic influencers are having a very negative effect on how boys perceive and treat them, with some subjecting them to sexual and gender-based abuse and harassment, such as sexualised groaning and physical and verbal intimidation (Wescott et al., 2024). Women teachers report that some male students are using disrespectful and misogynistic language associated with online influencers, such as 'Make me a sandwich', to belittle and undermine them (Lewins, 2024). School staff can trivialise the seriousness of such issues, with some actively avoiding naming the problem of misogyny and the sexual harassment of women teachers by

that are often predicated on social inequalities and discriminatory practices. Therefore, discussions about online masculinity influencers in this resource should be taken as a proxy for similar content in these digital and 'offline' contexts, which will change over time.

Figure 12: Myron Gaines on *YouTube*:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQqD7uZeJEo

Figure 13: Andrew Tate on *YouTube*:
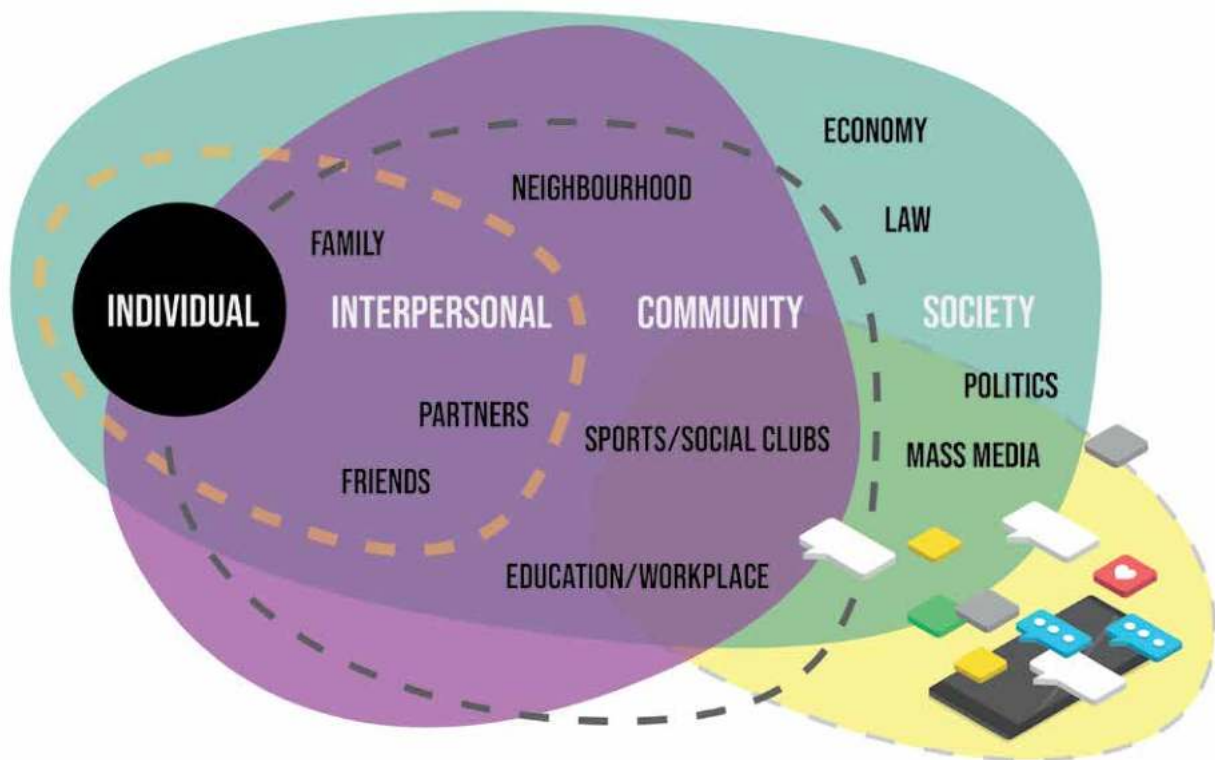https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMJGpHZ7drI

Figure 14: Social and cultural ecosystem

boys, instead claiming that women teachers' behaviour management capabilities are at fault (Roberts & Wescott, 2024). This has the effect of undermining these teachers, thus exacerbating the gender-based discrimination they are being subjected to in their classrooms.

Other studies have pointed to a link between the harmful attitudes and behaviours promoted by specific online masculinity influencers and violence-supportive attitudes among children and young people. For instance, a UK-based study observed a significant difference in the acceptability of physical violence amongst those exposed to this online content: 19% of children and young people who had seen Andrew Tate content thought 'hurting someone physically is okay if you say sorry after hurting them' compared with just 4% of those

not exposed (Women's Aid, 2023). The harmful impact of these online masculinity influencers on children and young people presents serious safeguarding concerns for schools, teachers and parents/guardians, which urgently need to be addressed via appropriate educational interventions and initiatives.

How should we start to address these issues? Firstly, we need to consider why these online masculinity influencers and the online content they post is popular among some teenage boys and young men to better understand how to develop effective educational interventions and initiatives that mitigate harmful practices and their adverse impacts.

Why are masculinity influencers popular among some teenage boys?

Concerningly, research suggests that online masculinity influencers, like Andrew Tate, have considerable popularity amongst teenage boys and young men in Ireland and the UK. According to a UK-based survey, involving 1,200 participants aged 16-24 years, 79% boys (aged 16-17 years) have watched, listened to or read Andrew Tate's social media content, with just over half (52%) viewing him in a positive light (Hope Not Hate, 2023). Similarly, another UK-based study (Smith, 2023a), involving 1,106 children aged 6-15 years, found that 84% of boys (aged 13 to 15 years) surveyed had heard of Andrew Tate. Overall, 23% of these teenage boys had a positive view of Tate. In another related study (Smith, 2023b) involving 2,087 adults in the UK, 27% of the young men (aged 18-29) surveyed had either a 'very favourable' or 'somewhat favourable' view of Andrew Tate, with 24% of this demographic saying they agreed with his views about women[4].

Online masculinity influencers are also appealing to some adults, including parents. In a UK-based study (Internet Matters, 2023) that sought to understand more about the impact of online masculinity influencers on family life, which involved over 2,000 parents of 4-16-year-olds, over half (56%) of younger fathers (aged between 25-34) surveyed have a positive impression of the influencer Andrew Tate. This may be due to a number of factors, which include his motivational videos aimed at inspiring men to take on a physically healthy lifestyle, his finance and business advice, or the discriminatory and hateful rhetoric that targets specific groups, particularly women. However, regardless of whether teenage boys and young men in the UK consider Andrew Tate and his wide-ranging online content favourable or not, his reach and appeal is significant. This prompts the question, why do some teenage boys and young men engage with online masculinity influencers, like Andrew Tate? Why is his reach and appeal so significant?

While research indicates that there are links between online masculinity influencers, social media use and a rise in harmful gendered norms in teenage boys in Ireland, the UK, Australia and elsewhere, it is not a straightforward cause and effect relationship. A wide range of factors play a role in why teenage boys may engage with masculinity influencers and the content they post on social media, which include complex and intersecting social, political, psychological, economic and cultural factors, some of which are explored below. In addition, personal factors will play a significant role in the extent to which teenage boys seek out and/or engage with online influencers. For instance, an individual's personal experiences and their 'offline' social environment (e.g. home, school, peer groups), may influence their willingness to engage with and internalise the gendered attitudes and behaviours promoted by online masculinity influencers (see Diepeveen, 2024).

4   See also Ging, D., Ringrose, J., Milne, B., Horeck, T., Mendes, K., & Castellini da Silva, R. (2024) 'Moving beyond masculine defensiveness and anxiety in the classroom: exploring gendered responses to sexual and gender-based violence workshops in England and Ireland', *Gender and Education*, 36(3): 230-247.

Challenges facing teenage boys and young men

Critically, an emerging body of research has suggested that online masculinity influencers appeal to some teenage boys and young men in Ireland, UK and elsewhere because they speak about significant issues and challenges they are facing, which include:

- **Mental health:** Men have disproportionately high rates of mental health challenges, including depression and suicide.[5] Factors such as being socially isolated, bullied, or experiencing mental health difficulties may push teenage boys and young men to seek out online content that they feel may help them. Research has found that social media algorithms suggest misogynistic content promoted by masculinity influencers to young men who search for content related to loneliness, low self-esteem or mental health issues (Regehr et. al., 2024). These findings indicate that these masculinity influencers and associated algorithms are exploiting these boys and young men by capitalising on their psychological vulnerabilities and pushing them towards reductive self-help content.

- **Socio-economic factors:** Changes in the global economy, which have come as a consequence of deindustrialization, automation and free trade, have dramatically shifted the labour market and created a cost-of-living crisis. In the current socio-economic context, online influencers who claim to be able to teach boys how to acquire wealth have significant appeal, especially for those who are economically disadvantaged. Traditional norms of masculinity often centre economic status (men as 'providers' or 'head of household') and, therefore, such economic insecurities are often connected with concerns regarding masculine identities.

- **Changing gendered power dynamics:** Gains in gender equality, women's and LGBTQI+ [6] rights have destabilised patriarchal norms, which is challenging traditional ideas about gender roles and what it means to be a man. At a local level, teenage boys in

Ireland and the UK may perceive these changing dynamics in various ways, such as believing that girls are achieving more than them at school, and that as a result, they may feel they are being disadvantaged, which may give rise to feelings of anger, frustration and anxiety (see Setty, 2023). This may lead some boys to seek out online masculinity influencers who claim that they offer solutions to these problems.

- **Gender backlash:** Changes in patriarchal norms are also occurring at a time when the #MeToo movement has raised critical awareness of women's experiences of sexual harassment and assault in the mainstream media and elsewhere, which have led some men to believe that they are being blamed for the actions of other men.[7] Some may perceive such increased spotlighting of women and feminism in the media as a threat to masculinity. Boys may feel excluded from these cultural conversations or may believe that their challenges are being ignored or they are not being provided with positive frameworks for masculinity.

- **Social environments:** Boys who are immersed in social environments (e.g. home, school and local communities), which stigmatise and pathologise men and masculinity may feel that their gendered identity is under attack, which may lead to anger and resentment (see Setty, 2023). This may in turn play a role in motivating them to seek out online masculinity influencers who post content that celebrates and idealises men and masculinity as they find it inspiring.

This body of research indicates that teenage boys and young men in Ireland, UK and elsewhere can face a range of significant challenges that may play a role in motivating them to engage with online masculinity influencers. Many of these challenges have emerged from decades of social, political, economic and cultural changes. However, the manosphere and masculinity influencers blame women, feminism, immigrants, gender diverse and LGBTQI+ people, as the cause of these problems and claim that they have solutions to these complex issues, which they use to engage boys and young men. Some of the strategies they use to engage boys and young men are outlined below.

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5   In Ireland, the male suicide rate was 14.9 per 100,000* compared to the female suicide rate of 3.6 per 100,000 (as of 31st October, 2023). Source: https://www.samaritans.org/ireland/samaritans-ireland/about/samaritans-work-in-ireland/policy-and-reserach-ireland/self-harm-and-suicide-statistics-in-ireland/

6   The acronym 'LGBTQI+' refers to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning. The '+' refers to other non-heterosexual self-identifications, which have not already been mentioned, such as intersex, asexuality, pansexuality, and polysexuality.

7   Stewart, H. (2024) 'Andrew Tate is a symptom, not the problem': why young men are turning against feminism', *The Guardian*, 3 February, 2024. Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/feb/03/andrew-tate-symptom-not-problem-why-young-men-turning-against-feminism (Last accessed 26/06/2024).

Strategies used by masculinity influencers to engage boys and men

Online masculinity influencers are aware of the challenges and issues facing teenage boys and young men and they often propose simplistic and often problematic solutions, some of which are described below. Their 'solutions' do not address the underlying social, psychological, political, economic and cultural factors at play, and instead often promote the money-making initiatives of these influencers (e.g. selling courses)[8] and scapegoat women, immigrants and people who identify as gender diverse and LGBTQI+. The strategies and talking points online masculinity influencers use to attract or engage boys and young men can include the following:

- **An idealised version of masculinity:** In a social context where masculinity can be described as 'toxic' (Ging et. al., 2024), boys and young men are turning to online influencers, who offer an idealised and 'celebratory version of masculinity' (Setty, 2023). This idealised and celebratory representation of masculinity may appeal to boys who feel that men and masculinity are constantly criticised and stigmatised in cultural conversations that have embraced women's rights and feminism.

- **Advocates for men:** The popularity of online masculinity influencers among teenage boys appears to be partly due to the fact that they post content that appears to advocate for, and empower, men. For example, an Australia-based study (involving 117 young men aged 16–21 years) found that some young men endorse Andrew Tate's male empowerment rhetoric and view him as a positive advocate for men in a society they feel has been too focused on female empowerment (eSafety Commissioner, 2024). However, such content does not address the root causes of the challenges facing boys which lead them to seek out positive and empowering frameworks for masculinity, but instead exploits these legitimate needs for profit.

- **Emotionally engaging issues:** Online masculinity influencers post content that claims to understand and empathise with the issues teenage boys and young men are experiencing (Emba, 2023). Examples include emotionally charged content that expresses anger about how men's rights have supposedly been 'eroded' as a result of women's rights and feminist gains, which may appeal to boys and men who feel marginalised or excluded from cultural conversations that have embraced and popularized women's movements.

8   For example, Andrew Tate created 'Hustler's university', which claims to be an online educational platform that can teach people various skills that will help them to earn money.

Boys and young men may not always intentionally seek out harmful online masculinity influencers (Baker et al., 2024). For example, studies indicate that some may encounter them while looking for innocuous content on social media, such as health and fitness videos, and online algorithms may then suggest content posted by online masculinity influencers, which then becomes a gateway for promoting sexist, misogynistic and other discriminatory content (Baker et al., 2024).

Online masculinity influencers, teenage boys and agency

It is important to note that the content promoted by online masculinity influencers will not appeal to all boys. In addition, studies have indicated that teenage boys and young men can bring a high degree of critique and literacy to the content they observe in online masculinity influencer cultures. For example, an Australia-based study, which conducted focus groups and interviews with 117 young men aged 16–21, found that some of these participants were very critical of online influencers, like Andrew Tate, and the way he 'uses his controversial status and sexist views for financial gain, as a way to generate clicks, views and revenue' (eSafety Commissioner, 2024: 40). These findings indicate that many teenage boys and young men do have agency in relation to harmful online ideas and behaviours, including those associated with online masculinity influencers. Other studies suggest that teenagers are more likely to consume online content that is promoted on their social media feed and timelines through algorithms, rather than running active searches for new content (Bamberger et. al., 2023), which suggests that there is an urgent need for critical media and digital literacy programmes that support them in safely navigating online spaces.

Part 2

Implications for educational interventions

This section outlines the implications of the research, which was explored in section 1, for understanding and responding to the impact online masculinity influencers are having on children and young people, particularly teenage boys, via educational interventions.

Key issues to consider

Due to unclear cause-and-effect relationships between social media use and a rise in harmful attitudes and behaviours among teenage boys in Ireland, there is a need for nuance and care in developing educational interventions to mitigate and prevent harmful practices and their adverse impacts. The following key issues warrant consideration:

Recognise the 'ecosystem' of influencers

The harmful ideas and behaviours promoted by online masculinity influencers are not online only phenomena, they are part of a broader 'ecosystem' that maintains and reproduces gendered power dynamics and inequalities, which includes social and cultural systems, structures and institutions that precede digital technologies and social media (see figure 14). People inscribed within this ecosystem, including teachers, parents/guardians and wider communities, can be implicated in these practices. In this sense, children and young people, including teenage boys, can have a wide range of 'influencers' that inform how they think about gender, masculinity and what it means to be a man. Therefore, targeted interventions should not just focus on examining individual online masculinity influencers, but rather on the underpinning ecosystems from which they emerge, which boys should be supported in navigating via critical thinking and reflection skills. Moreover, there is a need for teenage boys and young people more broadly to have a stronger information ecosystem that counters the disinformation promoted by online masculinity influencers, such as pedagogic programmes that enhance critical thinking and the ability to recognise and challenge harmful ideas. Recent psychological work has found evidence that countering disinformation by inoculation and prebunking approaches, which preemptively debunk inaccurate information, may hold promise for tackling online hate.[9]

Understand the appeal of masculinity influencers

Online masculinity influencers appeal to some teenage boys because they speak about a number of significant issues they are facing, such as feeling alienated from cultural conversations that have emerged from the #MeToo movement; confusion about what it means to be a man; anger at social problems men are experiencing; fears and anxieties about the future, which do not appear to be meaningfully addressed on a significant scale elsewhere. Therefore, there is a need for teachers, schools, parents/guardians and wider communities to understand and take seriously the appeal of online masculinity influencers among some teenage boys and young men and the various ways that they appear to be explaining and offering solutions to some of the issues they may be facing.[10] Familiarise yourself with some of the factors that may lead some teenage boys to engage with these online influencers, some of which have been explored in part 1 of this resource, to better understand how you can work to counter them. Develop appropriate support systems and structures to address the significant issues and problems teenage boys and young men are facing.

Reach out to alienated boys

Schools, teachers and parents/guardians can play a key role in reaching out to boys who may feel alienated within their communities and supporting them in dealing with the issues and problems they are facing, which should include engaging them in constructive and empathetic discussions about their experiences. Moreover, given the widespread misunderstanding of the term 'toxic masculinity' as equating men with toxicity, there is a need to create a more positive culture around masculinity and what it means to be a man — especially for teenage boys and young men, which should involve promoting positive role male models and a masculine identity they can aspire to. Ultimately, these initiatives should aim to support boys and men to build healthy, respectful and equitable social and intimate interpersonal relationships.

9   Lewandowsky, S., & van der Linden, S. (2021) 'Countering Misinformation and Fake News Through Inoculation and Prebunking', *European Review of Social Psychology*, 32(2), 348–384.

10   Setty, E. (2023) 'How 'Misogyny Influencers' Cater to Young Men's Anxieties,' *The Conversation*, March 24, 2023.

Invest in supportive 'offline' environments

A teenager's personal experiences and their 'offline' social environment (e.g. home, school, communities, peer networks) will likely influence their willingness to engage with harmful ideas and behaviours on social media[11], such as those associated with online masculinity influencers. For instance, teenage boys who have contact with strong male role models in their local communities, who express positive forms of masculinity that they find supportive, nurturing, and healthy, may be less likely to seek out and engage with harmful online masculinity influencers who they feel may give them support and guidance.

Link language and behaviour

The disrespectful, discriminatory and often violent language promoted by online masculinity influencers is playing a role in creating a culture that legitimates and normalises discriminatory beliefs, hatred and violence towards specific marginalised groups. This relationship between language and behaviour is clearly visualised in the 'Pyramid of sexual and gender-based violence' (see figure 15), which represents the broad spectrum of attitudes, practices and behaviours that can play a role

in enabling and normalising sexual and gender-based violence.[12] For instance, if verbal forms of sexual and gender-based abuse, such as sexist and misogynistic comments become acceptable within specific online and offline communities, it raises the threshold of what is considered acceptable within these contexts, which may lead perpetrators to think that physical forms of abuse, such as sexual assault, may also be accepted. Therefore, it is important to tackle and prevent all forms of sexual and gender-based abuse, harassment and violence, including those located at the bottom of the 'Pyramid of sexual and gender-based violence', before they lead to more extreme forms.

Digital technologies and social media - take a balanced approach

Digital technologies and social media are vehicles, not the root cause of online masculinity influencers, which are a product of our gender inequitable societies and cultures. Therefore, it is important not to attribute all of the harms associated with online masculinity influencers to digital technologies and social media. Indeed, studies caution against making blanket statements about the negative effects of digital environments

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11   Diepeveen, S. (2024) *How does social media influence gender norms among adolescent boys? Key evidence and policy implications*, ALIGN brief, London: ODI.

12   Kelly, L. (1988) *Surviving sexual violence*, Cambridge, UK: Oxford, UK, Polity Press.
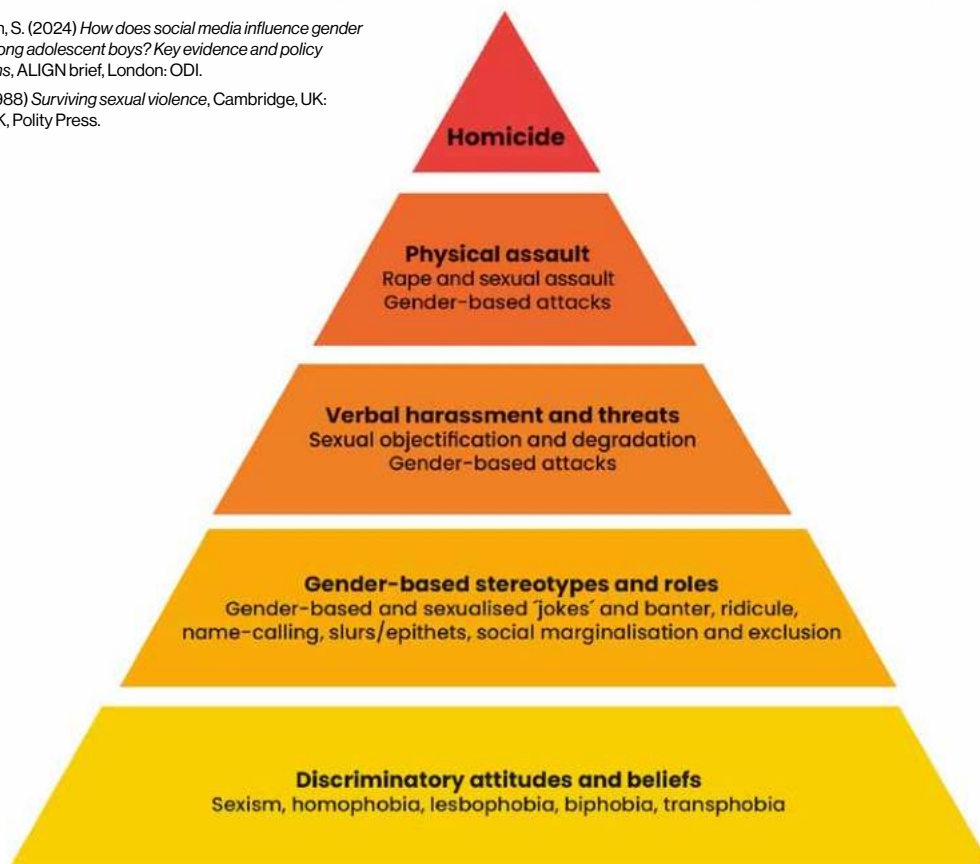

Figure 15: Pyramid of sexual and gender-based violence

and social media, which can facilitate virtual social interactions and opportunities for engagement with online communities that can transcend geographical barriers.[13] Consequently, when developing educational interventions to mitigate harms associated with these online cultures, take a balanced approach and consider both the potential harms and positive benefits of digital technologies and social media.

Acknowledge agency

Teenage boys and young men can bring a high degree of critique and literacy to their engagement with social media and online masculinity cultures. Therefore, it is extremely important not to characterise all teenage boys and young men as being 'sexist', 'misogynistic' or uncritical in their engagement with the harmful online content posted. Acknowledge that they do have agency in relation to prevailing gendered norms. However, studies suggest that teenagers are more likely to consume online content that is promoted on their social media feed and timelines through algorithms, rather than running active searches for new content.[14] These findings suggest that there is a need for critical media and digital literacy programmes in schools that explain how digital spaces work and equip young people, including teenage boys, with the skills to critically navigate them safely to ensure they are less likely to passively consume algorithm-generated media, such as those associated with online influencers.

Core guiding principles

Based on these key considerations, we suggest that educational interventions focused on addressing the impact of online masculinity influencers and the ecosystem from which they emerge, should be guided by the following core principles:

- **Critical thinking and reflection:** Focus on giving teenage boys the critical thinking and reflection skills that will enable them to recognise that the harmful gendered ideas and behaviours promoted by online masculinity influencers and the ecosystem from which they emerge are harmful, rather than simply telling them they are bad.

- **Knowledge and understanding:** Develop teenage boys' knowledge and understanding about the potential harms and the positive opportunities and benefits of digital technologies and social media in ways that aim to support young people in navigating these spaces safely and responsibly.

- **Agency:** Empower teenage boys to recognise that they have agency in relation to prevailing norms associated with masculinity, which they can resist and challenge by practising gender-equitable attitudes and behaviours that will enable them to build healthy, respectful and equitable relationships.

- **Social responsibility:** Find relatable ways of enabling teenage boys to understand that harmful ideas and behaviours promoted by online masculinity influencers can adversely affect all gendered groups (men, women and gender diverse people) so that they feel a sense of collective responsibility to resist and challenge them to advance gender equality.

- **Meaningful inclusion of boys:** In keeping with the importance of designing 'with' (as opposed to 'for') young people, as seen in evolving youth mental health research, it is useful to consider meaningful ways of engaging teenage boys in the life cycle of intervention design through to rollout. This can assist in valuing their agency and pre-empt any issues that could later arise.

13 O'Rourke, F. & Haslop, C. (2024) 'We're respectful boys... we're not misogynistic!': analysing defensive, contradictory and changing performances of masculinity within young men's in-person and digitally mediated homosocial spaces', *Journal of Gender Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/09589236.2024.2335627.

14 Bamberger, A, Stecher, S; Gebel, C; Brüggen, N. (2023) Ich habe einen normalen Account, einen privaten Account und einen Fake Account. Instagram aus der Perspektive von 12- bis 15-Jährigen mit besonderem Fokus auf die Geschlechterpräsentation. *ACT ON! Short Report Nr. 10 Kurzfassung*. München: JFF – Institut für Medienpädagogik in Forschung und Praxis.

Part 3

Guidance on addressing the impact of masculinity influencers

This section presents practical guidance for schools, teachers and educators on how to respond to the impact of online masculinity influencers on young people, particularly teenage boys, via educational initiatives that include having critical discussions with them about this topic. Although this information may not be directly actionable for parents considering one-on-one discussions about this topic with their child, the overall guidance may still be helpful for those preparing for such discussions.

Information for teachers

The following section provides information to teachers about how to facilitate critical and constructive discussions with teenage boys about online masculinity influencers.

Facilitator[15] preparation

Before initiating critical discussions about online masculinity influencers with teenage boys, which will likely explore topics such as gender-based discrimination and violence, it is important that facilitators are first aware of their own personal experiences, sensitivities, belief systems and values in relation to these issues, as they may affect how they talk about them with young people. For instance, if a facilitator appears to agree with some harmful gendered behaviours promoted by online masculinity influencers, such as rigid and oppressive forms of masculinity, sexism, misogyny, homophobia and/or heteronormativity, what kind of messages may they give to their group? In other words, those facilitating these discussions need to ensure that they have the appropriate mindset and capacity for self-reflexivity that will enable them to engage teenage boys in talking about online masculinity influencers in a constructive manner that does not inadvertently reify the harmful ideas and behaviours they promote. In addition, the way in which facilitators initiate, guide, and moderate these discussions with teenage boys will likely affect their reactions and level of engagement.

In what follows, we provide information about the key issues that facilitators should consider when preparing to engage teenage boys in critical discussions about online masculinity influencers and the ecosystem from which they emerge.

- **Thoroughly prepare:** Facilitating these discussions is challenging work, which will need skilful and sensitive navigation of a range of topics, including those that relate to masculinity. Therefore, it is important that those facilitating these discussions thoroughly prepare for them (see the 'resources hub' for more information).

- **Avoid assumptions:** To mitigate the risk of disengagement, facilitators should not make any assumptions about the thoughts, feelings or behaviours of teenage boys. There may be complex factors underpinning their interest in online masculinity influencers, some of which have been explored in this resource (see part 1).

- **Engage in relevant training:** Facilitators should engage in the relevant training to ensure they acquire the knowledge and skills to engage teenage boys in critical discussions about online masculinity influencers in a safe, constructive and empathetic way. This training should involve learning about the various factors that may lead some teenage boys to engage with masculinity influencers. This knowledge will better enable facilitators to understand how they can discuss these issues with teenage boys and provide them with the appropriate support (see the 'resources hub' for information about training programmes).

- **Resist the urge to distance yourself:** The harmful gendered ideas and behaviours promoted by online masculinity influencers (e.g. sexism) are deeply entrenched within our social and cultural systems, structures and institutions. Resist the urge to distance yourself from these issues. Instead, critically self-reflect on how you may participate in reifying them, which is a necessary first step in preparing yourself to facilitate critical and constructive discussions about these issues.

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15   Within this resource, the word 'facilitator' is used to refer to those who prepare and facilitate critical discussions with teenage boys about online masculinity influencers and the cultures from which they emerge. Within these spaces, the role of the facilitator is not to position themselves as the 'expert' who imparts knowledge to participants in a didactic manner. Rather, it is to create a safe and respectful space that enables participants to engage in group discussions, peer-to-peer learning, critical self-reflection and skills-building.

- **Be self-reflexively engaged:** Facilitators should consider how their age, sex, gender, racial identifications and socio-economic position may influence their ability to engage teenage boys in critical discussions about online masculinity influencers, which requires a self-reflexive approach. In addition, facilitators will need to prepare themselves to discuss sensitive and potentially personal issues (e.g. gender-based discrimination) with teenage boys in a way that is constructive and inclusive.

- **Commitment to gender equality and inclusion:** Those facilitating critical discussions about online masculinity influencers should be intentional about and committed to practising gender equality and inclusion to ensure that they initiate, guide and moderate discussions in a way that is inclusive, fair and equitable.[16]

- **Safeguarding:** Teachers facilitating discussions with teenage boys should be familiar with relevant safeguarding policies, procedures and processes at their educational institutions, which should include knowing how to handle student disclosures, follow their legal obligations to inform relevant authorities and signpost to appropriate advice and support services (see 'Advice and support' section of this resource).

- **Consider time constraints:** Ensure sufficient time has been set aside for proper, in-depth discussions about the topic of influencer cultures with teenage boys. Do not try to cover too many issues in one discussion.

- **Think about room layout:** Arrange the room and seating in a circular or u-shape format, so that facilitators are sitting alongside participants. Arranging the room in this way may help to foster a sense of inclusion within the group, which may enhance group discussions.

- **Access requirements:** Facilitating these discussions in schools should consider student's potential access requirements before they meet face-to-face. Ask participants to inform the facilitator about their individual access requirements and needs (e.g. hearing, sight and/or mobility) before convening as a group and take these into account when planning face-to-face discussions.

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16   Teachers facilitating discussions about men and masculinity with teenage boys should consider how they are inclusive of young people who identify as non-binary/trans boys. They should explain the nature of the discussion and leave it up to the pupils who identify as non-binary and trans boys to decide if they want to join. If they do not think they will be comfortable in this group discussion, they do not need to join it.

Discussion framework

Facilitators should design a framework for discussion that provides enough time and the right structure for engaging teenage boys in critical discussions about online masculinity influencers, which will enable all participants to contribute in an inclusive, constructive and equitable way. A discussion framework and guide has been provided below:

- **Outline the overall aims of the discussion:** Inform participants about what the group discussion aims to do, the various topics that will be discussed, and the kinds of emotions people typically experience when discussing them, which can help them mentally prepare for talking about these issues in ways that may support engagement. Provide information about advice and support services they can access, if they need them (see 'Advice and support').

- **Introduce specific topics for discussion:** This resource has provided some discussion topics (see 'Key discussion themes'), which explored a range of themes relevant to online masculinity influencers (i.e. Men, masculinity and mental health; Masculinity, and what it means to be a 'successful' man; Men, women and gendered roles).

- **Facilitate discussions:** Moderate, guide and ask questions to promote critical thinking in ways that aim to enable participants to recognise this content as harmful. A range of facilitation techniques are explored in the next section.

- **Debriefing and group reflection:** A 'debriefing' should give participants the opportunity to reflect and talk about what they thought and/or felt during the discussion in ways that should give them a sense of shared closure in talking about these issues, before the session concludes.

- **Signposting:** Teachers should signpost participants to advice and support services they can access if they need them (see 'Advice and support' section of this resource).

Facilitation techniques

This section describes a range of facilitation techniques that can be used to engage teenage boys in critical and constructive discussions about online masculinity influencers and the social and cultural ecosystem from which they emerge.

- **Employ youth-centred facilitation techniques:** Avoid didactic approaches to these discussions, instead employ youth-centred facilitation techniques that give teenage boys the space to take the lead and to voice their views about online masculinity influencers. That is, rather than telling them what to think and believe about these influencers, moderate and guide what is talked about in ways that will enable them to recognise this online content as harmful.

- **Create a safe, open and inclusive space:** When facilitating critical discussions about these masculinity influencers with teenage boys, aim to create a safe, and inclusive space where they can talk about these issues in an open way by asking questions, sharing views and seeking advice.

- **Create a 'group agreement':** Before discussions begin, work with participants to co-create a 'group agreement' - a set of guidelines on how facilitators and participants will work together to express their opinions in a safe, inclusive and respectful manner. It can be useful to write this agreement on a piece of paper or on a board so that you can refer back to it throughout the discussion.

- **Recognise and value diversity:** Early in your discussion, acknowledge diversity among boys and men. For example, gender, class, race, nationality, sexual orientation and educational attainment can structure and mediate their access to power and privilege. Refer back to such diversity throughout the discussions to ensure that boys/men are not spoken about in homogenising ways.

- **Engage in non-judgmental listening and curious open questioning:** Approach discussions about online masculinity influencers with genuine curiosity, not judgement. Begin by asking open questions such as 'Who or what comes to your mind when you think of online influencers?', 'What do we know about online influencers?', 'What do they say about what it means to be a man?', 'How (un)helpful do you think their views are in helping you to understand your life experiences?', 'For instance, is their vision of

the world appealing in terms of how you think about yourself and your place in the world?', 'Why/why not?', 'Do you think these influencers are good role models? 'Why/why not?'. It is important to note that this can be challenging where there are disagreeable viewpoints, disengagement or resistance - all of which is to be expected when critically discussing gendered ideas and behaviours that are entrenched within our society.[17]

- **Explore boys' motivation for engaging with this content:** Boys may have complex and varied reasons for engaging with online masculinity influencers (e.g. they may speak to real anxieties they feel, such as social isolation; they might gain a sense of belonging by affiliating with these online communities, which may also enable them to gain peer approval). Asking them why they engage with these influencers may help to unpack these reasons and direct them to alternative sources of support.

- **Promote critical thinking:** Ask questions that promote critical thinking (what, how, why?) e.g. 'What if we look at this from this perspective...?', 'Is it possible that an alternative view to what you said might be true for some people? Why/Why not?' Focus on topics associated with online masculinity influencers (see 'key discussion themes') to get a sense of what teenage boys agree or disagree with to better understand how to steer and moderate the discussion to promote critical thinking.

- **Model empathetic, constructive and respectful dialogue:** A facilitator's comments and behaviours can often influence and 'set the tone' for group discussions and interactions. Therefore, facilitators should intentionally model the attitudes and behaviours they want participants to engage in (e.g. careful listening, openness, curiosity, respectful behaviours and a non-judgmental attitude), which should help to support constructive dialogue.

- **Promote and model critical introspection:** Acknowledge the harmful gendered ideas and behaviours you have had to unlearn and why (e.g. they did not align with your values). This can be an effective way to model and promote critical introspection and open up discussions about young people's values and whether online masculinity influencers reflect them or not, which can instigate progressive change.

- **Monitor emotional cues and responses:** Critical discussions about men and masculinities may be emotionally difficult for some teenage boys and may cause some to become worried, irritable, defensive, or even combative. Facilitators should monitor emotional cues (verbal and non-verbal) to assess if participants are finding discussions emotionally difficult. If necessary, they can intervene in a variety of ways, such as by calling a break and/or having one-to-one conversations. This resource will later provide guidelines on how to manage specific emotional responses, including defensiveness and anger (see 'Potential challenges').

- **Value all contributions:** At the end of the discussion, thank everyone for contributing (except if they violate the terms of the 'group agreement').

17 Keddie, A. (2022) 'Engaging boys in gender transformative pedagogy: navigating discomfort, vulnerability and empathy', *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 30(3), 401–414. doi:10.1080/14681366.2021.1977980

Tips for talking to teenage boys about masculinity

When you initially engage teenage boys in critical discussions about online masculinity influencers, it is important to keep in mind that it may be the first time they are talking about this topic, the concept of masculinity and what it means to be a man with their peers in a group setting. The following section provides a number of practical tips for guiding and moderating these discussions in ways that aim to be constructive and empathetic.

- **Take a positive affirmative approach:** Talking to teenage boys about masculinity should take a positive affirmative approach, rather than one that is negative and combative.[18] The focus should be on critically examining and challenging harmful ideas and behaviours associated with masculinity in ways that support boys in building healthy, respectful and equitable social and intimate relationships.

- **Consider language use:** Avoid making pejorative statements about boys, men and masculinity (e.g. referring to men as 'toxic' or as actual or potential perpetrators of misogyny), which will likely put teenage boys on the defensive and may lead to their disengagement from group discussions.

- **Aim to be non-judgmental and empathetic:** Some teenage boys are engaging with online masculinity influencers because they feel their concerns about gender and masculinity are not being meaningful addressed elsewhere. So, when opening critical discussions about these issues, create a safe, open and inclusive space for interactive discussion, which is non-judgemental and empathetic.

- **Encourage self-reflection and positive aspirations:** Invite teenage boys to critically reflect on the kind of man they aspire to be by asking questions such as 'How would you like to be perceived?', 'What values and morals do you aspire to live by?' (e.g. loyalty, integrity, honesty, kindness, generosity, trustworthiness), 'What actions do you take that are aligned with these values?'. Asking such questions aims to motivate teenage boys to align themselves with positive forms of masculinity, which will ultimately support them in challenging and rejecting harmful behaviours.

- **Affirm positive gendered traits:** Explore how teenage boys can embrace positive gendered traits associated with both masculinity (e.g. courage, assertiveness and strength) and femininity (e.g. emotionally open, caring and empathetic) and the various ways they can put these into practice in their own lives in constructive ways for the common good.

- **Promote equitable gender relations:** Explore how gender inequalities are collective issues that harm everyone (men, women and gender diverse people). Discuss an alternative aspirational model for gendered relations that is not based on dominance, divisive or zero-sum attributions of power, but rather on respectful and gender equitable relationships. Encourage boys to reflect on how they would benefit from this model for gendered relations (e.g. it would enable them to build healthy, respectful and equitable social and intimate relationships).

- **Remain patient and supportive:** It may take some time to engage teenage boys in thinking critically about the harmful content promoted by online masculinity influencers, especially if they have been consuming it over a long period of time. Therefore, it is important to remain patient and supportive as they talk about their experiences and work through associated issues and feelings.

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18   See Flood, N. (2019) *Engaging men and boys in violence prevention*, Palgrave MacMillan.

Key discussion themes

A number of discussion themes have been provided below, which can be used to engage teenage boys in critical discussions about harmful ideas and behaviours promoted by online masculinity influencers such as Andrew Tate, Myron Gaines and Mike Thurston.

Men, masculinity and mental health

Online masculinity influencers often rely on rigid and oppressive forms of masculinity that value strength, self-reliance and stoicism, while stigmatising emotional vulnerability and help-seeking.[19] Some influencers deny the existence of mental health struggles, such as depression (see figure 3), and argue that men can overcome sad feelings through stoicism and willpower. These representations of masculinity can be harmful as they suggest that if boys talk about their mental health or seek help, they are 'weak'. Among other risk factors, emotional stoicism and suppressing emotions can play a role in depression and suicide among men.[20] Therefore, it is important to critically examine representations of men with teenage boys in safe and evidence-based ways, given the lower levels of help-seeking, awareness of services, and overall mental health literacy among boys.[21] The following questions could be used to support these critical discussions in a way that aims to promote critical thinking and reflection skills:

- Some influencers argue that 'real men' must be strong and not show emotion or vulnerability. Why do you think they might say this? (e.g. it might get them 'likes' and followers from specific types of people). What do you think about this?

- Do you think some people may interpret this view of masculinity as helpful and positive? Have you seen these views promoted anywhere else (e.g. mainstream media, advertising, gaming)?

- What other consequences do you think this view of masculinity may have? Do you think it could put boys and men under pressure to behave, think and feel in particular ways? What do you think about this?

- Has this view of masculinity influenced you in any way? (e.g. your behaviour, self-image, social relationships and understanding of what it means to be a man?)

- Do you think someone's mental health could suffer if they don't talk about their feelings or mental health, or seek help when needed? Do you think it's important to seek help when you need it? Why/why not?

- What would be the best way to seek help if you or a friend are having a difficult time with your/their mental health?

Inform participants about advice and support services they can access if they need them (see 'Advice and support' section of this resource).

19   Baker, C. R., Ging, D., & Brandt Andreasen, M. (2024) Recommending Toxicity: the role of algorithmic recommender functions on YouTube Shorts and TikTok in promoting male supremacist influencers, Anti-Bullying Centre Dublin City University.

20   Cleary, A. (2019) *The Gendered Landscape of Suicide: Masculinities, Emotions, and Culture*, Palgrave MacMillan/Springer Nature.

21   Haavik, L., Joa, I., Hatloy, K., Stain, H. J., & Langeveld, J. (2019) 'Help seeking for mental health problems in an adolescent population: the effect of gender', *Journal of Mental Health*, 28(5), 467–474. https://doi:10.1080/09638237.2017.1340630

Masculinity and what it means to be a 'successful' man

Online masculinity influencers, like Andrew Tate, often post content on social media that promote rigid and oppressive views about what it means to be a 'successful' man, which they often associate with wealth and material possessions e.g. such as cars, watches and clothes. Women are often positioned as 'objects' to be dominated and possessed within these influencer spaces. These representations of masculinity can be harmful for boys and men as they can lead them to believe that they must acquire wealth and objectify women in order to be successful and if they do not, they will be seen as a failure. Therefore, it is important to critically examine these representations of 'successful' men with teenage boys in safe and constructive ways. The following questions could be used to initiate and guide these critical discussions in a way that aims to promote critical thinking and reflection skills:

- What do you think it means to be a successful man? What has informed this view? (e.g. representations on mainstream media, advertising, gaming). Have you seen content on social media that has influenced your views? If so, would you like to tell us about it?

- Some online influencers argue that to be a successful man, you need to make lots of money. Do you think some people may interpret this view as helpful and positive? What are the downsides of this view?

- Do you feel this is what it takes to be a successful man? (i.e. make lots of money)

- What may be the counterproductive consequences of this view of masculinity? Do you think it could put boys and men under pressure to behave, think and feel in particular ways? Has this view of masculinity influenced you in any way? If so, how?

- Some online influencers argue that to be a successful man, you need to date and have sex with lots of women? What do you think about this? How do you think it would make women feel?

- Some online influencers promote heterosexuality as the only acceptable sexual orientation. What do you think the potential consequences this view could have?' (e.g. it promotes homophobic attitudes and behaviours).

- Do they think men and boys can achieve success without acquiring immense wealth, material possessions and dating lots of women? Why/why not?

- Can you think of examples of successful men in your personal lives (e.g. fathers, uncles, family friends, sports coaches) and the public realm (e.g. influencers) who do not conform to this rigid idea of what it means to be a successful man?

- How do you think they may benefit from this version of 'success'? (e.g. it opens up opportunities for them to express their personalities, pursue a range of career aspirations and build gender equitable social relationships).

- What do you think you could learn from this version of 'success'?

Inform participants about advice and support services they can access if they need them (see 'Advice and support' section of this resource).

Men, women and gendered roles

Online masculinity influencers, such as Andrew Tate and Roberts Ziogelis, post content on social media platforms on issues relating to men, women and their respective gender roles, which is highly regressive. For instance, some online influencers argue that men should have 'authority' over their female partners, are the 'property of men' and 'belong at home'.[22] This online content promotes oppressive gender roles, which position men as dominant at the expense of women who are controlled by and subservient to men. Some online masculinity influencers promote the idea that men should be violent to women.[23][24] These regressive gendered roles, which are predicated on misogyny and violence against women, are very harmful and should be critically examined with teenage boys in safe, constructive and considered ways. The following questions can be used to guide these discussions, which aim to promote critical thinking and reflection:

- What do the online influencers you follow say about men and women and the roles they should have in society? What roles do they feel men should have? What roles do they feel women should have?

- Do you think these gendered roles are ok? Why/why not?

- Have you seen these messages anywhere else? (e.g. mainstream media, advertising, gaming).

- What impact do you think these gendered roles have on people?

- Do these gendered roles reflect your personal values?

- Do they think men, women and other gendered groups can have relationships with one another, which are not based on dominance? Why/Why not?

- Do you think people could benefit from such relationships? (e.g. it would help them to build healthy, respectful and equitable relationships with one another).

- Can you think of examples of successful men in your personal lives and the public realm who have healthy, respectful and equitable relationships with women and people from other gendered backgrounds?

- How do you think these relationships benefit those people? (e.g. they have a strong social support network, which can support them).

Inform participants about advice and support services they can access if they need them (see 'Advice and support' section of this resource).

22   Will, M. (2023) 'Misogynist Influencer Andrew Tate Has Captured Boys' Attention. What Teachers Need to Know', *Education Week*, 02 February, 2023.

23   Franks, J. (2024) 'Who is Andrew Tate, the self-styled 'king of toxic masculinity', awaiting trial in Romania?', *Sky News*, 4 April, 2024.

24   Howard, H. (2023) 'The misogynistic men making money for social media giants: Fury as TikTok and YouTube continue to host Andrew Tate-inspired influencers amassing millions of fans and charging up to £400 for tips on 'dominating women', *Daily Mail*, 14 January, 2023.

Potential challenges

Those facilitating critical discussions about online masculinity influencers with teenage boys may encounter a number of potential challenges. Experienced facilitators will be trained to deal with such challenges. However, for those who may not have such experience, we have outlined strategies for managing and mitigating specific challenges below:

- **Defensiveness and backlash:** Critical discussions about the relationship between gender, masculinity, power, privilege and gender-based discrimination (e.g. misogyny) can elicit anger, defensiveness and resistance within some teenage boys[25]. Those facilitating these discussions should be self-reflexively engaged and have the skills and willingness to manage these responses empathetically. For instance, rather than viewing angry, resistant and defensive responses as 'problems', see them more as opportunities to engage constructively with teenage boys who are in a process of critically thinking about and working through their inherited beliefs about gender and masculinity. Give boys space to speak about any grievances, frustrations or discomfort they feel about gender-related issues. Listen to these feelings, but do not validate them or agree with discriminatory or hateful comments. Acknowledge that social inequalities, such as those structured by class, race and ethnicity, can structure and mediate boy's and men's access to power and privilege. Point out that boys and men can play an active role in building a culture that supports healthy, respectful and equitable social relationships by helping to tackle and prevent harmful practices, such as gender-based discrimination, racism, classism and so forth. This affirmative approach can be an effective way of engaging boys in critical discussions about masculinity.[26]

- **Discriminatory and hateful comments:** Facilitators should be mindful that they may hear discriminatory and hateful comments when discussing harmful forms of masculinity, including gender-based forms of discrimination (e.g. sexism and misogyny) promoted by online masculinity influencers. Listen to, but do not validate, harmful or discriminatory comments, like sexist and misogynistic views. A range of appropriate and proportionate responses can be used to deal with these responses, such as friendly reminders to the whole group to respect the 'group agreement', to more specific requests directed at individuals to 'self-monitor' their own behaviours, to ensure that exchanges remain respectful. However, try not to shut down or ban specific topics about masculinity from discussion as this may lead boys to feel that their views, concerns and experiences are not being heard. In addition, shutting down discussions about these issues can feed the conspiracy theories promoted by online masculinity influencers, who claim that important issues that relate to men and masculinity (e.g. misandry) are often 'cancelled' by mainstream society. Instead of shutting down these topics of discussion, ask questions that aim to promote critical thinking e.g., 'Do you think that gender-based discrimination may be harmful to those subjected to it?' 'How would you feel if someone you care for was treated this way?'. Asking such questions can also cultivate empathy for those who have been subjected to such discrimination, which can help participants to understand their negative impacts.

- **Reifying polarising 'us' vs. 'them' positions:** Critical discussions about online masculinity influencers may involve talking about the divisive and polarising ideas they promote, such as those that position 'men' vs. 'women', which may reify them. To mitigate this issue, frame gender-based discrimination and gender inequalities as collective issues that harm everyone (men, women, gender diverse people), which removes the 'us vs. them' narrative.

25 Ging, D., Ringrose, J., Milne, B., Horeck, T., Mendes, K., & Castellini da Silva, R. (2024) 'Moving beyond masculine defensiveness and anxiety in the classroom: exploring gendered responses to sexual and gender-based violence workshops in England and Ireland', *Gender and Education*, 36(3): 230-247.

26 See Flood, N. (2019) *Engaging men and boys in violence prevention*, Palgrave MacMillan.

- **Gendered disinformation and conspiracy theories:** Online masculinity influencers often promote gendered disinformation and conspiracy theories, which include the following: 'men are superior to women', 'men and masculinity are under threat in modern society', 'all feminists hate men', 'modern laws give preferential treatment to women', 'statistics on the prevalence of sexual violence against women are false', 'women make false rape allegations against men'. Teenage boys who have engaged with online masculinity influencers and who have consumed their content may make such statements in your group discussions. Be prepared to challenge such statements with appropriate responses. The individuals who verbalise these statements within your group discussion may have complex social, cultural and psychological reasons for doing so (see part 1 of this resource for relevant information), which may require specific support (see the 'resources hub').

Information for schools

Schools can play a key role in building a culture that promotes respectful and gender-equitable relations, which challenges and changes the harmful ideas and behaviours associated with online masculinity influencers, which are predicated on rigid and oppressive forms of masculinity, gender-based discrimination (e.g. sexism, misogyny, homophobia, lesbophobia and transphobia) and sexual and gender-based abuse, harassment and violence against women.

Take a whole-school approach

Schools should take a whole-school approach to proactively build this culture of respectful and gender-equitable relations, which should involve all members of the school community - headteachers, teaching and support staff, students and their parents/guardians. Key components of a whole-school approach should include:

- **An institutional framework:** Devise and implement an institutional framework that actively works to build a culture of respect and gender-equitable relations through a whole-school strategy, action plan and school policies that are driven by effective leadership, which should be committed to tackling and preventing sexual and gender-based abuse, harassment and violence.

- **School curricula:** Students should receive in-depth, ongoing education that fosters gender-equitable identities and relations through the school curriculum, which should start at primary school. This education should support the wider Social, Personal and Health Education/Relationship Sexuality Education/Wellbeing curricula in Irish schools. In addition, schools should have critical media and digital literacy programmes that equip children and young people with key skills, such as how to navigate digital content responsibility, critically evaluate digital information, recognise and avoid misinformation, understand their digital rights and responsibilities, manage their online safety, express themselves creatively through various digital platforms and use digital platforms for communication and collaboration. These critical media and literacy skills, which would enable them to engage safely and responsibly in digital communities, which would mean they are less likely to passively consume algorithm-generated media, such as those associated with online masculinity influencers.

- **Innovative educational resources:**
  Critical digital literacy programmes should explore innovative resources to engage students e.g.

  The **'algorithm of disrespect'** is an educational tool simulating the average young person's online experience. It is designed to educate people on the gender-based discrimination, hateful language and sometimes violence-supportive attitudes that young people who use social media can be exposed to via algorithms that work to engage and inculcate users into harmful and increasingly toxic content over time. This resource can be used to raise critical awareness about these practices among students, teachers and parents/guardians.

  Gentopia - a digital game for young people (aged 14-16 yrs) that promotes gender equality and tackles sexual and gender-based abuse and harassment. The key message of this game is that gender stereotyping and sexism disadvantage people from all gendered groups (women, men and gender diverse people). The game devotes several activities to exploring masculinity and the negative emotional and psychological impact of gender 'straight-jacketing' i.e. how rigid and oppressive forms of masculinity can adversely affect boys and men.

- **Build staff capacity:** Headteachers, classroom teachers, pastoral and support staff should receive relevant training on how to effectively build a school culture of respectful and gender-equitable relations, which should involve learning how to identify, respond to and prevent harmful attitudes and behaviours, including those associated with online masculinity influencers. Examples include gender-based discrimination (e.g. sexism, misogyny, homophobia, lesbophobia and transphobia) and sexual and gender-based abuse, harassment and violence (see the 'resources hub'). Staff should be encouraged to share their safeguarding concerns at an early stage to improve the effectiveness of educational interventions to tackle and address them.

- **Specialist support and expertise:** Headteachers and classroom teachers should seek advice and support from external specialists who have been trained to help schools build cultures of respect and gender-equitable relations, which will involve critically examining rigid and restrictive forms of masculinity, including those promoted by online masculinity influencers, gender-based discrimination and sexual and gender-based abuse, harassment and violence (see 'resources hub' for information).

- **Empowering students:** School staff should empower and support students in building a culture of respect and gender-equitable relations, which should involve learning how to recognise, navigate and deal with harms they may encounter in online and offline spaces, including those associated with online masculinity influencers. They should receive guidance on how to report incidents of sexual and gender-based abuse, harassment and violence to the appropriate authorities. Clear policies and procedural guidelines should be in place to deal with these reports and disclosures in school settings, which should include appropriate safeguarding measures and a clear point of contact.

Long-term commitment: Building a culture of respect and gender-equitable relations and challenging harmful gendered ideologies, attitudes and behaviours, which are deeply entrenched within our society, takes time. Therefore, whole-school initiatives that aim to address these issues must be delivered over a long period of time in order to maximise their effectiveness and impact. Ongoing initiatives to promote gender equality, which are sustained over a longer period of time, are more successful and effective than brief, one-off initiatives. [27]

Link with national-level plans: Whole-school approaches to tackling sexual and gender-based forms of abuse, harassment and violence in Ireland should link with and complement national-level plans, e.g. **Zero Tolerance: Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence 2022-2026**, which is a whole-of-government strategy to combat domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, and the Department of Education's anti-bullying strategy, **Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying**.

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27   See Flood, N. (2019) *Engaging men and boys in violence prevention*, Palgrave MacMillan.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Glossary of terms

Cancelled: A term used to describe someone, often a public figure, celebrity or influencer, who has faced significant backlash and disapproval from the public, typically in response to controversial statements they have made that are deemed offensive. If an influencer is cancelled, they could be banned on social media platforms and/or boycotted by fans.

Gender: A term used to describe the social norms, roles, behaviours that are associated with specific gendered groups, including women, men and gender diverse people, which are learned through processes of socialization. The term 'gender' is different from the term 'sex', which focuses on biological differences: a person's gender may or may not correspond to their biological sex. Gender differences are not fixed, but instead change over time and vary within and between different cultures.

Gender-based discrimination: This term describes cases where someone is treated unequally or less favourably than others simply because of their actual or perceived gender. This includes harassment and/ or discrimination based on their gender identity, or gender expression.

Gendered norms: A term that refers to the different behaviours that are expected of specific gendered groups (men, women and gender diverse people) within specific socio-cultural contexts. Gendered norms and behaviours are harmful when they constrain the life experiences, choices and aspirations of people as a consequence of their gendered identity backgrounds.

Incels: A term used to describe men who are 'involuntary celibates' based on their perceived inability to find a romantic or sexual partner though they desire one.

Manosphere: This term is used to describe a heterogeneous network of online communities that focus on issues relating to men and masculinity, which promote anti-feminism, misogyny and hateful ideas about women, trans communities, and non-binary people via forums, blogs, vlogs and memes that coalesce around false myths and narratives, which are divisive and polarising, e.g. that men's rights have supposedly been 'eroded' as a result of women's rights and feminist gains.

Masculinity: Masculinity (or masculinities) refers to societal ideals of what it means to be a man or a boy, which include attributes, behaviours, languages and practices that exist in specific cultural and organisational locations. Like all gender norms, norms of masculinity vary across different cultures and communities and evolve constantly over time.

Meme: A (social media) meme is online content that often combines an image and text (such as a captioned picture or video), which aims to be entertaining and amusing.

Misogyny: A term that describes hatred or irrational fear of women, including prejudice, hostility, or feeling of disgust towards them.

Misandry: A term that describes hatred or irrational fear of men, including prejudice, hostility, or feeling of disgust towards them.

Online influencer: A person who has developed a sizeable community of followers on social media platforms, like *YouTube*, *Instagram* and *TikTok,* through content production and distribution, social interactions and personal appearances on these digitised spaces, which have the ability to influence others.

Online harms: This term refers to behaviour/s online which may hurt a person physically or emotionally. It could be harmful content or information that is posted online, or information sent to a person, such as cyberbullying, sexual and gender-based abuse, such as misogyny, racism, and material promoting violence-supportive attitudes and behaviours.

Social media algorithms: This is a term used to describe the complex set of rules and mathematical calculations used by social media platforms to rank and prioritise the content a social media user sees in their feeds. Some of the key algorithmic factors taken into account by social media platforms include the content online users have previously engaged with and the relevance and popularity of online posts.

Sexism: Perceiving and judging people only on the basis of their belonging or perceived to belong to a particular sex or gender. Sexism leads to unfair treatment of people on the basis of sex or gender.

Appendix 2: Resources hub

Disclaimer: The following weblinks to external organisations and resources are being provided for information purposes only; they do not constitute an endorsement or an approval by Dublin City University of the opinions, products, services or resources that they feature. Dublin City University bears no responsibility for the accuracy, legality or content of these external weblinks. Please contact the external organisations directly on any matter that relates to content on their websites.

Please review content on the listed websites and resources below before using it with children and/or young people to ensure it is age appropriate and suitable for the intended audience.

Engaging boys and men in critical discussions about masculinity

This section provides some information about organisations who provide specialist support for engaging boys and men in critical discussions about masculinity.

- **Beyond Equality** is a UK-based charity that works with boys and men to tackle gender inequalities in ways that aim to advance gender equality and build inclusive communities and healthier relationships. They deliver online and in-person workshops in schools, universities, sports clubs, workplaces and community spaces.

- **The Men's Development Network** is a non-profit organisation in Ireland, which aims to promote and drive progressive change and gender equality within society via one-to-one and group workshops, training programmes, phoneline support and awareness raising initiatives.

- **Promundo** is an organisation that works to promote gender equality and prevent violence by engaging men and boys in partnership with women and girls via learning programmes, campaigns, and advocacy efforts.

- **Global Boyhood Initiative** is an organisation that provides resources to parents, teachers, and boys to foster healthy masculinity and gender equality.

Tackling and preventing sexual and gender-based abuse, harassment and violence

This section provides some information about organisations who provide specialist support for tackling and preventing sexual and gender-based abuse, harassment and violence in schools.

- **White Ribbon Ireland** is part of a global movement in over 60 countries, which seeks to engage men and boys in working to end violence against women and girls.

- **UK feminista** is an organisation that works for a society in which women and girls live free from sexism, which involves working with schools to end sexual harassment, sexist language and gender stereotyping.

- **Dublin Rape Crisis Centre** provides a range of training programmes for educators who want to work with students to discuss issues of consent, gender-based violence and media.

- **It Happens Education** is a UK-based organisation that delivers Relationships, Sex & Health Education (RSHE) for students, parents & teachers.

- **Everyone's Invited** is a UK-based social movement, which is focused on exposing, tackling and eradicating rape culture through critical discussions, education and offering support.

- **Bold Voices** is a UK-based educational organisation that works with school and university communities to learn, discuss and tackle gender inequality and cultures of gender-based violence. It delivers workshops, talks and offers online resources, which you can access here.

- **Sex Education Forum** is a UK-based charity that works to ensure all young people can get high-quality Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) by training educators and sharing research with teachers, school leaders and politicians. You can access their resources here.

Tackling and preventing racism, fascism and hate

This section provides some information about organisations who provide specialist support for tackling and preventing racism, fascism and hate in schools.

- **Yellow Flag** is an Irish organisation that offers practical programmes, which support primary and secondary schools in Ireland to become more inclusive of all cultures and ethnicities, celebrate diversity and challenge racism and discrimination.

- **Hope Not Hate** is an advocacy group based in the UK, which campaigns against racism, fascism and hate. They work with schools to train teachers and with students to challenge racism, prejudice and to act as a catalyst towards positive behavioural change in pedagogic spaces and elsewhere for a more inclusive society.

Critical media and digital literacy resources for schools

This section provides a list of educational programmes and resources for schools that can be used to build capacity among staff to empower children and adolescents to understand and be critical consumers of the media they engage with in digital spaces, and deal with online harms.

- **FUSE** is an Anti-Bullying and Online Safety Programme developed by Dublin City University's Anti-Bullying Centre, which has been designed to comply with UNESCO's Whole Education Approach to tackle bullying and online safety issues in schools.

- **Gentopia** is a digital game for young people (aged 14-16 yrs) that promotes gender equality and tackles sexual and gender-based abuse and harassment.

- **Let's Get Real** is an educational programme created by the **Dublin Rape Crisis Centre**, which aims to empower young people to be critical consumers of the media they consume, including social media, pop culture and pornography, and to increase their critical awareness of the impact such influences have on their lives, their development and their relationships with others.

- The **Algorithm of Disrespect** is an interactive website tool that has been developed to simulate the average young people's social media feed. It reveals the hidden trends of disrespect, disrespectful content, and influences young people who use digital technologies and social media can be exposed to daily and the various ways it can have a negative impact on their behaviour. This resource aims to increase critical awareness about these practices among the general public and government policymakers, teachers and parents/guardians.

- **Influencer Culture in the Digital Age: Resources for and by Girls and Young Women:** This toolkit provides age focused insights on girls' opinions and experiences of influencer culture, with practical recommendations for girls, parents, and educators to navigate these spaces.

Online safety

This section provides some information about organisations who provide advice and support about online safety.

CyberSafeKids is an Irish charity, which has been empowering children, parents, schools and businesses to navigate the online world in a safer and more responsible way. They have a wide range of resources, which you can access here.

Webwise is the Irish Internet Safety Awareness Centre that promotes safer, better internet use through awareness raising and education initiatives targeting teachers, children, young people and parents/guardians. You can access their resources here.

Internet matters is an organisation based in England, which offers child internet safety advice to parents, careers and professionals. You can access their resources here.

Appendix 3: Advice and support

Please see below information about services in Ireland that offer advice and support to people who have been subjected to sexual and gender-based abuse, harassment and violence.

- **Text About It** is a free, anonymous, 24/7 messaging HSE funded service in Ireland, which provides those who are experiencing a crisis, with a safe space where they can access advice and support. To access this service text 5808.

- **Samaritans** is a charity in Ireland that provides emotional support to anyone in emotional distress, struggling to cope or at risk of suicide throughout the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom. You can access support through their national Helpline – 116 123.

- **Dublin Rape Crisis Centre** is an independent body in Ireland that aims to prevent the harm and heal the trauma of sexual violence. They have a 24-hour helpline – 1800 77 8888. They also provide information about local Rape Crisis Centre/Network across Ireland, which you can access here.

- The **National Male Advice Line** (MAL) is a confidential helpline that offers advice and support to men experiencing domestic abuse and violence. You can access this support through their freephone helpline – 1800 816 588, during specific hours, which are as follows: Mon & Wed: 10am-8pm, Tue & Thu: 12-8pm, Fri 2pm – 8pm, Sat, Sun, Bank Hols: 2-6pm.

- **Health Service Executive (HSE)** provides public health and social care services to everyone living in Ireland, including victims/survivors of sexual assault and violence support, which you can access here.

- **Garda Síochána.** You can report an incident of sexual assault and violence to the Garda Síochána (the national police and security service in Ireland) in person or by telephone. They have a national 24-hour helpline - 1800 77 88 88. They also provide advice and support to victims/survivors of sexual assault and violence support, which you can access here.

- **LGBT Ireland** provides advice and support for people who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans, Online Chat Service, Telefriending and Peer Support Groups. They have a national 24-hour helpline – 1890 929 539.

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