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“The purpose of life is finding the largest
burden that you can bear and bearing it.”

– A study of the making of meaning among Jordan
Peterson supporters

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to study, understand and explain the theories and work of the Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson, whose controversial statements and lectures have made him a darling of certain factions of the political right, as he portrays himself as an enemy of progressive ideology. With a focus on understanding and explaining Peterson and how he provides meaning to his followers, the study will go through Peterson's work in his two books *Maps of Meaning* and *12 Rules for Life* in order to analyze their content and the follower's reaction to the books as well as Peterson's persona as a whole.

To analyze these works, hermeneutic methods based on the work of Finnish theologian Björn Vikström will be utilized. The texts will be analyzed on a textual and intertextual level, but the role of the author as well as the readers will also be put under scrutiny in order to elaborate on many aspects of Peterson's writing. To analyze how he provides meaning to his followers and the definition of the terms *lifestance* and *meaning*, the work of Swedish theologian Carl Reinhold Bråkenhielm will be referenced and compared to Peterson's work.

While Vikström and Bråkenhielm will be the main sources of intertextual comparison with Jordan Peterson, they will also be supplemented with the work of other established theologians such as Hjalmar Sundén and others to further understand and compare the making of meaning undertaken by Jordan Peterson to other academic studies in the field of making meaning.

Keywords: meaning, lifestance, psychology of religion, hermeneutics

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1. Introduction and Purpose

In the autumn of 2018, the Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson visited Sweden thrice; first to participate in the television show *Skavlan*, which he did on the 24th October. After that, he visited Stockholm two more times, on the 5th and 10th of November respectively, to hold lectures in front of a live audience on stage in the centre of Stockholm. All of his visits were highly covered by the Swedish press: major newspapers like *Dagens Nyheter*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Aftonbladet* and many more all covered the psychologists visit, producing a vast amount of articles, opinion pieces and criticism (Bojs, 2018).

But why did a visit of a foreign academic cause such a stir within the Swedish media? After all, many academics come and visit Sweden to hold lectures, but very few get such a large media reception. The answer to that question is quite simple: few academics are as controversial, which have given Jordan Peterson a large media platform. Among his many fans, he is a highly regarded intellectual guide (Svanell, 2018), while his detractors regard him as dangerous or regressive (Lynskey, 2018). This divide has only grown wider as Jordan Peterson has grown more famous, leading to the American news channel Fox News, famous for their right-wing leaning, having presented him as "The Left's new public enemy no. 1" (Carlson, 2018), while left-leaning newspaper such as the Swedish *Aftonbladet* produces opinion pieces pointing out the psychologist's errors (Al-Dewany, 2018).

While the essay will elaborate further on Jordan Peterson and his work later, for now, one merely needs to know how the psychologists' high profile and controversial nature. The source of his controversy and fame is his academic work: his books such as *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief* and *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote for Chaos*, as well as his YouTube channel and podcasts, where he hosts his lectures. In these books and lectures, he spreads his world-view and rules for life, which are often inspired by his Christian upbringing and religious world-view, as well as a pronounced dislike of feminism and political correctness, and what one might generously call a 'classical' view of gender (Kelman, 2018).

Above all, Jordan Peterson's work is aimed at what he describes as the modern young man, who he believes have been feminized and separated from classical religion, leading to them becoming aimless, rootless and spiritually adrift. Through his 12 Rules and lectures, he tries to reconnect the young men with classical masculinity, and he uses Bible stories and other religious and mythological parables to do so (Heller, 2018). As a result of this focus, a large group of young men have flocked to Jordan Peterson's lectures and work; but who are these men, and what is the spiritual meaning that Jordan Peterson's work creates for them?

1.1 Research Question

The aim of this thesis is to explore the young men (and to a lesser extent, women) who have been attracted to Jordan Peterson's lectures and worldview, and the phenomenon that arose around him. Primarily, the questions will be the following:

- *Who is Jordan Peterson, and what are his teachings?*
- *Who are the men following his teachings, and why?*
- *What purpose and meaning are Peterson's teachings meant to fulfill for these men?*

To do this, the study will focus on Jordan Peterson's books, with an emphasis on the later *12 Rules*, as well as selected videos from his YouTube channel to see what is expressed by the commentators on his videos, to see how Jordan Peterson's lessons on how religion and mythology creates spiritual meaning correspond to the young men's need. The videos will be selected after how they relate to the theme of the essay, and then finally studying the comments as well as the content of Jordan Peterson's argument to analyze the relation between the two.

Ultimately, the focus will be on the content of Jordan Peterson's teaching, as well as his fanbase and the making of meaning they participate in as they follow Jordan Peterson's lectures and lessons.

2. Background

2.1 Jordan Peterson

Jordan Bernt Peterson is a clinical psychologist and a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto, studying the areas of abnormal, social and personality psychology, with an emphasized interest on the subject of belief, which will be elaborated on in the section below (ResearchGate, 2018). Born in 1962, he grew up in the small town of Fairview in Canada. Peterson was politically active from a young age, working for the centre-left, social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP). However, after joining the party as a young teenager, he left it when he was 18 years old, citing disillusionment with the party: in his first book *Maps of Meaning*, he described his reasoning as finding that the middle-class socialists in his party were motivated by resentment towards the rich, and he expresses a skepticism towards anyone wishing to change the world by changing others rather than themselves (Peterson, 1999, p. xiii). This belief, that the political left is motivated by resentment, would later be included in his academic work and the speaking tours he has gone on.

In 1999, Jordan Peterson's first book *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief* was published by Routledge. It was written over the duration of Jordan Peterson's academic career, taking 13 years for him to write it. The book spans a wide variety of subjects: from poetry to brain chemistry, religion and psychology to animal behaviour and more (Lambert, 1998). In this wide-spanning book, he tries to explore how evil came to play a role in the world - why humans commit atrocities like the Holocaust or genocides, or create Gulags and concentration camps. While the book is undeniably broad in what it attempts to cover, two of Jordan Peterson's arguments will continue to feature in his work. One of these is the view of the world consisting of a conflict between order and chaos; order representing culture, knowledge and the known while chaos represents the unknown, nature and overt emotions. He describes the two forces as represented by two divine figures: the Great Father who personifies order and represents explored territory, while unexplored territory and chaos is personified the Great Mother. Between the two of them is the Divine Son, the representation of the 'archetypical individual' who navigates between order and chaos (Peterson, 1999, p. xxi). It's in this framework, navigating between order and chaos, Jordan Peterson means we exist.

Arguing this is his second point; that we as individuals represent and personify grand mythology in our ordinary life, as we navigate between order and chaos. Mythological representation and stories form our human experience; they shape who we are and what we strive for, which is exploring the "known, orderly" world to guard ourselves from chaos. Stories and mythology represent who we are, where we would like to be and how we are going to get there (Peterson, 1999, p. 20). Being a follower of Jungian psychology, Peterson means that mythology and stories represent the *collective unconscious* – the unconscious that mankind as a whole share, creating our shared framework for existence (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018).

These two points: order versus chaos, as well as the role of mythology in our human experience, became the framework of Jordan Peterson's second book *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote for Chaos*. Released in 2018, this self-help book provides life advice in how to navigate through chaos to create an orderly life. Unlike *Maps of Meaning*, which was academic this, *12 Rules* is told through anecdotes and essays written by Jordan Peterson to detail the titular 12 rules which is meant to be improve one's life (Bartlett, 2018).

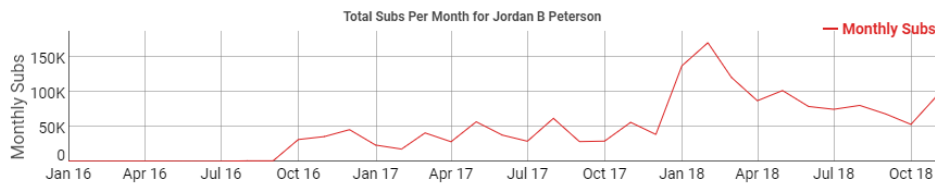
While Jordan Peterson had originally been a fairly obscure figure, it was the release of *12 Rules* that rocketed him to international fame. Before that, he was mostly famous as a Toronto professor who refused to use gender-neutral pronouns for his transgender students, which sparked a controversy at the time (Murphy, 2018). Following this, he participated in various podcasts and YouTube videos, arguing his case and spreading his message, but his main source of fame came, as so many other things in 2018, as a viral video.

In January of 2018, Jordan Peterson was invited to an interview on Channel 4 News, a British television news program. The interview was about his "controversial views" on gender, the gender pay gap and many other stereotyped 'left-wing' topics. The video became a huge viral success, and as of the time of writing have amassed more than 13 million views. In the video, Jordan Peterson is interviewed by the journalist Cathy Newman, who presses Jordan Peterson on his opinions (Channel 4 News, 2018). The video quickly gained a large amounts of view, with viewers praising Jordan Peterson's calm mannerism and attacking Cathy Newman for her line of questioning. Soon, she became the target of online abuse and ridicule (Revesz, 2018).

In online forums, images mocking her were also being created, emphasizing how reasonable they claimed Jordan Peterson was, compared to Newman's performance (Downer, 2018). A video further pushing this narrative, titled "Jordan Peterson Leaves Feminist Speechless" (reducing Newman to merely a representative 'feminist') has gained 3,7 million views and 55,000 "likes", with the comment section sharing a consensus that he "destroyed" her, and a mutual distaste of what they describe as "third wave feminism" (Tobin, 2018).

Following this interview, Jordan Peterson's received a massive influx of followers. After January 2018, his follower count on YouTube sharply increased, signaling his newly discovered popularity.

Figure 1: A graph showing Jordan Peterson's YouTube subscriber count.



Jordan Peterson's YouTube subscription count from when he started the channel to October 2018, showing a spike in subscriptions in January 2018. Graph accessed from Social Blade (Social Blade, 2018).

It was this newfound popularity among conservative and right-wing supporters that led to Jordan Peterson's increased popularity and relevance, his controversial, near rock-star status among certain online communities, and to *12 Rules* becoming a global bestseller topping multiple charts and to his lectures being sold out all over the world (Washington Post, 2018). Just like on YouTube, his rise in popularity can also be chronicled on the online funding site Patreon.

Figure 2: A graph showing Jordan Peterson's Patreon supporter count



Jordan Peterson's Patreon support from the start of January 2018 until the end of November 2018, showing his increase in supporters. Patreon is a website where fans can pay the owner of the account a monthly fee to financially support them. Graph accessed from Graphtreon. (Graphtreon, 2018).

2.1.1. Jordan Peterson and religion

Jordan Peterson was raised in a Christian household and attended a conservative Protestant church during his upbringing. However, he doesn't describe his family as having been particularly dogmatic or authoritarian in their religion; in his words, he simply grew up in an era where everyone where he came from attended church (Peterson, 1999, p. xi). As he grew up, he left the church, but he continually describes himself as culturally and philosophically a Christian (Peterson, 1999, p. xii).

In general, Jordan Peterson seems to have a complicated relationship to his personal religion. Asked in interviews, he has described himself as agnostic as well as Christian. In a 2017, his answer to the question "Are you a Christian?" was a 'yes', but when asked to elaborate, he mentions that there are "different kinds of truths", and he regards himself as "agnostic" towards believing that Jesus rose from the dead; a central tenet in most forms of Christianity. In the same interview, he also rules out other core tenets of most mainstream Christianity like the existence of Heaven, life after death and redemption (Peterson, 2017).

Instead, Jordan Peterson has a more Jungian perspective on religion, where the world is formed by belief, and uses this as a springboard for his view that mythology – Biblical, but also from other religions – form the world (Peterson, 1999, s. xx). It's this more fluid definition of what religion means that allows Peterson to argue that, when he describes his main academic area of interest is *belief*, he doesn't just mean religious belief, but also ideology as a sub-category of religion (Tucker, 2016).

It's in this gray area between religious belief, mythological concepts and agnostic where a lot of Jordan Peterson's arguments are made. Our actions in the world are represented by myth, which act as a forum of action. In his examples, he lists the epic *Enuma Elish* as an example, where he means that the characters represent the forces that correspond to the human experience: the feminine dragon of chaos Tiamat, the king of order Apsu and the hero Marduk who represents the struggle between Tiamat and Apsu, chaos and order (Peterson, 1999, p. 90). Other myths, such as the story of the battle between Horus and Set in Egyptian mythology and the story of Saint George slaying a dragon are also used to represent the struggle of chaos and order, how the human is the "hero" navigating the mythological world. All myths blend together in an overarching shared experience; these are the shared maps, or what Jung referred to as the *collective unconscious*, that humans use to give themselves meaning by identifying themselves as the *hero* in the mythological struggle (Peterson, 1999, p. 447). This framework is built on mythology, Christianity and a decent dose of Taoism.

Figure 3: The Constituent Elements of Existence

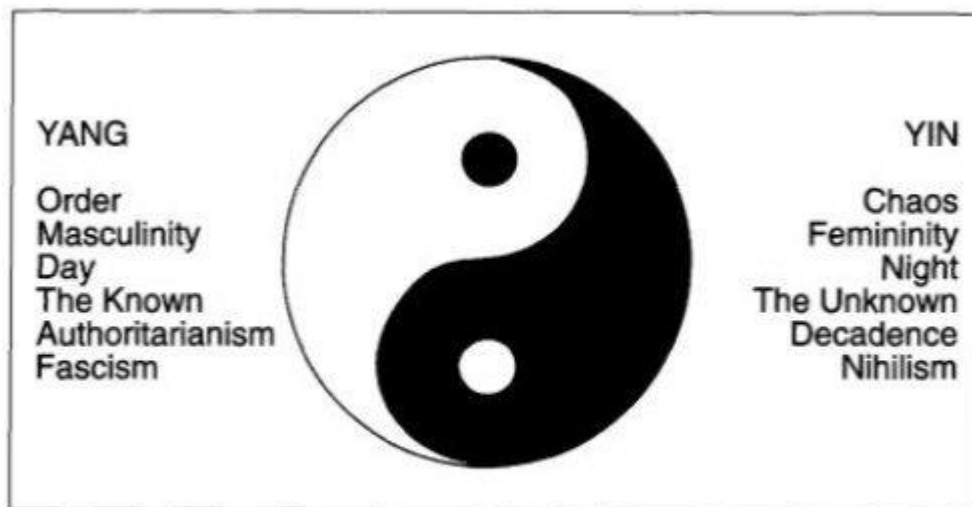


Figure 59: The Constituent Elements of Existence, Reprise

A Yin-Yang figure used by Jordan Peterson to illustrate the duality of the world, showing his inspiration from Taoism, from his book *Maps of Meaning* (Peterson, 1999, p. 338).

But, as Peterson detailed in the interview at the start of the section, it's not just *religious* belief that factors into this, but all manners of belief. Ideology is described as *incomplete myths* - partial stories, who are compelling because they appropriate mythological ideas (Peterson, 1999, p. 216). The fact that they are incomplete, Peterson means, also makes them dangerous. Being incomplete means that they only tell parts of the "story" but act as if they tell a complete one. If mythology tell a complete story, presenting the two opposing forces (order and chaos), ideology ignores parts of the story to twist the world after their own agenda (Peterson, 1999, p. 217).

Ultimately, one can split Peterson's view on religion in two categories: the first one is the struggle between order and chaos, unconsciously represented in classical mythology, where the individual takes the role of the hero to negotiate between order and chaos, striving for control over their own life. This means that religion and mythology play a role in all aspects of life, even outside of classic definitions of faith and belief.

Tied to this is the view of ideology an incomplete myth – it doesn't tell the whole story, and leaves the individual deceived into thinking they know more than they actually do. In a good example, Peterson means that they are on the verge of evolving into mythology, while in the worst case, they are deliberate half-truths. However, in either case, he emphasizes the fact that they are *incomplete* versions of mythology: the full truth is available in the domain of mythology, not ideology.

2.1.2 The controversy surrounding Jordan Peterson

As established in the sections above, Jordan Peterson is a controversial figure. Becoming famous first through his refusal to use transgender pronouns and then through a viral video where he was presented as “destroying” a feminist, he became a hero in certain right-wing circles. While he denies being a right-winger himself, he has taken up stances that have made him a darling of the right in what some describe as the online ‘cultural war’ (Callaghan, 2018). He has argued that liberal identity politics will destroy western civilization, argued against the existence of ‘white privilege’, he doesn’t believe gay parents should raise children and has argued against the #MeToo-movement, expressing skepticism towards the validity of the claims of the women stepping forward (Beres, 2018).

All of this means, even if Jordan Peterson himself denies being a right-winger, his ideas and arguments have certainly taken root among right-wing communities. On far-right websites like Breitbart, he has been defended and presented as a hero (Delingpole, 2018). On a reddit thread dedicated to Jordan Peterson, followers exchange tips on how to argue against “feminazis”¹ (JackGetsIt, 2018). Peterson himself has also stated on multiple occasions that he believes feminists long for ‘masculine dominance’ (Peterson, 2017). Jordan Peterson’s own statements on gay marriage, feminism and the role of men and women in society have only fed this narrative. After the Toronto van attack in 2018, where a man belonging to the incel community killed 10 people because he felt unable to enter sexual relationships with women², Jordan Peterson argued that attacks like this could be avoided by ‘enforcing monogamy, where he argues that all men should have an ‘assigned’ female partner, otherwise ‘a small percentage of the guys have hyper-access to women’ (Bowles, 2018).

Ultimately, regardless of whether Jordan Peterson regards himself as right-wing or not, one can clearly see that his views continuously overlap with theirs and he argues their opinions on a global stage.

2.2 The struggling young man

In his book *12 Rules* as well as in interviews, Jordan Peterson describes his mission as “toughening up young men”, who he believes have been mistreated by modern society. Don’t, he writes in *12 Rules*, be a ‘girlie man’ (Peterson, 2018, p. 158). Modern society, he argues, is the worst for young straight men: with feminist ideology grows more pronounced, they are considered “sexually suspect” as adherents of rape culture, and as the beneficiaries of the patriarchy, he says that their achievements are considered unearned (Peterson, 2018, p. 145). Because of that, he has written *12 Rules* to help those struggling, aimless young men who suffer both academically and in relationships in our modern society. This is where the earlier mentioned argument, of relationships as something reserved only for women and resource-rich men reappear, while more ‘average’ men are neglected and abandoned (Peterson, 2018, p. 147).

¹ “Feminazis” is a term used in anti-feminist circles to decry feminism, combining the word “feminist” and “nazi”.

² “Incel” refers to the incel community, short for “involuntarily celibate”, and refers to groups of men who feel women only sleep with “high-end men”, meaning that some men hoard all sexual relationship and leaves them celibate against their wishes (Wendling, 2018) <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-43881931>

Neglected at school and work while unable to marry, these men are the primary losers of the modern western liberal society.

No wonder then, that Jordan Peterson's first rule in *12 Rules* is 'Stand up straight with your shoulders back', where he advises the reader of his book (primarily young men, considering Peterson's chosen audience) to 'rise up'; to stop being a loser and to fight back against those who wish to keep you down (Peterson, 2018, p. 25).

But who are the young men Jordan Peterson refers to? As mentioned above, he refers to young men who are "losers", who are struggling in our society. Young men who struggle academically, romantically and in their self-confidence. It's been a well-documented general trend that boys struggle behind girls in school, and this has been the case for the last few decades (Guo, 2016). In recent years, it's also been noted that a general trend is for young people to have less sex and sexual relationships in general (Julian, 2018).

Beyond those two, there's also the increased trend of young men not working; a trend which has accelerated to the extent that some economists genuinely consider modern leisure activities like video games a source for young men's situation (O'Conner, 2017).

It's these men *12 Rules* is primarily written for. As mentioned in the start of this section, Jordan Peterson specifically considers the young men who struggle in school or with relationships, and in the chapter "*Toughen Up, You Weasel*" he specifically refers to young men gaining more from, rather than "skulking off to his basement to play video games in his underwear, covered with Cheetos dust"³, dedicating time to bettering yourself: be it mentally, or in the example listed in the chapter, physically (Peterson, 2018, p. 158).

These young men: the ones who are struggling, regarded as losers, and are aimless in society, are who Jordan Peterson writes for. These are the ones who he hopes to help find meaning through his *Maps of Meaning* and an Antidote for Chaos through *12 Rules*.

³ Cheetos is an American snack not available in Sweden, which leaves quite distinct dust-prints. In online circles, people eating cheetos and playing video games have become a heavily mocked 'gamer' stereotype. See: <https://kotaku.com/f-ck-cheetos-481537557> .

3. Theory and earlier research

3.1 Meaning

The concept of a human striving to have ‘meaning’ shows up in many academic fields. It exists in psychology and philosophy, and most relevant for this essay, in the study of religion. Within this essay, the concept of “meaning” will overlap with “purpose” of one’s life; in psychology, purpose might be the goal to one which dedicates one’s life (Taylor, 2013). In philosophy, ‘meaning’ has been a highly debated topic, from the time to Aristotle, to the religious scholar Thomas Aquinas to the modern day. In this essay, however, I wish to pursue the subject of “meaning” from the angle of the psychology of religion.

In the book *Den religiösa människan* (The Religious Human) written by Antoon Geels and Owe Wikström, a professor and professor emeritus respectively in the psychology of religion. In their book, they describe humans as an interpretive being that search for meaning (Geels & Wikström, 2012, p. 84). In our world, where we are constantly barraged with a constant supply of stimuli and through religion, one can navigate through these myriads of impulses that affect one in one’s day-to-day life (Geels & Wikström, 2012, p. 85). One of these methods is through *role-theory*, which will be listed below.

When it comes through to search for meaning, similar opinions to Geels and Wikström’s have been expressed by other sources, too. The American political philosopher Ronald Dworkin describes in his book *Religion Without God* how one of the basic tenets of religion is that it gives the faithful a purpose and innate value to human life by the logic and faith in the religion in question (Dworkin, 2014, p. 19). Instead, in comparison, the non-religious will grapple with the fact that they can’t present a moral or simple explanation on why we exist, what our meaning is, and so on, while the religious adherent will see any easy explanation for such questions (Dworkin, 2014, p. 24).

Other research on the subject of meaning and the making of it reinforce this point. In her thesis *Vilken mening!? En blandad metodstudie i religionspsykologi av meningsskapandets betydelse för skolungdomar*, Åsa Schumann writes about the term ‘existential’; this is a term that she intimately connects to religious affiliation. The way Schumann describes religion is as an “*existential expression of meaning*”, by which she means that religion answers questions like ‘What is most important’, and ‘What makes life precious’ (Schumann, 2018, p. 22).

From both these sources, one can see that religion is used as a tool to find meaning in life through one’s faith; ‘meaning’ here being a purpose, or driving force, for one’s existence.

3.1.1 Hjalmar Sundén's role theory

In Geels and Wikström's book, one method for coping with difficulties in life is described as *role-theory*, based on the work of the Swedish psychologist and priest specialized on the psychology of religion. In Sundén's role-theory, an individual learned in sacred texts may act after them. What this means is that by reading certain texts, an individual can identify with them and experience regular experiences as religious ones (Geels & Wikström, 2012, p. 89).

In Sundén's case, this primarily meant the Bible. By relating to a character in the story, one can take confidence and follow their example, using the knowledge one has from their examples to navigate in one's everyday life. For example, for a Christian, one might step into the role of Jesus to try and emulate his example to be a good Christian. Events that happen in one's life are put in relation to the stories one knows, and by knowing the stories, one knows how to act in real life, too (Geels & Wikström, 2012, p. 91).

Compared to Jordan Peterson's views of how a human uses mythology to navigate through society, there are a lot of overlapping elements between the two theories. While Sundén leaves room for interpretation in which role one should overtake, Jordan Peterson more specifically addresses that one take the role of the 'mythological hero' (Peterson, 1999, p. 447). However, in both cases, the role one has overtaken are used to relate to the world around you: to interpret other scenarios after either the sacred texts in the case of Sundén, or after the mythological framework of chaos and order in Peterson's case.

However, that need not be the end of role-theory. In fact, I would argue that role-theory applies to far more than just these examples: movies, books and all manners of experienced stories can be used to apply to your life, to follow their example or to be inspired. Examples of this exists in multiple fields; for example, fans of Harry Potter arguing that Harry Potter is a great role model, and an inspirational figure and asking themselves "What Would Harry Potter Do?" (Boardman, 2018). This, too, is an example of role theory, applied to non-religious text.

Ironically, Jordan Peterson himself have positioned himself to be the recipient of people utilizing role theory; with his bestselling self-help book *12 Rules*, he has positioned himself as a mentor-figure to thousands of young men seeking help navigating through society. In a time of crisis, these young men might just ask "What would Jordan Peterson do?", and try to take on a role that fulfills their guru's expectations.

3.2 Carl Reinhold Bråkenhielm's lifestance

Carl Reinhold Bråkenhielm is a senior professor emeritus at the Department of Theology at Uppsala university, specialized at the studies in faith, ideologies and world views. His work focuses on what is in Swedish called 'livsåskådning', which in this essay will be translated as *lifestance*⁴. One's lifestance are the theoretical values that determine a human's primary priorities when it comes to what matters in the world, other people and life in general. It can be a religious lifestance; when one follows a particular religion, that religion most likely will shape your values and form your lifestance, but one's lifestance can also be a non-religious view (Bråkenhielm, 2009, p. 14-15). A lifestance is something all humans have, but the *importance* of one's lifestance and how strictly one follows it can change from person to person (Bråkenhielm, 2009, p. 16-17).

While most major religions could form one's lifestance, it's interesting to imagine what *outside* of religion that one could consider a lifestance. The examples Bråkenhielm gives in his book *Verklighetsbilder* (roughly translated: Images of Reality), are political ideologies and philosophies: Marxism, existentialism, humanism, feminism, naturalism and more (Bråkenhielm, 2009, p. 34). Following this theory, a lifestance is something that in an academic definition stands above religion and ideology – the umbrella category under which they can both be defined.

But what do these lifestances mean for those looking for meaning or purpose? Simply put, a lifestance could be regarded as the framework from which one create meaning. Depending on one's lifestance, it creates meaning for one, as it is formed from what one considers most important (Bråkenhielm, 2009, p. 249). One's lifestance determines what religion, ideology or otherwise belief one might follow, and what you follow will determine what gives you meaning and purpose. To go back to Schumann and her definition of *existential meaning* from 3.1, these lifestances serve to answer the same questions for an individual: 'What is most important', and 'What makes life precious'.

Now, as mentioned earlier, how strictly one follows one's lifestance varies from person to person. Some might have a strong understanding of what ones' lifestance is, while another might be unclear, and some might argue that some lifestances give a "weaker" purpose than others. This, however, will be further addressed in the later section *Ideology as religion*.

⁴ https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/life_stance

3.3 (Decline of?) Religion in the west

In recent years, studies have shown that there has been a decrease among young people's religious following. Following one of their survey's, the British newspaper The Guardian even wrote of the rise of a 'non-Christian Europe'; Christianity is no longer the default, and more and more people identify as non-religious. "The new default setting is 'no religion', and the few who are religious see themselves as swimming against the tide," says the professor of theology Stephen Bullivant, who published the report (Sherwood, 2018).

A 2017 global demographic study showed a similar result; while the majority of the world's babies were born to Christian mothers in that year, their figures showed that Muslims were projected to be the world's fastest growing major religious group, predict that "the worldwide impact of religious switching alone, *absent any other factors*, would be a relatively small increase in the number of Muslims, a substantial increase in the number of unaffiliated people, and a substantial *decrease* in the number of Christians in coming decades."

That's merely a prediction when it comes to switching religion, however: when it comes to births, the study predicts that babies born to Muslim women will outnumber births to Christian mothers by 2035, while the religious unaffiliated will decline due to a birth dearth. However, in the west – The United States and Europe – which is the area where Peterson has chosen to focus on, the decline of Christianity as a majority religion is predicted to continue (Pew Research Center, 2017).

It's this decline of religion and Christianity in particular that leads to the section below, *Ideology as religion*.

3.4 Ideology as religion

In Jordan Peterson's *Maps of Meaning*, he described ideology as a 'half-formed' myth: an incomplete version of the more fully explanatory myth, which left the follower uncertain of the full context, and ignorant to the full truth of the world (Peterson, 1999, p. 217). As a result, he regards ideology as a sub-category of religious belief. Following in Jung's footsteps, he means that "whatever a person values most highly is their god" (Tucker, 2016). As a result, the distinction between ideology and religion is a very thin one: belief is something you have in what you regard as most precious to you, regardless of if that is a divine being, a philosophy or an ideology, and this belief is what can give one purpose.

In the article *America's New Religion*, written by the conservative Roman Catholic writer Andrew Sullivan, political ideology and groupings are presented as the modern replacement for religious faith, following the decline in religion written about above. Quoting the U.S. philosopher John Gray, he writes that "Religion is an attempt to find meaning in events, not a theory that tries to explain the universe", and that the reason for this is that we humans are the only species on Earth who have evolved to comprehend that we will one day die, an existential fact that requires some way of reconciling with us while we are still alive (Sullivan, 2018).

To go back to Bråkenhielm from an earlier section and the definition of *lifestance*, it's clear that political ideology can be a perceived framing of life, but according to both Peterson and Sullivan, it's an insufficient one: it does not give the clear purpose these spiritually starved people need. However, that is an opinion that I don't share, and one could easily make a case that both Peterson and Sullivan are highly biased in the favor of religion; as a proclaimed Christian in the case of Peterson and a practicing Christian in the case of Sullivan, it's clear that they'd be heavily biased in favor of their own viewpoints. Similarly, as a non-religious individual, I'll be biased towards my own perspective, and see the merits in non-religious viewpoints.

As mentioned in 3.2 about Carl Reinhold Bråkenhielm's definition of *lifestance*, it's not something that needs to be religious. It merely needs to be what forms the basis of one's approach to life and reality, and while it definitely can be a religious perspective, it doesn't need to be, and a religious perspective is not immediately preferable to another one. Therefore, for the purpose of this essay, religion and ideology will both be secondary, albeit crucial, aspects of one's *lifestance*.

3.5 Summary and central concepts

In summation, there are a few central concepts that will be used for this particular study of analyzing the making of meaning among Jordan Peterson and his legion of followers. These central concepts are as follows:

Lifescape

Lifescape is one's general world-view and value system, that an individual operates out of at the world at large. As Bråkenhielm stated, it is one what one perceives as most important and what one most strongly identifies with, be that a religion, an ideology or any general values, world-view or opinions.

Meaning

Meaning, or purpose, is the overarching goal one might feel in one's life. In common terms, it might be something akin to the *meaning of life*. But it can just as well simply be feeling that you have a position in society, and that you have a role to fill that you are satisfied. In many cases, *meaning* is the personal fulfillment of one's *lifescape*, where one lives according to one's values.

Role

In a situation where one faces complications or hardships, one might take on a *role* as a method of operating through said hardship. In Hjalmar Sundén's case, the roles one took were that of religious figures, where one operated out of knowledge of religious stories. However, in modern society and among the religiously "unaffiliated", the role one takes, or the inspiration one might take, might more commonly be inspired by popular culture such as movies, games or books, or self-help mentors such as Jordan Peterson.

4. Method

4.1 Research design

In the field of theology and religious sciences, *interpretation* is often a crucial aspect of conducting a study. When reading a text, one interprets it and tries to reach an understanding of it. This is the field of *hermeneutics*, the methodology of interpretation. There are many different takes on this field, but in this essay the primary basis of hermeneutics will be Björn Vikström's book *Den skapande läsaren: hermeneutik och tolkningskompetens*. Vikström is a Finnish Doctor of Theology and bishop, with his thesis written on the subject of interpretation and hermeneutics and is therefore highly relevant for the topic at hand, where I'll be interpreting Jordan Peterson's two books, *Maps of Meaning* and *12 Rules*, and creating a comparison between them and established theologians and academics such as Bråkenhielm and Sundén.

Because of this focus on reading and analyzing text, this study will be a qualitative one. As a result, this study will be heavily inspired by social sciences, and in social sciences, there's often a divide between the ambition to *understand* or *explain* compared to the ambition to *predict* (Esaiasson et al., 2017, p. 67). In the case of this, the focus will be on analysing Peterson's texts to *understand* and *explain* them, and by extension understand the people who look up to Peterson as a guru and who follow his teachings. Through greater understanding of Peterson's text and his fanbase, one might grow more familiar with the spiritual need that Peterson's work fulfills.

Beyond the two books Jordan Peterson wrote, data will also be gathered from videos on Jordan Peterson's YouTube channel as well as the comment's section from said videos, to lightly go into Jordan Peterson's audiences and how they present their feelings toward Peterson's teachings. A hermeneutic analysis will be made on these texts, from the basis of the theories of Bråkenhielm and Sundén.

4.2 Data gathering: Maps of Meaning, 12 Rules and Peterson's videos

There are many things to keep in mind after selecting a text to analyze from; the text's age, different versions of said text, as well as the historical context of the text in question (Vikström, 2011, p. 34). For this study, the texts chosen are the two books written by Jordan Peterson; *Maps of Meaning* and *12 Rules for Life*, as well as his YouTube videos.

While the background of said two books have been elaborated in detail upon in the section *Background*, here's a brief summary: *Maps of Meaning* is the academic text written by Jordan Peterson under a long period of time and releasing in 1999, and it constitutes the core of Jordan Peterson's view of the world and society. This book is then the basis for his later work, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote for Chaos*. Based on the world-view elaborated upon in *Maps of Meaning*, of the world as a struggle between feminine chaos and masculine order where one strives to find a balance and resist chaos, Jordan Peterson gives self-help advice for the reader to follow based on 12 rules he has created. This is a classic example of *intertextuality*; how an author builds on their earlier work, or other works, with their texts (Vikström, 2011, p. 95).

The later book came out as Jordan Peterson rose to stardom and topped multiple bestsellers list. In tandem with this rising stardom, Peterson's YouTube channel grew in size and became a central avenue for Peterson to spread his message (more on this in the section below, *Why YouTube?*).

The context of Jordan Peterson's person – of his status as a psychologist and professor of psychology, with an interest in religion and belief, along with his status as a right-wing and far-right hero – also needs to be considered. Similarly, one also needs to consider the status of Peterson's fans and who they are.

The data have been gathered through reading Jordan Peterson's two books and watching the selected YouTube videos. With the selected data in mind, one will then need a way to analyze it. But before that, two topics will be clarified.

4.3 Why 12 Rules?

Much of the focus of the final analysis will be on Jordan Peterson's latest book, *12 Rules to Live*. There are many reasons for this emphasis: it is Jordan Peterson's latest, and best-selling, book, and it is the primary source of Peterson's popularity as well as what he is best known for. It is also far more accessible – both in price, as it is much cheaper than *Maps of Meaning*, but also when it comes to readability.

While *12 Rules* is an easily readable self-help book, accessible to most readers thanks to its structure where it consists of multiple essays that splits the book into twelve separate parts and with clear instructions over what the purpose of each chapter is, *Maps of Meaning* is a heavy academic text over 500 pages long. Even a highly devoted fan of Peterson would find it difficult to deny that the book is drawn out and confusingly structured, with the general point: that myths are culturally universal and the basis of morality, and that life is a struggle between order and chaos, drawn out and repeated over multiple pages in an overly complex language, and generally presented in a very unclear way.

Beyond that, even though Peterson is a professor of psychology, the book goes into many other academic subjects. Elements of religion, mythology, anthropology, philosophy, biology, politics and ideology are included to present his arguments, leading to a confusing structure where one chapter is dedicated to studying the human brain, while the chapter that follows is dedicated to studying mythological and religious imagery within the ancient Babylonian story Enuma Elish. Both these highly separate subjects are included to present his argument that life is governed by order and chaos, and that all mythology follows his Father/Mother/Son motif, a motif that could be easily debunked by including mythology that Peterson conveniently ignores.

Ultimately, the book is an incredibly confusing, complex and ultimately aimless read, with utterly plenty of nonsensical figures. However, since the book builds the framework in which Jordan Peterson presents the world in *12 Rules*, and the fact that he still references it as the basis of reality, *Maps of Meaning* will still be used as a tool to understand *12 Rules* within this study.

Figure 4: The Regeneration of Stability from the Domain of Chaos & Figure 5: The (Voluntary) Descent of the Buddha

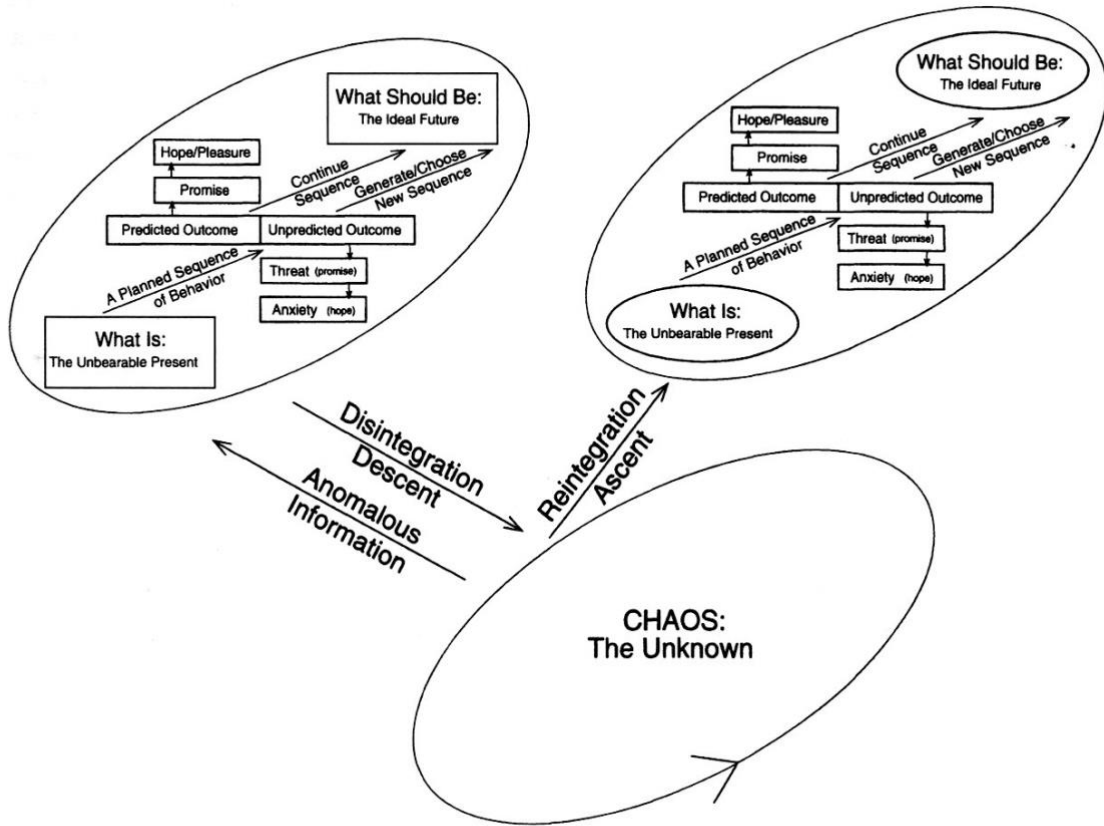


Figure 9: The Regeneration of Stability from the Domain of Chaos

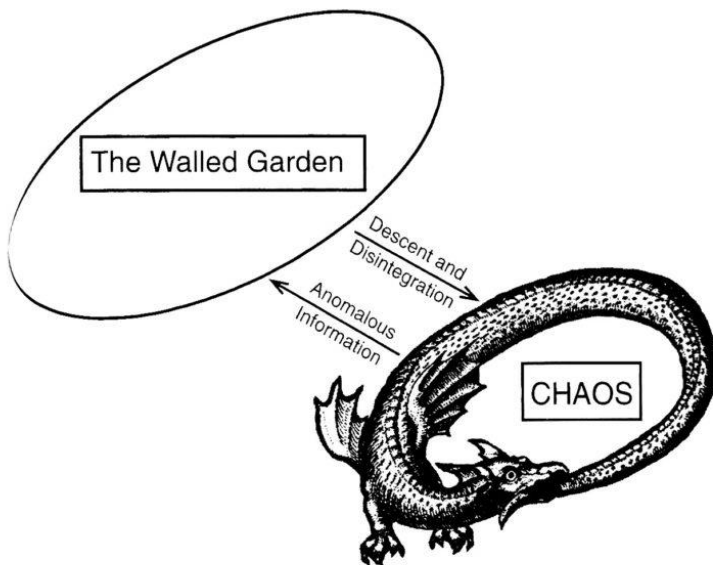


Figure 53: The (Voluntary) Descent of the Buddha

Two figures from Jordan Peterson's first book, *Maps of Meaning*. There are 68 figures in total in the book, and they all follow a similar highly complicated pattern. These figures represent a state of mind and the individual development of the mythological Buddha, respectively.

4.4 Why YouTube?

While Jordan Peterson have written two books, a large portion of his fanbase come from the internet. There are many fan sites dedicated to Peterson, both on major sites like Reddit and Facebook, but also separate sites like the Swedish *JBP Sällskapet*⁵. These communities are driving influences of his fanbase, driving discussion around his work. As the time of writing, his subreddit *r/JordanPeterson*⁶ has 102,922 subscribers, and average around 1000 users online at a time, signaling the size of his influence, especially considering that this is merely one of his many fansites.

Yet, despite this, YouTube could be considered his largest vehicle for communication to his fans. His YouTube account has over 1,5 million subscribers, and here is where Jordan Peterson personally uploads videos directly to his fans. Here he uploads videos of his lectures as well as interviews and other information, but the main draw of the channel are the aforementioned lectures; lectures that are a based on his two books. On the channel, he describes the sources of his videos as deriving from the following two sources:

“ 1. His UToronto courses Maps of Meaning (which describes how values, including beliefs about good and evil, regulate emotion and motivation); and Personality & Its Transformations (which describes psychological theories from Eliade, Jung, Freud, Rogers, Gray, Luria, Sokolov, Vinogradova, Panksepp, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Solzhenitsyn as well as psychometric models such as the Big Five).

2. His public lectures on topics of general psychological relevance, including the meaning of music, the significance of hero mythology, and the structure of the world as represented in religion.” (Peterson, 2018).

Here we can see the great overlap between the topic of his books and his lectures, and how they are often one and the same. This means they are a great additional source of information, since they are his main method of communication with his fanbase, and something Peterson himself heavily advertises, which makes his YouTube channel a great source for study.

Beyond that, YouTube is also a great tool to see direct communication towards Peterson. On his lecture videos, one can see direct response from his followers to his videos. These comments will be used to exemplify Peterson’s effect and influence over his followers. However, due to sheer amount of comments having been made on each video, only the ones from the first month after a video’s upload will be analyzed: this will be to ensure that the comments come from when interest of the video is at its highest, while simultaneously avoiding an overly high amount of data that would come from analyzing a greater amount of content.

The videos that are analyzed will be videos that are relevant to the books, the life rules and the making of meaning. Due to the structure of this study, they will be videos I personally deem relevant to the study, so a certain degree of personal selection will factor into it. However, as

⁵ <http://jordanpetersonsallskapet.se/>

⁶ <https://www.reddit.com/r/JordanPeterson/>

this is an unavoidable aspect of a hermeneutic study, I'll instead make a case for the videos' relevance for the study (Vikström, 2011, p. 21).

4.4.1 The selected videos

To limit the scope of the study, I have selected four YouTube videos that correspond to *Maps of Meaning* or *12 Rules* in order to study the fanbase's feedback on them. At the time of writing, Peterson's YouTube channel has 360 videos, so one had to narrow down the selection from 360 to a more manageable number. As earlier established, I'll only look at four videos and the respective first month of comments of each video to prevent having too much data, and to narrow my scope.

After I have narrowed down the amounts of comments, I will make a personal selection of the comments out of what I interpreted to be the most relevant⁷. This means there will be a personal interpretation involved, but I'll argue that the comments are representative: on most videos of Jordan Peterson, similar comments and sentiment will be presented.

The videos in question are as follows:

1. A commercial trailer made by Jordan Peterson for *12 Rules for Life*, published the 12th January 2018, with 540871 views at the time of writing and 761 comments⁸.

2. A preview for *12 Rules for Life*, where Jordan Peterson talks about the backstory of the book and some of the book's rules. It was published the 25th November 2017, and as the time of writing, it has 378 100 views and 1238 comments⁹.

3. A two-part video based on *Maps of Meaning*, where Jordan Peterson discusses how we all inhabit a story, and how we must undertake action to arrive at our life's destination. Part 1 of the video was published on the 13th of February in 2017, and the second one was published a week later, at the 20th February. At over 2 hours each, they are some of Jordan Peterson's longest and heaviest videos, suitable for a presentation based on *Maps of Meaning*.

At the time of writing, part 1 has 355 880 views and 678 comments¹⁰, while part 2 has 317650 views and 819 comments¹¹.

The primary focus of these will not be the videos themselves, but on the reaction of the commenters and their relationship to Jordan Peterson. The videos have been chosen due to their close proximity to the books in question, giving them a great representational value to Peterson's books, while simultaneously being on the site where Peterson has his largest community. Video 1 and 2, as a trailer and preview respectively, represents *12 Rules*, while the two-part video 3 represents *Maps of Meaning*, due to being a video version of the book's content.

⁷ The comments have been made accessible through the free program YouTube Scraper, which was used to download all comments. While the entire scraped content won't be included in the essay due to its sheer size, I can provide the scraped comments upon request.

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-kflb1dp1w>

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAat1HQU0M>

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RudKmwzDpNY>

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsZ8XqHPjI4>

4.4.2 The online articles

In this essay, a large amount of internet articles from newspaper and other online sources have been used. The reason for this is twofold: first, this is a movement and a fanbase that is heavily based around their online communities and online sources, and the majority of information is for that reason available online. The other reason is to illustrate how this is a topic that is currently highly relevant, and to tie it to this discussion. In that regard, other media can't compare to the swift discourse that takes place online, and this study will be tied to that discourse.

4.5 Analyzing the data

In his book, Vikström presents three possible methods of analysis for a text: one can analyse the author, the text or the reader. In this study, elements of all three will factor in, but the majority of the focus will be on the texts themselves, as well as two select theories of analyzing the reader and the author. While the study have addressed Peterson's person and status, and will detail the reactions of the reader's below, the majority of the study will be focused on presentation and interpretation of the text themselves. The intertextuality between *Maps of Meaning* and *12 Rules* will be of particular importance, but also the intertextuality between the work of Peterson and the work of the theologians whose theories build the theoretical core of this study. Texts can be used to interpret and understand other texts, and *Maps of Meaning* will be used to understand *12 Rules*, while Bråkenhielm's and Sundén's work will be used to understand *Maps of Meaning* (Vikström, 2011, p. 96).

Another textual analysis which will be relevant is *structural narratology*; the analysis of how stories are narratively constructed. This refers to how stories construct drama and conflict, and how they create roles through their characters that form a structure for the story. The characters are as follows: the subject, the project, the sender, the receiver, the helper and the opponent (Vikström, 2011, p. 93). This structural narratology will be applied to Jordan Peterson's worldview to clarify how he uses stories and mythology to emphasize his point.

When it comes to Vikström's other methods of analyzing a text, focused on the author and the reader respectively, there are separate aspects that are important to consider. For example, while Vikström suggests one should consider an author's life stance when analyzing their text, this feels redundant in the case of Jordan Peterson's texts (Vikström, 2011, p. 72). Since Peterson's works are written from his personal opinion, as a self-help aimed towards the reader, his personal life stance and values and that of the text have already blended together, are one and the same. When it comes to analyzing Peterson as a person in relation to his texts, it is more relevant to study the *role of the author*.

What this refers to is the attitude and approach the author has towards their role as the text's author, and if this is a role that the author actively cultivates and reinforces (Vikström, 2011, p. 76). In the case of Peterson, he presents himself as a confident teacher and lecturer in both his books and in his YouTube videos. Here, Vikström also refers to *imitatio Christi*: a practice in medieval Christian theology and how an author might strive to imitate Jesus Christ, and preach and educate through their text (Vikström, 2011, p. 76). While it might be an exaggeration to imply that Peterson outright compares himself to Jesus, there is certainly a

messianic element to his writing that should be taken into consideration, where following the 12 rules he has created will lead to one having an ‘antidote for chaos’.

This perception of Peterson’s authorial role being that of a teacher and guide leads to the final point of analysis; the relationship between the text and the young men who read it to learn. Here, I will try and read from the perspective of one of Jordan Peterson’s followers, rather than my own perspective. From this perspective, one can first see the importance of Jordan Peterson’s role as a self-help guru, and that relationship between the reader, Jordan Peterson and the guru.

From this perspective, what Vikström calls *the ideal reader* is most relevant. The ideal reader is described as a reader who follows the instructions and rules set out by the author: the reader will interpret and analyze the text, but they will do so according to the framework created by the author (Vikström, 2011, p. 101). Here, the interpretations made by the readers will be ‘predicted’ by the author, and most of the text are to be consumed as the author wishes.

Funnily enough, Vikström writes that the relationship between the author and the ideal reader is particularly obvious in a text when the author is deliberately obtuse and hard to interpret, which he describes as a deal from the author to the ideal reader: “*I confuse, as long as you promise to try and create order from all this chaos*” (Vikström, 2011, p. 100). Certainly a fitting comparison, considering the earlier criticism of *Maps of Meaning*, as well as the fact that the other book Jordan Peterson authored, the one that is the focus of this study, has the subtitle ‘*An Antidote for Chaos*’ and promise to help the reader to create order from chaos. With a connection between Vikström’s analytical method and Peterson’s work that is that obvious, one could consider it malpractice to not factor it into the analysis in the study’s upcoming part.

4.6 Summary

In this section, the hermeneutic method that will form the analysis of Jordan Peterson's work has been presented. The focus will be on the intentional intertextuality between the two works of Jordan Peterson, but also the unintentional intertextuality between Jordan Peterson's work and that of theologian's like Bråkenhielm and Sundén. The analysis will also go into Jordan Peterson's role as an author, and the reactions from his readers, based on two theories of Vikström's about the cultivated image of an author, as well as the view of an ideal reader.

The frame of the study has also been narrowed down to primarily analyzing the book *12 Rules for Life*, and with the corresponding YouTube videos on the topic of that book serving to emphasize the points and present the perspective of Peterson's readers and followers. *Maps of Meaning* will still feature in the study, but it will mostly serve to contextualize Jordan Peterson's *12 Rules*. This makes *12 Rules* the main source of data for this study, and it will be used to describe the general *lifestance* presented by Peterson's work, how the rules help to create *meaning* for Peterson's followers and the *roles* Peterson and his followers play respectively.

5. Presentation of findings

5.1 Introduction

In the following analysis, I'll be presenting my interpretation from reading Jordan Peterson's *12 Rules for Life* through the analytical hermeneutic method presented in Björn Vikström's *The creating reader* (Den skapande läsaren), with my emphasis placed on the methods presented in the prior section 4.

With that analytical method, a clearer picture of Jordan Peterson and his influence over his followers will be painted: who is he, what is his role to his audience, how does he help his followers – and from these questions, one will be able to answer the research questions asked at the start of this essay.

5.2 Analysis of 12 Rules

12 Rules for Life – An Antidote for Chaos is written in the form of twelve chapters, where each chapter is a separate essay detailing the rule in question. The essays vary between taking the form of personal anecdotes, presenting and discussing mythological stories, analyzing Disney movies, general science and many other forms of writing and analysis. No matter how the chapter is presented, however, be it a personal anecdote or an analysis of *The Little Mermaid*, the text serves to reinforce the importance of the rule in question. Below are the 12 rules, presented in their most basic form.

Rule 1: Stand up straight with your shoulders back.

Rule 2: Treat yourself like you would someone you are responsible for helping.

Rule 3: Make friends with people who want the best for you.

Rule 4: Compare yourself with who you were yesterday, not with who someone else is today.

Rule 5: Do not let your children do anything that makes you dislike them.

Rule 6: Set your house in perfect order before you criticise the world.

Rule 7: Pursue what is meaningful (not what is expedient).

Rule 8: Tell the truth – or, at least, don't lie.

Rule 9: Assume that the person you are listening to might know something you don't.

Rule 10: Be precise in your speech.

Rule 11: Do not bother children when they are skateboarding.

Rule 12: Pet a cat when you encounter one on the street.

At a first glance, one might be fooled into assuming that the rules alternate between being 'serious' and 'funny' respectively, but that would be a mistaken assumption; even rule 11 and rule 12, which on the surface seem more lighthearted than the others, serve to underscore Peterson's general narrative.

In the section *Do not bother children when they are skateboarding*, Peterson in the very first paragraph clarifies that the children were 'almost always boys', further connecting him to the fanbase that he established in the Channel 4 interview that made famous consist 80% of men (Channel 4 News, 2018).

In fact, rather than being lighthearted, this rule swiftly becomes political: as children (read: boys) are prevented and forbidden from skateboarding, denying their 'natural risk-taking', they become repressed. The children, he argues, have become overprotected from risk-taking.

"We're hard-wired, for that reason, to enjoy risk (some of us more than others). We feel invigorated and excited when we work to optimize our future performance, while playing in the present. Otherwise we lumber around, sloth-like, unconscious, unformed and careless. Overprotected, we will fail when something dangerous, unexpected and full of opportunity suddenly makes its appearance, as it inevitably will." (Peterson, 2018, p. 177).

The section then details how if somebody pretend to be acting from higher principles, for example “the safety of children” but the result is skateboard-safety that results in “unhappy adolescent males and brutalist aesthetic disregard of beauty”, then, Peterson reasons, that was most likely the point from the start.

If the comparison Peterson is making is still too subtle, the next section of the chapter is called “Self-Appointed Judges of the Human Race”, where Peterson details how young men are suffering in modern society, and how women are benefitting (Peterson, 2018, p. 183). Following this comes the section “The Patriarchy: Help or Hindrance?”, which details how all culture is an oppressive structure – but it is an oppressive structure to the benefit of mankind (Peterson, 2018, p. 185). Here, Peterson also includes the mythological framework from *Maps of Meaning*: the patriarchy is the *tyrannical king*, the Great Father who represents order and the known world. Ultimately, the chapter ends with the section *Toughen Up, You Weasel*. This section was highlighted earlier in the essay, but it is now in its full context: starting with a general rule about not disturbing children when they are skateboarding, but it develops into Peterson’s world-view and politics. From starting as a general rule about leaving ‘children’ alone, it has culminated to being a rule applying solely to men. Near the end of the chapter, Peterson writes:

“A woman should look after her children—although that is not all she should do. And a man should look after a woman and children—although that is not all he should do. But a woman should not look after a man, because she must look after children, and a man should not be a child. This means that he must not be dependent. [...] Men have to toughen up. Men demand it, and women want it, even though they may not approve of the harsh and contemptuous attitude that is part and parcel of the socially demanding process that fosters and then enforces that toughness.” (Peterson, 2018, p. 197-198).

The reason I highlighted this rule as an example is because it depicts the clearest example of Peterson’s writing style – it starts with his general rule, but it soon goes into Peterson’s politics, where “men should be men and women should be women”, and it goes into his theories from *Maps of Meaning*, with the tyrannical father of order, and the wicked queen of chaos who must be defeated.

The other chapters follow a similar structure: they start with a general rule, then uses said rule to inform the reader about how the world really works, delving into Peterson’s view of the world as based on the duality of chaos and order, man and woman. In the book written for men, men are encouraged to stand up, roll their shoulders back and better themselves. In the chapter about that first rule, Peterson writes:

“Maybe you are a loser. And maybe you’re not—but if you are, you don’t have to continue in that mode. Maybe you just have a bad habit. Maybe you’re even just a collection of bad habits. Nonetheless, even if you came by your poor

posture honestly—even if you were unpopular or bullied at home or in grade school.”

Here Peterson writes to his audience directly – as earlier stated, Peterson sees his mission as toughening up young men who have been neglected by modern society – and encourages them to stand up tall. It is, after all, a self-help book, and these are the people Peterson wishes to help. And once more, while Peterson’s rules start out with a general wisdom, they have by the end of the chapter become niched towards the fanbase Peterson have already developed.

In this way, Jordan Peterson introduces people to his *lifescape* through the book’s chapter. Starting from a general point and only steadily introducing the elements of his politics and *Maps of Meaning*, readers are “eased in” to the world of Jordan Peterson.

Mixing the general self-help advice, on how one should better oneself and face the world, with Peterson’s *lifescape*: life is suffering, but one can face and transcend the suffering to better oneself. As rule 7: *Pursue what is meaningful (not what is expedient)* states, one should not pursue happiness or personal gain, but rather *meaning*. It is in this section that the intertextual readings of *Maps of Meaning* as well as Bråkenhielm factors in.

5.2.1 The intertextuality of Jordan Peterson

Though almost two decades passed between the publishing of *Maps of Meaning* in 1999 and *12 Rules for Life* in 2018, the two books are deeply connected. In the introduction to *12 Rules*, Peterson refers to his earlier book and refers how he still follows what he wrote in that book about order and chaos, how he hopes 12 Rules will function as rules, standards and values that will cut through the chaos and provide ordering principles (Peterson, 2018, p. 16). In that regard, *12 Rules* can be seen as a more easily accessible version of *Maps of Meaning*, providing many of the same messages but in a different literary format.

In fact, in the introduction, Peterson writes that his original idea for a second book was a more easily readable version of *Maps of Meaning*, which Peterson himself describes as a ‘very dense book’. However, he says that his heart wasn’t in it, and he decided to write *12 Rules* instead (Peterson, 2018, p. 15). I would personally argue that this is not entirely accurate, however: as *12 Rules* follows many of the same teachings as *Maps of Meaning*, and if one were to talk about Bråkenhielm’s *lifescape*: what one considers most important and prioritize in one’s life, the balance between chaos and order and the strive to order one’s life is still what Jordan Peterson values highest. Indeed, this fact is even established in the same introduction, where Jordan Peterson states that walking on the border between chaos and order is to walk the divine Way, which is “much better than happiness” (Peterson, 2018, p. 15).

Another aspect that the two books share is a general blend of subjects. Like in *Maps of Meaning*, Peterson mixes many fields of science to present his points: psychology, religion,

politics, but also film criticizing, personal anecdotes and more. In that way, too, there's a clear thread between Jordan Peterson's first work and his second one.

In summation, the two books are intimately related: in the almost two decades that have passed, Peterson's lifestance of life as a struggle between order and chaos, where happiness is secondary to personal betterment and meaning, have only solidified, and *12 Rules* is that concept presented towards a general audience in the form of a self-help book. In that way, *Maps of Meaning* serves to give you a broader perspective on Peterson's lifestance, while *12 Rules* applies the theoretical framework to one's life.

According to Vikström's definition of intertextuality, this would be a work that builds and develops upon what have come from the author before. However, what if one were to contrast Peterson's two books, now seen as a cohesive whole, against another academic who studied meaning?

In his analysis, Bråkenhielm defines lifestance, as earlier stated, as a human's primary priorities and what they value in life, and how they through this create meaning in their day-to-day life (Bråkenhielm, 2009, p. 14-15). One thing Bråkenhielm notes can be used to build belief is the act of reading. In his book, the reading he refers to is specifically fiction, but he also offers that art, religion and science are the three main sources for creating a sense of belief, or a basis for a lifestance (Bråkenhielm, 2009, p. 221-222). The act of reading gives you *input* from the text you consume, which are then transformed into actions in the real world in the form of *output* (Bråkenhielm, 2009, p. 223). Reading, he means, pushes our internal boundaries on the topic of existential life experiences, which in turn generate knowledge and belief that help create one's lifestance (Bråkenhielm, 2009, p. 224). Similarly, literature can be used to grant a greater understanding of morality and other complex issues.

While Bråkenhielm refers specifically to fiction, I'd argue that *art* as a source of inspiration for one's lifestance is not limited to fiction. It can similarly be movies, lectures, video games and non-fiction, self-help books.

Here is then where Peterson's and Bråkenhielm's writing differ. While Bråkenhielm have written an academic text that analyzes the creation of lifestances, belief and meaning, to help the reader understand the phenomena, Peterson's work – both *Maps of Meaning* and *12 Rules* – serve the purpose of educating the reader in Peterson's personal lifestance, rather than create a wider understanding. Peterson's work is aimed at an *ideal reader*; a reader who engages the work on the basis that Peterson has written it.

To exemplify this, one needs read how they describe lifestance and how one makes meaning. Bråkenhielm offers no deeper meaning for the reader to engage in, rather than the information that an individual might have a meaning or purpose. Meanwhile, Peterson's rule 7: *Pursue what is meaningful (not what is expedient)*, outright lectures the reader on what life is and

what meaning one should have. The very first paragraph in the chapter dedicated to rule 7 starts as follow:

“Life is suffering. That’s clear. There is no more basic, irrefutable truth. It’s basically what God tells Adam and Eve, immediately before he kicks them out of Paradise.”
(Peterson, 2018, p. 109).

Peterson doesn’t portray an alternative, or a different opinion. He portrays it as an irrefutable *truth*. Even in his academic text *Maps of Meaning*, Peterson argues that existence itself is suffering (Peterson, 1999, p. 454). Peterson is confident in that he knows what life is, and he shares this knowledge about its meaning with the reader.

“Meaning is the ultimate balance between, on the one hand, the chaos of transformation and possibility and on the other, the discipline of pristine order, whose purpose is to produce out of the attendant chaos a new order that will be even more immaculate, and capable of bringing forth a still more balanced and productive chaos and order. Meaning is the Way, the path of life more abundant, the place you live when you are guided by Love and speaking Truth and when nothing you want or could possibly want takes any precedence over precisely that.” (Peterson, 2018, p. 129).

It is obvious from reading his books that Peterson’s lifestance is set firmly, and through his work, he shares his lifestance, politics and meaning with his followers, who strive to follow in his example. It’s for this reason that Peterson’s authorial role is important to consider.

5.2.2 Jordan Peterson’s authorial role and 12 Rules

12 Rules is a self-help book, and the author therefore by definition take on a more confident, authoritative role. After all, the book wouldn’t be much help if the author doubted themselves, so they present themselves clearly. Peterson leaves no doubt in his writing about the 12 rules: the rules are rules, and he offers very little to nothing in terms of arguing against them in his book. Instead, they are confident in their assessment of what is wrong in today’s society, and how one could adjust it: through valuing self-worth and aiming for self-betterment, following his 12 Rules for Life.

This confidence is reliant on the role he takes as an author, and it also underscores it. In Vikström’s textual analysis focusing on the role of the author, he discusses the role the author undertakes and reinforces, and in the case of Jordan Peterson, it’s obvious that he has cultivated a role of authority.

In an interview with *Esquire*, Peterson describes that the hardest part of his newfound fame is the emotional burden of acting as a virtual father to wayward young men, and he questions where these young men’s real fathers and teachers have been, and why they have left it up to him to educate his followers (Yang, 2018).

The interview is revealing for how it displays what image Peterson has cultivated – he has taken the role of both a teacher and a father figure, teaching his followers about how the world works, telling them to stand up straight and clean their room (rule 6). This explains the confidence in which he writes his texts, for as a teacher and father, he is not to be questioned.

In this role, one can also see medieval practice of *imitatio Christi* that Vikström referred to. In presenting himself as a stern, knowing father and the 12 rules that will better ones' life, there is a messianic element to Peterson's relationship to his followers. If they listen, and follow his advice, they will stop being 'losers' or 'wayward' and become better people that have found their way.

5.2.3 Jordan Peterson and the readers

The study has already reflected on that Peterson's works are best suited for an ideal reader, who read the text at face value, and take Peterson's teachings to heart. Vikström describes this manner of relationship between author and reader as an *educational* one, like that between student and teacher, which is certainly what Peterson strives to achieve (Vikström, 2011, p. 102).

A criticism Vikström raises towards the *ideal reader* in textual analysis is that it is a one-way communication, where the reader interacts with the author's text only in the way the author intended (Vikström, 2011, p. 102). If one considers the position Peterson has put himself in, as a teacher and father figure, this is certainly a suitable criticism. It should be stated, however, that a text's worth isn't determined over how it is interpretable under a hermeneutic model, as the reaction's to YouTube videos will show.

5.2.3.1 The commentator's reaction

When it comes to online commenters, a degree of filtration is always necessary, and Jordan Peterson's videos are no exception. One word or one sentence comments, or spam, gives us very little in terms of actual content to analyze. The longer, more substantial comments are the ones where one can see the audience's reaction, or input, towards Peterson.

While these comments are chosen specifically from the four videos listed earlier in this study, it's important to note that the reaction from the audience are supported by other sources. If one were to check Jordan Peterson's subreddit, or the book reviews for 12 Rules for Life or his Facebook, one would find many similar comments. These comments are therefore examples of a general trend that one could personally duplicate with personal research.

The comments could be grouped into general categories: there's simple spam, like earlier mentioned, as well as simplistic comments merely praising Jordan Peterson. There's also the comments that ask about the book itself; whether it will be available in their country, or in their language. While these posts are interesting in that they show that Jordan Peterson have a

large number of followers, but the posters that are the most interesting are the one's who are truly emotionally invested in Peterson.

On the video *Official Book Trailer*, there are multiple examples of this type of commenters even within the first month.

"Jordan, you have changed my life for the better. I started following because of the C-16 bill, but your life advice has changed me. I was the one clinging to the life raft when the rescuers were trying to save me. While I still don't have it all figured out, I do know that I can find my own way. I have the strength inside of me that will carry me through this life. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." *Joshua and Lise Misener*

"I love you so much. I'm not saying you're a prophet, but you have helped me so much with my coming of age throughout the 2016 election and helping me think for myself without telling me well \"jesus is the son of god, shut up and read your bible\" so that's my perspective on how I've felt about all of this (I've read the bible), especially with the internet where chaos is right in my house, sometimes uninvited. Anyways, I just really appreciate the philosophical and psychological perspective that has helped me find my own thoughts and guided me to my own version of my own reality. It just makes sense to me and of all the knowledge and wisdom I have obtained in this life, im 25, yours was there in a crucial point in time. Thank you, I don't imagine you will read this but whatever." *Scominggreger*

It's no stretch to imagine these people as the very people Jordan Peterson had dedicated himself to help; the troubled, wayward young men who are confused in today's society. They admit as much in their own posts, discussing how they lived troubled lives but that Jordan Peterson's teachings have helped them structure their lives.

"I just want to say, my parents tried to make me clean my room for 24 years. But it was only after watching Professor Peterson's videos I learned to do it. And not really learned. I saw someone for whom it was important that I do that. And that's all that mattered. That somebody just really fucking cared and was able to provide insights into why it was important. Instead of telling me what to do just because they said so not really caring about anyone then themselves.. I owe you a lot, sir. I owe, a lot." *Daniel Albrecht*

This, too, is an example of Peterson's goal being fulfilled. As an author and lecturer, he took the role of a figurative father, and his message of cleaning one's room and the important of doing so got through to this viewer, who saw it as a first step towards bettering himself. With these examples, one can see that Peterson's message have certainly resonated among some men, and he has become a positive influence regardless of whether or not his text is interpretable; in fact, the very reason it is not might be why his message have resonated so strongly.

"I believe Dr. Peterson helped me realize I have a case of acute depression that I've been neglecting." *Jacob Kent*

"Despite his serious and brooding demeanor, I honestly feel like hugging JBP. He's like a wise uncle I've only recently met. His raw brilliance is a gift to the world." *DubskiDude*

"Jordan I don't know if you will ever read this, but I hope you know, that you are loved and appreciated more than you know. There is something helpful in your lectures, for everybody- and for me, it was deciding to stay on the Earth. Thank you for healing my heart with your wisdom, and generosity, and humor... Heil Kermie¹²!" *Joseph G*

In these examples, one can see that he had followers who have realized and started working on their psychological problems as a result of Peterson's presence and video. In their lives, he truly is a beloved, admired figure that they look up, in some cases like a father or uncle, and in other's as a teacher or a spiritual or intellectual leader. With a fanbase like that, it's not strange that some followers have taken it to a near-religious degree.

"Jordan Peterson descends from the mountaintop with the commandments." *Richard Richard*

"thanks for being a great teacher Jordan and dedicating your life to it, you're a badly needed Shepard for the masses" *Catspeeler*

"Is petersonism a religion I can join?" *trapperwreck*

While the final comment might be more joking in nature, it does still highlight the religious experience Jordan Peterson's beliefs become to some of his viewers; one only needs to read the earlier two comments, where one compares Jordan Peterson's 12 rules to commandments, while the other uses the messianic comparison of calling Peterson a shepherd. Here, one can see how Jordan Peterson's views and messages affect his followers, and how his ideology and lifestyle might inspire others to follow in his footsteps: obey his commandments and follow the shepherd. In a sense, Petersonism might be something of a religion.

Other than religion, another aspect that shows up among the commenters are the politics. Within the comment sections, one doesn't have to look far to find examples of alt-right/far-right language.

"I love the way you think, Mr. Peterson. You're doing a great thing, fighting against the onslaught of Orwellian Leftism. You have my respect, and the respect of many others" *Jon Anthony*

"Im buying it Sir...Just pre ordered it arriving 16th of January. Id buy it even if I knew I wasnt going to like it just to support this man, he is a soldier to me, on the front line defending us all even those SJW wormfood's. Did we forget WW2? Not me I looked in those guys eyes in Achnacarry Scotland when I was a young Marine. LEST WE FORGET." *Mad Dog Murdoch*

"Feminists want the burka for all women so that feminists can get husbands. :-)" *mark boggs*

¹² 'Kermie' is a reference to the fictional character Kermit the Frog, who some people have compared Jordan Peterson's voice to.

Comments such as these, using the language of the far-right, show the other side of Peterson's fanbase: the users who have taken up his call to action against feminism, leftism or "cultural Marxism", or decrying political correctness culture, or attacking SJW's¹³.

It's important to note that not all these groups of commenters have to be separate. In some cases, one can see a person praising Jordan Peterson and simultaneously attacking feminism or left-wing culture. But reading the comments, one thing is obvious: many people, primarily young men, have been genuinely touched by his 12 Rules, and are benefiting and structure their life around it. Like with a religion, they have taken his *lifescape* and his proposed *meaning* and made it their own, following in his footsteps. In that regard, his followers are truly *ideal readers*, taking his message to heart.

5.3 Structural narratology, roles and Jordan Peterson

Another aspect of Jordan Peterson's world-view is the individual as the heroic son, navigating between chaos and order to find the bath of balance. Here is where Peterson's mythological framework fits in; where stories are used to frame events on face in one's life. In this framework, mythology and stories are the psychological and philosophical origin and basis for morality and for how life works.

"The world as a forum for action is composed, essentially, of three constituent elements, which tend to manifest themselves in typical patterns of metaphoric representation. First is unexplored territory—the Great Mother, nature, creative and destructive, source and final resting place of all determinate things. Second is explored territory—the Great Father, culture, protective and tyrannical, cumulative ancestral wisdom. Third is the process that mediates between unexplored and explored territory—the Divine Son, the archetypal individual, creative exploratory Word, and vengeful adversary." (Peterson, 1999, p. xx)

This view, of stories as representing the framework of all action, occur in two other theologian's work. First is the work of Björn Vikström, and his description of structural narratology: where each story is represented by the actantial model; there's a subject, a projekt, an assigner, a receiver, a helper and an opponent (Vikström, 2011, p. 93). The subject is the individual, or the hero, who takes the lead of the story, while all other elements of the story can be broken into parts: the project is the goal given to the hero, assigned to them by the assigner. The receiver is the one who will benefit from this assignment, and on this journey, they will meet both helpers and opponents to this adventure.

This structural narratology has overlapping elements with Jordan Peterson's mythological context. In both cases, the individual plays the role of the hero, and the world as a whole is represented by broad tropes to simplify a complex reality. Peterson's worldview is therefore much like the mythology it is based on and have grounding in other theologian's work. In this regard, it is obvious that Peterson's view is based on other's work, and strive to prove that life and mythology work much the same.

The other analysis to be made of Peterson's mythological model is the work of Hjalmar Sundén, whose role-theory mean that one, in difficult moments, take on a role one is familiar with. In Sundén's example, it was the case of the Biblical stories, but in Peterson's case it is

¹³ SJW is a derogatory term created referring to progressives, feminists and people who possess other progressive values. It's short for Social Justice Warrior.

the grand, spanning mythology of chaos and order that one turns to. One takes the role of the Divine Son, the archetypal individual navigates and explore difficult situations. This means that, intentionally or not, there's an overlap between Peterson's theories and that of established theologians.

6. Conclusion and future studies

6.1 Conclusion: Making meaning

In this thesis, my goal has been to shed light on who Jordan Peterson is, why he was catapulted to the spotlight under 2018, and what he and his followers believe. The goal has therefore been primarily to explain and clarify as to who he is and how his followers relate to the phenomenon of lifestance and making meaning as a whole, rather than delving into a further, deeper analysis.

The goal here at the end, then, is to have expanded the reader's knowledge on Jordan Peterson, his lifestance and the meaning provided by his 12 Rules, as well as the relation between him, his followers and briefly to their relationship to the alt-right.

What one can see is that, while his work is controversial, it is also simplified – summing up all of human existence as a simple struggle between chaos and order – while simultaneously made immensely more complex through his writing and the many fields of science and personal anecdotes he includes, which creates an unique reading experience that clearly has resonated with a lot of readers.

Beyond that, what's also important is his politics. Peterson has filled a niche in a certain moment of need; with an increasing amount of jobless young men and increasing depression rates (Jowitz, 2018), there's a need for a spiritual guide and a sense of purpose, and for many of these young men, Jordan Peterson have provided just that with his strict, fatherly advice and confident rules.

Ultimately, Jordan Peterson's popularity might be another example of the increased radicalization and tribalization of our modern political system; as the left goes further to the left, the right simultaneously goes further to the right, insulating themselves in filter bubbles where they can listen to their ideologically aligned hero "DESTROY" their opponent in politically aligned videos. However, even if this is the case, one shouldn't take away the fact that Jordan Peterson have been a positive influence on the lives of many of the young men that have listened to him, and his *lifestance* and *meaning* have made them emulate him to strive for personal improvement, which should be lauded even if one might disagree to many of his other opinions, as I personally do.

6.2 Future studies

Ultimately, a study on this level can never dig as deeply as a study over a longer period of time could accomplish. As a result, this is a subject that one could certainly explore further, and I see two distinct routes for one to take if one were to do so.

This has been a qualitative study, but it has focused entirely on text; the text produced by Peterson himself, as well as the text produced by those who follow his teachings. Because of this, a lot of this study has relied on personal interpretation, based on my personal understanding and first-hand knowledge. But no matter how much knowledge I have, I'm still an outsider to the phenomenon; in a more expansive study, it might have been relevant to interview or in some manner contact the actual Jordan Peterson followers, to hear their opinion and feelings towards Peterson and how they interpret the making of meaning. Combining the analysis with qualitative interviews to deeper analyze the phenomena would certainly add a layer of depth to it.

Beyond a layer of depth, it would also be interesting to add a layer of time to the study. After all, as 2019 begins, Jordan Peterson's newfound fame will have its one-year anniversary. Though a lot of articles and texts have been producing discussing Peterson, and he has become a highly controversial figure, the Canadian psychology professor have only been in the spotlight for a relatively short time. Because of that, it is not yet clear whether his fame will last or if he is merely a passing fad that will fade out, with his followers finding other sources of guidance. Is the lifestance that Peterson provides something that can stand the test of time, and is the meaning it provides to the young men who follow it something that will leave them content over a longer period of time, or do they only follow it while Peterson remains fresh and new?

With these different angles, there are many ways to continue the work this study started. As there isn't yet any sign of the current trend of certain groups of rootless young men living aimlessly and unemployed stopping, they will remain a highly volatile group attracted to various ideologies in pursuit of a greater meaning, which means that continued studies in this field will remain highly relevant for understanding their developments, and it is hopefully a topic I will revisit in the future.

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