Self-help and masculinity: speech acts in an online men's group

Abstract

This study investigates the interactional norms of a manosphere discussion forum known as *The Red Pill (TRP)*, and asks whether it can be conceptualised as a self-help group. 2104 posts and comments from regular users and high-status users in the community were analysed qualitatively to determine how the community is characterised by certain speech acts, and how these speech acts correspond to face-enhancement and face-threat as well as to certain impression management strategies.

Since personal disclosure, advice-giving, and face-enhancement are key characteristics of *TRP*, it could be argued that *TRP* shares some functional characteristics with self-help communities. However, much of the advice given is unsolicited, a disproportionately high rate of face-enhancement is directed towards high-status users, and speech acts such as elaborating, and some advice-giving and personal disclosure seem to be used for self-promotion purposes. Furthermore, the prevalence of unhedged face-threats sets *TRP* apart from traditional supportive communities.

Keywords: impression management, manosphere, masculinity, relational work, self-help, speech acts

1. Introduction

This study investigates the speech acts, relational work, and impression management utilised by a community known as *The Red Pill* (hereafter referred to as *TRP*), and seeks to determine to what extent *TRP* can be described as a supportive self-help community. *TRP* is a subset of a wider group known as the 'manosphere', which is a loose network of anti-feminist online websites and discussion forums. They are united by the belief that "feminist values dominate society, that this fact is suppressed by feminists and "political correctness," and that men must fight back against an overreaching, misandrist culture to protect their very existence" (Marwick and Caplan, 2018:4). As well as its opposition to feminism, the manosphere is also defined by its sexist stance towards women, and its focus on issues relating to men and masculinity. The manosphere can be split into five groups: men's rights activists (who foreground legal issues), men-going-their-own-way (who advocate that men separate themselves from women to varying degrees), pick-up artists (who use formulaic tactics to seduce women), involuntary celibates (who believe that women will not have sexual and romantic relationships with them, and resent women and people who do have these

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relationships), and *TRP* (who broadly identify with the manosphere but not with one sub-group in particular). The purpose of *TRP*, according to their rules page, is to benefit men by discussing what it means to be a man in the modern era, and to construct a notion of masculinity which *TRP* perceives as an alternative to the mainstream. Although Mountford (2018) claims that the content of *TRP* amounts to self-help advice, and Dishy (2018) notes that *TRP* regularly discuss self-improvement, there has not yet been a linguistic investigation into whether *TRP* can be categorised as a self-help or support group.

While O'Neill (2016), Dayter and Rüdiger (2016) and Rüdiger and Dayter (2020) have investigated the role that social interaction has in pick-up artist communities, most academic and journalistic articles which concern the manosphere have foregrounded the potentially harmful representation of female social actors. The past literature acknowledges that the manosphere broadly refers to women in derogatory and dehumanising ways (Dayter and Rüdiger, 2016; Heritage and Koller, 2020; Lawson and McGlashan, 2017; Krendel, 2020). For instance, Krendel (2020) analysed 42 *TRP* posts and their associated comment threads, and found that women and girls are represented as dehumanised, dishonest, and seeking to both manipulate men and be harmed by men. While this is an important approach to take, past research also emphasises that the social aspect of online communities leads to membership acquisition and retention and, in the case of extremist online communities, to radicalisation (see Bowman-Grieve, 2009). Presently, the intra-group dynamics of the manosphere are widely under-researched, and so the current study addresses this research gap by considering the following core research question:

1) To what extent can *TRP* be described as a supportive self-help community in terms of its discourse?

By investigating how similar or dissimilar *TRP* is to such groups for men, we can further understand what makes *TRP* an appealing community to actively participate in. Furthermore, if *TRP* does share the characteristics of supportive self-help groups, this could give the sexist ideas espoused in the community an image of legitimacy by being couched in self-help language.

To answer the core question, I consider the subsequent specific research questions, which pertain to how *TRP* members act within the community in relation to other in-group members:

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2) What speech acts characterise *TRP*, and to what extent can these be characterised as face-enhancing and face-threatening?

3) How do *TRP* members manage their self-image?

4) Does the *TRP* hierarchy affect the way *TRP* members relate to each other?

Turning to the structure of the paper, I first discuss the past literature on men's talk and online communities which situate themselves as helping men, and then describe the structure and norms of the *TRP* as a community of practice. Following that, I introduce the ten posts in the dataset, and describe the speech acts and impression management strategies in them. I then discuss the findings of this study in comparison to men's self-help communities and men's talk more widely and outline the implications of such findings.

2. Men, self-help, and self-disclosure

Historically, men's talk has been characterised as more information-focussed and competitive than women's talk, which has been characterised as more collaborative (Tannen, 1990). For instance, women were found more likely to give compliments and reference personal attributes in these compliments, whereas men were shown to compliment work performance or skill (Holmes, 1988). A lack of public self-disclosure has also been associated with men's talk, as emotionality is perceived as a feminine trait (Coates, 2003). This manifests in men being less likely than women to seek help for health issues (O'Brien, Hunt, and Hart, 2005), and in men who discuss reading self-help books perceiving the practice as carrying a social stigma (McLean and Vermeylen, 2019).

The self-help literature targeted towards men focuses on career success or managing one's finances (McLean and Vermeylen, 2019), as well as on romantic and sexual success. However, most academic research on this topic deals with pick-up artist guidebooks, which claim to teach men how to seduce women using formulaic techniques. Apart from Mountford's (2018) discussion of *TRP*-adjacent content, the pick-up artist subsection of the manosphere is the only subsection to be consistently referred to as a self-help community. Indeed, Hendriks (2012) characterised pick-up artist guidebooks as advice literature and also noted that both guidebooks and offline pick-up artist experts advocated external actions and internal changes such as valuing self-improvement, self-discipline, and pushing oneself out of one's comfort zone, which Hendriks (2012) argues are established features of the self-help genre. Furthermore, the structure of offline pick-up artist courses, involving an expert who is positioned as infallible teaching a group of paying students, indicates that interacting with

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others is an integral element to the community, a sentiment which is echoed by London-based pick-up artists (O'Neill, 2016).

The pick-up artist community has also grown online, with many popular pick-up artist forums being hosted on the same website as *TRP*. Lawson and McGlashan (2017) conceptualise these online seduction communities as self-help groups, where users share (alleged) offline experiences and tactics with each other in so-called 'field reports' (Dayter and Rüdiger, 2016). These field reports are characterised by self-praise (Rüdiger and Dayter, 2020), supporting Tannen's (1990) assertion that men compete with each other through language use. However, Dayter and Rüdiger (2016) also found that some pick-up artists respond to failure stories with advice and sympathy.

Other online communities which specifically cater to men focus on issues which have been historically considered taboo, namely men's mental and physical health. In such communities, men feel able to talk freely and anonymously, without fear of being judged as unmanly (Hanna and Gough, 2018), and thus emotional support features consistently. For instance, Flynn and Stana (2012) found five types of social support used by the members of a men's online eating disorder forum: personal disclosure in 33.8% of the 358 posts analysed, emotional support in 23.2%, as well as advice (9.3%), providing information (9.1%), and emotional venting (9.1%). Thus, empathy, sympathy, agreement and encouragement were more characteristic of the community than action-oriented advice. However, the opposite trend was found by Gough (2016), who analysed men's talk on an online support forum for depression. She noted that although replies to posts sought to provide reassurance to the original poster that their experiences were shared, many posters gave hedged action-oriented advice, such as recommending exercise. Together, these studies of male-oriented online spaces demonstrate that norms of stoicism typically associated with masculine behaviour are not necessarily applicable to online spaces, as online support communities are characterised by both emotional and factual support to differing degrees.

2.1 *TRP*

Turning to the community of interest to this study, and following Heritage and Koller (2020), who analyse an involuntary celibate community, *TRP* can be conceptualised as a hybrid between a community of practice and an imagined community (Anderson, 1983). This is because while some members seek connection with, and recognition from, others, due to the size of *TRP* (approximately 300,000 users subscribed in October 2018, when subscriber numbers were last publicly viewable), most members are unknown to each other.

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Furthermore, due to the online nature of the forum, many members will be unknown to those who actively post, as many members will subscribe to the forum and read what is posted, but not post themselves.

TRP meets three of the four criteria which define communities of practice (Wenger, 1998:76; Lave and Wenger, 1991). Firstly, *TRP* is defined by the practice of users discussing men's issues using their shared repertoire of in-group jargon (see Krendel, 2020), and specific linguistic routines (e.g. field reports, as discussed in Dayter and Rüdiger, 2016). This is done after users undergo a standardisation process of reading texts which outline the community's anti-feminist beliefs (detailed in Van Valkenburgh, 2018), before they post in the community.

Secondly, these practices have the jointly negotiated and agreed goal of promoting discussions on how to enact a masculine identity in a world which is perceived as being hostile towards men. Van Valkenburgh (2018) noted that the masculine identity of *TRP* is inherently neoliberal, as the core texts of the community (which one has to read before posting on the forum) claim that men must take actions as individuals to optimise themselves, which is also a feature of self-help texts (Hendriks, 2012). Following this initial standardisation process, through subsequent discussions and the upvoting and downvoting of contributions, a *TRP* masculine identity is mutually negotiated by posters. Also, Mountford's (2018) analysis of a *TRP*-adjacent website found that 46% of the posts analysed mentioned the topic of goals and personal growth, and 20% mentioned teaching and learning. This suggests that *TRP* positions itself as an anti-feminist self-help community, which provides men with the knowledge and resources they need to navigate modern society. Thirdly, members regularly interact with each other on the forum. Although it is impossible to know how many users are currently active or how many users view *TRP* content without posting or upvoting/downvoting, there were a total 8316 post upvotes and 921 users in the dataset used for the present study.

However, as opposed to the community being made up of core and peripheral members, as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) predict in their definition of communities of practice, members of *TRP* are structured in a hierarchy. The *TRP* hierarchy is made up of moderators (who curate the content of the website), the Vanguard (members who have contributed for years), senior endorsed contributors and endorsed contributors (whose opinions are valued), and users who are awarded 'point flair' (a number which appears next to their username) and are thus on their way to becoming endorsed contributors. Additionally, the rules assert that

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users in the *TRP* hierarchy should be respected and thanked by other members of the community as their contributions are the most valuable. In comparison, regular users who are not part of this hierarchy are arguably less valued by the community. It should also be noted that this detailed hierarchy is a feature specific to *TRP*, as other groups on the same site typically have only regular users and moderators. Dishy (2018) argues that by participating in the forum posts, regular *TRP* members aim to become endorsed and to climb this hierarchy.

To date, only two studies consider the bonding strategies that members use to relate to each other in the manosphere. In their analysis of a men-going-their-own-way forum (the separatist subsection of the manosphere), Wright, Scott, and Jones (2020:921) observed multiple supportive behaviours between users, such as agreement, encouragement, advice and support, avoidance of arguments, and storytelling, which together "build a sense of solidarity and community around shared struggles and experiences". Similarly, Dishy (2018) found in his analysis of *TRP* posts that anecdotal evidence was used to back up 58.5% of claims made in the data (695 of a total 1188 claims), and that agreement was present in 12.3% of the total 6780 *TRP* posts and comments, whereas disagreement was only present in 1.6% of posts and comments. These results indicate that supportive actions via personal disclosure and agreement are undertaken in the manosphere more widely, and in *TRP* specifically. However, Wright, Scott, and Jones' (2020) study considers more directly supportive speech acts than Dishy's (2018), and thus their findings are not necessarily applicable to the *TRP* subset of the manosphere. Furthermore, although Dishy (2018) argues that regular *TRP* members seek approval from the hierarchy members, this claim has yet to be substantiated through linguistic analysis. This sets the context for the present study, which investigates the nature of interaction between *TRP* users on a broader scale, to determine what could make *TRP* an appealing community to participate in.

3. Data selection, collection and preparation

When choosing which posts and comment threads to analyse, I chose posts' popularity as my criterion. Popularity was determined by the number of upvotes the posts had received from users. I collected the ten most popular posts of the past thirty days at the time of data collection (15th July 2020) along with their associated comment threads. This was done to capture the interactional behaviour of the community at the time of conducting the study. This resulted in a total of 10 original posts and 2094 comments associated with these posts, with 6 original posts and 1911 comments from 884 regular users (91.2% of the dataset), and 4 original posts and 183 comments from 37 members in the *TRP* hierarchy (8.8% of the

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dataset). These posts and comments are polylogic in nature, in that multiple people respond to both the original posts and to individual comments on the original post. A content summary of the original posts, plus the number of upvotes and comments they each received, is displayed in Table 1.

Post number	Upvotes	Comments	Summary
1	1400	343	A regular user discusses a woman who used to be a porn star and now wants the online pornographic videos of herself removed
2	1200	267	A moderator warns users that the group may be banned and that they should move to a replacement website
3	939	139	A regular user argues that too many *TRP* posts focus on out-groups instead of the in-group
4	922	225	A user with point flair gives weight loss advice and encourages feedback
5	713	235	A regular user discusses feeling more fulfilled after a personal achievement than a sexual encounter
6	690	98	A user with point flair writes a fable style narrative about the internet keeping men placated while they are young
7	665	250	A regular user discusses another post on the host website about an unsuccessful open marriage
8	664	159	A regular user discusses another post on the host website where a man catches his wife cheating on him
9	598	203	A moderator provides a space for members to give advice about avoiding, and dealing with, false rape accusations
10	525	175	A regular user gives advice about improving one's appearance and taking pictures for online dating profiles
10 posts total	8316 upvotes	2094 comments	

Table 1: The ten most popular posts of the past 30 days in *TRP,* as of 15th July 2020

I did not seek informed consent from the authors of the posts and comments for two reasons. Firstly, the website from which the data was collected is free to access for anyone with a website account and thus arguably constitutes a quasi-public space (see franzke et al., 2020). Secondly, researching the manosphere presents a potential security risk to myself, as this community holds hostile views towards both women and feminists, and has a history of harassing feminists in a networked manner (Marwick and Caplan, 2018). For these reasons, instead of obtaining informed consent, the name of the website and the titles of the posts have not been given, and when I provide quotations from users, they are anonymised.

I uploaded each of the ten posts and their associated comment threads to ATLAS.ti version 9 for Windows in ten separate documents. Each post/comment was assigned a unique reference number corresponding to the document it came from and its position within that document

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(e.g. 1:1 refers to the first post/comment in the first document). This numeral reference is given in brackets alongside each example. I also labelled the posts and comments for whether the author and direct addressee are regular users or part of the *TRP* hierarchy (i.e. a moderator, Vanguard, senior endorsed contributor, endorsed contributor, or a user with point flair). This hierarchy information is given as part of the numeral references alongside each example, with regular and hierarchy members marked with the letter R and H respectively. Furthermore, to interrogate the effect of the *TRP* hierarchy on speech act use, a distinction was made between speech acts used laterally between peers, upwards from regular members to hierarchy members, and downwards from hierarchy members to regular members. This information was marked using the letters L (lateral), U (upwards), and D (downwards). Due to the low frequency of posts between hierarchy members (only 35 in total), I did not create separate categories to discuss posts between regular members and posts between hierarchy members.

4. Methodology

Firstly, I read each post and comment and inductively compiled a list of the speech acts which occurred in them. For this study, I used Searle's (1969) definition of 'speech act' as the intended function of communication that a speaker wishes to perform via language. Searle (1976) theorised five types of speech act, although these can overlap: representatives, which can be true or false statements about the world (e.g. describing, stating or asserting); directives, which attempt to get the hearer to take action (e.g. ordering, advising, asking); commissives, which commit speakers to future actions (e.g. offering, promising); expressives, which express speakers' attitudes and emotions (e.g. thanking, praising, apologising); and lastly declaratives, which require felicity conditions to render them true (e.g. a boss firing their employee). While the list of speech acts identified in the present dataset (see Section 5) is not exclusively based on Searle's (1976) taxonomy, the latter is still used in an inductive manner to consider what can be classified as a speech act. As I solely focus on how *TRP* members act in relation to other in-group members, only speech acts which were directed towards the in-group were identified.

Following Trosborg's (1995) lead, I argue that speech acts are characterised by their communicative function as opposed to their formal expression at the sentence level. Thus, for this study, the whole post or comment was treated as the unit of analysis. For example, if a comment which consisted of multiple sentences elaborated on a point which was previously made, it was tagged as one instance of the 'elaborating' speech act (discussed further in

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Section 5). The same post/comment could be labelled with multiple speech acts, such as in (1), which was labelled for both complimenting/praising and thanking.

(1) This is a phenomenal post. Thanks for laying it out in such a way that is easy to read and understand. (10:135/R/U)

After identifying these speech acts, I considered the role they play in users negotiating relationships with each other, as well as managing their own self-image. To do this, I classified each speech act as either broadly face-enhancing or face-threatening, in accordance with Locher and Watts' (2005) relational work framework. This is done within the context of my *TRP* data and is not intended to be used as a general typology. Furthermore, although many of the speech acts are labelled as broadly face-enhancing or face-threatening, multiple behaviours can be combined so that users enact both face-enhancement and face-threat in the same post or comment, e.g. defending one user while disagreeing with another. These combined cases are discussed in more detail in Section 5.

I also considered how the speech acts could correspond to certain impression management strategies, i.e. conscious or unconscious attempts to influence other people's perceptions of ourselves (Goffman, 1959). This allowed me to make claims about what speakers could wish to project about themselves in using these speech acts. To do this, I used the five impression management strategies posited by Jones and Pittman (1982): ingratiation (conforming to in-group norms, doing favours, and praising others, to be regarded as likeable), self-promotion (emphasising one's own good qualities and name-dropping important people, to be regarded as competent), exemplification (taking on extra duties, to be regarded as dedicated), intimidation (making threats and expressing anger, to be regarded as threatening), and lastly supplication (acting submissively, to be regarded as in need to help).

However, it was impossible to categorise every speech act in this manner. For example, it could not always be gleaned whether speech acts such as elaborating and advice-giving were face-enhancing or face-threatening in their context. In these instances, the speech acts were only categorised in terms of impression management (see Section 5.2). For other speech acts, they could only be identified as face-enhancing or face-threatening. Indeed, while impression management strategies could be applied to all the face-enhancing speech acts identified in this study, it was not a useful framework for considering three of the four face-threatening speech acts in the dataset: disagreeing, criticising, and correcting other users. This is because disagreeing with another user, criticising their contributions, or correcting the way they

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interpreted a previous post or comment by providing clarification does not necessarily mean that the speaker wants to be seen as either a competent or a threatening person. Instead, it may indicate that they wish to express a potentially face-threatening difference of opinion. This being said, the remaining face-threatening speech act, insults, could be categorised as intimidation impression management, and some corrections of other users constituted self-promotion impression management because they provided original information by way of correction.

Lastly, I considered how all the speech acts were modified by face-saving linguistic strategies. This also included face-enhancing speech acts because users may employ face-saving strategies to pre-empt interpretations of face threat and imposition from other members in the community. Such strategies can also be used to express ambiguity about the topics discussed, in order to minimise the possibility of being incorrect and triggering a conflict within the community. Although two of the three face-saving strategies were classified as ingratiation impression management, the remaining strategy of hedging could not be categorised consistently as indicating a desire to be likeable, competent, dedicated, threatening or in need of help. This is because users could hedge for multiple reasons, including minimising an imposition, expressing deference, and expressing genuine ambiguity or nuance on a topic.

5. Results and discussion

In this section, I firstly discuss the face-enhancing and face-threatening speech acts identified in the data, and the face-saving linguistic strategies which modify them. I then consider the speech acts which were neither face-enhancing nor face-threatening, and the face-saving strategies which modify them.

5.1 Face-enhancing and face-threatening speech acts

All the speech acts identified in the dataset which corresponded to either face-enhancement or face-threat are given in order of frequency in Tables 2 and 3. For reasons of space, only speech acts which occurred over 70 times are discussed in detail. These speech acts are used to address both individuals or groups; for example, a compliment can be extended to an individual or the whole *TRP* community.

Speech act	Definition	Impression management	Example	Total
Agreeing	Agreeing with another user	Ingratiation	"Agree with everything you said" (2:80/R/L)	534 (57.1%)

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Complimenting/praising	Compliment another user and/or their contribution	Ingratiation	"Fantastic story" (4:42/R/U)	173 (18.5%)
Thanking	Thanking another user	Ingratiation, supplication	"Thank you for sharing and writing this out" (3:176/R/L)	87 (9.3%)
Expressing positive emotions	Expressing appreciation, affection, enthusiasm and happiness towards other users	Ingratiation	"I appreciate it man, I'm glad it helped you out" (3:177/R/L)	28 (3%)
Sympathising	Expressing compassion for another user	Ingratiation	"What a shame" (9:202/R/U)	24 (2.6%)
Empathising	Personally relating to another user's experiences	Ingratiation	"Same for me" (5:24/R/U)	21 (2.2%)
Encouraging	Motivating other users	Ingratiation	"Work on yourself and everything will be fine" (6:101/R/L)	19 (2%)
Accepting advice	Explicitly accepting advice given by another user	Ingratiation, supplication	"Nice, going to check it out" (10:6/R/L)	14 (1.5%)
Defending another user	Showing solidarity with another user after they incur a face-threat	Ingratiation	"I don't understand why you're being downvoted" (3:38/R/L)	13 (1.4%)
Congratulating	Congratulating another user	Ingratiation	"Congratulations on losing and keeping the weight off" (10:102/H/D)	9 (1%)
Wishing luck	Wishing another user luck	Ingratiation	"Good luck!" (8:53/R/L)	8 (0.9%)
Agreeing to disagree	Foregrounding respect for another user while acknowledging an irreconcilable difference of opinion	Ingratiation	"I can appreciate that at least. We can disagree with each other without being a little shit about it" (1:62/R/L)	6 (0.6%)
Total				936 (100%)

Table 2: Face-enhancing speech acts found in *TRP*

Speech act	Definition	Impression management	Example	Total
Disagreeing	Disagreeing with another user	N/A	"they were criticised lol" (9:20/R/L), in response to "They can't be criticised in any way and they can do whatever the hell they want" (9:18/R/L)	348 (56.4%)
Criticising	Criticising an element, or the importance, of another user's contribution	N/A	"Posting shit like this is counterproductive. It's stupid garbage nobody should waste their time or energy on." (1:257/H/D)	153 (24.8%)
Correcting another user	Correcting an aspect of what another user has said	N/A or self-promotion	"I never said it was RP men who did it" (6:118/R/U)	63 (10.2%)

			"That's calorie restriction not fasting" (10:87/R/L)	
Insulting	Explicitly insulting (an)other user(s) via personalised negative vocatives and assertions (Culpeper, 2011)	Intimidation	"you fat lazy bastards" (10:171/R/U) "you guys can't read" (10:196/R/L)	53 (8.6%)
Total				617 (100%)

Table 3: Face-threatening speech acts found in *TRP*

In total, 936 instances of face-enhancing speech acts were identified, compared to 617 face-threatening ones, and 12 different types of face-enhancing speech act were found compared to 4 face-threatening ones. This suggests that, overall, *TRP* can be classified as more supportive than combative. However, while agreeing is the most frequent speech act, it is followed by disagreeing, complimenting/praising, and criticising. This illustrates that despite being characterised by face-enhancement over face-threat, *TRP* contains more face-threatening work than may be expected from a traditional self-help environment (e.g. Locher, 2006). Furthermore, three face-saving linguistic features which modified all speech acts were identified, as shown in Table 4. The fact that these only occurred in 5.8% of the posts and comments analysed suggests that face-saving behaviours are not typical in this *TRP* sample.

Face-saving strategy	Definition	Impression management	Example	Total
Hedging	Making assertions vague/conditional	N/A	"That's not normal. Maybe do some tests." (3:6/R/L)	104 (86%)
Use of politeness markers	Politeness markers such as "please" used non-sarcastically	Ingratiation	"Please post this on NoFap" (4:66/R/U)	12 (9.9%)
Pre-empting face-threat interpretation	Seeking to mitigate a potential face-threatening act before it happens	Ingratiation	"Not attacking genuinely asking" (1:273/R/L)	5 (4.1%)
Total				121 (100%)

Table 4: Face-saving linguistic strategies in *TRP*

Considering face-enhancement in more detail, the three most common face-enhancing speech acts were agreeing (accounting for 57.1% of all face-enhancement) complimenting/praising (18.5%) and thanking (9.3%). Users explicitly compliment the contributions and alleged actions of other individual users, as opposed to their intrinsic qualities, and thank each other for useful posts using strongly evaluative language. For example, in (1) in Section 4, the post is positively evaluated via 'phenomenal' and 'easy to read and understand'. This is arguably less personal than complimenting someone's personality, which is in alignment with Holmes' (1988) findings on men's complimenting patterns. Moreover, gendered terms of affection

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such as 'bro' and 'brother' are used alongside agreeing and complimenting/praising, and thus the presumed masculine identity of other users is foregrounded.

Although the majority of these speech acts are used to address individual users, the whole *TRP* community is also addressed in some instances, particularly in Post 2. For instance, in (2), a regular user compliments and thanks the whole group for having a positive influence on their life.

> (2) I'm so grateful I stumbled upon this [group] 6 years ago when people were saying it was sexist. I have changed so much people don't even recognise me. I couldn't even speak to girls and I finally feel like I have an abundance. You posters and commenters genuinely changed my life trajectory. Thank you. (9:91/R/U)

Examining the distribution of these face-enhancing speech acts reveals that 23.8% of all face-enhancement was directed upwards, whereas 71.5% of face-enhancing speech acts occurred between peers and 4.7% was directed downwards. Hierarchy members authored 8.8% of the total posts and comments, so if hierarchy did not have an effect on commenting behaviour, we could expect 8.8% of the speech acts to be directed towards them. Thus, the disproportionately high rate of upwards face-enhancement suggests that some of it is done strategically in *TRP*, in that users may seek to climb the *TRP* hierarchy by enhancing the face of hierarchy members. Indeed, over half of all complimenting/praising and thanking instances are directed upwards. Contrastingly, hierarchy members direct a smaller proportion of face-enhancing speech acts towards regular users than vice versa, with only one hierarchy member accounting for 28.2% of downwards face-enhancement. This demonstrates that although *TRP* may appear to be a broadly supportive community, these supportive behaviours are affected by whether the interlocutor is a member of *TRP* hierarchy. This was also the case for face-saving, where 76.9% of face-saving was done laterally, 16.5% of all face-saving was directed upwards but only 6.6% was directed downwards.

Turning now to face-threats, their prevalence in *TRP* sets the community apart from traditional self-help groups. Disagreement, which accounts for 56.4% of total face-threat, is only hedged in 62 of 346 instances (17.9%). Criticism accounts for 24.8% of face-threat and tends to target individuals as opposed to the whole group. However, criticism can be expressed in more or less threatening ways. For instance, in (3), one user criticises another user in an unhedged manner for how they are interpreting a given discussion, and in (4), the

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criticism of multiple users' comments is maximised via taboo language. Moreover, only 13 of the 153 instances of criticism co-occur with a face-saving strategy.

(3) You're not listening to what people are actually saying (6:68/R/L)

(4) jesus christ the state of these fucking comments (8:127/R/L)

However, the fact that agreeing and disagreeing co-occur 60 times indicates that some disagreement posts discuss multiple viewpoints on a given topic and hedge their assertions. For example, in (5), one user responds to another user who claims that there are no reasons for men to be married.

(5) Agree that marriage is a certain loser for a man, but if you want to raise children right, there's no other option (6:103/R/L)

Conversely, when criticism co-occurs with face-enhancing speech acts, this reveals a competitive element within the group which is absent from traditional support communities. For instance, users compare one another, as in (6), where individual face is enhanced at the expense of group face using taboo language. Alternatively, users criticise an element of a post while agreeing with the overall message, as in (7) where the original post (1:1/R/L) is followed by the critical response (1:298/R/L). Taken together, such instances of criticism suggest that *TRP* is a more hostile space than traditional support communities.

(6) much better than the bullshit advice that gets upvoted [in this group] (8:19/R/L)

(7) So [a woman] has started a petition to get her pornhub videos removed and it has garnered 1.1 million signatures…she talks about how much she regrets doing porn and was "taken advantage of" for doing it and being paid so little. But she was paid market rate... And chose to do it... Along with additional videos after the fact... It [sic] literally the equivalent of a retroactively withdrawing consent. (1:1/R/L)

Badly written post but I get what you mean. She gave consent to the relevant parties to have her porn videos up. (1:298/R/L)

These face-threatening speech acts are not restricted to peer-to-peer interaction, as 13.9% of face-threatening speech acts are directed upwards at the *TRP* hierarchy (whereas 9.6% are directed downwards). In upwards instances, users attempt to position themselves as more knowledgeable than the hierarchy member, as in (8). The first utterance (1:97/H/D) is by an endorsed contributor, and the second (1:98/R/U) is an unhedged disagreeing response from a

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regular member, which is framed informally via 'nah' and boosted via the intensifier 'exactly'. Thus, the regular user does not show any deference.

> (8) She regrets that she isn't as hot as she used to be and gets far less attention so lets pay her even less now (1:97/H/D)

> Nah, she doesn't regret anything. She knows exactly what she's doing. (1:98/R/U)

This indicates that despite the prevalence of lateral and upwards face-enhancement in the dataset, *TRP* is not characterised by unwavering deference from regular members to hierarchy members. Furthermore, the fact that 39.7% of the speech acts discussed in this section constituted face-threats suggests that *TRP* is not a traditional supportive group.

Having considered the speech acts which corresponded to face-enhancement and face-threat, I will now consider the rest of the speech acts.

5.2 Other speech acts
The rest of the speech acts identified in the dataset are listed below in Table 5 by frequency. As in Section 5.1, only those speech acts which occur over 70 times are discussed in detail.

Speech act	Definition	Impression management	Example	Total
Elaborating	Building on a previous point made in the discussion	Self-promotion	"They banned 2000 [groups]" (9:97/H/L), responding to "[host website] may ban TRP" (9:1/H/L)	636 (35.9%)
Personal disclosing	User discloses their positive or negative feelings, inner thoughts, and personal experiences	Ingratiation, supplication, self-promotion	"I had anabolic french toast for dinner last night" (10:36/RL) "I couldn't get laid to save my life lol thank god I found TRP" (3:96/R/L) "The easiest way for me to lose weight is by doing extended (3-day) fasts" (10:169/R/U)	389 (22%)
Advice-giving	Giving advice in declarative, directive, interrogative, conditional, or indirect forms	Self-promotion	"Stop watching porn" (1:296/R/L) "It's unwise to sabotage your potential at growing in this area." (6:24/R/L)	344 (19.4%)
Asking questions and making requests	Asking non-rhetorical questions and making requests	Supplication	"So you mean that keto is a scam?" (8:38/R/L)	197 (11.1%)

Answering questions and requests	Answering non-rhetorical questions and requests	Self-promotion	"The way it's marketed, yes", responding to "So you mean that keto is a scam?" (8:40/R/L)	152 (8.6%)
Joking	Making jokes and using sarcasm	Ingratiation[1]	"Her pussy haunted lmao" (5:14/R/L)	37 (2.1%)
Apologising	Apologising directly, or indirectly through admitting fault	Supplication	"My apologies for my arrogant message" (9:200/R/U) "Bad wording on my part" (4:11/R/L)	10 (0.6%)
Offering assistance	Offering to write specific posts and direct messages for other users	Exemplification	"I'll do a post on my protocol" (10:29/H/D)	7 (0.4%)
Total				1772 (100%)

Table 5: The remaining speech acts found in *TRP*

Elaboration is the most common of these speech acts (and indeed the most frequent speech act overall), followed by personal disclosing (third most frequent overall), advice-giving (fifth most frequent overall), asking questions, and answering questions. Thus, the most common impression management strategies used in *TRP* overall are ingratiation and self-promotion. In elaborating, users self-promote by introducing new factual information in response to other users' contributions and thus present themselves as a source of relevant and original information. For instance, in (9), a user directly responds to Post 7 (5:1/R/L), which discusses another post on the host website about a man whose wife has cheated on him. The responder (5:163/R/L) both agrees with the premise of the original post (i.e. negatively evaluating the woman for her behaviour and the man for excusing her initial flirting with a co-worker) and contributes with an 'even worse' story. By doing this, the responder intensifies the severity of the perceived issue being discussed.

(9) This post ended up making its way to the front page and I couldn't help but gag. "[UPDATE] You were right. I ignored every single one of your comments and eventually caught my wife with the other man."…This man allowed a small indiscretion to become a larger indiscretion and it cost him nothing more than his pride and sanity. In the previous post we learn of a "man" who caught his wife in a compromising situation. (5:1/R/L)

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[1] Although there is the occasional instance of contestive humour in this dataset, it cannot be accurately categorised as intimidation, nor any other impression management strategy.

There's an even worse one today, where some kid 'takes a break' and his virgin girlfriend promptly sleeps with 3 guys in a month, and now wants back with him, and he wants to take her back. (5:163/R/L)

The fact that elaborating co-occurs with 43.1% of agreeing and 40.5% of disagreeing shows that elaborating is used to back up user's evaluative stances regardless of face-enhancement or face-threat. The prevalence of elaborating differentiates the group from traditional support communities, as members make original topic contributions more often than engaging in either personal disclosure or advice-giving.

On the other hand, the prevalence of personal disclosing in the dataset suggests that *TRP* is also a space to share one's personal feelings and experiences, which mirrors the purpose of traditional support communities. However, in this dataset, personal disclosure serves multiple impression management purposes. Firstly, personal disclosure can be considered an ingratiation strategy, as the past literature has identified self-disclosure as a key facet of communication for developing relationships and bonding with others (Altman and Taylor, 1973). This is best illustrated in examples such as (10), where users reciprocally disclose their feelings and experiences on a shared topic. In (10), users in (1:48/R/L) and (1:49/R/L) share their surprise and upset about finding out that their shared role models, Jesse and Kong, experienced a falling out after Jesse's ex-girlfriend, Kel, began a relationship with Kong.

   (10) Oh and fun fact about [a pick-up artist YouTube Channel], that super hot girl Kel
        dumped Jesse and started fucking his best friend and business partner Kong.
        (1:74/R/L)

        Damn, I had no idea about the whole Kel and Kong hookup! I used to follow [a pick-
        up artist YouTube channel] quite religiously and it was my gateway into pick-up
        when I was young. (1:48/R/L)

        Yeah it was really sad when I found out. They were like my role models getting into
        pick-up. (1:49/R/L)

Personal disclosure can also be used as a supplication strategy in *TRP*, as users can disclose that they need assistance. For example, in (11), a user discloses their negative personal experience with a diet program and admits to needing better dieting advice than the programme is giving. They thank the original poster for the help they provide, and

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compliment both their guidance as 'detailed', 'convenient', and 'useful', and their personality as 'awesome'.

(11) Dude, thank you for writing this and providing detailed convenient options. I'm in a official paid diet program right now and nothing they're provided so far is even close to as useful as the info you provided here. You are awesome. (10:131/R/L)

Personal disclosure is also used as a self-promotion strategy, as users construct themselves as experts using their own thoughts and experiences. For instance, personal disclosure is used to express personal opinions, as in (12), where the user also presents themselves as a spokesperson for the group via the first-person plural pronouns 'us' and 'our'. Personal disclosure can also be used to explicitly brag, as in (13), where the user provides positive feedback on an advice post while stating that they themselves do not need such advice. However, such instances are rare.

(12) I think there's nothing wrong with sex, it feels amazing. It's just not something us men should prioritize and chase as much as our goals (3:169/R/L)

(13) I can't be arsed reading all that because I don't need the advice but it looks good (8:19/R/L)

Furthermore, the fact that 22.6% of personal disclosure was directed upwards (and only 6.9% was directed downwards) indicates that, like face-enhancement, this can be done in a strategic manner. This is particularly prevalent in the responses to Post 2, in which regular users respond to a moderator, who says that the group is likely to be shut down, by disclosing their personal positive experiences with *TRP* while signalling both metaphorical kinship and in-group identity. For instance, in (14), the masculine kinship term 'brothers' and the collective 'you' signal group face-enhancement towards the whole *TRP* community, in view of the moderator who originally posted.

(14) Brothers, it was a pleasure fucking around with you. Thanks to you, I have grown a lot in the past year and a half. (9:80/R/U)

It could be argued that by enacting whole group ingratiation in view of hierarchy members (and thus upwards), this ingratiation also constitutes a form of self-promotion, as regular members foreground their own membership in the community.

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Moving on, while the prevalence of advice-giving might suggest that *TRP* shares the advising function of other support communities, this is not done in the question-and-answer format observed in the past literature (Locher, 2006). Indeed, only 20 instances of advice-giving are in response to a question in the comment section, and although two posts in the dataset (Posts 4 and 9) explicitly facilitate advice-giving between users, only 136 of the 344 instances of advice occurred in these posts. This indicates that over half of the advice in the dataset is unsolicited. This phenomenon is particularly visible in the comments of Post 8 (6:1/R/L), where users respond to a user sharing a story about a married couple who are external to *TRP*. In (15), a user responds to the original post (6:1/R/L) by directing advice at the out-group man, who will likely never see the advice.

(15) Wife demands Open Marriage or else divorce. Husband accepts for the kids. Wife starts sleeping with a guy lined up immediately. Husband finds someone to sleep with. Wife becomes furious, demands Closed Marriage. (6:1/R/L)

make her know she doesn't have the power over you (6:48/R/L)

Giving advice in *TRP* is used to show other community members that they are knowledgeable and thus in a position to offer advice, constituting self-promotion. Furthermore, advice-giving is more often directed upwards (23.8%) than downwards (10.5%), which suggests that advice-giving is used strategically by regular users. Although the majority of this advice is directly elicited by hierarchy members in their own posts (Posts 4 and 9), by giving advice under the gaze of hierarchy members, regular users can promote themselves by demonstrating their knowledge.

In all directions of communication, advice is typically given in a directive form (48.5% of advice, or 167 comments, with only 8 instances hedged), or in a declarative form (33.7% of advice, or 116 comments, with only 13 instances hedged). This indicates that more potentially face-threatening forms of advice are preferred by most users in *TRP*, a finding which conflicts with past research on online advice-giving (Locher, 2006). As these instances of advice-giving can be interpreted as enacting self-promotion, the preference for directive and declarative forms could reflect the confidence the speaker may wish to project.

Lastly, considering how questions and requests occur in *TRP,* as mentioned above, users rarely ask for advice or reassurance. Rather, users ask other users for factual information and clarification, and for their opinions about certain topics. By positioning themselves as needing supplementary information, asking questions and making requests can be considered

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a supplication strategy in *TRP* overall. However, this supplication strategy saves the speaker's face to some extent, as the requests are relatively impersonal, particularly in comparison to the instances of personal disclosure in which a degree of vulnerability and supplication was expressed (see example (11)). Furthermore, the function of questions as directives prompting further contributions from other users (in either a face-enhancing bonding manner or a face-threatening critical manner) should also be acknowledged. In answering questions and requests which require specific factual knowledge, users aim to demonstrate that they have sufficient knowledge to answer said questions, and doing so therefore constitutes another self-promotion strategy. Furthermore, 20.4% of answering is directed downwards whereas only 6.6% is directed upwards. Conversely, 31% of asking is directed upwards whereas 10.6% is directed downwards. Thus, regular users ask for a disproportionate amount of information from hierarchy users, who in turn provide it. This shows that hierarchy users are seen as trusted sources of information, which reinforces their powerful position within the community.

Overall, these findings reveal that although *TRP* is characterised by personal disclosure, advice-giving and information sharing, the way in which this occurs is not typical of a traditional men's self-help group.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, although *TRP* shares the face-enhancing, personal disclosing, and advice-giving characteristics of traditional self-help groups, there are three reasons why it cannot be deemed a self-help group. Firstly, the prevalence of unhedged face-threatening speech acts in *TRP* demonstrates that the community is less supportive than traditional self-help groups. Secondly, the evidence would suggest that face-enhancing speech acts are used strategically. Indeed, although *TRP* is characterised by agreeing, complimenting/praising, and thanking, these are disproportionately directed towards members of the *TRP* hierarchy, as encouraged by the site rules. This suggests that face-enhancement could be done strategically to advance one's own position in the community. Thirdly, the prevalence of self-promotion via elaboration, advice given in directive and declarative forms (much of which is unsolicited) and self-promoting personal disclosure sets *TRP* apart from traditional self-help groups. Overall, *TRP* aligns with a traditionally masculine mode of communication where potentially face-threatening assertions, debate, and extended discussions which deal with information outnumber posts which offer emotional support and solicited advice.

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Although *TRP* should not be considered a self-help group on the basis of the present findings, the fact that *TRP* shares the face-enhancing, personal disclosing, and advice-giving characteristics of such groups may give the community an image of legitimacy it can use to further its ideology. Indeed, in the present study, users discussed their experiences of personal growth since finding *TRP,* which could make them more likely to engage with the community more and to internalise the sexist beliefs which characterise it. As detailed in the past literature, the beliefs shared in *TRP* have the potential to harm women and gender relations (Krendel, 2020).

For further insight into how *TRP* users conceptualise their community, future researchers could conduct interviews with members of the community, to determine their personal reasons for joining *TRP*, and the factors which encourage them to actively participate in the forum. Future research could also examine the popularity of different posts' topics, such as advice posts, using the host website's upvoting/downvoting system, which would allow for the analysis of a larger dataset. Overall, this study has shown that the formal features of online self-help groups can be utilised by otherwise hateful communities, to encourage members to actively participate in the forum.

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