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INCELS AND THE MANOSPHERE:
TRACKING MEN'S MOVEMENTS ONLINE

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, men have responded to feminist progress with political backlash. Pre-internet men's groups used biological constructions of gender as a method of reinforcing patriarchal power by restricting the rights of women. Today, the same methods are used in a loose collection of men's rights groups online called 'the manosphere'. Within the manosphere, men who identify as involuntarily celibate (incels) blame women for their perceived loss of masculine power. Some incels have taken their anti-feminist backlash offline through acts of mass violence, suggesting an emergent need for social science research into the incel identity. This paper outlines the theoretical orientation of hegemonic masculinity then applies it to past men's movements and their extensions found online today. Data for this study was found on the public online forum, Incels.co, the forum's wiki page, and in news articles related to incels. A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted on 50 forum posts. Themes that emerged from forum data were compared to wiki entries and news articles to provide a comprehensive understanding of incels' identity development. Findings include narratives that describe incels' experiences of devalued masculinity on the heterosexual marketplace through *lookism*, or perceived discrimination by physical appearance. A subcategory of *lookism* emerged in observed performances of *masculine entitlement* over women and their bodies. This study's findings suggest that incels frame their perceived devalued masculinity as a justification for their political position of *anti-feminism*. A sub-category of *anti-feminism* emerged in incels' sense of *lost hope for life*, with narratives that describe experiences of depression, suicidal ideation, and fantasies about mass violence. Findings also suggest that incels reify their own power using narratives about marginalized masculinities that *subordinate men and women*.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the face of women's growing power in social, economic, and political institutions, collectives of men are gathering in backlash to their perceived devaluation in the gender hierarchy. This loose collective of men, defined as men's movements, believe that power over women is an essential trait of masculinity that they are entitled to. Movements in the 1990s applied anti-feminism backlash to biological conceptions of masculinity and Christianity's control of family dynamics. Today, men's responses to perceived gender devaluation operate through anti-feminist discourse and collective harassment towards women online, using the internet as a tool to amplify backlash. Clusters of online spaces where men mobilize against feminism construct the 'manosphere'. The backlash found in the manosphere has led to violent consequences in recent years, with the U.S. and Canada facing multiple instances of mass violence conducted by a niche group of men who identify as incels.

The anti-feminist position of incels, and men's movements more broadly, is a political mechanism that reproduces gendered social organization in the United States. Feminist scholars emphasize the relational aspect of gender that shapes the way society is organized. Through this understanding, mainstream expressions of masculinity are viewed as the enforcement of power and domination (Connell 2005). As mainstream gender expectations are internalized and reproduced, so are the inherent power dynamics. This means that gendered expectations for men are expectations of dominance. Bringing this idea to the individual level, gender expectations and relations are an important part of culture, driving attitudes and behaviors from a young age. Therefore, culture reproduces the expectation that men's relationship to women will be that of

domination and this provides the basis for social organization. Incels and other men's movements are no exception to this understanding. In fact, power dynamics are central to the political ideology behind anti-feminism. The men's movements outlined in this paper replicate movements of men that were formed in reaction to feminist progress throughout history. These previous movements include the creation of the Boy Scouts, fraternal orders, sports teams, and muscular Christianity. These groups have fundamental commonalities, including a retreat from women and an emphasis on gender relations as gender differences, especially regarding who deserves power. In this same vein, today's men's rights groups that push anti-feminism hold political positions that focus on mainstream expectations for gender relations and ultimately reinforce masculine dominance. Incels who post anti-feminist comments online provide a glimpse into a political position held by men's rights groups more broadly. Ultimately, these perspectives are derived from mainstream gender relations in attempt to enforce a social organization that associates men with power.

This paper outlines the theoretical orientation of hegemonic masculinity then applies it to past men's movements and their extensions found online today. Incels are introduced as part of the loose collection of men's movements on the internet warranting qualitative analysis. Data for this study includes 50 post documents from the forum Incels.co, the forum's wiki page, and related news articles. Strategies of thematic analysis and coding for sensitizing concepts were used to analyze forum data. Themes from forum data were applied to broader context from the Incels.co wiki and news articles about incels. Findings include narratives that describe incels' experiences of devalued masculinity on the heterosexual marketplace through *lookism*, or perceived discrimination by physical appearance. A subcategory of *lookism* emerged in observed

performances of *masculine entitlement* of women and their bodies. This study's findings suggest that incels frame their perceived devalued masculinity as a justification for their political position of *anti-feminism*. A sub-category of *anti-feminism* emerged in incels' sense of *lost hope for life*, with narratives that describe experiences of depression, suicidal ideation, and fantasies about mass violence. Findings also suggest that incels reify their own power using narratives about marginalized masculinities that *subordinate men and women*.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

Introduction to Symbolic Interaction

Symbolic interaction is a paradigm that traces an understanding of the social world down to the individual level. This paradigm is necessary to study gender as a social construction and relational concept. At the basic level, individuals act in response to shared meanings applied to physical and social objects as symbols that make up cultural norms, values, and beliefs. Shared meanings are internalized that lead to the social construction of reality. These meanings change over time in response to social and environmental factors through interactions. Symbolic interaction's perspective of social life examines how individual free will interacts with the social world (Appelrouth and Edles 2012:464).

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann describe the process of social construction in their work, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966). They argued that humans are deprived of the biological instincts found in other animals, making it essential that social interactions teach us how to exist in a shared, social world (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Social construction occurs through the habitualization of routine actions, which eventually are shared to the point of institutionalization, and then become internalized in individuals (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Finally, behaviors are socialized through interactions to ensure reproduction (Berger and Luckmann 1966). This formulation is an extension of Charles Cooley's (1902) looking glass self, which argued that the sense of self is developed through social interactions and that individuals see themselves from the perspective of others (Appelrouth and Edles 2012:293).

In 1934, George Herbert Mead conceptualized the sense of Self as something that, "arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a

result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process”. Mead’s (1934:347-349) concept of the Self situates the individual to exist as both object and subject, and they are understood as experiencing the world from the standpoint of their social group.

Symbolic interaction applies the Self to William Thomas’s (1928) theory connecting the internalized social reality to action, arguing, “if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Appelrouth and Edles 2012:470). The self is a socially constructed concept that responds to social forces, acting based off socially constructed meanings. With these tenants of symbolic interaction, sociologists can study meanings through actions.

Gender and Hegemonic Masculinities

Previous literature tracks the trajectory of gender theories from biological essentialism to social construction. Historical iterations of gender theories reduced gender relations to biological explanations. Early feminists referred to patterns of gender relations as dependent on interactions between positions within the patriarchy (Connell 2005; Messerschmidt 2018). Understanding that individuals exist within a gender hierarchy was important to the progress of feminist ideals, but radical feminism in the 1970’s reduced the causes of the gender hierarchy to biological explanations (Messerschmidt 2018). In the same vein, the general understanding of women’s and men’s positions in society were predicated on biological assumptions about where each was a natural fit. For example, Connell (2005:21) cites the belief that the female brain was unable to handle the workload in academia as a justification for the exclusion of women in universities. Further, early renditions of men’s movements, including the mythopoetic men and the Promise Keepers, leaned into essentialism to convince men that their position in society is grounded in

nature and biology (Kimmel 1995; Messner 1997). Although social scientists have moved past biological essentialism, the public's general understanding of gender still functions on the premise that gender relations are somehow natural. This is seen today in arguments around transgender athletes and women in leadership positions of business and politics. Biological essentialism as a part of the "common sense" of public knowledge can be explained by inserting power and conflict into the framework with the concept of hegemonic masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity is rooted in the ideas of the Marxist theorist, Antonio Gramsci (1971). Gramsci's concept of hegemony is a combination of conflict at the class-level and the Self as an object that lives in a socially constructed world. Gramsci (1971:239) argued that because philosophy cannot be separated from politics, any philosophical ideas that prevail in a society are also political ideas which, "serve to cement and to unify". If the philosophical orientation of a culture functions to solidify order, and that order creates and perpetuates unequal distribution of power, then groups with power have a stake in controlling the narrative at the expense of those who have none. Even when the practice of oppressively holding on to control contradicts an individual's personal values, hegemonic ideas are, "powerful enough to produce a situation in which the contradictory state of consciousness does not permit of any action...and produces a condition of moral and political passivity" (Gramsci 1971:41). This passivity can be explained through the masses' faith in "authority thinkers and experts", so to contradict these figures would be to go against what is positioned as historically true (Gramsci 1971:246). Ultimately, philosophical orientations, which cannot be separated from political orientations, prevail as common sense (Gramsci 1971:247).

By placing the onus of gender relations on biology, men have conveniently found a “historically true” explanation for their position in the gender hierarchy. Gender is a social construction, yet we socialize our boys and girls to see themselves as distinctly separate due to “nature”, which has political consequences through hegemony (Kimmel 1995). These conceptualizations, even as they are refuted by social science as inadequate, become a real driving factor in the reproduction of gender relations. Gramsci’s concept of hegemony laid the foundation for hegemonic masculinities. A term originally coined by R. W. Connell (2005:77), hegemonic masculinity was defined as, “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women”. This definition provides a more functional, realistic depiction of masculinity due to the following operational characteristics.

First, hegemonic masculinity instills the idea that there must be a connection between power held at the institutional level and the “common sense” found in culture. This can help explain how seemingly gender-neutral institutions continuously operate as masculine spaces without the option of pushback from the general public. In Messerschmidt’s (2018:49) reformulation of the concept, he specifies that dominance does not inherently legitimize the patriarchy, therefore dominance alone does not constitute hegemony. Institutions such as politics, the military, and the internet have historically been under the control of men. These institutions cannot be inherently masculine by biology or natural order, as addressed above. Instead, hegemonic masculinity has legitimized the idea that women do not fit in these spaces by making the public believe that women lack the qualities to excel. For example, women are too emotional for politics, not strong enough to serve in the military, or not smart enough to understand

computers. These perceptions are “social facts” because they are real in their consequences, as institutions normalize expected behaviors along gendered lines. Women are expected to be passive and emotional, characteristics that are antithetical to leadership qualities. On the other hand, men are expected to be assertive and stoic, which are valued characteristics in leadership.

Second, Connell (2005:73-74) specifies that masculinities are by definition a relational concept, which operate through processes of legitimation in three specific modes: power, production, and cathexis. Power relations refer to the patriarchy, which refers to the gendered social hierarchy that reinforces domination by men and subordination of women and minority men (Messerschmidt 2018:12). Production, on the other hand, is the inception of subordination through the division of labor under capitalism that places women and subordinated men in roles so that they receive an unfair return for their labor (Connell 2005:74). Last, cathexis places significance on the idea that sexual desire and the gender order cannot be separated, speaking to the deep connection between the patriarchy and the social construction of gender that becomes real through actions (Connell 2005:74-75).

Third, Connell’s (2005) and Messerschmidt’s (2018) conceptualizations provide the framework to understand multiple masculinities, as opposed to one normative type. Normativity does not make something hegemonic; it is the reinforcement of a gender hierarchy that determines whether behavior falls under the definition. Masculinities that are non-hegemonic can be subordinated, marginalized, complicit, or in protest within the gender hierarchy. Connell uses the example of gay men who experience subordinated masculinity through being oppressed within the gender hierarchy that provides privilege for heterosexual men (Connell 2005:78). Marginalized masculinities are found in men who experience discrimination due to identities that

interact with the gender hierarchy, which is specifically applied to sexuality, race, and ethnicity in the United States (Messerschmidt 2018: 29). Complicit masculinities are, “men who have some connection with the hegemonic project but who do not embody hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 2005:79). These men are complicit because they benefit from their position within the patriarchy, therefore they do not resist its consequences. Protest masculinities occur when men lose power in institutions and must compensate through a doubling-down on hypermasculine characteristics (Messerschmidt 2018:29).

Last, this definition instills the idea that hegemonic masculinity is not fixed, instead it shifts as culture does, leaving room for new methods to enforce patriarchal relations. Historical conceptualizations of gender, such as biological essentialism or sex role theories, are critiqued for their static representations of the hierarchy that leaves little room for change or progress (Connell 2005:23; Messerschmidt 2018:5). This premise also presents an area for men to respond when they feel threatened by the progress of subordinated groups through what Connell (2005:84) calls crisis tendencies. For example, men who are expected to be economically secure but have trouble finding employment will feel that their place in the gender hierarchy has been devalued (Connell 2005:90). Gender as a relational concept that can operate through multiple, fluid masculinities is the operationalization of hegemonic masculinities.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Social Movements

Social movements are often conceptualized in academia as subordinated groups who actively oppose structures that give privilege others at their expense. Sociological conceptions of social movements are critiqued for reducing movements to objects where the actions of participants are explained by rigid rationalizations, ignoring the moral and practical reasons that

movements form (Nilson 2009). A Marxist approach expands this definition to take into consideration reactionary pushback from hegemonic positions (Nilson 2009). Putting these ideas in Marxist terms broadens their application to a more fluid conception of social structures and interactions by analyzing dominant and subordinate movements' responses to social forces from either side.

Under capitalism, gender movements are inherently tied to patriarchal modes of power held by white, heterosexual males (Connell 2005; Kimmel 1995; Messerschmidt 2018; Messner 1997). The patriarchy is enforced and reinforced through masculinity that must continuously justify this position when threats to gendered power through hegemony arise. These justifications operate by achieving consent of control by the masses who have convinced the structure is simply common sense (Gramsci 1971). If the patriarchy completely refused women their basic human rights, such as the right to vote, work, and have legal control of their bodies, the masses would likely see through the false assumption that male dominance is common sense. Instead, top-down movements respond to oppressed groups by granting concessions to accommodate some of the movement's demands. The goal is to placate oppressed groups without enacting actual change to the dominant structure (Nilson 2009). Through this framework, feminist movements have been granted concessions historically through women achieving the right to vote, join the workforce, and receive adequate representation in media. Although we see this as progress, the structure of male dominance has not been altered. When accommodations are not enough to keep the peace, top-down movements go on the offensive and re-take concessions made previously (Nilson 2009). Contemporary men's groups are on the offensive when they argue that they must take back the definition of masculinity at the expense of feminist progress

and women's rights. The response of men's groups to their gender devaluation operates through a politically driven backlash to feminism. Examples of this concept in action are found in men's movements of the 1990's such as the mythopoetic men who believed that the re-taking of masculinity is rooted in biology, and the Promise Keepers who were re-taking masculinity through religion and the family.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

Men's Movements Pre-web & Web 1.0

Today's men's movements echo the devaluation privileged men have experienced in reference to the progress of feminism. Messner (1997:2) situated early political men's movements around the presumption that gender is socialized in a way that costs men. Rather than addressing this, men's movements blamed feminists for their perceived devaluation within the gender hierarchy. By further subordinating women and minority men, these groups are choosing to address the issue of emasculation rather than the costs of adhering to hegemonic masculinity. Messner (1997) found that these movements fall within three interrelated themes: institutionalized privilege, costs of masculinity, and inequalities between men. Institutionalized privilege has been addressed through gender theory's conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity above. Messner (1997:6) states that, "men tend to pay heavy costs – in the form of shallow relationships, poor health, and early death – for conformity with the narrow definitions that promise to bring them status and privilege". Inequalities between men occur when privilege from the patriarchy is unevenly shared among men, especially in relationship to subordinated and marginalized masculinities (Messner, 1997:8). These top-down movements, which are hegemonic masculinities pushing back against progress, are reacting to perceived devaluation from delegitimized privilege in power, production, and cathexis.

As feminism and gender theorists shifted their analysis to examine what "masculinity" means, men in the mythopoetic movement staked their claim back in essentialism, the idea that men's biology justifies men's power (Messerschmidt 2018:34; Messner 1997:17). The essence of the mythopoetic men is found in the book *Iron John* by Robert Bly (Kimmel, 1995:15). *Iron*

John is based on a fairy tale in which a boy was tasked with freeing the Wild Man by proving himself through masculine tasks and is eventually rewarded with heterosexual marriage and ownership over the Wild Man (Kimmel 1995:20). This fairy tale is a metaphor for what Bly argued was missing in modern masculinity: the initiation of boys by men into a natural and essential manhood (Messner 1997:17). Bly did not argue that it was the fault of men, though. Instead he placed the blame on mothers who were feminizing their boys and depriving them of their biologically essential role, therefore they must retreat to homosocial spaces in nature to re-take their masculinity (Kimmel 1995:26). This movement is criticized for its emphasis on biological essentialism, the reduction of men and women to mythical archetypes, the physical separation of men as an inadequate solution, and the doubling down on hegemonic processes that are harmful to men (Kimmel 1995; Messner 1997). The mythopoetic movement formed in response to crises of masculinity occurring in the 1990's from delegitimized power through, "mass unemployment and racism" combined with a lack of language for men to discuss these issues in a healthy way, resulting in the movement blaming women for their missing male mentors (Kimmel, 1995:85). Messner (1997:20) states that the crisis here occurs in the overlapping realms of institutionalized privilege and the costs of masculinity.

Christian men in the 1990's made their own essentialist retreat, responding to a devaluation of masculinity in the institutions of work and the family (Heath 2003; Messner, 1997). The Promise Keepers were led by Bill McCartney who organized hundreds of thousands of men to gather in stadiums and share their fears about changing gender relations (Messner 1997:24). The Promise Keepers were following the lead of "Muscular Christianity" which responded explicitly to the fear that men were becoming feminized by the progress of the

feminist movement, and were losing power domestically through shifting family dynamics that started in the 1960's (Messner 1997:25, 31). The leaders of the Promise Keepers argued that men were becoming "sissies" which is a departure from their natural roles under biological essentialism (Messner 1997:27). This idea taps into the common sense of hegemonic performances, using feelings of devaluation to argue for relegitimization of masculine power and subordination of women through embodiment of religious men. Further, they saw the family diverting from the "God-given" traditional division within the household (Messner 1997:31). These men were taking back patriarchal power by reinforcing hegemonic gender relations within the nuclear family. This movement has been criticized for its homosocial retreat that ignores women, emphasis on biological essentialism, and ignorance of race-based structural inequalities (Heath 2003; Messner 1997).

Around the same time that the Promise Keepers were gathering in stadiums across the country, men were meeting each other on message boards in what is known today as Web 1.0. Web 1.0 sites are characterized as being unconnected and non-interactive due to the primitive technological capacity of the internet at the time (Sharma 2018). Web 1.0 was a male-dominated space with men using, "online services more often and for longer periods" (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics 1985). For example, of the 13% of adults who had household access to a computer, 55% of women reported that they did not use it at all, compared to only 27% of men (Riccobono 1986). Differences in computer use were attributed to gendered decision-making practices in the family (NCSES 1985). The lack of interactive features of the pre-social media era combined with a male-dominated web created forums where feminist opinions were often missing. Without disagreement, ideas on early message boards were often

amplified within each space, creating echo-chambers. For example, early online forums such as soc.men and soc.singles were found while tracing early renditions of the term ‘misandry’ online (Marwick and Caplan 2018). Misandry was conceptualized on these boards to be used as a gender-reversal of the term misogyny (Marwick and Caplan, 2018). The process of taking ownership of anti-feminist terminology represents men in reaction to women who were working to understand their oppression under the gender hierarchy. The term ‘misandry’ was in steady use in Web 1.0 forums that operated as echo-chambers of men in a time where few women were online. The discussion of misandry was eventually picked up by news media in the early 2000s (Marwick and Caplan, 2018). This is an early example of how internet-born gendered discourses founded in echo-chambers can carry into mainstream media. The term misandry and its use as opposition to misogyny is used on the internet today as a tool for orientation in the social media landscape as pro- or anti-feminist (Marwick and Caplan 2018). Many participants on these sites discussed feelings of discrimination against men in the legal system like the Father’s Rights groups and Men’s Rights Advocates that were forming outside of the internet (Crowley 2009; Marwick and Caplan 2018; Messner 1997:41)

Men’s Rights Advocates began in the late 1970’s as a response to feeling victimized by the perception that feminism demonized men in general and feeling threatened that women were joining the workforce (Messner 1997:42). These groups re-appropriated the costs of masculinity from harming both men and women, to harming only men so they could position themselves as victims of the gender hierarchy (Messner 1997:42-43). This was exemplified when progress in the legal realm to criminalize violence against women resulted in backlash through the Father’s Rights movement (Crowley 2009; Messner 1997:42). The Father’s Rights movement is an

example of a top-down movement that reasserts hegemonic power, using the family to frame men as victims of feminists. Tactics like misrepresenting research and utilizing traditionally masculine institutions, such as government and the legal system, are employed to frame men as victims (Crowley 2009). Under hegemonic masculinity men have historically taken these measures to ensure their dominance in the patriarchy.

Introduction to the Manosphere

Just as progress in gender equality prompted crises of masculinity in previous decades through homosocial men's movements, the messages of today's men's movements are distributed through Twitter, 4chan, Reddit, and group-specific message boards. These sites that reinforce hegemonic masculinity via backlash to feminism have been coined 'the manosphere' (Ging 2017).

The manosphere is, "a neologism used to describe a loose network of blogs, forums and online communities on the English-speaking web that are devoted to a wide range of men's interests, from life philosophies and gender relations to self-improvement tips and strategies for success in life, relationships and sex" (Know Your Meme). Although this definition seems to fit a general self-help theme, the contemporary manosphere is also the site of collective anti-feminism with distinct strategies for reinforcing hegemonic masculinity. The manosphere today is united under 'Redpill' ideology, which, "purports to awaken men to feminism's misandry and brainwashing" (Ging, 2019). There are clear expressions of devaluation described here, as men are facing shifts in the gender hierarchy towards egalitarianism in institutions such as the internet, the workforce, and the legal system. The fact that the manosphere is described as a space for advice and self-improvement contributes to the guise that anti-feminism projects are in

men's best interests. These ideas echo what was seen in the mythopoetic men's movement who framed their power devaluation as individual and emotional problems (Kimmel 1995).

Although many men's groups online are 'redpilled', they become fractured in their ideas of how to respond. For example, there are a number of groups taking the redpilled stance such as Pick Up Artists (PUAs), Men's Rights Advocates (MRAs), Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), and Involuntary Celibates (Incels). MGTOW, for example, argue that adult men should socially disengage, not just from the dating world but from the economic structure as well, to be free of the lies propagated by feminism (Lamoureux 2015). On the other hand, incels wish to engage both romantically and socially but feel the way they look prevents them from doing so (Mahlo 2019b). Men's Rights Advocates express their grievances with the legal realm and ultimately blame feminism and discrimination of men for their emasculation (Rafail and Freitas 2019).

Although these separate online groups differ in how they respond to feminism, their similarities lie in characteristics and values that reinforce hegemonic masculinity on the internet. The internet is a masculine institution that emphasizes "geek" or "nerd" sensibilities such as value on mental and technical mastery, objectification of women, use of humor when discussing marginalized groups, and emphasis on logic (Drakett, Rickett, Day and Milnes 2018; Kendall 2000). Connell (2005:16) discusses the emphasis on technical competence as a shifting labor market away from physical labor towards more technical jobs has subsequently shifted the processes and practices of hegemony. Regarding use of humor, a study of memes from 2018 found that popular images portray women negatively and belittle feminists (Drakett, Rickett, Day and Milnes 2018).

Internet communities reinforce hegemonic masculinity by placing importance on shared experiences through technology and gaming cultures (Kendall 2000; Massanari 2015). Gaming communities are associated with the reenactment of white, masculine behaviors, regardless of the gender or racial makeup of the player base (Kendall 2000). Further, nerd culture employs complicit masculinities because it embodies non-traditional characteristics of masculinity while simultaneously benefitting from the patriarchy as the gender hierarchy extends onto the internet (Almog and Kaplan 2016; Drakett, Rickett, Day and Milnes 2018; Kendall 2000). Men who participate in the manosphere can view themselves as separate from hegemonic modes of power because they distance themselves from traditionally masculine characteristics, which leaves space to see themselves as discriminated against by feminism (Kendall 2000).

One example of a group in the manosphere that places heavy emphasis on the masculine nature of the internet is Pick Up Artists (PUA). Similar to previous men's movements, the PUA community draws men who are interested in self-help in the realm of dating, specifically "geeks" or "nerds" whose culture deemphasizes social competency. PUAs argue that males are repressing their biological nature, as expressed through the term Average Frustrated Chump (AFC) (Cosma and Gurevich, 2018). This concept echoes the Wild Man of the mythopoetic movement. Their solution is to try to attain sexual relationships with as many women as possible, which exemplifies a crisis tendency over power in the realm of cathexis (Cosma and Gurevich, 2018). PUAs follow the rules laid out in two books called *The Game* and *Rules of the Game* by Neil Strauss (Almog and Kaplan 2016). These books argue that men can gain sexual partners by employing gaming logic that portrays women as needing to be devalued through teasing or "negging" so that men can reposition themselves as obtaining control over their dating

interactions (Almog and Kaplan 2016). This process objectifies women as an object to be pursued to win “the game”. PUAs argue that women must be devaluated, and their solution is to hurling insults at them, which justifies abuse through the rules of “the game”.

The mansphere is an innovative space for anti-feminist ideals because of what the internet brings to the movement. The work of men on Web 1.0 forums inserting misandry into the anti-feminist vocabulary took place in echo-chambers which foreshadowed how some groups operate online today (Marwick and Caplan 2018). For example, sites like Reddit provide niche spaces called subreddits with heavy moderation privileges giving members freedom to delete dissenting opinions from appearing on the page (Massanari 2017). Other sites, like Twitter, give users the ability to tag and track both allies and opponents. These functions contribute to the collective harassment seen in moments where the mansphere mobilized in events that are known today as GamerGate and The Fapping.

Collective action in the mansphere. Pew Research cites that about 40% of Americans have experienced online harassment, and 18% have experienced severe behaviors such as physical threats or sexual harassment (Pew Research Center 2017). Two prominent examples of the severe harassment described above happened to women by masses of men online during GamerGate and The Fapping. Both events occurred in 2014 and are what some describe as an ushering in of a new form of anti-feminist backlash through collective harassment (Ging and Siapera, 2018; Rafail and Freitas, 2019).

GamerGate describes the collective harassment towards game creator Zoe Quinn who received hate comments in reaction to her newly released game, “Depression Quest” (Massanari, 2017; Parkin 2017). Initial criticisms of Zoe’s actions were in reference to the content of her game, which believed was used to capitalize on mental health issues (Parkin 2017). Soon after the release a wave of collective threats came when Quinn’s ex-boyfriend published accusations that she held unethical relationships with journalists in the industry to boost the popularity of Depression Quest (Massanari, 2017; Parkin 2017). What occurred next was a collective effort by gamers to harass Quinn, and other female gamers in general, by sending rape and death threats (Massanari, 2017).

The Fappening was the mass-posting of nude photos that were stolen from the hacked phones of female celebrities (Moloney and Love 2018). Shortly after the photos were posted they spread throughout the internet with explicit comments attached, even after sites like Reddit banned the nudes (Moloney and Love 2018). These comments were performances of hegemonic masculinity through the homosocial and heterosexual masses’ sexualization and reduction of the women to objects and signaling of masculinity through sexual comments and use of sexual humor (Moloney & Love 2018). Reddit noted that their website traffic increased while the Fappening photos were being shared, insinuating a monetary return for owners of big social media sites if they encouraged this massive breach of privacy and objectification of women (Massanari 2017).

GamerGate and The Fappening are important to analyze for two reasons. First, these events showed that implications of ‘doxxing’ (posting someone’s personal information online with the intention of prompting targeted harassment) and brigading (a coordinated effort to give

attention to a particular person or website online) can lead to real-life consequences for victims. Second, GamerGate paralleled men's movements of the past where anti-feminist issues were framed as noble under the guise of achieving justice, as seen in Men's Rights Advocates and the Father's Rights movement. For example, many of Quinn's critics claimed their hatred was justified because she was violating journalism ethics and contributing to a shift towards "social justice warrior" (SJW) gaming (Parkin 2017). The Fappening amplified the objectification of women that researchers argue is a staple of internet culture. Both events are examples of how the ideologies found in the manosphere are symptoms of the larger, hegemonically masculine institution that is the internet.

Incels and the blackpill. The incel ideology is based on the idea of being 'blackpilled'. The redpill describes the process of rejecting social norms due to the belief that hegemonic masculinity is harmful (Ging 2017). This is an example of men who understand the costs of masculinity as seen in previous men's movements. The solution to the crisis tendency described by the redpill represents a callback to biological essentialism and traditional masculinity, arguing that feminism and its progress are the forces harming the natural order that privileges men (Ging 2017). For example, the incel wiki page describes the redpill as, "The belief that those who lost the genetic lottery face shallowness and unfairness, but that this can be overcome through self-improvement, particularly looksmaxxing" (William 2019). Looksmaxxing is defined as, "any attempt to improve one's appearance" (Anon 2019). Further, most incel pages reject the premise of the redpill as a buying into the system that they view as oppressive. Instead, they argue that the blackpill is the logical response, which is defined as, "the belief that the sexual revolution has

caused mass incelism and that the only solution is reversing the sexual revolution, returning to traditions and enforcing monogamy” (Mahlo 2019a). Incels are describing their crisis tendency taking place in the realm of cathexis, where their position within the gender hierarchy is inherently tied to heterosexual desire.

Since 2014 there has been a surge in mass violence events perpetrated by men who are unhappy with their position in society and who have adopted the blackpill beliefs. The most prominent killing was done by Elliot Rodger, who targeted women to get his “revenge on humanity,” killing 6 before committing suicide (Blake 2016). In his manifesto, Rodger expressed outrage at the idea that women did not choose to sleep with him and included race-based hatred for minority men who were having successful relationships (Blake 2016). Rodger’s sentiments express how hegemonic masculinity marginalizes black men based off race alone. Further, Elliot Rodger objectified women as something he felt he deserved through his privileged position in the gender hierarchy, which is a basis for the incel ideology.

Elliot Rodger is important to understand in this context for his martyr status among incels and other mass killers. The Toronto van attacker, Alek Minassian, was a self-ascribed incel who not only looked up to Rodger but claimed to have spoken with him about committing mass violence before either of their attacks (Mandel 2019; Robertson 2019). Minassian killed 10 people by driving a rented van into a crowd. In the police interview directly after the event, he said he was targeting all the individuals in society who were perpetuating the conditions that make it harder for incels to have successful romantic relationships (National Post 2019; Robertson 2019). He also told police that Elliot Rodger is the “forefather of the incel movement” and that Rodger’s attack is the beginning of a “beta uprising” (National Post 2019). Since 2014,

there have been 4 mass killers who referred to Elliot Rodger, including Alek Minassian (Cai and Landon 2019). Two of the perpetrators self-identified as incels and backed up their claims with misogynistic speech both online prior to the events, and during their violent attacks. Further, authorities have thwarted one attack by tracking threats made online. These events include the following:

- In 2015, Chris Harper-Mercer killed 9 people on the Umpqua Community College campus in Oregon. He left a digital manifesto that attributed his lack of social success to his perception that black men were having relationships with women who he thought should be dating him instead. Harper-Mercer likened himself to previous mass shooters, including Elliot Rodger (Theen 2017).
- In 2017, William Atchinson killed 2 students at Aztec High School in New Mexico. He often ranted online, even contacting other rampage killers and practicing his own massacre on shooter videogames (Kellogg 2018). Atchinson made statements online that supported Elliot Rodger (Cai and Landon 2019).
- In 2018, Alek Minassian drove a rental van into a crowd, killing 10 and injuring 16. Minassian self-identified as an incel, announced his intentions online beforehand, and bragged to police about his success with a high body count. Minassian claims to have contacted both the Umpqua Community College shooter, Chris Harper-Mercer, and Elliot Rodger through 4chan. (National Post 2019).
- In 2018, Scott Beierle opened fire at a yoga studio, killing 2 and injuring 5 others. Beierle had a criminal history of violence against women and told stories online about rejections in his dating life that led him to identify with the incel community. This perpetrator

directly expressed support for Elliot Rodger. Beierle ranted about his hatred towards minorities, as well. (Zaveri, Jacobs and Mervosh 2019).

- In 2019, authorities arrested Christopher Cleary for making threats online, including a post stating that he was planning on indiscriminately killing women due to his frustrations with being a virgin. This thwarted attacker had a criminal history of stalking, harassing, and threatening women. Cleary pleaded guilty to the charge of attempted threat of terrorism and was sentenced to up to 5 years in prison (Donovan-Smithale 2019; Salt Lake Tribune 2019).

Connell (2005:212) discussed the connection between hegemonic masculinity and infatuation with guns. For example, there are groups who have used guns to promote myths that war is coming (similar to Minassian's beta uprising), that guns are symbolically penis-shaped weapons, and that gun ownership and use is usually found in conceptualizations of exemplary masculinities (Connell 2005:212-214).

In 2001, Donnelly, Burgess, Anderson, Davis and Dillard conducted a life course analysis on self-identified involuntary celibates. Although this study pre-dates more recent evolution of the manosphere, it is often cited on incel forums. Donnelly et al. (2001) sought to identify social factors that inhibit young males from a normal trajectory of dating and relationships. She found that overall, virgin involuntary celibates were overwhelmingly male, and did not adhere to traditional gender norms (Donnelly et al. 2001). For example, it was likely that they did not date as kids and were shyer than what would be permitted by traditional masculinity. Further, they found that their incelness has led to "despair, depression, frustration and a loss of confidence" (Donnelly et al. 2001:167).

Incels are a top-down movement of young men who are experiencing crises tendencies of cathexis due to both their interactions with hegemonic masculinities and with progress toward gender equality. Instead of partnering with women to oppose the structure that is causing them harm, they are opposing feminism by re-taking truce lines made in the past to retain their privileges from a patriarchal arrangement on the internet. Due to the recent history of violence rooted in incel ideology, it is important to analyze discourse online to understand how men become blackpilled, justify their positions, and see violence as a tool to reinforce masculine privilege.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Methods and Archival Research

Qualitative methods operate under the assumption that reality is constructed. Within this paradigm, social science researchers must seek the meanings that are formed through interactions to understand social phenomena (Denzin and Lincoln 2018; Gubrium and Holstein 2001; Linders 2008; Warren and Karner 2010). Denzin and Lincoln (2018:14-15) trace the history of qualitative research through eight moments from the early 1900s to today. These moments include the traditional, modernist, blurred genres, crisis of representation, postmodern, postexperimental, methodologically contested, and the present (Denzin and Lincoln 2018). The trajectory qualitative methods have taken reflects sociology's ever-evolving understanding of the social world. As the orientation of gender theories discussed above have shifted to social constructionism, so have the methods we use to understand how this works.

Social constructionism is necessary to use in research that seeks to understand the operation of contemporary life. The concept of the Self situates the individual as a social structure that interacts with other social structures through communication to form and express identity (Gubrium and Holstein 2001). Capitalism-induced consumer culture and social media have created a world in which individuals are inundated with messages that portray personal identities as insufficient, leaving much to feel troubled about. For example, photoshopped photos on social media present an unrealistic standard for beauty, yet they influence the public's standard of ideal bodies. Gubrium and Holstein (2001:2) observe that, "Today, identity no longer emanates from within, but penetrates us from every angle". This modern experience sets individuals up to constantly re-center their inner selves or be left feeling inauthentic and

uncomfortable (Gubriam and Holstein 2001:5). Incels describe these feelings through the blackpill concept, therefore the processes they take to voice their identity must be viewed through a constructionist, qualitative paradigm.

The qualitative paradigm gives researchers tools to ask what is happening, and how (Holstein and Gubrium 2008). The “what” refers to the substance of the phenomenon itself, while the “how” is concerned with, “the everyday rules and strategies by which reality is put together” (Holstein and Gubrium 2008). The method of seeking answers about social phenomena depends on which question is being asked. This study will ask both questions of the documents produced by and about incels. For example, what are they expressing, and how is that situated in the broader context of the current sociohistorical moment? The intention behind each question informs the methods of inquiry that will be used, such as interpretive social constructionism or objective social constructionism. Interpretive social constructionism (ISC) is based in, “the idea that the meaning of things is not inherent” and seeks to interpret how meanings are formed and changed through social interactions (Harris 2008:232). On the other hand, objective social constructionism (OSC) positions social constructions in the context of social factors (Harris 2008:234). For this project, I used the ISC frame to understand how incels are constructing meaning by examining documents from incel forums, while the OSC frame was used to place constructed meanings within the broader context of history and current events.

The qualitative paradigm allows for the position of the researcher, and even the field of study, to be considered reflexively in analysis (Holstein and Gubrium 2008). Denzin and Lincoln (2018:3) argue that, “qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These

practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations.”. From the perspective that there cannot be a true, empirical reality, researchers inject as much standpoint and bias as participants. While some social scientists may see this as problematic to the practice of inquiry, qualitative methods allow the researcher to rely on their training and skills without artificially posturing as non-reflexive observers. Studying internet communities makes this characteristic of qualitative research appealing and appropriate. It is impossible for the contemporary researcher to be untouched by some form of media online through social networks, news media, or entertainment. Even when we are using the web for a mundane goal, say to find a dinner recipe, we are faced with advertisements that target our demographic characteristics or search histories. Researchers cannot separate themselves from their online presence, especially Millennials who grew up in an online world. Utilizing qualitative methods to understand social phenomena on the internet allows the researcher to use their experiences to inform their procedures, as well as acknowledge their biases as members of the space.

This study of incels used the qualitative paradigm outlined above to conduct archival research of documents on the internet. Archival research traditionally required a researcher to visit a physical location to collect data (Hill 1993). In the time of big data on the internet, academia must shift this definition to include digital repositories and the individual’s ability to collect and save digital data. The archive, for the purpose of this study, is the researcher’s own collection of data on incels from online sources. Hill (1993:73) notes that, “the range and variety of useful alternative data sources are constrained primarily by your imagination and resourcefulness”. The researcher relies on a combination of their creativity and skills to create the archive, justifying the collection through organizational procedures that are informed by

theory and previous research. For this study, I am tapping into my experiences with internet communities to continue the story of men's rights movements online.

The decision to save documents instead of searching for them in real time is due to a pattern of incel forums and websites being shut down by site hosts (Hauser 2017). By saving the sites and audio transcripts in the form of digital documents, the researcher can preserve the data as it was posted and allow it to be viewed as a snapshot in time, as opposed to fluid content that can be edited. Further, doing archival research broadens the scope of data and methods to fluctuate between both inductive and deductive inquiry. With this strategy, documents can be explored inductively to establish an understanding of how incels construct reality, and then analyzed deductively within the context of wiki entries that guide the incel ideology and news articles about incels who commit violent acts.

Sources of Data and Sampling Procedures

The data for this study includes a collection of documented forum posts, the corresponding forum wiki page, and online news articles. These levels of data will be used for triangulation, which is “the simultaneous display of multiple, refracted realities” that enhances the validity of the data (Denzian and Lincoln 2018). These sites are described as levels because they each provide a different type of data for framing and utility. For example, forum posts are micro level in-depth conversations between members of the group who are continuously constructing and reconstructing the incel identity. The forum wiki page is used to provide macro level context for in-group terminology and frames the logic and ideological principals used in forum posts. News articles also provide a macro level, outside-in perspective that provide a look into the public's perception of incels.

Forum data was collected from the popular incel website, Incels.co. I discovered this data in my personal experiences with online spaces. As a member of various online communities, I am constantly made aware of new, extreme corners of the internet that seep into mainstream spaces. When incels began to make the news in connection to mass shootings, I took a deeper dive into the spaces where incels were forming their identities. Driving this project is a desire to understand the experiences of these young men to address my own concern for the men I share online spaces with. Following the Reddit shut down of incel forums, I found that the men who were posting on Reddit migrated to a self-hosted site called Incels.co. Incels.co is a unique site because it fosters deep conversation by actively forbidding trolling and low-effort content. Low-effort content is described as posting one-liners or jokes in comments, meaning posters must ensure their replies are contributing to a conversation. This was beneficial, as I was able to find rich data comprised of in-depth conversations without the need to sift through joke-posts or one-word responses. Further, there is no voting mechanism on the forum, such as “likes”, leaving no room for algorithms or user manipulation to alter the presentation of posts on the site. The forum is organized simply by presenting a list of the most recent posts. Documents saved from Incels.co were analyzed inductively by establishing themes and sensitizing concepts using methods of thematic analysis. There are over 100,000 current threads on incels.co, making it impossible to take the “anything you can lay your hands on” approach (Linders 2008). Instead, I utilized elements of proportionate sampling in which researchers organize data into proportional strata which elements are selected from. In this case, data was organized by daily contributions, then a sample was derived from those daily strata. This strategy was used to avoid selection bias for inductive analysis.

The sampling process consisted of archiving the 5 most recent posts at the same time daily for 90 days. I visited the site at the same time daily and saved the 5 most recent posts as PDF files labeled with the date and post number of that day. I worked backwards with the goal of attaining a sample of 50 posts. Given the timeframe of this project and the additional goal of increasing generalizability (at least to the forum), it made practical sense to collect a handful of posts daily to establish a larger list of files to sample from. With this goal, I calculated that I would attain 450 posts to then narrow down to a 50-post sample by selecting every 9th post. This was possible to achieve using live links from the forum, but there was concern during the research process over the continued availability of forum posts as incel pages were being shut down by large hosts like Reddit. By collecting posts daily, I was able to save documents on my own avoiding the potential for losing data with a site shutdown. The sampled forum posts consist of a main poster's contribution and comments underneath. Posts in the sample have a range from one to 84 comments, with the average of 27 comments per post.

Methods

The overall analytic strategy employed in this study was a thematic analysis of documents to create the archive. Thematic analysis is defined as, “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail” (Braun and Clarke 2006:79). A theme is something that is, “important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Brain and Clarke 2006:82). Organizational procedures for the archive consist of categorizing documents by type of data, then by thematic characteristics within a matrix. As themes are identified, the researcher takes notes to

contextualize each piece of data within the broader archive (Hill 1993:5). The archive itself cannot speak to the significance of the data that is included, why it has been included, nor where. The researcher's organizational decisions and notes are processes of deductive analysis through the objective social constructionism frame. This method provides an understanding of how incels fit within the sociohistorical context of men's movements and the innovation of the internet.

Forum data from Incels.co was analyzed inductively using interpretive social constructionism methods of thematic analysis and coding for sensitizing concepts (Braun and Clarke 2016; van den Hoonaard 1997). The goal of this sub-analysis is to understand the constructed reality formed by incels online. Archived forum posts were used to discover sensitizing concepts that are, "a starting point in thinking about a class of data which the social researcher has no definite idea and provides an initial guide to her research" (van den Hoonaard 1997). Incel forums are full of discourse using folk terms that are common enough to be labeled as sensitizing concepts. For example, a forum comment that says, "Just be Chad. He's volcel" means to incels, "A man who has stereotypical masculine characteristics has the ability to voluntarily choose celibacy". Understanding the in-group language of incels is essential to understanding their identity development. It is clear this comment contains folk terms that cannot be understood without sensitizing oneself to their situational meanings.

Sensitizing concepts were coded in relation to how they are used organically, and then organized by themes so the researcher can clearly explore the dimensions of each concept. Line-by-line coding was employed at this stage to inductively discover emerging patterns in the data. Eventually, clusters of concepts formed themes. The thematic products were analyzed within the context of data derived from the archive, relying heavily on information the Incels.co wiki page.

The goal for this level of analysis is to understand the situational processes of meaning-making that are happening within internet forums (Gubrium and Holstein 2009). The folk terms and themes found in the forum data create linkages from Incels.co to the broader sociohistorical context found in the archive (Gubrium and Holstein 2009:61). As I proceeded through the data analysis, concepts were re-coded and re-organized deductively. Themes were organized according to their relationships to concepts by building concept maps (example *Figure 1*). The process of writing out the analysis also provided new ways to look at and organize the data. Themes were continuously reorganized according to properties and dimensions until a clear conceptualization of each theme was established.

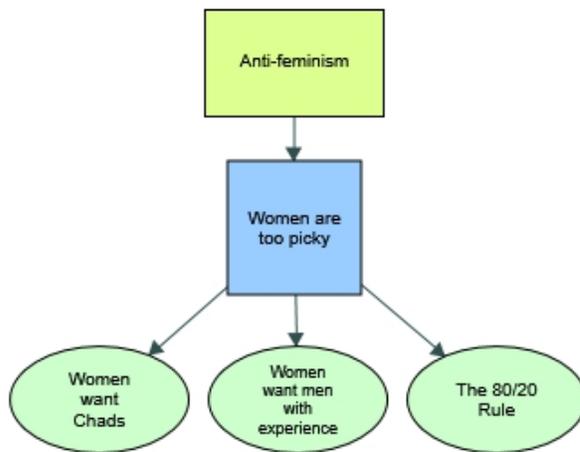


Figure 1: Example Concept Map

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

This study will explore how an anti-feminist identity is formed by incels online. The Incels.co forum surveys its members and found in September of 2019, 100% of respondents were male and 59% were between the ages of 16- 25. The analysis of forum posts was conducted with consideration for these demographic factors. In the process of thematic analysis, narrative themes emerged that suggest experiences of devalued masculinity on the heterosexual marketplace are leading these men to the incel identity. Posters to the Incels.co forum outlined processes of devaluation where they feel a loss of masculine power relative to women and other subordinated men. Processes of devaluation occur through what incels refer to as *lookism*, or the perceived discrimination by physical appearance. Posters on the forum describe *lookism* as a major reason for their inability to gain sexual access to women. Comments on forum posts outlined the ways in which *lookism* actively devalues incels on the heterosexual dating market by using an exemplar of masculinity embodied in the term ‘*Chad*’, a stereotypical hegemonically cis-gendered white man, as a comparison. Forum posters use the condition of their devaluation to justify anti-feminist rhetoric, advocating for the reversal of women’s rights as the solution to ensure incels have access to the heterosexual dating market. Some participants experience devaluation to the extent of losing hope for their future. This ideology led participants down a dangerous path towards suicidal ideation and mass murder fantasies. Posts on the Incels.co forum suggest that incels are working to actively subordinate marginalized men and express hatred for women in their posts in attempt to reify masculine power. Some, like Elliot Rodger and other mass murderers, make the decision to enact the ultimate masculine dominance by targeting women with mass violence.

Lookism as a Process of Devaluation

Posters on the Incels.co forum describe the ways in which they experience process of devaluation in society. Incels believe that society ranks individuals according to their value on the sexual marketplace, and that they are at the bottom of this ranking scheme due to their perceived ugliness. Posters describe dimensions of their physical appearance that are deemed undesirable, such as their facial features and height. Some attempt to change their appearance to be more desirable, using money to afford extreme methods like plastic surgery. Others discuss money as a method of attaining status to circumvent a lower rating according to looks. Posters use the concept ‘*Chad*’ as a narrative tool to compare themselves and identify their subordination. Incels emphasize that Chad’s access to women is an unfair advantage of exhibiting masculine traits that they cannot benefit from. The following concept map will guide the logical breakdown of incels’ described processes of devaluation.

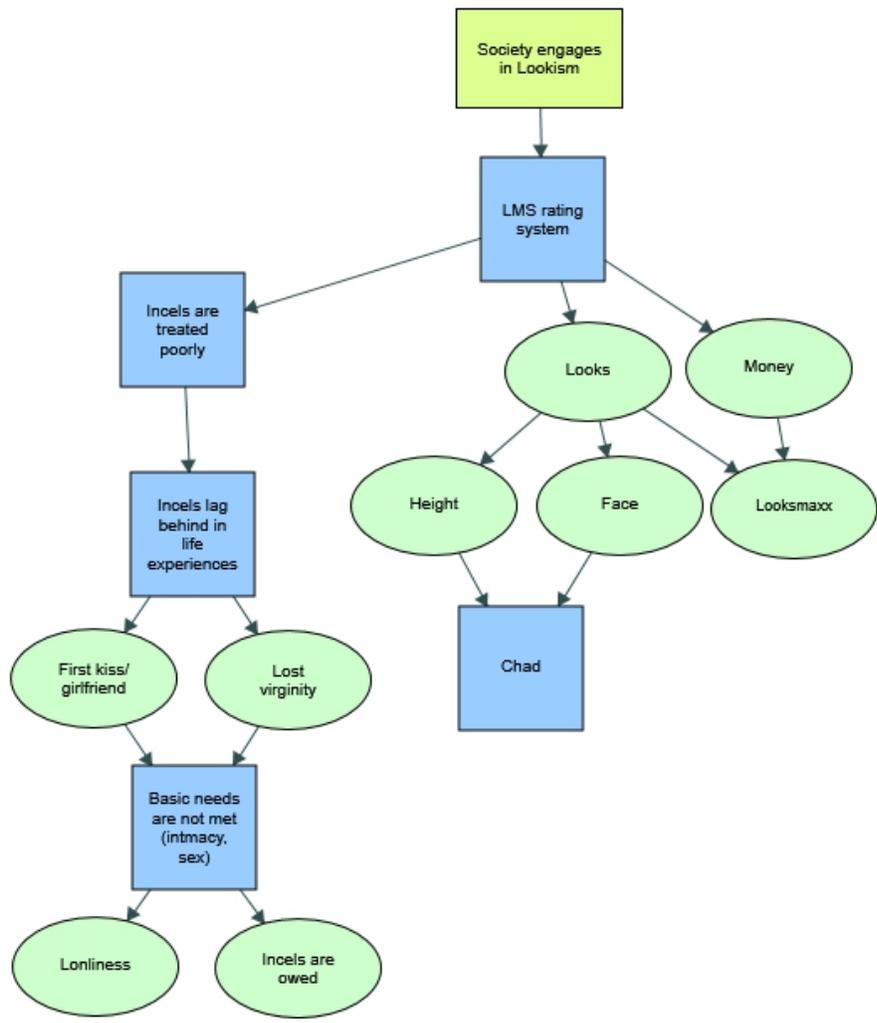


Figure 2: Devaluation Concept Map

Lookism. Incels do not declare their hatred for women, feminism, and liberal society without justification. One of the major tenants of the blackpill belief system and a theme that emerged from this sample is the belief that society participates in what they call *lookism*. *Lookism* is the idea that those who are perceived to be ugly experience prejudice or discrimination. This theme was mentioned 90 times throughout the forum posts (n=50). Judgements made under *lookism* are related to narrow conceptions of heterosexual desirability including stereotypical standards of masculinity. Standards of physical appearance are important to incels citing a lack of masculine facial features and stature. Incels emphasize that they are unfairly deemed undesirable by these standards and express frustration at the idea that they are restricted from the privilege of access to heterosexual relationships.

Forum posters frequently discussed *lookism*, its consequences, its principals, and even engaged in it themselves. The unfair process of discrimination based on physical appearance, these posters argue, has created their circumstance of celibacy. As with other belief systems of the manosphere, the blackpill follows the logic that dating and sexual relationship matching occurs on a sexual marketplace. Individuals on the marketplace, both male and female, are rated according to their looks, money, or status (otherwise known as LMS), which set the properties of the *lookism* theme. Although there is no definitive guide for what aspect holds more weight, posters on the forum discussed the *looks* dimension with much more frequency than *money* and *status*. *Money* is used as a tool to ‘*looksmaxx*’, or to try to better one’s appearance. Finally, under *lookism* the ultimate exemplar of masculine desirability is found in the concept “*Chad*”.

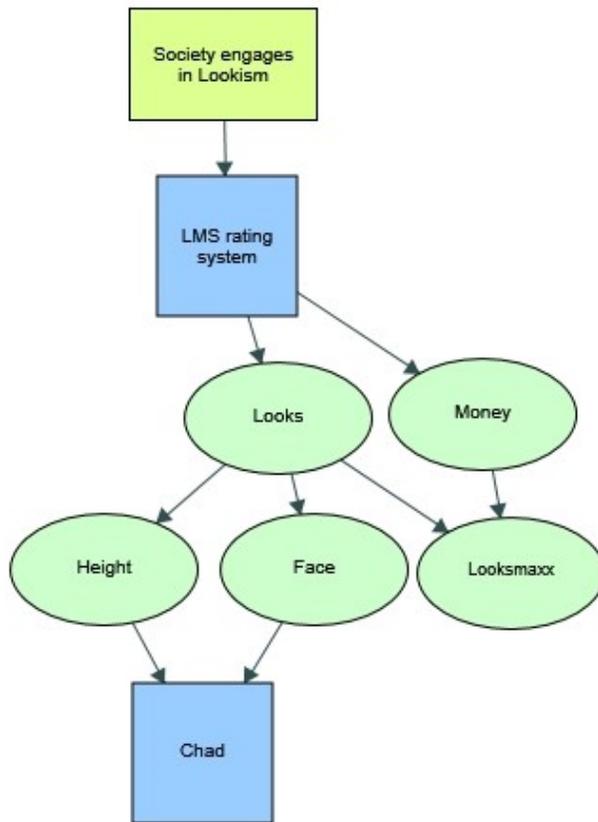


Figure 3: Lookism Concept Map

Face. Within the concept of looks, commenters frequently emphasized that facial appearance is an important factor in establishing value on the heterosexual marketplace. The Incels.co wiki provides a description of perceived ideal male facial features that includes,

...hunter eyes with little to no upper eyelid exposure, positively or neutrally tilted eyes, prominent high cheekbones, thick eyebrows, a large skull, compact midface, killer long chin, defined squarish jawline, long vertical ramus, gonial angle of approx. 120 degrees, forward growth of the mandible and the maxilla, a short straight nose, an ideal philtrum to chin ratio (with the philtrum being shorter), clean exotic skin, healthy bite with white teeth, and lastly, low body fat (below 15%).

Characteristics like “hunter eyes” or “killer long chin” are perceived through a “survival of the fittest” conceptualization of the dating world where masculine dominance is necessary to attaining heterosexual relationships.

Forum posters describe specific ways in which their facial features are devaluing with comments like, “I’m strong confident and intelligent (have many MALE friends) yet foids¹ still fucking despise me because of a few mm of bones”. The reference to a few mm of bones is a description of his facial bones (see *Figure 4*), which he argues elicits hatred from women.

The difference between Chad and non-Chad (incel) is literally a few millimeters of bone.



Figure 4: "Few mm of bones" Reference Image
Source: Knowyourmeme.com

Another claims his facial features damages his potential for success, “I always knew that this life is shit and I won't succeed (mostly due to mental + personality, now I realised it's cause of face

¹ Foid or femoid is a term that incels use to describe women. It is used to indicate women are sub-human and inferior to men. Foid was used 146 times throughout the 50 forum posts.

too) so I just coped by playing games 16h/day.” One user creates an entire post and discussion around the structure of his face. Specifically, he is disturbed by the placement of folds around his nose. He comments:

I dunno what the formal term for these lines is but I have them... Incel trait though tbh, indicative of poor facial bone structure. I have absolutely subhuman prey eyes with perpetual turbo bags even when I'm not tired (which to be fair isn't most of the time I'm awake, but still). I passed the mirror today after combing my hair (cause it looks godawful unless I comb it) and because the lighting from a nearby window exaggerated my nasolabial folds and the lines under my eyes, it became apparent that they are almost parallel to each other. Just lol. My cheeks are like a strip of flesh running between them that gets pulled along with my facial expressions. Absolutely fucking subhuman, bones 404². Who else has this?

This user references the alpha male trope in his description of “subhuman prey eyes” which is a commonly used narrative tool in the manosphere. This is the belief in that the social world has a dominance hierarchy, in which the most “alpha” individuals will be dominant. The Incels.co wiki describes how the dominance hierarchy operates: “social animals naturally compete for access to resources and mating opportunities which are limited in quantity and quality. Rather than fighting each time interests are in conflict, the animal of higher status gets to decide in a dominance hierarchy”. The conflict over resources refers to resources of masculinity that provide value on the heterosexual marketplace. Further, the association with “alpha males” and the “pack” falls into a biologically essentialist perspective of the dating world. The poster argues that his specific bone structure is essentially an incel trait that devalues him on the sexual marketplace, and as a man overall.

² When this user writes, “bones 404”, they are referencing an internet error message that indicates a webpage cannot be found. This is another way to say he is lacking prominent facial features associated with masculinity.

Height. The second most frequently mentioned dimension of the concept *looks* is *height*. The forum wiki page discusses the concept taking the “heightpill” as an element of the blackpill, which is the belief that women prefer tall men. The wiki page describes that, “...manlets (men who rank in the bottom half in terms of height) are heavily disadvantaged in dating...” Height is a resource for performing masculinity under heterosexual standards of desirability. Forum posters who are shorter describe how their lack of height perceived as a resource has impacted their ability to perform masculinity in their pursuit of heterosexual relationships, a marker of masculine power.

Two posters associated their height with extreme self-hatred and suicide. One made a post specifically asking the forum how to find the courage to kill himself, and responded to a commenter with, “my manlet height and looks make me too ugly to even try Stop asking me these fucking questions and help me fucking kill myself”. In another post, a user writes, “Every time I got outside I want to bludgeon my self to death because everyone mogs³ me and auto hates me because of my grotesque face and subhuman height”. This user expresses suicidal ideation at the idea that people hate him because of both his face and his “subhuman” height. Throughout the manosphere, incels and other groups discuss heightism found on dating apps like Tinder. Perceived heightism exemplifies the value placed on physical standards of masculinity. Characteristics that participants label as resources on sexual marketplace, like height, facial structure, and eyes, are all unchangeable without surgery or mutilation. Incels are placing a

³ Mogging comes from the acronym AMOG which stands for the Alpha Male of the Group and refers to the reduction of the gender hierarchy to biologically prescribed “alphas” and “betas”. Mogging is used to label a behavior as dominating. For example, a participant who cannot afford a vehicle comments, “I hate incels mogging me with cars”.

burden on themselves to meet impossible standards of masculinity, such as being taller. The inability to meet these standards are seemingly out of their control framing incels as a victim of masculine devaluation.

Looksmaxxing. Some posters on the Incels.co forum reference ways to address their looks through “looksmaxxing”: trying to better one’s appearance by using methods such as such as personal grooming, steroid use, hair growth products, and even plastic surgery. In 2019, Gizmodo released an article titled “For Men Who Will Try Anything to Get Taller, There's a World of Grifts and Gimmicks” that outlines the ways in which these men try to get taller including pills, stretches, and surgical procedures (Oelbaum 2019).

Comments on the forum discuss similar methods of looksmaxxing. For example, one post asked respondents about their goals for the year 2020, in which 6 of the respondents wrote “surgery” or “surgerymax”. In another thread, one poster responded to the question of “In 5 years, how many of you will still be on this website?” with, “I will have performed Prayopavesa⁴, the vultures and maggots will have cleansed my bones and my remains will remain hidden... unless I get surgery”. This poster argues that there are seemingly only two options for him, and that his appearance is so detestable that he must either commit suicide or take extreme measures to fix it. This shows the value placed on height as a resource to access masculine dominance, and the consequences of following expectations of vanity for men. In

⁴ Prayopavesa is a Hindi method of suicide by starvation.

commonly held expectations for masculinity, outward appearance is directly connected to sexual prowess and one's potential to assert dominance.

Money. The incels on this forum discussed the money dimension of LMS less frequently than the looks dimension as a method of increasing sexual market value. Wealth is central to achieving hegemonic masculinity. Posters argue that money can help achieve looksmaxxing by being able to afford extreme body modification like plastic surgery. Money is also a way to achieve status, which is the third dimension of the LMS system. Comments outline how money can be used to mediate looks in acquiring value on the sexual marketplace.

In the post where users were asked their goals for the year 2020, 6 respondents answered that they would like to get rich, or “moneymaxx”. Like the value placed on plastic surgery analyzed previously, one user said his plans are to, “Get rich or rope”. This user has framed financial capacity as the only way to regain his masculine dominance.

Rating System. One way that incels apply the logic of *lookism* is through a rating system. The rating of both men and women according to sexual market value is taken seriously in the manosphere. Groups like Pick Up Artists base their dating strategies around the logic of the rating system. The rating system is a scale of 1-10 that quantifies physical characteristics according to sexual marketplace value.

Commenters on the forum use the rating system to discuss females:

“If you take all that fake-up away, I bet she looks like a zombie. Even with it - she is at best 6 or 6.5/10 in my eyes. I wouldn't touch her with a bargepole tbh [to be honest] -

looks like trash.”

“...most guys would consider her a 10/10. she wears so much makeup you can see white shine dot on her nose.”

Here, the rating system is used to objectify women and reduce their worth to a subjective sexual market value. Posters also used the rating system to talk about themselves and other men:

“In present day, unfortunately if you are under 8/10, you are fucked. Maybe you won't be a total outcast, you'll have some friends and people will treat you relatively good, but in dating you will have it very difficult”

“Chad can sound like a soyboy⁵ as long as he is 8/10 that's all women want”

When incels use the rating system to label men, they are reinforcing standards masculine dominance. Attaching a quantitative value denotes an individual's position on the gender hierarchy. Using physical appearance to set this standard places incels in the position to make essentialist arguments about their condition of celibacy.

Chads. Incels use the name “Chad” to describe a man who exhibits stereotypical characteristics associated with masculine dominance. The concept “Chad” was used 215 times by posters and is an incel folk term that has spread to mainstream online culture. Chad is an exemplar of hegemonic masculinity used to compare incels in terms of masculine value. Chads are rated at the higher range of the 1-10 scale, while incels are at the bottom.

One poster describes Chad as tall, with a “good jaw”, “good eyes”, “good hair”, and is

⁵ Soyboy is a term used to degrade other men by saying they are effeminate. The Incels.co wiki page says, “The use of the word "soy" is sort of a joke and implies that the man in question has possibly been feminized by consuming a lot of phyto-estrogens from soy product”.

“super robust”. The Incels.co wiki explains what Chad means to incels in further detail:

A Chad is someone who can elicit near universal positive female sexual attention at will. A Chad usually has some combination of a really aesthetic appearance, a lot of money, or a lot of general social status. Chad often has very masculine facial features, such as a square jaw and "hunter" eyes. He is often at least 6' tall, has a lean body (sometimes muscular) and/or has a mesomorphic frame.

This definition makes the association between the physical appearance of Chad, along with his money and status, to the belief that he definitively and consistently attracts positive female attention. Incels express devaluation in experiencing differing levels of attention from women and sexual experience. The Incels.co wiki describes the process of labeling Chads using the LMS rating system,

A Chad who mogs [dominates] an average Chad is a "10" on the decile scale, often referred to as Gigachad. A Chad is a "9" on the decile scale, and as such, someone whom is moderately or slightly below a Chad in looks or overall sex appeal is an "8" on the decile scale, often called a Chadlite or Pretty Boy.

Incels connect Chad's label on the LMS scale to his dominant position on the gender hierarchy.

Chads are men who are seen to have an easier time in life and dating and use their power to assert dominance over women and other men. Incels obsess over Chad because he exemplifies the resources of masculinity incels claim they are deprived of in looks, status, and sexual experience. Dimensions of Chad are physical characteristics, like stature and facial features, positive attention from women, and the ability to assert masculine dominance over women.

Comments describe Chad as an archetype of masculine physical characteristics who receives positive attention from women: “Chad” is a mythical archetype we haven't yet defined, because we use "Chad" to mean whatever unrealistic handsomeness/sexual activity standard we happen to come up with.” This post describes that the expectation these incels will achieve dominant characteristics is unrealistic. One comment compares Chad's physical appearance and

treatment of women to Jesus with, “Jesus looks like Chad and respects adulterous women”. The image of Jesus has been used as an archetype for masculinity to reinforce masculine dominance throughout history. Chad’s physical appearance is important to incels to use as a reference point for their own masculinity. Posters mention the importance of Chad’s physique to his ability to find a partner:

“...her boyfriend is a muscular bodybuilder gigachad⁶.”

“You could be as mentally inept as humanly possible and, as long as you have the physique of chad, foids will be all over your cock.”

These comments argue that women prefer men who have the physical characteristics of Chad, which is opposite to the way incels see themselves. Other posters discuss the dimension that Chad gets positive attention from women with comments like,

“If he's an extremely good-looking chad then foids [women] seem to be okay with 100+ year old guys dating teen girls in HS”

“Life is a buffet of pussy for chads”

“...she clearly indirectly said it’s only acceptable for chad to approach and they can literally straight up ask to hookup while sub8s [under 8 on the rating scale] will get reported on sight”

⁶ Gigachads are men who are rated “10” on the LMS scale - the ultimate Chad.

“Chad can sound like a soyboy [effeminate man] as long as he is 8/10 that’s all women want”

Posters discuss how women will overlook what they deem as less-masculine, including being elderly or having a higher pitched voice, to be with men who have the appearance of a Chad.

Under the logic of the blackpill, Chad is an exemplar of masculine dominance. Posters describe how they conceptualize what Chad means in relation to themselves and their peers. Chad’s characteristics are intrinsically connected to positive attention from women. Incels are the opposite and believe they elicit negative attention and are deprived from access to the heterosexual marketplace. Both factors diminish incels’ value as men. The final dimension of Chad is in his ability to use masculine dominance over women. Posters frame examples of Chad getting away with sexual assault, manipulation, or statutory rape as unfair benefits of being physically attractive. For example, one comment says, “JFL [Just Fucking LOL] if you think Chad follows AOC [Age of Consent] laws.” This poster’s conceptualization of Chad includes having sex with girls under the age of consent. Another comment discusses how Chads can sexually assault women, “cute girls probably only get aroused by having their cheeks pinched by chad, they’d just scream in terror if it was us.” This comment is framed as a comparison between Chads and incels, where incels unfairly lack the privilege to touch women without their consent. Dominant men are perceived as entitled to sex with minors or touching without consent, and incels see their inability to perform these behaviors as subordinating factors to their position on the gender hierarchy.

Posters describe the ways in which their identity as men is devalued. Incels believe that they are deemed ugly on the 1-10 rating scale. They describe dimensions of their physical appearance that are deemed undesirable, including less-masculine facial features and height. Some attempt to “looksmaxx” with money by finding methods of increasing their sexual market value like getting plastic surgery. Others discuss money as a method of attaining status to circumvent a lower rating according to looks. Comments provide an exemplar of a man with a high rating who benefits from exhibiting masculine characteristics in the concept “Chad”. Chad is used as a narrative tool for incels to compare themselves and identify their subordination. Incels emphasize that Chad’s access to women is an unfair advantage of exhibiting stereotypical masculine traits. One aspect of Chad’s privilege is in his entitlement to women provided by masculinity that incels’ feel they are missing out on.

Masculine Entitlement

Incels directly connect *lookism* to their individual ratings, value on the sexual marketplace and life experiences. A subtheme of lookism emerged in performances of *masculine entitlement*. Posters describe the costs of their devalued masculinity in narratives that establish the properties of masculine entitlement as follows: *incels are treated poorly, lag behind in life experiences, their basic needs are not met, and society owes them*. One of the concepts within the theme *lookism* is the belief that incels are ugly. Incels are then devalued both in the dating realm and in society overall. Understanding the effects of *lookism* on their own lives, incels argue that negative treatment has caused them to *lag behind in life experiences*. Life experiences include missing out on a first kiss, holding hands with girls, and losing their virginity. Incels frame

sexual access as *a basic need* that they are deprived of, expressing masculine entitlement. Posters on the Incels.co forum follow this line of logic to justify the belief that *society owes them* money or sexual access because their basic needs are not being met. See the organization of the subtheme *masculine entitlement* in the following concept map (Figure 5).

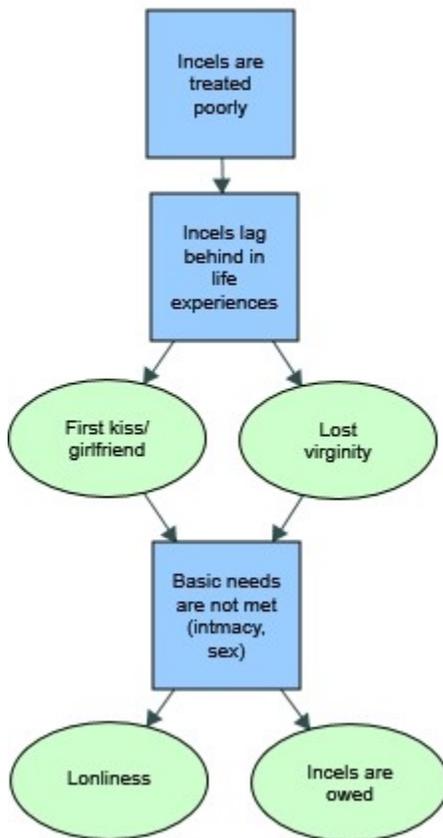


Figure 5: Masculine Entitlement Concept Map

Incels are treated poorly. Posters on the Incel.co forum described experiences in their lives they perceived as appearance-based discrimination. The forum’s wiki page uses psychological arguments for why “looks matter” in social interactions. This is another form of biological essentialism, where social interactions are reduced to biological explanations. For example, “the

scientific blackpill” page hosts articles that explore “universal standards of beauty” and arguments that attractive people get better treatment from parents, employers, and heterosexual partners. Accordingly, posters to the Incels.co forum discuss the ways in which the people around them treat them poorly due to their appearance.

For example, one poster writes: “Can't name a single person: teachers, 'friends' and 99% of people who don't hate me and try to find every reason they can to have an excuse to hate me when real reason is my face”. Another responds to the idea that incels are at the bottom of the social hierarchy with, “This world is a sick one. Everyone will always be against you”. These posters use their personal experiences as a tool to justify a victim status. This positioning gives incels the opportunity to argue that women who choose more desirable men are to blame for their social position.

Taking this concept to the dating world, commenters argue that women treat incels poorly due to their appearance. One commenter describes internalizing experiences where they felt devalued by women:

I have accepted that women don't see me as worthy of their companionship. They see me just as a walking mass who happens to walk by them. If I were to engage with them in anyway, then to them I would be seen as bothersome and a nuisance. I therefore accept that I am bothersome and a nuisance and that I am ugly and filthy and nasty to them.

Posters say women do not want to be around incels with comments like:

“Imagine actually having a female sit next to you”

“Daily reminder that I am 29 years old and that a female has never smiled at me in my entire life, not even in a faint autonomous polite way out of sheer habit.”

One poster is perplexed at his inability to interact with women in a romantic way compared to other men:

There have been so many occasions where I was like "this guy has got to be a virgin or incel" and he either has a girlfriend, is married, or has females at work being flirty with him while they completely ignore me. Just more proof that I might be the least attractive man EVER to exist.

The only seeming explanation for this participant's inability to access women is that he must be unattractive. The narrative frames the poster as unable to fulfill the male expectation of flirting with women in the office. These narratives of experiencing poor treatment are performances of victimization that strategically place incels in a position to justify anti-feminist backlash.

Incels lag behind in life experiences. Forum posters believe that discrimination under lookism has caused them to miss out on important life experiences. These experiences show the ways in which masculine value is tied to fulfilling heterosexual desires. Posters outline late development in dating when they were younger, including having a first kiss or losing their virginity. Incels use the term KHHV, which means kissless, hugless, handholdless virgin to identify themselves or others as missing out on milestones.

One comment connects the status of KHHV to the inability to be liked by women with, "they only want experienced chads. A femoid [woman] will only like you if others like you, but being a KHHV signals the opposite". In another post, an incel writes, "it really hurts me when i think about how i'm gonna be 20 and still a hugless, kissless, handholdless virgin". Virginity was commonly discussed on the forum. One poster compares his experience to national averages,

4% of people make it out of college as virgins. Assuming that's the age of 22 (18 to 22 for a 4 year degree) then that means basically everyone has lost their virginity before me, I'll be 23 very soon.

The age at which incels and others lose their virginity was a frequent topic. For example, one thread was titled, "Yes, everyone has been having sex since 13", with the poster continuing to write:

It's really just confirming water is wet, but yes everyone is having sex since 13-14. (I confirmed through younger siblings who have very large social circles). It's just the norm, like breathing, they don't even think about it. YES you are super fucking weird for not even having had a kiss past 20. And yes, women are disgusted by that and think it's creepy. I have family members who have commented on this stuff. It's such a normal thing, like humans are just animals at the end of the day, and yet here is this entire forum who has never gotten so much as a hug.

On another post about virginity, a commenter writes,

Reminder EVERY woman since the beginning of time has been slutting around since 12-14. Do NOT believe a single fucking thing they say otherwise about it, that has been the norm since the beginning of time and it's the norm you never got to experience and will die alone as a result and your genes will cease to exist. This is the norm EVERYONE experienced but you, fucking weirdo loser have fun coping with alcohol

The first poster argues that the fact that is missing out on life experiences in dating causes disgust in women and concern in his family. Both essentialize their position on the gender hierarchy with biological arguments. This tactic allows the posters to position themselves as having no access to heterosexual relationships, which is framed as essential to human experience. In these comments, the perceived devaluation in the realm of sexual experience leads to negative self-image. Other incels feel left out because of their inability to attain a partner: "There are things you need which are out of your control especially when you are an incel. You have these desires that burn you and you feel like you're missing out on life 24/7 so how the fuck are you going to just be cool with it?" These comments show how incels perceive they are devalued due to their physical appearance, leading to frustration over the inability to attain markers of dominant masculinity.

Incels' basic needs are not met. Incels argue that they are devalued on the gender hierarchy because they are unable to access heterosexual relationships with women. Inherent in this argument is a perceived male entitlement to women as sexual objects. When forum posters cannot cash in on this perceived male entitlement, they justify anti-feminism and violence against women with the argument that their basic needs are not being met.

Posters on the Incels.co forum frame sex as a basic need they are entitled to as men, for example:

I am a simple man. I just want to put my raging dick inside of a soft vag of a young and skinny female thats it. i am not a complicated snowflake but my basic needs are just too much to ask because i am not chad.

This comment frames sex with a young, physically fit woman as a male entitlement that they are missing out on. Another comment expresses this entitlement with, “Why is it so hard for them to believe that we exist? Or are they just mad at the fact that we're jaded over having exactly 0% of our even most basic needs for sex, intimacy, and romance met?” This comment describes missing out on sex, intimacy, and romance as a valid reason to become angry at the world. Following the blackpill logic, incels justify anti-feminism and violent rhetoric with the belief that women are not meeting their “basic needs”.

Incels are owed. Some posters use the belief that incels' needs are not met to justify extreme positions like the idea that society owes incels. One comment explains access to women as a point of male entitlement saying, “I deserve at least a little date with a young teen girl. She

doesn't even have to kiss me or anything, damn, do cucks⁷ really hate me that much that they think even something like that must be denied to me?" A second comment expresses anger at those who criticize their entitlement, "No human being should be forced to live so long without love and affection. Fuck everyone who tells us we don't deserve girlfriends." One poster lays out his specific expectations for what they are entitled to and how it should be provided:

"Governments should hand out money to sub 8 males every month for inducing traumatic experiences and for denying us relationships, families and basic human rights by promoting sexual liberation, hypergamy, abortions, feminism, individualism, etc." "Sub 8 males" refers to men under an 8 rating on the LMS scale. This commenter makes a direct connection between feminism, modern society, and their inability to have a relationship. Because this poster believes society has caused this situation, he argues the government should provide restitution to incels as victims of not earning what they believe they're entitled to. On the same post, three different commenters state, "I demand reparations", "I deserve millions" and, "I deserve a girlfriend".

Forum posters shared experiences of being negatively affected by lookism. They explain in comments that because of lookism, they are behind. Posters argue that expectations of hegemonic masculinity are harming their ability to date and have relationships, which ultimately devalues them as men. The costs of performing hegemonic masculinity are felt in their quest to find intimacy and partnership, which they believe is denied to them due their inability to meet physical standards. Narratives on the forum are evidence for the ways in which incels have deeply attached their heterosexual gendered desire and potential to act on that desire to their

⁷ Cuck is short for cuckoldry, which describes a situation where a man is unphased by a significant other's infidelity. Incels associate this with being dominated by others, which the man in this situation is experiencing. Cuck is sometimes used to refer to effeminate men.

social location and power. A disruption to their expectations, like a perceived disadvantage on the heterosexual marketplace, is felt deeply as consequence. When this expectation is not met, commenters expressed negative internal emotions, like loneliness or self-disparagement. Others pointed their discontent towards women and society, expressing that they are owed money or girlfriends. The entitlement seen here is derived from expectations of masculinity and power. Commenters describe that they are owed simply for being born human. On Incels.co, women are not talked about as if they were born with similar rights and instead are often described as “foids”. Therefore, these commenters express they are owed for being born male. This entitlement and inability to reach extreme standards of masculinity causes some incels to take the standpoint that women are too preferential and that their rights should be restricted, which leads to the next theme: anti-feminism.

Anti-Feminism

Incels believe *lookism* that leaves less stereotypically masculine-oriented young men out of social interactions, life-course milestones, and intimate relationships with women. Posters explain the condition that women have agency to decide who they want to sleep with is the cause of incels’ inability to access heterosexual relationships, a resource for performing masculinity. Incels use narratives of victimization to justify the theme of *anti-feminism*. A property of *anti-feminism* is the belief that *women are too picky* regarding their partners. Evidence for this property include the dimensions that *women want to have sex with experienced men and “Chads”* rather than incels. These ideas are justified by the property, the ‘80/20 rule’, which is the belief that 80% of women sleep with 20% of men. These concepts are used as narrative tools

to justify advocacy for an organized backlash to feminism.

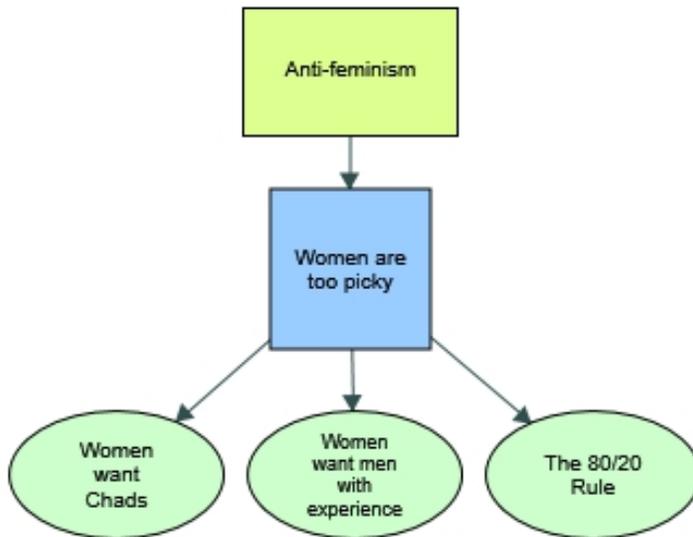


Figure 6: Antifeminism Concept Map

Women are too picky. Incels argue that lookism hurts them because they believe women are too preferential in choosing a romantic partner based on the standards of the rating system. This paves the way for incels to place blame on women for their celibacy.

One commenter provides an understanding of women’s perceived pickiness in a conversation about the subreddit “IncelTears”, which is a group of people that post anti-incel content. The reply says,

...let's look at it from their perspective. Why would women fuck below-average or even average men? Women have abundance mentality and almost all can literally sleep with the T10% [top 10% of] men due to Tinder, social media, and other forms online dating. We know this is what's happening and is the massive cause of the increase in incelhood. Why exactly would they sleep with anyone else?

This poster describes his frustration with the idea that women’s ability to consciously choose who to date is based on looks. The comment states that this is a direct cause of incels’ inability to have sex. Others attribute women’s perceived pickiness to the fact that women have rights. On a

post titled, “I deserve a girlfriend”, one commenter responded with: “We need to shame picky whores until they become less picky, and remove all the cucked [dominating] laws that give whores advantages over incels. Then they'll be happy with their looksmatches⁸”. Replies to this suggestion include,

High iq⁹. If all those things happened giving us an equal playing field it would be like before feminism, and foids [women] wouldn't be as picky with men around their looksmatch, probably even willing to settle for less than their looksmatch since usually men make more money.

Both posts argue that women are “picky”, especially around men that are their “looksmatch”.

The first commenter describes shame as a method of devaluing women, which they believe will have an influence on women’s preference, or inability to have a preference, in a partner. Another method is to “remove all the cucked laws” that they believe give women an advantage on the dating market. The second comment agrees that reversing feminist laws would give incels an equal playing field, ironically helping incels further due to the gender pay gap and women’s disadvantages in employment. These suggestions provide a look at the logic driving anti-feminism in the manosphere. In making comments that advocate for the reversal of women’s rights, posters perform masculine entitlement to control the lives of women. The consequences of lookism that leave incels at the bottom of the gender hierarchy in dating, combined with women’s agency to be preferential, brings incels to the conclusion that women are to blame for their involuntary celibacy, a fact that they clearly resent.

⁸ Looksmatch is somebody who shares the same rating on the 1-10 scale.

⁹ “High iq” is a way that incels label something as an intelligent point to make that they value, which is congruent with performances of masculinity on the internet discussed in the literature review of this paper. In using the term “high IQ” these men are performing another form of objectification through reducing opinions to quantitative measures like the intelligence quotient

Women want to have sex with experienced men and Chads. Frequently discussed dimensions of women's pickiness include the belief that women want to have sex with Chads, and that women want experienced men. As defined above, Chad exemplifies the characteristics associated with masculine dominance that incels feel they cannot embody. When women choose Chads instead of incels, incels experience the costs of *lookism* and their value on the heterosexual market is diminished, which in turn devalues their masculinity.

Forum posts provided examples of this concept in action. In a post titled "Roastie"¹⁰ explains why 2 chads fucking her friend in the gym bath room = not creepy, but 1 nice guy bringing her flowers = kicked from gym", comments said, "lmao [laughing my ass off] she clearly indirectly said it's only acceptable for chad to approach and they can litterly straight up ask to hookup while sub8s [under 8 on the rating scale] will get reported on sight", and, "They are lusting for his dick hardcore." These commenters frame Chad as receiving positive attention from women, which grants him sexual experience. Another poster described his fantasy of a women teaching him about sex so that he can lose his virginity, to which someone replied,

That would be nice but to bad women dont want a guy they pervceive as inferior. whores want a man that is superior to them in every way...more sexually experienced more social status more tall more muscular more rich more everything and if they can find a guy who they believe is superior to that guy they will want him instead

In this commenter's opinion, women want someone who not only had Chad qualities, but who also has sexual experience. The narrative frames sexual attention from women as a resource for performing masculinity that is unfairly afforded to men who perform masculine dominance. The desires of women are harmful to the masculine value of less-desirable men. Other posters echo this sentiment through comments such as:

¹⁰ Incels use the term roastie to describe a woman who is perceived to be sexually promiscuous.

“Why do girls want guys that have had sex with 100s of women? Don't they feel disgusted by that thought of knowing the man they're with has mixed bodily fluids with 100s of other people?”

“...they only want experienced chads. A femoid will only like you if others like you, but being a KHHV [kissless, hugless, handholdless virgin] signals the opposite.”

“Lol Chad doesn't have to be taught. Chad has been fucking girls since he was 13.”

These comments show that incels actively share and adapt the meaning of ‘*Chad*’ as it pertains to their individual experiences. Because they themselves are inexperienced, Chad must then be the opposite. In this dimension, ‘*Chad*’ is used as a comparison tool for incels’ lack of access to women. In these narratives, incels can distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity which aids in their framing of as victims of the gender hierarchy, a situation that can only be fixed by taking women’s rights away.

The 80/20 rule. The 80/20 rule is a property of justification for anti-feminism. From the Incels.co wiki,

The 80/20 rule, or ‘Pareto Principle’, comes from economics and refers to the observation that inequality often approaches a distribution where the 20% richest own 80% of the wealth. In case of the sexual marketplace, wealth means the number of sex partners...Many incels perceive their inceldom to be caused by the 20% most dominant men hoarding 80% of the females, which is a somewhat exaggerated view of the facts, except perhaps for a few subcultures and online dating platforms with very unequal sexual markets. For this reason, many incels rather use 80/20 as a meme to warn of the damaging effects of our current dating scene and increased competitiveness in online. Participants further exaggerate the referenced statistics by saying things like,

“Today 90/10, tomorrow 99/1”

“99/1 rule confirmed?”

“That's a good point, the promiscuity is getting worse amongst the top 1-10% while the bottom 90-99% of guys get little or nothing.”

“Honestly, anyone who denies 99/1 at this point is a gigabrainlet [not smart]. The results are right in our face. In the modern era, its literally CHAD or NOTHING”.

One comment explains the 80/20 rule and the consequences for incels in detail:

Reason why most men can't get laid is that it's the top 20% of men passing all the women around. One Chad is fucking 30 or 40 women while you and I (bottom 10%) get nothing and Normies [individuals who are neither incel nor Chad] might get 3 or 4. I've seen some Chad's self report over 100 women and I wouldn't doubt it.

The 80/20 rule here is framed as directly responsible for this participant's inability to acquire a sexual partner. The use of “scientific” evidence, regardless of how reliable or valid that evidence might be, is another example of performing masculinity on the internet. The OkCupid study is used to essentialize behaviors on dating sites and reify masculine dominance by providing an objective framework for incels to justify their patriarchal goals.

Women shouldn't have rights. Posters on the Incels.co forum draw a connection from lookism to their own advocacy for the reversal of women's rights. Incels are frustrated because of the claim that feminism-empowered women have taken society. They are not wrong in the sense that feminists have in fact made progress in gender equity. The pay gap is slowly shrinking, women are in the work force, becoming educated, and have protections under law for situations like domestic violence or divorce. Posters on the Incels.co forum ignore the historical inequalities women have faced to argue that they have now achieved too many rights at the detriment of incels.

Comments that support this framing include,

“We've empowered the femoids [women]. It is game over right then and there.”

“Women shouldn't have rights”

“This world is going to hell. I hate old people because they gave women rights”

“We do have a great war to fight. The war against women for reconquering the World.”

Posters perceive feminist progress as “the world going to hell”, or the conquering of men by women. Comments provide examples of incels ignoring the inequalities women continue to face today. For example, one poster commented on a video of young adults dancing explicitly at a college fraternity party with, “We really need worldwide sharia law NOW or it will never stop. It will never fucking stop with these degenerate animals. They will fucking ruin everything men built in the last 10000 years.” This poster ignores the women who have helped to build society to what it is today, which reifies male dominance by altering how history is conceptualized to justify patriarchal order. They insinuate that men can proudly claim ownership over progress, and that the only way to stop society’s demise is to place harsh restrictions on women’s rights through structural policies like Sharia law. Another poster outlines the areas in which he feels women’s have dominated men:

Women's status needs to fall back to reality. Men need to stand up and say no more welfare, no more chivalry, no more crap divorce laws, no more spousal support, no more reservations in companies and universities, no more false women empowerment and feminist lies, no more academic misandry, no more protesting, lobbying, or fundraising, no more voting. Women must compete in the same playing field as men.

Again, the idea that women have privilege in society than men is a distortion that ignores gender inequalities. The comment that “women’s status needs to fall back to reality” gives insight into what this poster feels that women deserve in society. The comment states that women should be abandoned by institutions like social services, jobs, education, politics, and voting, and that advocacy for these things under feminism is based on lies. This incel has constructed a reality

where real gender inequalities are ignored, men are harmed by policies that promote equality, and women are unfairly advantaged. Consistent with other forum comments, anti-feminism and advocacy for taking away women's rights is a common conclusion to the blackpill logic.

Anti-feminism is a core tenant of the blackpill logic. Forum posters continuously form their identity discussing life experiences and ideas with other incels on Incels.co. The premise of lookism and incels' unfair disadvantage on the heterosexual dating market leads these men to advocacy for the reversal of women's rights. Embedded in these narratives is male entitlement to women's bodies, a resource for performing masculinity. Incels believe they are disadvantaged because they cannot access things males stereotypically use to perform dominance. When faced with this gender identity problem, participants turn to blaming women for their involuntary celibacy. Narratives that ignore the inequalities women face and that frame incels as victims provide justification for this political stance. While some incels turn the premise of *lookism* to *anti-feminism*, others express emotional consequences and feelings of no hope that lead to justifying violence.

No Hope

A sub-category to anti-feminist theme on the incel forum is participants' *feelings of no hope for the future*, referenced 169 times throughout the 50 posts. One property of *no hope* is the idea that "*it's over*" for incels, a phrase commonly used to label narratives that devalue men and justify anti-feminism. A second property of *no hope* is found in detailed *experiences of depression*. Comments were coded for this property only when posters explicitly stated their experiences of depression to avoid any researcher-driven diagnoses. The property *experiences of*

depression has the following dimensions: *giving up*, *coping techniques*, *suicidal ideation*, and *encouraging mass violence*. As seen in comments from previous sections, harsh self-degradation and statements that might signal mental health concerns are not uncommon. Comments discuss ways they deal with their experiences of depression. Some comments use the term ‘*LDAR*’, or “lay down and rot” to discuss giving up on life, while others talk about *copes* (coping techniques). Finally, some posters express *suicidal ideation* and tie these narratives to *mass violence*, in which comments discuss mass murder as a method of committing suicide-by cop.

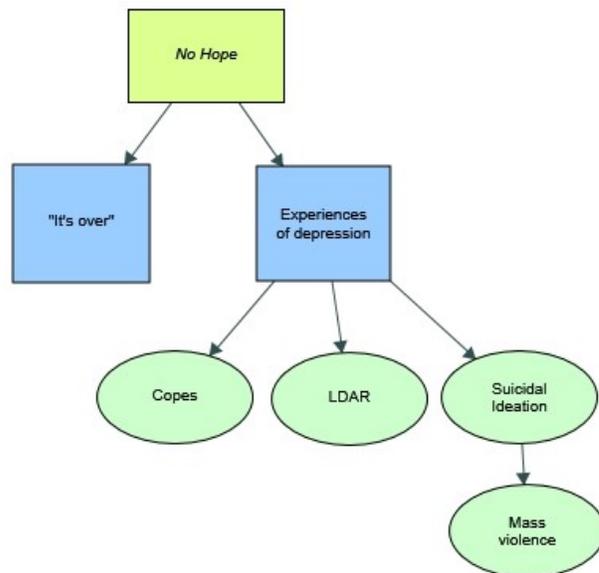


Figure 7: No Hope Concept Map

It's over. Incels describe how they are devalued through their inability to reach dominant standards of masculinity in physical appearance and access to heterosexual relationships. For some, the inability to reach these narrow markers of perceived masculine success leads to feelings of hopelessness. Incels used the term “*it's over*” to label instances where they feel that men in general are hopeless. Projecting their feelings of hopelessness onto other men instills a

sense of solidarity in the incel community. Narratives of every-day experiences of devaluation illicit the belief that men are harmed and provide justification for mobilization against women's rights or violence against women. The term is also used to label specific scenarios that lead to feelings of hopelessness where incels actively devalue themselves and their peers.

One commenter writes that his "average" looking friend is having a hard time finding a girlfriend, "I asked him if he used tinder and bumble and apps like that, no he says, its impossible on those apps, he told me women on those apps usually dont even respond to him and he have never ever met a girl from there." Comments in response express that this scenario instilled a sense of hopelessness in his incel peers:

"Its over for men. Now, I wonder how many years it takes for the majority of men to realise this."

"If you are not a chad in 2019 it is simply over. And it will only get worse and worse."

"Ascension¹¹ is becoming more and more unlikely each day. It is a beyond desperate race against time."

"Its really bad, its worse than fucked, we are all doomed dude."

These commenters argue that having sex with a woman or being a Chad is so too high of bar to reach. The idea that other men also are perceived to be affected further engrains their sense of devaluation and creates a sense of solidarity.

Other posters use the phrase "*it's over*" in response to their individual situations. For example, "Yea. It would have been nice to have known that it was over, so that we didn't waste

¹¹ Incels use the word "ascend" to describe getting out of incelism by finding a partner. Some participants also use the term to describe losing their virginity.

time trying to frivolously chase women that are disgusted at our very existence.” This commenter uses the term “*it’s over*” to describe the perspective that nothing matters, specifically in the realm of dating. Posters also let others on the forum know that they believe it is over for them after reading stories of personal experiences. For example, one post describes an incel’s crush on his physical therapist. In response, a comment says, “I’m sry, but it’s over for you. You oughta become more blackpilled”. This participant uses “*it’s over*” as a method of devaluing the incel he is responding to. Posters turn to the forum for solidarity in their degradation. Incels insult both themselves and others, reinforcing the devaluation they feel in society. Further, the idea that there is no hope gives this commenter the opportunity to use incel language like “become more blackpilled” to identify with others by using in-group language.

Experiences of depression. A property of the sub-category *no hope* includes incels’ experiences of depression. Incels believe they are unfairly treated due to *lookism*, which can lead to social isolation and feelings of loneliness. Some posters explain how the effects of *lookism* and the sentiment that “*it’s over*” has led them to personal experiences of depression. In narratives describing these experiences, some incels explain their situation using biological essentialism, or the belief that genetics are to blame for their experiences of depression. This argument frames their inability to reach standards of masculinity as outside of their control, paving the way to justify anti-feminism and violence against women. Commenters also outline the perceived effects of experiencing depression on their mental capacity.

Some posters believe that depression is a normative state for incels in general due to their perceived ugliness: “Depression is natural state for ugly people while for normies [non-incels]

it's an anomaly.” One commenter blames pain and despair in his life on his looks and lack of experience:

Life as an ugly male is nothing but pain and despair. Even if we do wake up and were not ugly, girls will know that we were virgins when we try to kiss them and then they will tell all their friends and it will spread that you're a loser. I hate life.

Similar comments use biological essentialism to understand their experiences of depression. The

Incels.co wiki outlines how biological essentialism leads to feelings of no hope:

Biological essentialism is the claim that biological instincts cannot be overridden and therefore activism to change the way most people naturally behave, on a timescale shorter than thousands of years of human evolution, is a waste of time.... Some biological essentialists/blackpillers promote fatalism, believing that it is impossible to change female nature (gender essentialism), so we should just "give up".

The forum wiki's narrative makes a clear connection between biological conditions and feelings of hopelessness. Commenters use this same narrative framing to outline their experiences of depression,

We aren't above nature, we are just biological failures and dead ends so mother nature decides to cut us off. The more you think about it, the more depressing it gets realizing there's an entire other reality to life we don't know and never will.

Another commenter describes that biology and genetics are to blame for their position on the social hierarchy. In this position, individuals with poor physical development also deal with emotional issues like low self-esteem or depression, which is exacerbated by lookism. This commenter writes,

Bad genes tend to come in packages. Poor bone development often signifies poor development overall (poor organ development including brain development, weak immune system etc). Being treated poorly by others then makes this even worse due to onset of low self-esteem, anxiety, depression and other mental illnesses.

Incels that use biological essentialism to frame their experiences with depression contribute to the general theme of fatalism found in this section. Incels cannot change their biological conditions that are perceived to cause their experiences of depression, forming a reality in which they are ultimately hopeless.

Commenters discuss some of the consequences of being depressed. These comments pertain to experiences of depression hurting their intelligence or mental capacity. For example,

“Often I have a great deal of difficulty organizing my thoughts or concentrating on anything at all, and tbh I think this has more to do with depression than anything else.”

“I feel myself losing most of my intelligence as a result of depression”

Comments like these are examples of the costs of masculinity that include men’s higher likelihood of experiencing depression. Depression is also used to create solidarity and further emphasize the belief that incels are victimized by society. Participants say things like,

Normies [non-incels] don't pretend to be happy. They DO have their moments of happiness, unlike us! Yeah they may be 'depressed' and shit but they will have their happy moment to show for it, unlike us who are 100% flat in terms of emotion. Statements like this generalize individual experiences of depression to all incels and frame lacking emotion as essential to the incel identity.

Lay down and rot. The first way forum posters express how they deal with depression is through the term “LDAR” or “lay down and rot”. This phrase follows the logic of the blackpill that life is hopeless for incels due to their inability to reach stereotypical standards of masculinity.

Narratives that use “LDAR” argue that incels’ existence is inherently devalued so they should stop trying to achieve stereotypical masculine markers of success. To lay down and rot is to completely give up on dating and life in general. The forum wiki page provides a checklist for the conditions that lead to LDAR:

Are you incel? Are you a 1-4/10 on the decile? Do you earn less than \$60,000 per year 2019 USD? Do you have no extraordinary traits, or abilities such as extremely hi IQ/creativity or exceptional strength? If answered yes to all of those questions then you may find yourself LDARing.

Here, the wiki entry presents a guideline that explains to incels when they might reach a point of

no hope with benchmarks like minimum earnings, a minimum rating on the LMS scale, and the belief that they are highly intelligent, creative, or strong.

Commenters use the term LDAR as an alternative to interacting with a world that victimizes them. One comment explains a participant's choice to LDAR as the lesser of two evils writing, "Given the options of being a slave and being able to comfortably LDAR, I prefer my freedom over something society says I need or else.. or else what? I wasn't going to have a family anyway..." For this poster, the choice to LDAR makes sense when compared to the alternative of following social norms or trying to find a partner. In incel narratives of hopelessness, LDAR is a logical response to the feeling that there is *no hope*.

Copes. A second dimension and method of dealing with depression is the idea of '*cofes*'. Posters on the Incels.co forum use *cofes* to describe activities that take their mind off of their sense of hopelessness. The forum wiki page describes an ideal "cope society" where institutions are structured to cater to celibate males:

A cope society provides outlets for men that makes them less prone to public displays of anger. In cope societies, video games are a national sport and celebrated, virgin shaming is minimal, immersive cartoons geared towards adult men are ubiquitous, NEETs [not in education, employment, or training] are housed, the homeless are institutionalized, porn is ubiquitous, women are commodified, etc...

This definition is framed so that incels' perceived lack of dominance over women, media, and leisure activities makes them prone to displays of aggression. This is used to justify the idea that the enforcement of hegemonic masculinity and male dominance is in everybody's best interest, setting the stage for anti-feminist backlash. Elements of this ideal "cope society" are found in participants' individual coping methods, such as playing video games, watching TV, and viewing pornography.

Posters on the Incels.co forum describe copes they use to take their mind off their sense of hopelessness:

“Browse the internet, watch series/movies, sometimes read, day dreaming and porn”

“Vidya's [video games] entire existence is meant for us, we are the main consumers who cope day and night with it.”

“My copes are: study, read many books, to lift weights and play video games TV, vidya”

The copes these commenters use to take their mind off feelings of *no hope* tend to be activities done in isolation. Browsing the internet, watching movies/TV, reading, exercising, and watching pornography are all mostly individual activities. Besides exercising and reading, most of these copes are not healthy treatment for social isolation or feelings of loneliness. Instead, participants are increasing their likelihood of feeling symptoms of depression by isolating themselves from others. Although video games are an activity that can be done with others to reduce social isolation, video game culture itself tends to be misogynistic and can lead to targeted harassment against women like in the case of GamerGate.

Suicidal ideation. Under the blackpill ideology, incels believe that they have no hope for the future with the idea that “it’s over”, experiences of depression, and narratives of “laying down to rot”. The Incels.co wiki describes one proposed solution to being blackpilled: “Some social darwinist blackpillers promote fatalism and advocate incicide. If nobody is left to be an incel, then the problem is solved”. These incels take their loss of hope to extreme conclusions through suicidal ideation, found in incel comments that detail plans for ending their own lives.

Some posters talk about suicide as if it’s something they’re actively thinking about or

planning with comments like, “I am going to rope in probably 2 years.” One incel titled his post, “[Serious] How do I gain the courage to kill myself?”. Respondents to this shared in suicidal ideation with messages like,

I'm in the same boat tbh [to be honest]. I don't have a gun and other forms of suicide could go wrong, 1 incel told me that getting decapitated by a train is a good way to die but i'm still hesitant to do it besides for whatever retarded reason i still have some hope that my life will improve even if i know it won't. My plan rn [right now] is to wageslave [work hard] in a couple of years and that will depressed me even more so i can finally kill myself

Comments like this show that some incels are experiencing real and serious suicidal ideation.

Some use suicide as a backup plan, for example one poster explains his plan to, “be more productive, If it fails and that’s what i’m expecting, Then rope”. The term “rope” is a commonly used incel word for suicide.

Mass violence. Incels are becoming known in mainstream society for an association with mass killers like Elliot Rodger, Alek Minassian, and Scott P. Beierle. These men all interacted with the incel community online and used the blackpill rhetoric to justify killing others. Rodger and Beierle both specifically targeted women in their rampage. These mass killers operated under the narrative that women must pay for incels’ celibacy. After killing, all three men attempted to take their own lives. Mass violence is included here because it is framed as an effective method of committing suicide-by-cop while asserting masculine dominance over others with violence. On the forum, some posters encourage suicidal users to commit mass violence before killing themselves.

Commenters use the term “going ER”, in reference to the incel mass shooter Elliot Rodger, to talk about themselves and others committing mass violence. Sometimes the term ER

is hidden in a response, only understood by those who are “in the know”. Using in-group language is a method of establishing group solidarity for incels. Those who understand the blackpill rhetoric are valued within the community as “true” incels. For example, a commenter argues that an incel peer should be angry due to their celibacy, and should act on that anger by committing a mass shooting with the statement, “his blood should’ve boiled more so things would’ve ended up a bit bettER.” Capitalizing the -ER in better signals to other incels that they can use mass violence as a method of dealing with incelhood by enacting the ultimate expression of male dominance. In the post where an incel asked for courage to commit suicide, one reply said,

Stop attention whoring. If you are srs [serious] don't sui. That is cucked [effeminate] as fuck. Go find some soyfuck [dominated man]/foid [woman] hangout and go ER in GTA V¹². Alternatively, drive around shooting random gang members until they kill you. I recommend Grove Street for doing this as Ballas [ballers] will auto engage once you kill one of them. Be careful though because they can spawn [show up] pretty quick. Also make sure you livestream it. GTA V streams are always fun.

This user suggests the poster commit a mass shooting targeting less-masculine men, women, or gang members. They argue that committing suicide is “cucked” [effeminate] because they would be allowing themselves to be devalued without asserting dominance over others. The alternative is to kill others first to ensure they are not devalued a final time. Other participants glorify Elliot Rodger and mass shooters in general with comments like,

“>mass shooters >not losers”

¹² The use of “in GTA V” is a method of inserting plausible deniability in this statement. By adding “in a video game” to the end of comments that encourage violence, posters believe that law enforcement cannot treat the comment as a serious threat. A second participant used this same method in reference to his own situation: “If I were not Christian, and had no financial ambition, I would go edmund kemper and systematically take out as many of them as possible while going undetected. (In GTA, if anyone asks). 11.6#1 These are examples of incels using gaming culture references to manipulate the framing of their comments in the hopes of avoiding prosecution for advocating mass violence.

“I'd be proud if ER was my son, but I wouldn't have failed my son like ER's dad.”

Incels who glorify mass shooters are praising exemplars of ultimate dominance. Elliot Rodger was a disenfranchised male with similarities to participants in this sample. In his manifesto, Rodger describes feelings of no hope and depression from not being able to find a female partner. Instead of LDARing or coping, Rodger took his devaluation into his own hands by taking the lives of others, asserting his power through violence. Incels on this forum frame Rodger's assertion of power as an option to combat their own devaluation.

The theme no hope has properties that range from sentiments that “*it's over*”, to narratives around *experiences of depression*. “*It's over*” is used to label examples that contribute to their loss of hope for the future. Dimensions of *experiences of depression* include *copes* and *LDAR* as methods of dealing with hopelessness. Other dimensions of *experiences of depression* reach the extremes in posters' *suicidal ideation* and encouragement of *mass violence*. Incels are men who already feel devalued, are vulnerable to experiencing depression, and spend their time on a forum that places blame for their devaluation on women and society. Posters on the Incels.co forum perform masculinity by conforming to gender norms and expectations around self-reliance (*copes*, *LDAR*) and physical aggression (*suicide*, *mass violence*). Pursuing masculinity here comes with extreme costs that threaten their lives and the lives of others.

Power on the Gender Hierarchy

As these men express devalued masculinity on the heterosexual marketplace, they attempt to reify power by subordinating others. Subordination is a common practice in performing hegemonic masculinity. The gender hierarchy is seen as a zero-sum game where

incels are competing with both men and women to establish a dominant position. Incels make comments to reinforce the subordination of others unapologetically to combat their own loss of power under *lookism*. Dimensions of men on the gender hierarchy are the concept ‘*Tyrone*’, an incel term for a black man, and degradation of other marginalized men from minority ethnic and religious groups. Dimensions of women on the gender hierarchy were found in the concept ‘*Stacy*’, an example of emphasized femininity, and a general hatred for women in attempt to subordinate their position relative to incels.

Subordinating men. Incels use the term ‘*Tyrone*’ to describe black men who have all of the characteristics of a Chad, except skin tone. No posts were found to discuss Chad’s race, yet the addition of a specific term to distinguish black men with dominant traits shows the racial undertones in their conceptualization of masculinity. The name *Tyrone* symbolizes a stereotypical black man that can have the stature and facial features of a Chad, but who can never be a Chad due to his skin color. One forum poster applies the historically oppressive “one drop rule” to marginalized black men who exhibit masculinity traits writing, “His dad was black and his mom was mixed with black and white. However, under the old one drop rule, they may still be considered Tyrone's.” One post was made to discuss a relationship between a man labeled as Tyrone’s relationship with a white woman. When commenters discuss that the black men decided to break up with his partner, commenters replied with, “Tyrone will be Tyrone,” and, “Tyrone not found”, both jokes to insinuate that it is in a black man’s nature to leave his partner. On another post a commenter expresses a perception that black men get undeserved attention in North America with,

...tyrones don't get any action outside of north america. even in europe, the whole black bbc¹³ meme doesn't work nearly as well as people think. in asia and india, large black men are just seen as gorillas and most foids [women] would be repulsed by them...

This participant refers to a racial stereotype in calling black men “gorillas” that would repulse women. Another participant says, “Yeah they steal our women” in reference to a man labeled *Tyrone*. The subordination of ‘*Tyrone*’ was expressed by Elliot Rodger in his manifesto:

How could an inferior, ugly black boy be able to get a white girl and not me? I am beautiful, and I am half white myself. I am descended from British aristocracy. He is descended from slaves. I deserve it more. I tried not to believe his foul words, but they were already said, and it was hard to erase from my mind. If this is actually true, if this ugly black filth was able to have sex with a blonde white girl at the age of thirteen while I've had to suffer virginity all my life, then this just proves how ridiculous the female gender is. They would give themselves to this filthy scum, but they reject ME? The injustice!

Rodger described his perceived entitlement to the bodies of white women. Although he was of mixed-racial heritage, he expressed that having even a partial white identity gives him entitlement that black men do not deserve. This racist excerpt shows how Rodger and other incels use narrative tools to conceptualize the hierarchy of masculinities. They insinuate that white men, especially white Chads, are deserving, while black men are marginalized. Because of this, white women who date black men are devaluing the masculinity of white men.

Other subordinated and marginalized masculinities discussed by forum posters include the degradation of Indian men, Asian men, and Jewish men. Indian men are sometimes referred to as ‘curries’ or ‘currycels’, both crude stereotypes used to marginalize men of Indian ethnicity. One commenter describes the perception that Indian men cannot hold masculine traits saying,

¹³ This is a racist acronym that stereotypes the penis size of black men. Black men have historically been stereotyped to be sexually aggressive to justify their marginalization. The term “bbc” reinforces the threat that black men are coming to take white women.

“Just imagine an indian janitor trying to out "alpha" and out "frame" [appear physically larger] a chad.” This commenter uses sarcasm to explain that Indian men are dominated by Chads. Others write about men from Southeast Asia as less masculine, sometimes calling them ‘ricecels’ as a stereotype. The Incels.co wiki describes the logic behind the process of SEAmassing, or traveling to Southeast Asian countries to find a partner with the belief that Asian women will appreciate the perceived masculinity of white men in comparison: “Native South East Asian men are often associated with low-incomes, short stature, and small penises. The exact opposite of what women naturally want.” With this, incels place Asian men in a subordinated position in terms of access to women as compared to white men and Chads. Additionally, forum posters frame Jewish men as the cause of their devaluation by arguing that individuals who are Jewish promote feminism:

“If I have to choose between a Jew and a Roastie, i'll pick the Roastie [woman], because Jews made Roasties the disgusting whores they are today.”

“She was a sweet sounding southern girl who could have been your waifu [intimate partner] but the Jews ruined her!”

“Kike gives women rights Kike gets mad at its own creation”

Blaming individuals of Jewish ethnicity for devaluation is not a phenomenon isolated to this forum, as white supremacist groups and anti-Semitism in general are growing trends. Here, participants are marginalizing Jewish men on the gender hierarchy by blaming them for progress around women’s rights.

Subordinating women. When it comes to labeling women on the gender hierarchy, most participants use the terms “foids” or “roasties” to discuss women in general as subordinated. The only word these forum posters use to describe specific placement on the hierarchy is in the archetype of a “*Stacy*” who is Chad’s counterpart performing emphasized femininity. The Incels.co wiki describes her as, “Stacy is a nickname a woman able to secure sexual intimacy with Chad. Stacy is vain and obsessed with jewelry, makeup, and clothes.” A forum commenter applied this definition to a woman he saw on social media, “...the foid [woman] had all the gigastacy [rated 10 on the scale] traits, she was hot, blonde, wore makeup, wears skimpy clothes, popular, parties, and her boyfriend is a muscular bodybuilder gigachad.” This commenter only discusses the perceived Stacy as connected to her masculine-performing boyfriend. Other posters do the same with comments like, “just dont enjoy in anything bro while chad is on his 3rd stacy today,” and, “...obviously Chads and Stacies are happy”. These statements show how *Stacy* becomes a problem for incels due to her relationship to Chads. Commenters point out characteristics like vanity or using makeup as a method to stereotype a woman as a *Stacy*, and she is important because she symbolizes women who do not want incels for a partner.

The concept of a ‘*Stacy*’ is one way that incels conceptualize women’s placement on the gender hierarchy. Stacy does not use masculinity to dominate incels, but she does devalue them by restricting their sexual access they express entitlement over. Another common way that incels conceptualize women on the gender hierarchy is through dehumanizing, expressing hatred for, and advocating for violence against women. These are all methods of framing women as lesser than in attempt to reify their own masculine power. Forum posters express explicit hatred for women with statements like, “the nerve of some whores, hope she dies”, and “The more I talk to

women the more I really start to despise them to the core”. The term ‘foid’, short for feminoid, was used 94 times as a method of dehumanization to frame women as a sub-human species. Other posters argue that women are children or incapable of making decisions for themselves with comments like, “Women are children, they don't know what they want”. These methods of devaluation place incels in a dominant position deserving control over women. Dehumanization of women leads commenters to advocate for rape or violence against them with comments like, “We need to organize rape parties,” and, “It's time to take what's ours.” Incels have framed themselves as entitled and oppressed. To them, women are subhuman threats to their value as men. This narrative provides incels the justification to advocate for “rape parties” to forcefully take back what they express they are entitled to.

Incels appear in the news in their connection to multiple mass shooters since Elliot Rodger’s attack in 2014. These mass murderers enact the ultimate form of masculine dominance in their violent outbursts. Rodger was the first to publicly transform the anti-feminist rhetoric of incels into real-world violence. Since his attack, a handful of men have followed suit. Some perpetrators are connected to the incel movement when investigators uncover their social media accounts post-attack. For example, in October of 2019, Scott Beierle opened fire on a yoga studio killing two women and injuring others. Beierle made posts detailing how he had been rejected by women and expressed hatred as a response to his perceived devaluation relative to women. Attacking a yoga studio was a political choice ensuring that women would be in the crosshairs of his ultimate dominance. Similarly, in early 2019 a Colorado man’s plan to commit mass violence was stopped by authorities after he posted on social media saying he was going to kill as many girls as he sees in retribution for his inability have a heterosexual relationship (Salt

Lake Tribune 2020). Both of these violent actors blamed women for their devalued masculinity. When these men lose hope for their future, they turn to mass violence to reify their masculine power. Targeting violence towards women is a method of ultimate subordination.

Incels use degradation as a narrative tool to subordinate marginalized men and women. Participants label black men and other ethnic minorities as inherently different than white men with terms like “Tyrone” and “currycel”. This labeling process is a method for incels to reify their masculine power by actively subordinating other men. Incels use the same degradation tactics to target women. Women who are desirable, found in the concept *Stacy*, are framed as devaluing in their rejection of incels as partners. All other women are deemed “foids”, a method of dehumanization and subordination of women as lesser than. Incels use degradation of others to reify their own masculine power. Some take the methods offline and transform their online hatred into real-world violence. Mass murderers like Elliot Rodger, Alek Minassian, and Scott Beierle all cited incelism as justification for extreme violence. When power cannot be attained through other methods, these men enact their masculine dominance by taking the lives of others.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Discussion

Although incelism is a modern phenomenon, the sentiments expressed by participants echo the frustrations of men's rights groups of the past. Like the mythopoetic men of the 1990's, incels view their devaluation through a framework that reduces men and women to biologically essential archetypes. Just as the mythopoetic men blamed their mothers for their devalued place in society, incels blame women who will not date them. Instead of finding healthy alternatives to narrow standards of masculinity that cause them harm, both groups double down on hegemonic process of attaining dominance. Messner used the themes of costs of masculinity and inequalities between men to understand previous men's rights movements. Incels discuss the costs of masculinity in their quest to conform narrow standards of masculinity, especially regarding physical appearance. Participants argued that they are so far from narrow conceptions of masculinity they must consider extreme methods of reaching standards of appearance, like plastic surgery. The inability to conform, for some men, comes with emotional costs in a loss of hope for the future, depression, and suicidal ideation. Incels also discuss the unequal distribution of power amongst men, arguing that *Chads* have unfairly dominated society leaving incels out of the privileges they feel entitled to. Although it may seem feminism has made great strides in gender equity, men are still responding to progress with protest.

Incels, like the Promise Keepers, believe that society is feminizing men. Instead of doubling down on their own hegemonic masculinity, like the Promise Keepers did, incels take this framing and place themselves as the victims of feminization. Incels conceive of themselves as both in protest of and in pursuit of hegemonic masculinity. This narrative is driven by

contradictory conceptions of reality. Incels feel victimized by society because they cannot conform to physical standards of masculinity. Incels also feel they deserve to be dominant, even in acceptance of their lack of masculine power. This group of men consciously place themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy through examples of experiencing discrimination and self-degradation. Incels may be strategically positioning themselves as victims to emulate the experience of marginalized groups they see as unfairly gaining power in society.

The innovation of internet technology has changed the game for political movements. The incel identity exists on the fringe of larger patterns of white, masculine supremacy online. In any other real-world space, they would likely have limited means to spreading their ideals due social norms to condemn extreme rhetoric. On the internet, though, participants can hide behind the veil of anonymous usernames. They do not have to attach their personal identity to their political beliefs. On sites like Incels.co, participants are free to incite violence or suicidal rhetoric in a space that lacks common societal norms and boundaries. It is unlikely these men would vocalize the same beliefs without the benefit of hiding their identity. Anonymity makes it difficult to pinpoint the individuals attached to these narratives. This makes the problem both potentially pervasive, and distant at the same time. It is easy to detach anonymous posts from individual actors, and it is just as easy to assume that the men around you could be posting on the Incels.co forum. Anonymity also opens the window of acceptable norms to an “anything goes” conceptualization of political rhetoric. In this, the internet has ushered in an era of vocalizing extreme beliefs. Incels are just one facet of the extremes online, taking misogyny the level of advocating violence against women and the reversal of women’s rights.

Internet spaces also make it possible for the nuances of identity to develop through in-

depth conversation where time and space are not an issue. The Incels.co forum wiki page is an excellent example of the development of the incel identity. As new phrases, patterns, and beliefs form, the wiki is edited to reflect changes in detail. In this, incels have an ideological guide leading them to anti-feminism and violence against women. Anyone is free to edit the wiki pages, so participants and site moderators alike all have an equal opportunity to drive the rhetoric of the movement. For disenfranchised young men, this may be viewed as a medium to assert dominance within a subculture. These men can make their mark on society through contributing to the incel subculture. Individual men can learn a new framework of beliefs, values, and slang terms that subordinate women and create in-group solidarity amongst the men involved. In this, the incel movement is a homosocial experience that isolates men from women to create separation and emphasize subordination, empowering the men who actively participate.

Incels and their narrative tools have trickled into the mainstream through news stories about mass murder. Common stereotypes of these young men include labels as “loser virgins” or “psychotic mass killers”. Both of these labels reduce the real processes and consequences of masculine devaluation to simplified generalizations of young men in turmoil. Ignoring rhetoric on large forums like Incels.co can lead to unchecked potential violence in the form of suicide or mass murder. Ignoring the processes of devaluation expressed by these men may push them further into the blackpill ideology. Social scientists and gender researchers should pay attention to what is going on in these dark corners of the internet where modern young men gather. Understanding processes of perceived devaluation can provide insight into methods of promoting a healthy version of masculinity. Incels’ described experiences where they felt devalued by *lookism* based on a deep need to adhere to characteristics associated with dominance. Inherent in

this is the idea that women should be subordinated by men. Boys should be socialized to see women as human beings who are not inherently dominated. Boys should also be socialized with a broader conception of characteristics associated with masculinity, so they are not held to narrow standards of determining their self-worth. Finally, boys should be taught resilience in the face of social strain. Programs targeting boys in schools or in their homes should encourage empathy, vulnerability, and emotional intelligence as healthy characteristics of masculinity. White, heterosexual men have been taught they are entitled to success in the United States. When some subsequently fail to achieve their conception of success, such as attaining a heterosexual partner, men should have healthy coping mechanisms and an understanding that their personal worth is not devalued.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore how the anti-feminist incel identity is formed by young men online. Posters to the Incels.co forum outlined processes of devaluation where they feel a loss of masculine power relative to women. Masculine power is conceptualized under hegemonic masculinity, where culture reinforces masculine power and dominance on the gender hierarchy. Processes of devaluation occur through *lookism*, or discrimination by physical appearance. These processes are examples of men trying to live up to narrow standards of masculinity in their physical appearance. Traits like physical strength, height or prominent facial features are associated with masculine dominance. Posters described the ways in which *lookism* actively devalues them on the heterosexual dating market by using an exemplar of masculinity through the term *Chad* as a comparison. Incels are both devalued by Chad because he has access to women they desire, and by women who choose to date others instead. Posters use the condition

of their devaluation to justify their expressions of *anti-feminism*, advocating for the reversal of women's rights as the solution to ensure incels have access to the heterosexual dating market. Expressions of *anti-feminism* are performances of *masculine entitlement* to women, their bodies, and their right to choose. Some incels experience devaluation to the extent of expressing *no hope* for their future. This dangerous ideology led some forum posters down a dangerous path towards *suicidal ideation* and encouraging *mass violence*. Incels actively subordinate marginalized men and express hatred for women in their posts using narratives to reify masculine power. Some, like Elliot Rodger and other mass murderers, make the decision to transform these narrative tools into reality enacting the ultimate form of masculine dominance by targeting women with mass violence.

Limitations

Internet research provides the researcher easy access to data but comes with unique ethical considerations. Research subjects are not truly participating, only their public documents are being used for analysis. This consideration has benefits to the female researcher, especially as some members of the group are known for violence harassment targeted at women. Consequently, there is no real interaction between the researcher and those who are producing public data. This aspect of internet research can work as a limitation because the researcher cannot probe for further details and is instead left to analyze what is available publicly. Since incels are an understudied group, the archive was used to fill gaps in the literature regarding contemporary men's rights movements. Future research may engage with incels and other men's groups online to gain further, more reflexive data.

The other major limitation of this study is in the nature of research conducted with

anonymous participants. Posts were sampled from Incels.co, an active forum where anonymous users post discussions under pseudonyms. Posts were publicly shared giving the researcher total access to their conversations. Participants identities cannot be attached to their forum identities. Further, there is no way to establish sincerity on an anonymous forum. It is not uncommon for “trolls” to post on internet forums with jokes, memes, or “fake news”, because they are afforded the veil of anonymity and the freedom of unpoliced speech. To establish validity, all posts used for this research were considered sincere statements. Although participants could write whatever they want without any incentive to be honest, other participants read the same posts with no knowledge of intent. Especially regarding comments that incite violence, even if the original poster was joking, the reception is what matters. If somebody saw a “joke” encouraging suicide as serious and acts on it, the intent no longer needs to be considered. After all, what is real is only real in its consequences.

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