

Journey into the world of the incel.

**An investigation into the emergence of the incel subculture and an
evaluation of their threat to women.**

Zsuzsa Holmes (UP2034747)

University of Portsmouth
Institute of Criminal Justice Studies

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Supervisor: Dr Francis Pakes

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Statement of Originality

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Criminal Justice



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Journey into the world of the incel. An investigation into the emergence of the incel subculture and an evaluation of their threat to women.

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Abstract

Incels are a predominantly Western, antifeminist online subculture who represent an increasing threat to public safety. This project explores incels and evaluates the threat they pose to women (their enemy) and to greater society. This research reports on the results of a systematic literature review on incels and the debates encompassing the incelosphere. Incels represent a manifestation of twenty-first century socio-economic shifts and technological innovations. The backlash from women's ongoing liberation, neoliberalism and the #MeToo movement within an increasingly technological landscape have amplified an existing undercurrent of toxic masculinity and antifeminist rhetoric. This interdisciplinary investigation explores the context from which the incel emerged, their myopic ideology and subcultural identity. Findings suggest incels are an emerging societal harm who promote and incite online and real-life violence and extremism. Essentially, the incelosphere offers a platform to spread violent misogyny, radicalise young men and fuel extremism. This research illuminates the state of play of men's online movements and aids in exposing and holding accountable those who inhabit the manosphere as well as the technological conglomerates who offer the tools for radicalisation. Ultimately, incels place a mirror to the parts of society which are failing where greater support is vital for vulnerable individuals to prevent them from falling down the slippery slope of radicalisation.

Keywords: Incel, Antifeminist, Misogyny, Violence against Women (VAW), Manosphere, Internet, Subculture

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my dearest Omi. You have been my guiding light throughout and your strength, optimism and wisdom will always be a true inspiration to me, thank you.

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Thank you to my wonderful, supportive and loving family, friends and partner, I adore you and I am so lucky to have you.

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Glossary of Acronyms and Nomenclature

AWALT - All Women Are Like That

Betabuxxing - making as much money as possible

Black pill (BP) - nihilistic, fatalistic worldview adopted by incels

Chad - hegemonic masculine, alpha male who is good looking, confident, domineering, athletic, and successful with women

Cumdumpster - a woman who is sexually active

Fakecels - those who falsely claim to be incels

Femoid - female android (robot)

Foid - short for femoid

Going 'monk' - abstaining from romantic/casual sexual relationships with women

Gymmaxxing - improving appearance by going to the gym

Hypergamy - phenomenon of women marrying up in socioeconomic status based on genes and wealth

Incelosphere - internet neologism to describe the cyberspace in which incels commune

Inceldom - the state of being an incel

KHHV - Kissless, Handholdless, Hugless Virgin

Landwhale - a woman who is overweight and unattractive

LDAR - Lay Down and Rot

Looksmaxxing - improving personal appearance and trying to look more masculine (often via cosmetic surgery)

Manosphere - internet neologism for a collection of male centric online groups

MGTOW - Men Going Their Own Way

Misandry - hatred of men

MRA - Men's Right Activist

MRM - Men's Rights Movement

NEET - Not in education, employment, or training

Normie/Betas - ordinary people

PUA - Pick Up Artist

Red pill (RP) - enlightenment to the harsh reality of life where men are the oppressed gender, adopted by manosphere members

Roastie- a sexually promiscuous woman

Rope - to commit suicide

SMV - sexual market value

Stacey - unobtainable, female ideal, beautiful yet lacking intelligence, will only date Chads

Truecel - the archetypal incel - KHHV who see themselves as ugly and inceldom as a permanent existence

VAW- violence against women

Introduction

This exploratory research outlines the emergence of the incel - a portmanteau of involuntary celibate. Incels are a growing and insidious, largely Western phenomenon, representing a new manifestation of toxic masculinity centred upon 'the aggrieved entitlement of celibate men failing under hegemonic masculinity' (Grinnell College, 2020, para. 8). Dominated by young, predominantly white, disillusioned men, incels are characterised by extreme misogyny and congregate online revelling in the societal injustices which deny them sexual and romantic success (Hoffman et al., 2020). Unsurprisingly, incels are increasingly recognised as 'one of the internet's most dangerous subcultures' (Beauchamp, 2019, para 1). This hatred is fuelled by the pain and anger incels feel due to their inability to have sex or a successful relationship with a woman (Glance et al., 2021). Consequently, incels find refuge online where they can bond over shared homosocial experiences of sexlessness, loneliness and insecurity (Allely & Faccini, 2017).

A multitude of factors have provided the foundations for the incel subculture to originate and flourish. Women's ongoing liberation in conjunction with a changing socio-economic landscape facilitated by the rise of neoliberalism, economic recession and technology have triggered a crisis of masculinity. Here, traditional gender roles have become displaced and increasing numbers of men believe they have become victimised by a 'feminized gynocentric society' (Zuckerberg 2018, p. 11). As a result, hybrid and hyper displays of masculinity are developing as individuals failing to meet hegemonic male ideals create their own unique versions of male identity. This is evidenced by incels who embody a twenty-first century manifestation of masculinity. Problematically, in their efforts to reclaim dominance, these hybrid displays of masculinity are often toxic and extreme and manifest in behaviours of extreme and violent misogyny, sanctioned rape, sexual slavery and even mass murder. At the crux of this warped mindset, women (and romantically successful men) are positioned as the enemies who hold all the power in society. Subsequently, incels plot revenge in order to restore the patriarchal oppression of the past and obtain what they are biologically entitled to - sex. At least 11 self-identified incel men have committed mass murder since 2009, with many scholars predicting this to be just the tip of the iceberg (Hoffman et al., 2020; Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). To date there have been two *main* incel extremist attacks which have become idolised by 'fans'. These shed light on the kinds of acts which could become more commonplace with growing mobilisation. In the 2014 Isla Vista

killings, Elliot Rodger killed six people after distributing a manifesto describing ‘his deep-rooted loathing of women, fuelled by an intense frustration over his virginity’ (BBC News, 2018, para. 6). Similarly, in 2018 Alek Minassian killed 10 people in a van attack in Toronto (Sky News, 2020). Minassian told police he acted in retribution at being rejected by women and for still being a virgin (Sky News, 2020). These high-profile events are just two examples within a wave of many more minor incel-related attacks. Although, numbers are hard to define, reports allude to incel membership being in the tens of thousands; a 2016 Reddit thread estimated there to be 40,000 incels (Hauser, 2017). Yet, scholars speculate current figures are at least double this (Brzuszkiewicz, 2020). At present, violence perpetrated by incels or those who sympathise with their ideologies has killed at least 60 victims with many more injured (see Appendix A) (Hoffman et al., 2020). Clearly, this is a growing and dangerous phenomenon which requires urgent government and scholarly attention.

Research focus

This research will centre around an investigation into the growing emergence of the incel subculture and an evaluation of the extent to which this subculture poses a threat to women. This research represents a deep dive into the online antifeminist underworld of incels and is centred upon charting the origin and development of the incel subculture (Baele et al., 2019). By mapping and analysing the incel worldview and their online/offline behaviour, this research illuminates how incels interpret their life through the prism of the incelosphere. Moreover, this research focuses on the role of technology in the radicalisation process and evaluates the threat incels pose to women and greater society. Adopting a feminist lens, the safety, protection and rights of women are emphasised throughout. Although, this research examines the manosphere within which incels are situated it does not look in-depth at other sub-groups which inhabit this space such as Pick-Up Artists (PUA), Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) and Men’s Rights Activists (MRA) (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019, p. 5016). In addition, one cannot negate the racial dimensions of incels and their parallels with white supremacists and far-right politics. However, this research will primarily focus on the gendered aspects of this group and not address race explicitly.

Research Purpose

As incels are such a new and emerging phenomenon limited scholarly output exists. Thus, this research can aid in illuminating and enriching an under-researched field and assist in filling these gaps. The central purpose of this research is to propel the incel phenomenon into the public and political sphere and highlight this radical milieu as an emerging societal harm. As this research uncovers, this is not ‘just sad teenagers sitting in their parents’ basements, whiling away the hours in a pair of grubby Y-fronts’ (Bates, 2020, p. 4). This is a real, unregulated, hate group which ‘has spawned a detailed, often delusional and violently anti-feminist worldview’ (Bates, 2020, p. 15). Thus, these individuals must be taken out of their ‘behind screen’ comforts and held accountable. This research is also instrumental because it highlights the epidemic of VAW online and offline, emphasising how this is normalised in the public arena and aggravated by technological innovations (Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021). The potent vocabularies of sexism, misogyny, rape culture and VAW which characterise the incelsphere highlight this (Jane, 2014). Clearly, incels represent a growing security threat and this research offers a window into this covert dark corner of the web. Furthermore, by evaluating the level of threat incels pose to women and greater society, the future trajectory of this extremist group can be forecast, providing valuable information for government officials and policy makers to help hinder and prevent future extremism. Ultimately, with growing radicalisation, time is of the essence and this societal ‘disease’ infecting disillusioned, young men must be halted. Thus, it is imperative that this group is investigated further, exposed for wider consideration and raised onto the political agenda to safeguard the public from future incel extremism.

Research Value

Incels are growing in momentum and their online vindictiveness, emotional volatility and antifeminist rhetoric is increasingly spilling into the real-world. This research illuminates how anger, misogyny and violent fantasies can translate into real-life violence and reflects the globally endemic issues of gender-based violence (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). Moreover, it is fundamental that this deranged manosphere where vitriolic leaders are grooming and

radicalising 'lost' young men is further investigated before this misogynistic ideology becomes embedded in the psyche of more impressionable young men. Failure to act endangers eradicating the very freedoms women have been fighting for. Furthermore, this research adds value by enriching the dearth of research in the field and shining a spotlight on a current and critical concern. This study also provides a framework for our understanding of incels and exposes how technologies enable misogynistic propaganda to propagate. In addition, this research helps to enhance the visibility of incels to the public sphere and aid in developing social policy for the defence of women online and offline. Also, this study highlights the need for greater regulation and responsibility required by major technology companies whose platforms facilitate and promulgate extremism. Evidently, the magnitude and disturbing nature of this group is what makes this research so integral, relevant and valuable. This is a timely and pressing phenomenon seeping into the consciences of disenchanted young men as we speak - a Pandora's box ready to burst which must be attended to.

Whilst there has been a recent surge of media and publicity on incels, the inconsistent and at times problematic character of much of the public and academic conversation on the phenomenon demands more thoroughgoing assessment. Also, this phenomenon has primarily only been documented by journalists and feminists yet must be propelled as a collective concern for all academics, policy makers and law enforcement. In particular, there has not been enough research executed to gain a *true* picture of incels (particularly because they are a covert group who often do not want to be found). Thus, this research which entails a dissemination of literature on the topic so far is a prime place to start to see what the landscape entails and dip one's toes into this murky and dangerous world. Ultimately, the incel movement must be moved onto the forefront of the political and social agenda to halt escalation and gain a greater understanding of these individuals who may simply need greater education, community and mental health support.

Methodology

The methodology of this research comprises of a systematic literature review of existing literature on incels. This extensive and holistic interrogation of literature provides an overview of the current state of play of incel research. Using the University of Portsmouth's EBSCO Discovery Service, key terminology, Boolean operators and snowballing were employed to ensure all key literature in the field was located. Results were then filtered down via relevance to research questions and subsequently amalgamated to achieve a key sample of 23 sources. All sources were English language peer reviewed academic journal articles published within the last 5 years. Data was then meticulously extracted, analysed and thematically coded deductively in relation to the research questions and feminist lens. A grounded inductive approach was also incorporated which allowed key themes and subthemes to freely generate throughout the data collection and analyses (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Explorative in nature, this research is informed by a feminist analysis and research on gender, VAW, subcultures, digital behaviour, identity and extremism. A feminist theoretical framework was chosen due to the researcher identifying as a feminist concerned for women's safety, rights and freedoms.

Aim

This research aimed to investigate the growing incel subculture and evaluate the severity of its threat to women and wider society, in order to raise it further onto the socio-political agenda and contribute to its eventual immobilisation.

Objectives

- 1) Undertake wider research of the social, political, economic and cultural landscape which has created the incel phenomenon.
- 2) Undertake a systematic literature review to identify the prevalence of misogyny and violence against women rhetoric in the incel subculture

- 3) Consider the extent to which this violence is a threat to women and the danger of its increasing escalation into the 'real' world.
- 4) Offer recommendations and preventative measures to demobilise and hinder this hate group.

Chapter Structure

Following this introduction, the remainder of this thesis is separated into a series of sections and chapters:

Methodology offers an overview of the chosen methodological processes, focusing on how the research was both devised and executed. This chapter outlines the practical details of the study, the theoretical lens which underpins it as well as assessing the methodological limitations of the research.

Chapters 1-4 incorporate the results of the systematic literature review; these are divided up thematically.

Chapter 1 will explore the social, political, economic and cultural landscape from which the incel phenomenon emerged and gained popularity. Situational factors which can coalesce to lead individuals down the path of inceldom in conjunction with incel demographics will also be addressed. Ultimately, the role of technology in the genesis and propagation of incels will be explored.

Chapter 2 will examine the unachievable ideal of hegemonic masculinity and how this has led to the proliferation of hyper, hybrid and toxic masculinities. These new legitimate versions of masculinity will be examined within the context of the online realm of the manosphere. The increasing gender status threat of white cisgender men and the erosion of their privilege and what this means for women and society will also be analysed.

Chapter 3 will investigate the subcultural aspects of incels by examining the shared norms, values, narratives and language central to this radical milieu. This chapter will also highlight what the incel subculture has to offer disillusioned young men and why it holds such an appeal in the current climate.

Chapter 4 will dig deep into the incel worldview, dissecting the ideology and indoctrination tools and processes which are implemented. This chapter will also assess how the incel ideology is magnified and spread via technology and explore attacks of incel-related violence and extremism to date.

Discussion/Conclusion will revisit the main aim and objectives of the study and conclude the key findings and implications of the research. Attention will also be given to research limitations and recommendations for future research and avenues of enquiry.

Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the project's methodology and discuss the processes which were undertaken. Firstly, an in-depth rationale for the preferred research method will be explored. Feminist theoretical underpinnings of the research will then be discussed, illuminating the lens through which the data was processed. Subsequently, the sample selection process including the criteria for inclusion and search strategy will be examined. Finally, there will be an exploration of the data collection and analysis processes and an evaluation of the methodological process.

Research Design

After consulting the main aims of the study and the inaccessibility and covert nature of the phenomena itself, a systematic literature review of secondary sources was selected. Being such a new and emerging subject, incel research is in its infancy and limited scholarly output exists (Cottee, 2021). Nevertheless, in accordance with the growing societal awareness of incels, there has been a recent wave of public interest and blossoming of academic research (Ging, 2017; Jaki et al., 2018; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021). Incels have been consequently propelled into the academic and public spotlight as an antifeminist threat and an 'object of intense scrutiny and also morbid fascination' (DeCook, 2021, p. 234). Nonetheless, the literature remains sparse, often provoking more questions than answers. Therefore, a critical assessment and extensive examination of the current literature was imperative. By identifying, interpreting and critically evaluating the subjective, cultural and structural dimensions and connotations of the literature an extensive overview of the incel phenomenon including the values, beliefs and narratives which characterise this radical milieu was achieved. By synthesising the incel literature, this research offers a picture of the current state of play of an under-researched and emerging topic. This largely exploratory research 'sets the scene' and illuminates the incel worldview, highlighting the gravity of the threat they pose. Thus, this research presents an ideal stepping-stone for future empirical research and valuable data which can aid policy making to dilute and hinder this hate group.

Theoretical Approach

Feminism considers how power is positioned in society and argues men hold structural power over women. By applying a critical feminist framework, the safety and equality of women within a patriarchal society and the underlying gendered realities of the incel agenda were emphasised. Subsequently, this coloured how the researcher interpreted and extracted the data. Moreover, there was specific consideration of theoretical and empirical literature on gender, VAW, misogyny and antifeminism. This lens is particularly notable due to the fact that this research encapsulates a deeply misogynist, and 'women hating' phenomena. Importantly, this framework allowed the researcher to detect and expose the gendered power relations central to the incel ideology. As this research will uncover, the majority of the literature on incels aligns with a feminist perspective due to feminist scholars being of the most paramount concern to shed light on this insidious group. Ultimately, the incel ideology ardently opposes feminism and views women's progression as the main source of their suffering. Therefore, it is important to highlight this combative undercurrent of the research.

Sample

The sample included 23 peer-reviewed, English language academic journal articles published within the last 5 years and which related most explicitly to the research questions.

Criteria for Inclusion of Studies

To be eligible for the review, all data was required to be of a textual nature and only peer-reviewed, academic journal articles were selected to guarantee a high-quality data set. To ensure the data collected was current and the scope of the literature review manageable, only articles published within the last 5 years (2016- 2021) were chosen. This was ideal for the subject matter as it is a relatively new phenomenon and most of the literature has been published within the last 3 years. Of the 34 articles selected for the final sample, 11 were negated as they failed to explicitly relate to the project's research questions. Relevance was determined via an overview of the article's abstract and key terminology. This ensured the projects' aims and objectives were met and the research remained focused.

Search strategy

Several search strategies were implemented to conduct an exhaustive search for studies which met the eligibility criteria. Firstly, a key word search was performed using the University of Portsmouth Library's EBSCO Discovery Service for the term incel. Subsequently, to refine the search, key words within this search were selected these included; masculinity, feminism, violence, social media, gender, misogyny and terrorism. Then, sub-categories within this selection were chosen, these included; toxic masculinity, extremism, manosphere, incel, anti-feminism, masculinities, virtual communities, subcultures, cyberterrorism, incels and mass violence. After, key terms were selected and combined with Boolean operators. Next, snowballing from key academic works was incorporated to achieve the most relevant and precise data set. This entailed reviewing the bibliographies of key studies within the field and forward searching works cited within these. This amassed a total of 78 sources. Finally, duplicate articles were eliminated leaving the researcher with a sample of 34 sources. After screening each study's abstract and key terminology to determine whether the articles explicitly met the project's eligibility criteria, 11 sources were excluded. Ultimately, this screening yielded 23 unique studies eligible for the main analyses of the review which were subsequently systematically reviewed.

Data Collection

Data collection entails the accumulation and measurement of information. Data was collected, examined and disseminated via scientifically summarising, synthesising and evaluating each source. These sources were logged using a search activity spreadsheet, catalogued, thematically coded and refined with key data extracted, highlighted and colour coded. Although repetitive and time-consuming, the researcher was able to achieve full data immersion and 'step into the incel world' as a metaphorical fly on the wall.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of examining, cleansing and evaluating data with the aim of acquiring valuable information, guiding theory and determining conclusions. Underpinned by a feminist lens, the project's research questions, aims, objectives and hypothesis were reviewed from the outset and functioned as a key analytical framework for navigating the data. This allowed for themes and theories to be pre-emptively outlined and then tested

deductively which subsequently guided and shaped the collection and analysis of the data. This deductive method was used in tandem with an inductive, grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This immersive approach is ideal for rich, textual data and merges the data collection and analyses processes (Baker et al., 2013). Employing this bottom-up approach, theories and themes were able to freely emerge during and after data was gathered and analysed. This open coding technique allowed for themes, subthemes and unexpected avenues to develop via multiple examinations of the data and a recognition of dominant themes based on word frequency and co-occurrence. Essentially, data analysis adopted an open, reflexive engagement with the current literature in order to allow for new theoretical possibilities and relationships to organically emerge which consequently guided the data collection and analyses. Themes gained via open coding were amalgamated with the pre-existing themes outlined by the research questions, aims and objectives and then selectively coded to generate a final categorical data set. Key concepts and criminological implications of the material were also recorded. Additionally, greater theoretical flexibility was achieved due to the data collection and analyses being simultaneously deductive and inductive. This type of analysis was advantageous as it allowed the researcher to have a free flow of consciousness and not be restricted by narrow categorisations; ideal for an under-researched topic (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Subsequently, the data was contextualised within a broader context of VAW, subcultures, online radicalisation and feminism. Findings were then interpreted and assessed holistically as an entire data to ensure the themes which emerged were conducive to and incorporated responses to the research questions and thesis. After, conclusions were generated and gaps and future research opportunities identified. Finally, the assembled data was written up to provide a critical evaluation and summary of the chosen works and to locate the research within the larger field.

Limitations to research design

The chosen methodology offered opportunities to expand and further knowledge of a secretive and predominantly inaccessible group without the dangers of ethnographic or covert immersive research. In her book *Men Who Hate Women* (2020), Laura Bates engaged in undercover ethnographic research, portraying an incel online. In order to navigate her way through the manosphere Bates was faced with a barrage of graphic violent and fanatical misogyny. Clearly, such immersive work can be disturbing and psychologically harmful, especially as a woman, the target of the hate. Concerningly, this abuse is mirrored in the

violent rape and death threats habitually directed at feminists online and in the real world (Ging, 2019). This degree of risk exemplifies the moral dilemmas researchers often face when conducting criminological research. It is sometimes necessary to delve into dangerous territory to help expose and ameliorate troubling societal issues. In this instance, a literature review proved an ideal mechanism to safely gain a comprehensive understanding of the topic and prepare the researcher for future empirical exploration.

Undeniably, the researcher's own positionality with regard to the phenomena examined was noteworthy. Being a feminist woman, the researcher's gendered experiences informed the way the misogynistic content was reviewed and interpreted. The researcher was propelled by a responsibility to protect women and hinder the dissemination of hate and violence central to the incel ideology and this is reflected throughout the research. Clearly, this research can in no way claim to be objective as it is laden with researcher bias. Nevertheless, this was never the researcher's intention, objectivity was compromised on the basis a topic of great personal interest and public concern was explored. It must also be highlighted that this study was fundamentally heuristic in nature and not expected to generate scientifically rigorous data. The researcher overcame these limitations by generating a rich and detailed account of the incel worldview with credible conclusions drawn. Ultimately, this approach offered an opportunity to dig deep whilst maintaining a safe distance, subsequently achieving a more reflexive, holistic perspective and providing an appropriate starting point for future study. Lastly, this method was selected as the most appropriate and pragmatic to answer the research questions in the allocated time frame within a global Covid-19 pandemic.

Ethical Considerations

As this project involved an investigation of secondary sources already in the public domain, this research did not pose any ethical considerations other than the psychological impact of continuously digesting misogynistic, and often disturbing data. Nevertheless, the researcher's mental wellbeing was monitored throughout. Also, it is important to note that when reporting on incels, the research does not glorify or give credit to an extremist group who feed off of public exposure and sensationalism as a way to advance their ideology. However, the researcher felt their ethical duty to enhance the understanding of this group to help society safeguard and impede it outweighed this risk.

Conclusion

Evidently, a systematic literature review provided the tools to gain a true understanding of the environment which incels inhabit and their overarching ideologies. This is imperative information for enhancing public knowledge and safety and informing policy. In addition, this research was able to gain an understanding of existing research and debates encompassing the incelosphere, illuminating the current state of play of a covert online group. This research also offers a paradigm and theoretical basis for understanding incels and their wider societal significance, which can be developed and expanded upon and represents a catalyst for future research. Furthermore, this research strategy allowed the researcher to enrich the existing dearth of literature on the topic and provide new insight. Ideally, the severity of the topic which is exposed throughout the research will propel additional research and mobilisation in the field to hinder this extremist group. Moreover, this research further exposes society's responsibility to help buffer vulnerable individuals from falling down the incel rabbit hole whilst highlighting the responsibility of large technological companies to regulate content and hinder future extremism. Ultimately, this research assists in mobilising instrumental change required by law enforcement, policy makers and technological conglomerates to combat and hinder online radicalism, extremism and misogyny.

Chapter One: Climate and Broader Context

The context is two thousand years of violent religious patriarchy, five centuries of brutal capitalist biopolitics, and a decade of punishing austerity that has left a great many young men quaking in the ruins of their own promised glory, drowning in unmet expectations (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019, p. 5019).

This chapter offers an exploration of the socio-economic, historical and political backdrop from which the incel originated and developed. A constellation of factors has led to the emergence of the incel subculture, including the increasing freedoms gained by women, an escalating neoliberal capitalist agenda and technological advancements. These shifts will be examined to uncover how and why incels developed. This chapter is separated into three subthemes: (a) Neoliberalism and Feminism (b) Situational Factors and Incel Demographic and (c) Technology. In order to contextualise the incel, it is important to note, incels are primarily associated with the classic Western regions of North America and Europe (ADL, 2020, para 9). Although the term is gender-neutral, incels are almost exclusively heterosexual, male and predominantly aged between 18-35 (Cottee, 2021).

1.1 Neoliberalism and Feminism

The rise of neoliberalism and increasing freedoms gained by women particularly after the 3rd and 4th waves of feminism led to an economic shift and a rupturing of traditional gender roles. The changing nature of the job market prompted by the decline of industry and propelled by a Thatcherite (UK) and Reaganomic (USA) political climate of the 1980s also laid the foundations for the current gender landscape and the birth of the incel. Championing individualism, this *laissez-faire* approach (economic capitalist philosophy where government intervention is as limited as possible) resulted in scarce government support and a decline of unions which exacerbated class divisions and provoked greater societal unrest (Bean, 2007). Furthermore, the decline of industry shifted the dynamic of the job market from masculinised forms of labour such as mining to white collar/traditionally female office-based work. Consequently, this shift robbed many men of their work identities and threatened the essence of what an idealised man should be/do (Messner, 2016). This in tandem with an increasing rise of women working in typically male roles led to a destabilisation and feminization of the labour force where male unemployment, wage stagnation and downward mobility ensued

(Duffy, 2007; Kimmel, 2013). The dismantling of traditional male labour coincided with the 3rd wave of feminism. This movement began in the early 1990s, spurred by Naomi Wolf's book *The Beauty Myth* (1990) which dissected women's unrealistic beauty standards. Sparking further mobilisation was Anita Hill's trial against US Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas for sexual harassment in 1991 (Brock, 1994). This landmark trial brought to light the epidemic of workplace sexual harassment, triggering a watershed national referendum and empowering women to report misconduct. An iteration of previous feminist movements, this wave was more pluralistic and inclusive, embracing diversity, sexuality and self-expression. The movement worked to question traditional gender and sexuality binaries, viewing these as central to preserving white cisgender male supremacy. Subsequently, the growing progressions for the rights of women, people of colour and the LGBTQ community created greater employment competition and further threatened the dominance of white, heterosexual men (Ging, 2019; Jewkes et al., 2015). Consequently, resistance to these progressions is reflected in the racist and sexist ideologies which underpin the incel philosophy.

The professionalisation of women conflicted with key neoliberal values based on traditional gender roles which relied on the 'sexual and emotional availability of women' and maintained men should be the providers and protectors (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019, p. 5014). Clearly, this philosophy was unrealistic and outdated and added additional pressure for men to be the breadwinner in an increasingly competitive workforce. In addition, central to the neoliberal ethos is individualism which has fuelled a cultural sea change, shifting the focus from community, religion and united political action to self-development, personal relationships and emotion (Ging, 2019). Undeniably, neo-liberalism plays heavily into the notion of the American Dream where one can be whoever they want to be and champions free-market capitalism, entrepreneurship and self-confidence. However, men increasingly began to be enlightened to the realisation that this was an unrealistic ideal believing they had been sold a lie. As a result, men began to feel increasingly powerless and disillusioned (Krüger, 2021, p 245).

For many men already mourning their once untouchable white male privilege, the 2008 Financial Crisis drove this further into disarray. As echoed by Bratich & Banet-Weiser (2019, p. 5010), since 2008, 'the failures of neoliberalism to live up to its promise of economic success, entrepreneurship, and happiness' have been exposed and the American

dream shattered. The collapse of the job market and global economic turmoil led to government cuts where government support decreased exacerbating anxieties and the already endemic male suicide trend (Cleary, 2019). Lacking integrative power, neoliberalism has been found to foster fierce competition, loneliness and social disconnection (Becker et al., 2021). Unsurprisingly, this environment created a downward spiral for many men failing to meet societal expectations of masculinity in a society of displaced patriarchy.

This gender role rupturing has been exacerbated by the 4th wave of feminism which began in 2012 and was characterised by greater gender equality, female empowerment and intersectionality (understanding identity as layered by various forms of discrimination and privilege) (Crenshaw, 1989). Instigated by a plethora of troubling events and revelations, this movement was galvanised and amplified by social media. These events include the Delhi gang rape (2012), Jimmy Savile allegations (2012), Harvey Weinstein allegations (2017) and the subsequent #Me Too and #Times Up Movements. This movement has been instrumental for holding men accountable and dismantling the historic dominance of men. In response to this landscape, increasing numbers of men have found refuge online, espousing antifeminism and misogyny in their attempts to relinquish dominance with the incel subculture located at the forefront of this. Incels believe women now have too much power and are not giving men the-one-thing they owe them - sex (Maxwell et al., 2020). Incels additionally blame women, sexually successful men and feminism for their celibacy & relationship and societal failures (Ging, 2017; Hines, 2019). Also, incels perceive women as genetically subordinate who only wish to mate with 'genetically superior' men (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020, p. 279). Subsequently, incels find comfort in the digital sphere where they can bond over shared experiences of loneliness, rejection, isolation and pain.

Evidently, tormented by the failures of neoliberalism, incel victimhood configurations have emerged from a culture of individualism, self-endorsement and cutthroat competition (Hoffman et al., 2020). Clearly, neoliberalism offers no infrastructure for those who do not meet its unrealistic ideals and places societal failings at the feet of the individual turning a blind eye to those who fall through the cracks (Hearn, 2017). This eschewing is encapsulated by Crispin (2020, para 1) 'we're always afraid of alienated figures, because of what they reveal about a society'. Subsequently, this arc of decline manifests in accelerated misogyny and violence where internalised anger is projected onto others as opposed to society itself (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019). Evidently, it is easy to see how the incel subculture offers

sanctuary to individuals who have been relegated to the margins of society and are desperate to belong and regain dominance. Clearly, the failings of neoliberalism coupled with the progressions of women and non-cisgender white men have provided a central locus for online antisocial interaction and extremism (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019).

1.2 Situational Factors and Demographics

Examination of the literature has highlighted several predispositions or ‘chronic strains’ which influence one to follow the path to incelism (Levin & Madfis, 2009; Silver et al., 2019). These include mental illness, autism, bullying, ostracism, romantic rejection and failed military careers. The *laissez-faire* ethos of neoliberalism in conjunction with government cuts post 2008 offer little or no support for individuals experiencing these issues keeping them stuck in a vicious cycle of self-loathing and isolation (Levin & Madfis, 2009).

Unsurprisingly, when these experiences coalesce, they have been found to generate hostility, violence and social disengagement. Clearly, these individuals possess high rates of VTR (vulnerability to radicalisation) and are ideal candidates for online indoctrination (Srinivasan, 2021). Incels are primarily a Western phenomenon, with over 80 percent residing in North America and Europe (Hoffman et al., 2020). Although incel demographics are ambiguous, there is a consensus that most incels are ‘young middle-class white males who live with their parents and have never had sex or true intimacy with a woman’ (Cottee, 2021, p, 95).

Moreover, incels are predominately Caucasian with most possessing sympathies for far-right, white supremacist politics. Furthermore, the majority of incels are plagued and haunted by mental illness and trauma (Hoffman et al., 2020). According to an ‘INCELS.CO’ 2020 survey, a large proportion of incels also suffer from depression and over a quarter identify as autistic (Cottee, 2021, p, 101). In addition, over half of incel attack perpetrators possessed a degree of military training which parallels jihadi and far-right terrorist groups which include a disproportionate number of former militia (Hoffman et al., 2020). Thus, this begs the question as to whether military involvement increases the risk of a terrorist trajectory or if a certain type of person is attracted to this lifestyle?

This primarily anglophone community are also representative of a generation where technology has become entwined with everyday life (Byerly, 2020). Incels are predominantly affected by debilitating loneliness and a feeling that they do not belong. Thus, the online world offers belonging, community and sanctuary in a world where they are rejected and

marginalised. It can be attested, that this feeling of isolation has been exacerbated by the individualistic ethos of neoliberalism, increasing liberations of women and secularisation which have led to a 'cultural suicide' where religion, morality and community have declined (Díaz & Valji, 2019, p. 44). Moreover, these factors in concert with declining marriage and increasing divorce rates have led to a destabilisation of the traditional family model (Baele et al., 2019). Studies have found that if men grow up without a father figure they are more likely to engage in toxic displays of masculinity such as hyper violence and sexual aggression (Harrington, 2021). Young people are increasingly being raised in broken homes with absent role models and government cuts to youth clubs and community incentives mean young men are increasingly turning to deviant subcultures to find meaning and identity and express their grievances. Essentially, the incel subculture fulfils a need and desire for community, kinship, and belonging absent in the current socio-political climate (Krzych, 2013).

Romantic, sexual and societal rejection are central to the woes of the incel subculture. The incelsphere is dominated by narratives 'ripe with rejection, bullying, and misunderstanding' (Maxwell et al., 2020, p. 1861). This rejection reflects normative anxieties amongst young men transitioning into adulthood, characterised by an exploration of love and worldviews yet is exacerbated in the incel context (Arnett, 2000). Incels often possess 'a strong sense of missing out on teenage love' which can lead them down a trajectory of loneliness, despair and misogyny (Klee, 2018; Scaptura & Boyle, 2020, p. 291). Concerningly, it is no secret that romantic and societal rejection provides fertile ammunition for lone shooter mass murder attacks. Turning internalised pain outward, most lone shooter perpetrators are fuelled by narratives of sexual and romantic failure (Fox & DeLateur, 2013). Alarming, violent and extremist attacks are often glamorised and celebrated throughout incel discourse and imagery (Witt, 2020). This coupled with the global rise of the extreme right, easy access to guns in the USA and the proliferation of *ultra-violence* in the mass media is creating a culture where individuals are becoming increasingly desensitised to violence (Burgess, 1962). This disturbing cultural phenomenon is amplified by the speed, propagation and reach of the internet. Thus, it is not surprising that lone-shooter mass killings are rising, in 2019 alone, there were at least 21 mass shootings in the USA (Keneally, 2019). Troublingly, these acts of violence are increasingly committed by incels or those with incel sympathies (Hoffman et al, 2020). As evidenced by the recent (2021) incel-inspired lone shooter attack by 'hate-filled misogynist' Jake Davison in Plymouth which resulted in six fatalities (Weaver & Morris, 2021, para 1). Evidently, the limited support for individuals

suffering from mental illness, autism, trauma and rejection can propel individuals to find solace in digital subcultures where they become lost down a rabbit hole of extremist ideologies.

1.3 Technology

The advent of the information age and platform of online forums has created the perfect 'invisible' environment for 'silenced' men to cohort behind the faceless comfort of screen names and avatars plotting revenge on those who have wronged them and reasserting their dominance. The growth of the 'sociotechnical world' has activated a plethora of new toxic online behaviours which demand a reframing of sexual violence (Byerly, 2020, p. 291). These include trolling, revenge porn, cyberstalking and the propagation of extremist misogynistic rhetoric (Lenhart et al., 2016; Maddocks, 2018). Concerningly, these acts of 'networked misogyny' have become increasingly normalised and represent part of women's online engagement (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2019; Marwick & Caplan, 2018). Citron and Norton (2011, p. 1435) regard these online behaviours as 'digital citizenship' abuses. The amplification and 24/7 nature of the technological world means individuals are habitually saturated with media content. The incelosphere is dominated by venomous language and degrading imagery of women which is intensified via the speed and repetition of the internet (Young, 2019). In addition, social media acts as an echo-chamber for extremist groups, offering a megaphone to circulate and magnify messages to mounting audiences, increasing membership in the process (Byerly, 2020). These 'toxic ecocultures' work in harmony with new articulations of toxic masculinity via the exponential dissemination of potent antifeminist rhetoric, allowing insidious ideologies to spread and cross-pollinate (Ging, 2019, p. 644). Clearly, the online sphere creates a 'nursery for burgeoning misogyny extremism' which simultaneously offers the luxury of anonymity and unaccountability (Byerly, 2020, p. 300).

Fundamentally, the rise of social media has been central to the genesis and development of digital subcultures like incels. The interconnectivity of social media means geographically scattered individuals can now interact online united by a common thread of misogyny in a 'global village' where views become homogenised (McLuhan, 1964). In the past, individuals with incel tendencies would have been confined to a life of solitary isolation. Yet now members of hate groups from all corners of the globe can congregate in

cyberspace and ‘feed on each other and build into frothing extremism’ (Ricard, 2018, para. 33). The danger here is when extremist content translates into the real world as boundaries between online and offline worlds increasingly blur (Locke et al., 2018). Moreover, the correlation between engagement with antifeminism online and real-world physical violence is a real and rising phenomenon (Díaz & Valji, 2019), (Smith, 2021). Thus, it is imperative to ensure law enforcement agencies are aware of this symbiotic relationship to prevent future real-world extremism.

Evidently, much of the mobilising of online extremist groups lays in the hands of large media and technological companies. These conglomerates play a central role in enabling and promoting extremist ideologies and offering ideal platforms for mobilisation (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019). Nevertheless, social media platforms have begun to implement techniques to diffuse and prevent radicalism. In 2017, Reddit banned the most prominent incel subreddit *r/Incels* and other more minor ones for inciting violence, extremism and promulgating misogyny (SPLC, 2018). However, efforts by technological companies are inadequate and there remains a mounting concern for the way radical groups employ technologies to incite extremism. Resistance also exists where many individuals believe online engagement is an extension of their right to freedom of speech which should not be censored. Nevertheless, greater accountability and regulation by technological conglomerates is imperative to hinder future radicalisation (Ging, 2017).

Chapter 2: Masculinity

The chapter centres upon the theme of Masculinity and is split into three distinct subthemes; (a) Hegemonic Masculinity and its Decline (b) Antifeminist backlash (c) The Manosphere and (d) Incel Origins. Please note subtheme (a) includes the sub-sub theme; Gender status threat and subtheme (c) includes the sub-sub theme; The Pill Ideology. This chapter will provide important contextual understandings of the incel and illuminate why this radical milieu emerged within the backdrop of an antifeminist revolt. This chapter will also explore why traditional configurations of masculinity are declining and have led to the proliferation of hyper/toxic masculinities. Additionally, the online manosphere umbrella under which incels are located will be addressed in conjunction with the pill ideology which unites it.

2.1 Hegemonic Masculinity and its Decline

The hegemonic male ideal is a heteronormative societal construct which stipulates men must be strong, masculine and dominant and works to preserve the patriarchal mythology of men as the superior sex (Connell, 1987). This construct operates to legitimise women's subordination and justify men's dominant position in society (Connell, 2005). Origins of this construct emanate from the advent of 'The Man Box', a new industrialised model of masculinity which developed after the Second World War (David & Brannon, 1976). Characterised by a rigid set of behaviours and expectations, this model policed masculine behaviour and built the foundations for hegemonic masculinity (Greene, 2013). No man fits this unattainable ideal, yet problematically this model is located as normative and consequently represents a 'strait jacket' which monitors legitimised versions of manhood whilst devaluing women and 'feminine' men (Farrell, 1974, p. 9; Jones et al., 2020) As a result, this construct has spawned generations of men desperately trying to fill these too high standards yet failing and feeling emasculated (Edwards & Jones, 2009). The disconnect between reality and expectation has created a 'crisis of masculinity' where gender identities and expectations have become confused (Connell, 1995). Concerningly, these crises often provoke a reinstatement of hegemonic masculinity, a kind of 'retro-manhood' which is channelled via toxic and hyper displays of masculinity such as violence and sexual aggression (Martino & Greig, 2012, p. 130). This is echoed by Saptura & Boyle (2020, p. 291) who found men threatened by social changes 'expressed greater support for war, pro-dominance attitudes, belief in male superiority, and homophobia'.

Aggrieved men paradoxically seek to distance themselves from the confines of hegemonic masculinity and the privilege which accompanies this so that they can adopt a victim identity, yet simultaneously perform exaggerated displays of masculinity which actually reaffirm hegemony masculinity and exacerbate gender dichotomies (Glance et al., 2021; Williams, 2020). These new toxic versions of legitimate masculinities have now migrated online with the manosphere operating as a hub for this toxic activity. Clearly, ideals of hegemonic masculinity stifle men, creating a pool of disillusioned and emasculated men ripe for incel radicalisation (Ging, 2019). Ultimately, the first step to hindering toxic configurations of masculinity is to dismantle the hegemonic male ideal and work to restore a balance between realistic and idealised masculinities (O'Donnell, 2021). Evidence of this model dismantling is rising; heterosexual music icon Harry Styles recently graced the cover of *Vogue* wearing a dress and make-up and male role models such as the musician Professor Green and boxer Anthony Joshua have been vocal about their emotions and mental health struggles (Bowles, 2020; Robinson, 2018). Still, the hegemonic masculine ideal reigns supreme and greater efforts must be mobilised to disassemble it.

2.1.1 Gender status threat

Men's dominant position in society has become increasingly displaced and has led to the development of a *gender status threat* (Branscombe et al., 1999; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This develops when a group's dominance - in this case, cisgender white male privilege - is undermined by exterior forces (women, people of colour and the LGBTQ community) (Branscombe et al., 1999). Moreover, when status, power and 'rights' are threatened, a victimhood complex ensues which Kimmel (2013) coined *aggrieved entitlement*. This phenomenon is analogous with the incel experience and the way incels view sex as an intrinsic male 'right' and constitute rejection of this as a form of 'reverse rape' which leads to shame and wounded male pride (Hoffman et al., 2020, p. 573). This is echoed by Williams (2020, p. 13) who argues incel hate is a 'by-product of privilege' festered and coalesced from a 'lack of access to women's bodies'. Additionally, the fact that incels view their identity as *involuntary* mirrors the lack of agency they feel in society which leads to acute suffering (Donnelly et al., 2001). Furthermore, incels view women paradoxically as their oppressors and as the inferior sex and are thus tortured by a 'painful combination of being privileged and feeling inferior at the same time' (Almog & Kaplan, 2017, p. 31; Nagle, 2017). As a result, incels see misogyny and violence as a vehicle for reclaiming their 'rightful' dominant

position (Gotell & Dutton, 2016). Comparably, Kalish and Kimmel (2010, p. 451) found aggrieved entitlement was often a central component of mass shooter attacks; a real-world manifestation of how anger and rejection can translate into violence (O'Donnell, 2021). Correspondingly, Vandello & Bosson (2013) found men who suffer from aggrieved entitlement were more likely to engage in behaviour which displayed hyper-conformity to masculinity such as aggression, misogyny and homophobia and were more likely to have violent fantasies about rape and mass murder. Clearly, these narratives of victimhood can lead to the exhibition of toxic masculine behaviours which operate to dismantle threats and reassert dominance (Shifman, 2013). Concerningly, evidence of a gender threat validates and legitimises violent behaviour against women which fortifies a culture of toxic masculinity centred upon violence and dominance which has now migrated online (O'Malley et al., 2020; Saptura & Boyle, 2020).

Online misogyny and antifeminism function to police women, stifle their upward mobility and 'preserve the integrity and position of the dominant group' (Blumer, 1958, p. 5; Megarry, 2014). This behaviour is evidenced by the humiliation and degradation of women in the incelosphere where women are reduced to objects and tools which can be owned, consumed or exploited via dominant and aggressive displays of sexual aggression (Flood, 2008; Garlick, 2010). These performances reflect a 'weaponization of the penis' and echo narratives of rape as a weapon and men's biological need to conquer and dominate (Byerly, 2020; Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021, p. 16). This misogyny is further illustrated in the commonplace trolling of female celebrities and feminists known as *gender trolling* (Mantilla, 2013). After creating a campaign called Kickstarter to address sexist portrayals of women in gaming, Anita Sarkeesian was extensively gendertrolled (Mantilla, 2013, p. 567). Similarly, actress Emma Watson was also a victim of this online abuse after her gender speech at the UN in 2014 when hackers threatened to post nude photos of her (Holpuch & Woolf, 2014; Watson, 2014). Evidently, men who believe their positioning in society is being threatened often react with exaggerated displays of masculinity as a survival tactic to reassert dominance (Baele et al., 2019).

2.2 Antifeminist backlash

From the 1960s onwards, the backlash from burgeoning feminist movements caused many men to feel as if their historic white male privilege was being eroded and the pendulum was beginning to swing too far in favour of women (Auchmuty, 2018). Subsequently, many men began to see feminism as a form of ideological terrorism at fault for the demoralising of 'golden age' gender roles and family ideals which prescribed women to be subservient, pure and devoted to their husbands as illustrated by Virginia Woolf's analogy of '*The Angel in the House*' (Baele et al., 2019; Woolf, 1947, p.153). Moreover, feminism has empowered women to reclaim their bodies which have historically belonged to men with women possessing the right to refuse male sexual advances. This was later crystallised by the criminalisation of sexual harassment (UK Equality Act, 2010) and marital rape (R v R, 1992). As a result, many men felt 'oppressed' by feminism, adopting a narrative of victimhood which was then internalised and festered as hate and anger towards women (Byerly, 2020, p. 302; Díaz & Valji, 2019). This antifeminist backlash was epitomised by the publication of Farrell's text *The Myth of Male Power* (1993) which discussed male hardships, shining a light on how feminism was to blame for the eradication of men's rights and liberties and for displacing the 'natural' patriarchal order. Almost thirty years later, this was echoed by MRA Paul Elam (2019), who claims social institutions are biased against men and 'alpha masculinity has been hijacked by feminists' (as cited in Ging, 2019, p. 650). Essentially, men are caught in a narrative of (lost) privilege and pain and see feminism as toxic 'anti male' propaganda (Love, 2013; Regehr, 2020, p. 10). Men additionally feel as if women now hold an advantage in things like dating, divorce rights and custody battles, with increasing cohorts of men now committed to re-establishing and preserving patriarchy (Connell, 2005). Evidently, antifeminist rhetoric works to demonise women and feminism which thereby gives men a license to espouse harassment and misogyny (Díaz & Valji, 2019; Jhaver et al., 2018).

This environment is exacerbated and normalised by the influence of political figures such as ex USA president Donald Trump who has been documented espousing sexist remarks and more recently New York governor Andrew Cuomo who has been accused of sexual harassment by eleven women (Byerly, 2020; Mehta, 2021). Concerningly, commonplace sexism is often presented as male 'banter' or 'locker room talk' which mitigates the severity of the content and reinforces misogyny (Jones et al., 2020, p. 1907; Rhodes et al., 2020, p. 741). Furthermore, Meiering et al (2020, p, 9) argue antifeminism operates as a 'bio-political

instrument' which regulates the masses by deploying conservative gendered narratives which stipulate gender roles are biologically encrypted (Messner, 1998). Evidently, incels are part of a larger narrative around antifeminism, a continuum of responses to women's rejection of traditional gender roles and the quaking of white cisgender male privilege (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019). Consequently, in a climate where the current zeitgeist is undeniably feminist, incels attempt to re-establish patriarchy via symbolic, virtual and real-world misogyny (Harrington, 2021).

2.3 The Manosphere

The term 'manosphere' was coined in 2009 on a blogpost and then later popularised by the publication of Ian Ironwood's book *The Manosphere: A New Hope for Masculinity* in 2013. The manosphere represents a diverse confederacy of interlaced groups, forums, subcultures and organisations with a fluid set of divergent ideologies united by the red pill philosophy which dictates that feminism has gone too far and men are in fact the oppressed gender (Ging, 2019; Gotell & Dutton, 2016). These groups include PUA's (Pick-Up Artists - 'dating' coaches who excel in the manipulation of women for sexual gain), Men's Rights Groups, MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way - men who lead a life without women) and incels (Ging, 2017). This evolving assortment of groups are bonded by misogynistic and anti-feminist rhetoric and centred upon what it means to be a man in the 21st century and how to improve one's increasingly fragile position (Ging, 2019). Fundamentally, manosphere groups bond over their shared aim to defeat feminism and recoup the 'lost erotic capital of men' (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019, p. 5008). Moreover, the manosphere cross-pollinates amongst its diverse groups resulting in a fertile breeding ground for the proliferation of unorthodox misogynistic and hostile views of women (Farrell, et al, 2019; Gotell & Dutton, 2016). This has been particularly prevalent within the last five years where cyberspace has offered an ideal, covert platform where 'women-haters mobilise against a supposed gynocratic conspiracy' (Bates, 2020, para 4). Incels have emerged from the homosocial online space of the manosphere and represent a more extremist, radical subgroup (Marwick & Caplan, 2018).

Before its online configurations the roots of the manosphere stemmed from Men's Rights Movement (MRM) activity in the 1970s. Motivated by second-wave feminism, men worked in unison with the Women's Liberation movement to 'attract men to feminism by

constructing a discourse that stressed how the male role was impoverished, unhealthy, and even lethal for men' (Messner, 1998, p. 256). Here, orthodox beliefs of masculinity became challenged and a more egalitarian society prescribed (Carrigan et al., 1985). However, prompted by the deindustrialisation of the workforce in the 1980s and sense of male decline, the movement split into pro and antifeminist parties (Ging, 2019; Messner, 2016). Some continued in the fight against sexism whilst others believed society was becoming increasingly feminised and emasculating (Bean, 2007). This rupture was typified by the publication of *The Male Ordeal: Role Crisis in a Changing World* (Skjei & Rabkin, 1981) which examined male victimisation. Moreover, this sea-change coincided with the emergence of toxic masculinity where exaggerated displays of masculinity were increasingly performed as a way of reasserting the long-established dominance of the white, heterosexual man (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016).

From the turn of the millennium, the increasing technological age which spurred the emergence of online communities created a platform for the arrival of the manosphere, thereby migrating the epicentre of activism and debate online (Ging, 2019). Subsequently, a modern men's movement was formed, offering a safe place for disillusioned men to congregate anonymously and work to free men from the feminist delusion (Ging, 2019). Turning women's historic oppression on its head, these men felt as though they were being 'witch hunted' for their jobs and livelihood and the very essence of masculinity under threat. Consequently, men are now fighting back from their version of 'oppression' and this 'revolt' is central to the rhetoric encompassing the manosphere (Lockhart, 2015; Salter, 2018). Clearly, the hybrid displays of masculinity which typify the manosphere incite and reflect key questions regarding what it means to be a man in modern Western society and how to revalorise traditional gender roles (Blais & Dupuis-Deri, 2012; Tomkinson et al., 2020). Moreover, it is clear technological platforms enable a cohesive element which unite disillusioned angry men, propagating 'new articulations of aggrieved manhood' and creating a misogynistic hotbed (Ging, 2019, p. 638).

2.3.1 The Pill Ideology

The pill ideology functions as a common thread uniting all members of the manosphere. Initiation into the group, 'taking the red or black pill', is derived from *The Matrix* movie (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999) where Neo the protagonist is offered a red or blue pill,

‘the blue pill to keep him in his current blissful, fantastical world of illusion and the red pill to shatter that fantasy jolting him into the real world’ (Rai, 2015, p. 623). The red pill rouses men from the *misandry* (hatred of men) and indoctrination of feminism and enlightens them to the ugly truth of the world that men are the oppressed sex (Ging, 2019). Additionally, *redpillers* view women as superficial gold-diggers and subsequently often adopt *looksmaxxing* vocations such *gymmaxxing* (going to the gym), undergoing plastic surgery to look more masculine and *betabuxxing* (earning as much money as possible) in order to attract women (Regehr, 2020). Essentially, redpillers are simultaneously awakened to the belief of female brainwashing yet also adopt techniques to manipulate women into sex saving themselves from potential incelism (Hoffman et al., 2020). Conversely, the black pill represents a more extremist, nihilistic reality where individuals adopt the myopic worldview that privileged (predominantly white) men have been sold a lie and it is actually women who hold all of the power and subsequently need to be ‘put back in their place’. The black pill, a ‘particularly toxic brand of antifeminism’, is primarily associated with incels where already disenfranchised men cross over to the ‘dark side’ and position themselves below all other men (Ging, 2019, p. 639; Maxwell et al., 2020). Moreover, the black pill is rooted in biological determinism and sees the world through a fatalistic lens free from illusion, rejecting the notion that attractiveness and desirability are adaptable (Cottee, 2021; DeCook, 2021). Thus, the black pill exists as a permanent status, ‘an eternal sentence, a curse, a destiny’ (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019, p. 5017). Unsurprisingly, incelism is dominated by nihilistic depression and suicidal ideation as incels lament their *forever alone* status and LDAR (Lay Down and Rot) (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019, p. 5017). Evidently, the pill ideology operates as a key ideological tool which creates solidarity and offers a portal through which disillusioned individuals can make sense of the world.

2.4 Incel Origins

The term incel was initially used by a woman named Alana in 1997 on a blog titled ‘Alana’s Involuntary Celibacy Project’ which offered an online space of connection and support for romantically unsuccessful, lonely individuals of all genders (Taylor, 2018). Coining the moniker ‘incel’, Alana denoted this identity as ‘anybody of any gender who was lonely, had never had sex or who hadn’t had a relationship in a long time’ (Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021, p. 7). The concept’s foundations of celibacy and loneliness remain, yet the term has deviated dramatically from its origin and is now analogous with misogyny and extremism (Bratich &

Banet-Weiser, 2019). Inceldom depictions have existed throughout history prior to having the linguistics to communicate this 'life situation' (Cottee, 2021, p, 97). These sexual and social 'rejects' and can be traced back to the counterculture movements of the 1960s, including the Sexual Revolution, Women's and Men's Liberation Movements and backlash against the Vietnam War where traditional gender roles began to shift (Karner, 1998; Williams, 2020). This is echoed by Baele et al (2019, p, 13) who believe 'inceldom has always existed but was rare, it expanded and worsened significantly from the 1960s onwards'. Historical individuals who would have been seen as incels today or at least possessing incel sympathies include the lone shooters of the École Polytechnique de Montréal attack (1989), the Luby's shooting (1991) and the LA Fitness shooting (2009). These attacks all involved loners with extremist views on women (Lindeman, 2019; Terry, 1991). Moreover, media representations of 'catatonically lonely American men driven to the brink by their disdain for what they perceive as a rapidly declining modern society' have also been around for years preceding the incel (Zoladz, 2018, para 1). This is portrayed in the film *Fight Club* (Fincher, 1999) where lonely men achieve brotherhood through violence and by the character Travis Bicker in the film *Taxi Driver* (Scorcese, 1976) a loner who becomes increasingly detached from reality and enthralled by violent fantasies. Evidently, these articulations of lonely men who exist on society's peripheries parallel present day incels.

Chapter Three: Subculture

This theme is divided into three subthemes (a) Incel subculture (b) Views, norms and narratives and (c) Lexicon. Please note subtheme (b) is divided into three sub-sub themes (1) Loneliness and isolation (2) Sex, celibacy and virginity and (3) Black pill fatalism. The incel subculture is an insular and culturally specific digital community characterised by ideological extremes, colourful language and a unique sense of belonging and brotherhood. By using the lens of subcultural theory and dismantling the rich cultural tapestry of the incel milieu, a better understanding of the inner workings of incels, how they operate and the culture which characterises has been achieved. In addition, this chapter highlights what the incel subculture offers to disillusioned young men and why it holds such appeal in our current climate.

3.1 Incel Subculture

Incels represent a multifaceted subcultural landscape which encourages misogynistic violence (Dragiewicz & Mann, 2016; Kalish & Kimmel, 2010). A subculture is a ‘culture within a culture’ and exists in opposition to popular culture and is characterised by cultural specificity and a unique set of values and norms (Cohen, 1955, p. 12; Hebdige, 1979). The cult-like subscription, rituals and philosophies which characterise the incel subculture solidify a sense of belonging and group solidarity and facilitate a unique incel identity (Meiering et al., 2021; Regehr, 2020). Additionally, incels represent a digital subculture united around an anti-female experience which situates women as the enemy and draws from a reservoir of male anguish which is intensified and proliferated by the anonymity, speed and geographical reach of the internet (Holt, 2007). This radical milieu coalesces around collective feelings of loneliness and sexlessness and synthesises these into antifeminist misogyny (Hines, 2019; Witt, 2020). Essentially, incels represent a microcosm of male grievances in modern society and offer an online sphere for disillusioned young men to bond and find meaning. Krüger (2021, p 246) regards incels as a ‘fringe’ (existing on society’s peripheries) culture representing an ‘affinity between male subcultures and a volatile political extremism’. In addition, this online community can be considered as a *neo-tribe* typified by ‘fluid boundaries and floating memberships’ and evocative of postmodernist *liquid modernity* where identities are ‘pick n mixed’ (Bauman, 1991; Bennett, 1999, p, 600; Nagle, 2017).

One of the key organising principles of a subculture is a shared philosophy. Incels are governed by core ideological beliefs of antifeminism, misogyny, victimhood, and traditionalist gender ideals. Undeniably, these theoretical components colour and shape incel narratives and language. Utilising the internet, incels use pop culture to deliver explicit and subliminal messages through memes, fan art, songs and videos underpinned by dark humour, satire and sarcasm which mitigate and normalise the severity of the content (DeCook, 2021; Meiering et al., 2021). Concerningly, these narratives and ideologies are represented in ways which make them appear entertaining, fun and frivolous which mask the gravity and insidiousness of the messaging, gradually grooming individuals into adopting extremist ideologies (Hoffman et al., 2020). Evidently, technological advances have generated a means for subcultures to migrate online, with the interconnectedness of the internet creating a catalyst for extremist online subcultures to emerge and proliferate.

3.2 Views, Norms and Narratives

3.2.1 Loneliness and isolation

An overarching theme of the incel subculture is loneliness and isolation with incels routinely feeling alienated and outcast from dominant society (Maxwell et al., 2020; Witt, 2020). Subsequently, the incel subculture offers young disillusioned men a sanctuary to share their neuroses and romantic rejections and presents a stepping-stone for those trying to overcome social isolation (Burgess et al., 2001). This subculture offers a safe place to decompress and share anxieties with others helping individuals feel less alone in a world where they are misunderstood. Essentially, the incel community fills a void for many young men desperate for connection, a 'fraternal' 'brotherhood of the shipwrecked and the defeated' (Cottee, 2021, p, 101). Sharing personal traumas is cathartic and therapeutic for incels where pent up 'intropunitive aggression' (aggression turned inward) can be released (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Fox & Levin, 1998). The incel subculture further represents a milieu where personal and private sufferings morph into an all-encompassing hatred of women where personal responsibility for one's own lot in life is eradicated and instead placed at the feet of society (Cottee, 2020; DeCook, 2021). Moreover, this subculture offers a sense of community, solidarity, meaning and faith in a society where these are increasingly absent (Jane, 2018; Regehr, 2020). This subculture is unique in its appeal to the lonely, a place

where loneliness attracts others; ‘antisocial sociability’ (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019, p. 5017; Cottee, 2021). Thus, it is easy to see how disillusioned young men can be seduced by the incel subculture and its promises of salvation and domination, like moths to a flame.

3.2.2 Sex, celibacy and virginity

Narratives of sex, celibacy, and virginity are fundamental to the incel subculture with incels bonding over their shared experiences of romantic and sexual failure (Beauchamp, 2019; Ging, 2017). Sex is often regarded as a biological rite of passage to becoming a man and incels believe that by failing to offer access to female bodies, society (women in particular) robs incels of their manhood (Krüger, 2021). Consequently, incels are trapped in a phase of developmental immaturity and adolescent angst (DeCook, 2021). This ‘symbolic castration’ encapsulates feelings of inadequacy in light of not living up to societal ideals of manhood which leads to powerlessness, humiliation and shame which is then converted into anger and resentment at those having sex; alpha men and women (DeCook, 2021, p. 236; Lacan, 2007). Krüger (2021, p 254) argues that this sense of ‘immaturity and impotence’ can lead to a loss of total control. This is evidenced by the increasingly extreme sexually deviant ideas which attract incels in their attempts to regain control (Byerly, 2020). These include sanctioned rape, sexual slavery and state sponsored girlfriends; ‘if women will not give their bodies to the incel, he will take it from them, and in doing so, he punitively affirms his power over them’ (Witt, 2020, p. 686). Here, rape and violence are presented as the optimum way for men to reassert their status, virility and pride and reclaim what they believe they are biologically entitled to (Cottee, 2021; Witt, 2020). Moreover, the incel ideology is riddled with contradiction with women trapped within a Madonna/Whore paradox (Williams, 2020). Women possess the ability save men from incelism, their bodies and love desired, yet sexually active women are simultaneously regarded as disgusting, promiscuous and ruined (roasties) (Ging, 2019; Glace et al., 2021). Essentially, women are concurrently desired yet vilified, their worth centred upon their sexuality (Glace et al., 2021; Williams, 2020, p. 99).

Incels often adopt the identity of being involuntarily celibate as an act of ‘symbolic defiance and withdrawal’ (Cottee, 2021, p, 101). Incels call this *going monk* (abstaining from the dating economy and subsequently any sexual/romantic relationships with women) (Jones et al., 2020, p. 1915). O’Malley et al (2020) attests that to identity as an incel you must have not engaged in sexual activity for a least six months despite desiring this, yet a large portion

of incels have never had sexual activity of any sort and identify as KHHV (Kissless, Handholdless, Hugless Virgin) (Incel Wiki, 2021). This 'delinquent solution' means that by removing themselves out of the sexual marketplace equation incels escape the pain associated with sexual and romantic rejection (Cottee, 2021, p. 101). Thus, through the nihilistic enlightenment of the black pill, incels resort themselves to a fatalistic trajectory and vicious cycle of sexlessness, loneliness and disengagement from the world, a kind of *anomie* (normlessness) (Durkheim, 1897/1951; Maxwell et al., 2020). Consequently, this damages any hopes of gaining social connection through relationships which are a fundamental part of what makes us human. A lack of sex has been found to be psychologically distressing and this is reflected in the incel experience (Donnelly, 1993; Weiss 1973). Essentially, this subculture represents a subversion of a natural and common experience of rejection, which keeps incels stuck in a fatalistic spiral they feel they can never escape (O'Malley et al., 2020).

3.2.3 Black pill fatalism and suicide

Suicidal ideation, nihilism and self-loathing are key elements of the incel subculture belief system and are encapsulated within the black pill ideology (Glance et al., 2021). Nihilistic fatalism can be seen as correlational to 'the external locus of control' principle, a continuum which measures how much control individuals have over their lives and how much external forces possess (Rotter, 1954). For incels, individual responsibility is placed at the feet of society and women in particular which frees them from the weight of expectation and the need to progress in life. This seductive feature of the incel subculture is encapsulated by Cottee (2021, p. 101) 'the blows of fate are somewhat easier to bear if one sees them as beyond one's control'. Consequently, incels believe they are fatalistically resigned to their marginalised position in society believing this is an immutable reality in which they feel imprisoned (Cottee, 2021). Furthermore, incels regard this *forever alone* status as a permanent existence, a 'master status', which keeps them in a perpetual state of victimhood (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019, p. 5017; Cottee, 2021, p. 94). In addition, forums are filled with suicidal ideation and collective feelings of hate and self-denigration which convey dismay for the status quo. These feelings of existential despair are evocative of the 'Clown World' analogy which incels often adopt which sees the world as absurd and meaningless as portrayed by the Joker in Batman (Jürgens, 2014).

Overwhelmingly incels believe they have been denied a conventional life and live in a constant state of torment and apathy; existing separately from humanity (Witt, 2020). Problematically, this refusal to participate in society often means individuals cut themselves off from family and do not work or try to educate or better themselves (NEET - Not in education, employment, or training) which further isolates them and only heightens their extremist beliefs (Incel Wiki, 2021). This is evocative of the Japanese subculture the *hikikomori* who have decided to retreat from society due to the anxieties of the modern world being too vast (Conti, 2019). Concerningly, these 'retreatists' could become an increasingly global trend, one which epitomises an anomic postmodern crisis fuelled by the decline of community and religion and the rise of 'hyper-individualism' (DeCook, 2021, p. 241; Merton & Merton, 1968, p. 241). This can also be seen as a reaction to our Western mainstream obsession with success and personal development (King et al., 2019). Evidently, the black pill concept simultaneously offers enlightenment, a collective identity and a dystopian vision which is so seductive to lonely young men desperate to belong. However, many do not realise the dangers of being sucked into this negative vortex of nihilistic fatalism.

3.3: Lexicon

Incels have a specific vernacular which makes them unique and constitutes part of their collective identity. This is characterised by 'complex and coded lexicons of terms, abbreviations, slang, and memes' laden with antifeminist misogynistic rhetoric (Witt, 2020, p. 681). Incel language is the antithesis of political correctness and the incelosphere offers a space for incels to vent and this is projected via a repertoire of raw, colourful sexist and racist language (Cottee, 2021). Glace et al. (2021, p. 291) call this vocabulary 'subverted social justice language' which represents a reaction to increasingly policed language and an affirmation of one's libertarian right for free speech (Ging, 2019; Jane, 2018). Concerningly, the expletive, derogative and verbally pungent language commonplace in the incelosphere mirrors the objectifying sexist language of wider society where women are routinely compared to animals, vessels and robots such as *cumdumpster*, *femoid* and *landwhale* (Kelly et al., 2021; Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021, p. 18). The concern here is that this vernacular which appears to be evolving and becoming more extreme is increasingly becoming part of everyday language and seeping into the public realm with the aid of the spreading capabilities of the internet (Farrell et al, 2019; Ging et al, 2019). This is exemplified by the emergence of the online dialect *Rapeglis* which is found throughout the web and is characterised by

graphic, sexually violent language and ‘hyperbolic misogynist discourse’ (Jane, 2018, p, 662). Moreover, as the incel language is often engineered to shock and provoke it is often difficult to decipher which content constitute safety and security threats and which ones are merely a performance of bravado (Cottee, 2021).

Evidently, the incel dictionary is extensive and represents an unique and covert way of communicating which an outsider looking in would take time to interpret and makes outsiders instantly identifiable (Cottee, 2021). Essentially, this language acts as a ‘power resource’ which further crystallises the ‘in-group’ nature of the subculture and exposes those who are not legitimate as *fakecels* (Bryman, 2012, p. 690). Additionally, using this special code of language demonstrates member’s dedication to the subculture and fortifies group solidarity whilst simultaneously distancing individuals further from normal society (Maurer, 1981). Adopting the incel argot also takes on a performative aspect as it functions as part of the ‘impression management’ of incel identity which affirms their status and right to be part of the group (Goffman, 1963/2007, p. 130). Ultimately, this lexicon works to solidify ideology and advance indoctrination which further propagate a myopic worldview (Baele et al., 2019).

Chapter Four: Ideology and Extremism

This core and final theme is concerned with Ideology and Extremism and is split into four distinct sub-themes; (a) the Incel ideology (b) Biological determinism (c) The sexual marketplace and (d) Incel attacks. Ideologies offer a 'narrow and obsessive lens through which the world is presented and understood', a prism where views become warped and distorted (Regehr, 2020, p. 3). This neo-noir, myopic view sees the world as black and white and draped in shadow, characterised by extremes of right and wrong and good and evil. The sophistication and incremental nature of ideologies is what makes them so insidious and dangerous. By seeping into the consciousnesses of young men, the incel ideology has fuelled a social movement of radicalised men who view feminism and women as the enemy. This chapter will unpack the indoctrination tactics of the incel ideology which facilitates key data for governments working to dilute and hinder incel radicalism.

4.1 Incel Ideology

Ideology is the central organising force of the incel subculture and is used to indoctrinate and radicalise young men into extremism via 'group-based sociocognitive, representations of practices in the service of power' (Lazar, 1991, p. 186; Regehr, 2020). The incel ideology has a cathartic and therapeutic function where internalised pain and anger is projected out towards a common enemy (women) and seductively offers enlightenment to see the world for what it really is (pill philosophy) (Regehr, 2020; Meiering et al., 2020). As a result, the incel ideology exonerates individuals from personal responsibility and this is fortified by the dogma which dictates women and society are to blame for all personal failures, thereby freeing incels of their self-loathing torment (Regehr, 2020; Simi & Futrell, 2010). Moreover, the 'in group' characteristics of the ideology further appeal to disillusioned individuals, offering identity, recognition, attention and a 'fraternal' experience of belonging in a society where they have been ostracised and rejected (Baele et al., 2019, p. 20). Concerningly, membership in online communities can often represent a slippery slope towards total indoctrination, a 'narrowing staircase' where disliking feminism can operate as a 'gateway drug' to gendered extremism (Díaz & Valji, 2019, p. 43; Moghaddam, 2005, p. 161). Evidently, the incel ideology functions as the 'nexus between misogyny and violent

extremism' and is fuelled by the echo-chambers and cross-fertilisation of the manosphere (Díaz & Valji, 2019, p. 40).

Indoctrination processes work to create homogenisation and belonging within the group and exclusion and hostility to those outside of it (Meiering et al., 2020). These sophisticated techniques keep members trapped in the group where it takes 'a lot of reprogramming to actively step away' (Regehr, 2020, p. 12). Furthermore, constant exposure to 'rich toxic culture' acts as a kind of propaganda loop which reinforces and exacerbates beliefs which are already verging on the extreme by capitalising on the efficiency of the internet to crystallise ideologies and encourage social isolation (Cottee, 2021; Regehr, 2020, p. 16). Interestingly, for a group whose ideologies are centred upon misogyny and sexlessness incels are concurrently obsessed by women and their bodies. Clearly, the incelosphere operates as a 'conveyer belt' to radicalism where individuals are united by their shared resentment and anger which facilitates a crusade against women and this becomes amplified and exacerbated by online platforms (Cottee, 2021, p. 103).

4.2 Biological Determinism

A fundamental organising principle which underpins ideologies is the framing of outsiders as homogenised 'others' which facilitates a dichotomy of 'us' and 'them' as evidenced by the incel acronym AWALT (all women are like that) (Díaz & Valji, 2019, p. 44). This extreme mindset operates as an indoctrination tool, creating a lens with no grey zone where multiple grievances of women are synthesised into an overarching critique of *all* women who are then demonised as the common enemy (Baele et al., 2019, p. 3; Cottee, 2021). Dividing the world into 'the saved and the damned', narratives which are simplistic, convenient and reduce life to one simple storyline are particularly attractive and powerful and are techniques shared by cult leaders and extremists worldwide (Cottee, 2021, p. 104). For incels, the Devil manifests as 'bad genes and bad women' and this dichotomous categorisation is then naturalised and presented as biological and not cultural which serves to fortify the ideology (Cottee, 2021, p. 101). This is evidenced by incel preoccupation with biological determinism which regards women as inherently evil and biologically inferior who owe men sex - their 'biological destiny' and regard powerful women as unnatural (O'Malley et al., 2020; Regehr, 2020, p. 8).

Moreover, incels represent a microcosm of archaic gender role narratives based in ‘biology’ which stipulate women must be submissive, sex is a man’s ‘right’ and violent sanctions are appropriate for women who do not conform (Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021). Clearly, in their efforts to preserve dominance and power incels often adopt extremist views of biological determinism which legitimise rape, sexual slavery and endorse a redistribution of women (where all men are allocated a sexual partner/wife) (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). Concerningly, individuals who possess these views have been found to be more inclined to commit rape, gendered violence, and be substance abusers (Casey et al., 2017; Munsch & Willer, 2012). Evidently, these pseudo-scientific theories are harmful to women who are viewed as regressive and dehumanised, ‘reduced to their bodies and their ability to either confer or deny pleasure to men’ (Williams, 2020, p. 99). Additionally, the naturalisation rhetoric legitimises incel claims of victimhood which then validates revenge as retaliation to this threat (Williams, 2020). These techniques of naturalised differences and othering of the enemy are evocative of Nazi and Islamic fundamentalist extremist ideologies (please note a comparison with incels would be enlightening yet is beyond the scope of this research). These socio-psychological techniques are clearly effective at luring individuals into an extremist vortex, spreading misogyny and damaging the male psyche and are aided by the acceleration and connectivity of our increasingly technological world (Baele et al., 2019; Regehr, 2020).

4.3 Sexual marketplace

Pseudo-scientific claims are further exhibited in the incel belief of the rigged ‘mating market’ where women are ‘hardwired to pair with alpha males’ (Ging 2017, p. 12). This phenomenon is called *hypergamy* and works to perpetuate incel victimhood (O’Malley et al., 2020). Female hypergamy is a kind of ‘turbocharged genetic determinism’ defined by the natural inclination for women to marry up biologically and reproduce based on the best genes for their children (Baele et al., 2019, p. 9). Consequently, female *hyperglotes* rob incels of ever having a chance with women as they are seen as biologically inferior and outcast from the sexual marketplace based on their SMV (sexual market value) (O’Malley et al., 2020, p. 11; Taylor, 1994). Concerningly, this state of ‘femoid hypergamy’ generates support for violence against the biologically gifted men and women who are monopolising sex (Baele et al., 2019, p. 12). As a result, incels perceive the world as dominated by women and attractive alpha

men who exclude incels from having their 'fair game' in the sexual marketplace (Brzuszkiewicz, 2020). Based on appearance and wealth, incels believe the sexual hierarchy is dominated by Chads (hegemonic, alpha, attractive men) and Staceys (attractive, unintelligent women who will only sleep with Chads). Subsequently, average looking *betas* and *normies* follow with incels located at the bottom (see Appendix B) (Baele et al., 2019; Strozier et al, 2010). Furthermore, incels believe there is an 80/20 sexual selection rule where 80% of women will only date 20% of the male dating pool, the most attractive/wealthiest 'AF/BB' (Alpha fucks/Beta bucks) (Cottee, 2021; Ging, 2019). Clearly subscribing to this immutable hierarchy precipitates a self-fulfilling prophecy which keeps incels stuck, celibate and ostracised as women are seen to be the sexual gatekeepers who use men for their own personal gain (Maxwell et al., 2020). Ultimately, incels believe their status as involuntarily celibate is a direct result of women's refusal to sleep with them which facilitates a false narrative where women are to blame for the pain and loneliness of incels (Maxwell et al., 2020).

4.4 Violent Acts

One of the reasons incels have been gaining attention in recent years is their involvement in a number of targeted terrorist incidents perpetrated by self-described incels. Although, most incels do not commit violence or are mass-murderers, 'incel traits and attitudes serve as a reference point for our understanding of mass violence as a gender-based phenomenon' (Cottee, 2021; Scaptura & Boyle, 2020, p. 289). Over the past decade, approximately six *mass* shootings have been perpetrated by incel identifiers with the number of fatalities and injuries standing at approximately 130 since 2014 (Hines, 2019; Tomkinson et al., 2020). However, it is safe to assume that this figure is much higher if one incorporates mass killings by individuals who do not overtly identify as incels but have been propelled by the same conditions of isolation, loneliness, sexual rejection, bullying and mental illness (Tomkinson et al., 2020). The Islamic extremist threat killed between 74 and 91 people in the USA between 2014-2018 and has gained considerable attention and is now regarded as a serious security threat by government officials (Tomkinson et al., 2020). Yet, incel related violence has yielded limited political and governmental reaction. This may be due to the fact that incel violence is a gendered issue rooted in misogyny; 94.4% of mass killings are committed by men with women disproportionately victimised (Lopez, 2017; Ramsey, 2015).

Problematically, this kind of violence is often not taken seriously by governments as gendered violence is so prolific it is often normalised as part of women's everyday reality (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). Moreover, the limited government action sparked from incel attacks highlight that governments do not possess the correct infrastructures to dealing with a gendered threat. Furthermore, the demographic of incels (18-35 year old men) mirrors that of lone shooter attack offenders (Bosman et al., 2019; Fox & DeLateur, 2014). More worrisome, the USA (where the majority of incels reside) holds the highest mass shooting rate worldwide which is further exacerbated by the ease of access to guns (Sakuma, 2019). In addition, mass killings as justification for romantic and sexual rejection have significantly risen in the West and it is important to shine a light on this correlation, particularly as the perpetrators often possess a history of gender-based violence (Dvorak, 2018; Bosman et al., 2019). Evidently, incel violence exacerbates an already globally endemic issue of gendered violence, incels are not outliers but represent a 'continuum of everyday violence' - adding fuel to the fire (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019, p. 5018). Ultimately, a reframing of misogynistic violence by governments as a security and terror threat is imperative to ensure the *gravitas* of this phenomenon is recognised and impeded.

Since Elliot Rodger's (2014) pinnacle Isla Vista attack, the number of incel related attacks have increased; Christopher Harper-Mercer (Umpqua Community College shooting, 2015), William Atchison (Aztec High School shooting, 2017), Scott Beierle (Tallahassee yoga studio shooting, 2018), Alex Minassian (Toronto van attack, 2018), Nikolas Cruz (Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, 2018) and Jake Davison (Plymouth shooting, 2021) represent the most notable cases. There have also been more minor ones including the murder of Bianca Devins (Brandon Andrew Clark, 2018) and Alex Stavropoulos' mother and baby attack (2020). Clearly, these events operate to publicise the societal grievances of incels in the hope of changing the status quo and furthering their ideological cause (Cottee, 2021). The extremist messaging and overt violence of these attacks are highlighted by the rhetoric espoused prior and after them. In Minassian's last Facebook post he called for an 'incel rebellion', whilst Rodgers attack was coined 'the day of retribution' (Kron, 2014, p. 4; O'Donnell, 2021, p. 67). After these attacks the perpetrators are glorified and heralded as 'heroes' and 'saints' in the incel community - Saint Elliot and Saint Alek - are key examples of *Incelebrities* and their attacks presented as blueprints for other extremist members (Hoffman et al., 2020; Regehr, 2020, p. 12). This symbolic deification is particularly concerning as it justifies and praises perpetrators which creates a perpetual loop where future

violence is incited (Hines, 2019; Regehr, 2020). Evidently, incels are not an isolated phenomenon and their attacks are not one-off incidences but part of a larger social movement towards a new gender world order (Brzuszkiewicz, 2020; Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021).

These events highlight how hostile actions towards women can lead to real-world violence and illuminate how the leap from online to offline violence is presented as a natural development for incels (Joseph & Abedi, 2019; Regehr, 2020). Irrefutably, incel culture enables and glorifies extremist acts and reframes them as ‘retributionally justified’ in the hopes of triggering a chain of events where society becomes awakened to the dangers of feminism and returns to traditionalist patriarchy (Baele et al., 2019; Witt, 2020, p. 675). Clearly, incel violence is no longer confined to the online sphere but has seeped into the ‘real world’ which is particularly worrisome (Citron & Franks, 2014). Concerningly, many incels are ticking timebombs who believe ‘exiting in a blaze of hot lead beats living in loveless obscurity’ (North, 2009, para. 12). Thankfully, conversations around incels are growing and slowly penetrating the public sphere. The public backlash following the film *The Joker* (Phillips, 2019) (which drew on and glamorised incel themes) is an example of this and incels have now been recognised as a domestic terror threat by the Texas Department of Public Safety (2020). Moreover, ‘male supremacists’ have now been classified as a hate group by the SPLC (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018). Nonetheless, greater government action is imperative to prevent future extremism.

Discussion/Conclusion

This research aimed to investigate the growing incel subculture and evaluate the severity of its threat to women and wider society, in order to raise it further onto the socio-political agenda and contribute to its eventual immobilisation. This was achieved by conducting a systematic literature review on the current literature on incels. In addition, the research hypothesis which stipulated that the incel subculture encourages VAW, thereby offering a platform for greater antifeminist radicalisation and extremism was confirmed throughout. Firstly, a summary of the key findings with interpretations and implications will be covered. Thereafter, the research limitations will be assessed by considering methodological restraints and addressing what could not be drawn out from the research. This chapter will then evaluate how the research has enriched knowledge in the field and provided a platform for future research. Finally, recommendations for future study will be addressed as well as policy suggestions and practical solutions to aid in the prevention and impediment of incel extremism.

Key Findings and Interpretations

Climate and Broader Context

This research demonstrated that the genesis and proliferation of incels has been heavily influenced by the decline of industry, women's increasing liberations and neoliberal individualism. These conditions have been exacerbated by the 2008 financial recession and technological innovations. With eroding male privilege, employment instability, secularisation and increasing sexual and romantic rejection, displaced men are increasingly turning to exaggerated forms of masculinity to reassert their dominance. This research illuminates incels as a group of sexually marginalised men who have failed in their performance of masculinity and therefore see society as having failed them. These failures are woven into their identity and internalised as hate and anger which is then amplified, spread and legitimatised by the online echo-chambers of the manosphere and incelsphere (Regehr, 2020). Evidently, incels represent a hybrid manifestation of toxic masculinity situated in the digital sphere and characterised by pain and paradox. Incels see women as their salvation out of a life of incelhood yet simultaneously regard them as evil and the source

of their suffering. Subsequently, incels plot revenge against those who have displaced their cisgender white male privilege - women, alpha men and society as a whole. Undeniably, social media and cyberspace offer a new platform for women's oppression and play a central role in heightening and promulgating online misogynistic rhetoric and merging antifeminist movements. Clearly incels are a prime example of how technology fuels radicalisation and extremism. Therefore, this research highlights why technological conglomerates must take more responsibility and provide greater regulation and censorship sanctions. This research has also demonstrated that the hegemonic male ideal must be dismantled and reframed as this unachievable ideal causes great suffering and steers men in the direction of toxic masculine behaviour. Irrefutably, incels are a manifestation of the twenty-first century socio-political climate and the web 2.0 (the current internet status where social networking presides) information age and represent a growing threat to the safety of women and wider society. Ultimately, configurations of this subculture have been around for the last 20 years but are now coming into their own and mobilising. Trumpian politics and the backdrop of neoliberalism, together with the rise of social media and the information age, have created a perfect storm for incel radicalisation.

Views on women

This research highlighted that incels feel threatened by women who they believe are advancing at their detriment and this narrative works to reinforce the belief that men are the oppressed gender. The research revealed incels represent a microcosm of society; a concentration of the rampant misogyny which exists globally and a reflection of a larger societal crisis regarding contemporary masculinities and VAW. Clearly, incels are exacerbating an already grave epidemic of gendered violence which exists online and offline. Nevertheless, focusing on what makes incels extreme risks negating the everyday, commonplace facets of the subculture such as the policing, dehumanising and silencing of women. Essentially, by looking at incels one is merely scratching the surface of a global epidemic of VAW where incels are part of the tip of the iceberg. Nevertheless, as this research has highlighted incels play a role in perpetuating ingrained narratives of female persecution, dehumanisation and scapegoating which must be hindered. Thus, this research is significant as it offers key knowledge to help towards hindering micro and macro manifestations of misogyny.

Subculture

Incels are made up of a diverse group of geographically fractured individuals bonded by a common thread of misogyny, and celibacy. As a collective, incels and other manosphere inhabitants represent a social movement seeking reparations for the dislocation of their white male cisgender privilege and blame women and society as a whole for their grievances. Moreover, this research has demonstrated how incels negotiate and manage their identities via performing hyper displays of masculinity and adopt a unique set of norms, beliefs and language which solidify belonging. Central to the incel ideology is a victim complex and the beliefs that women are inherently evil and the sexual marketplace is rigged, thus violence is legitimised to reassert men's 'natural' dominance. This is evidenced in the celebration and glorification of violent incel perpetrators as saints and heroes which further legitimises future extremism. Furthermore, although most incels are not violent it is clear that incel membership can function as a gateway/catalyst for future criminality and radicalism. Additionally, this research has highlighted why the incel subculture is so appealing to young men because it offers support, belonging, faith and community in a society where these key elements of humanity are being eroded.

Implications and Contributions to knowledge

To the researcher's knowledge, this research is the first systematic literature review on the topic of incels in the field. Thus, this research is unique and significant as it fills a gap and enriches an under researched field. Although limited scholarly output on incels exists, by synthesizing the current literature this research was able to provide a holistic understanding of incels and offer insights into a secretive and mysterious digital community. Moreover, this research highlights why incels must be reframed as an emerging terror threat and locates the incel phenomenon within a wider global issue of gendered violence. Importantly, this research also exposes that governments do not currently possess effective frameworks for dealing with online radicalism and incel extremism and highlights the parallels between incels and other extremist groups. This is significant as counterterrorist strategies effective for other terrorist groups could be transferable to the incel threat. Additionally, this research has highlighted why sweeping generalisations of incels as mentally ill, romantically scorned lone wolves (as evidenced in the media) are not helpful and prevent governments from

regarding incels as a serious threat. Furthermore, this research illuminates the correlation between technology and radicalism, a relationship which requires greater attention and academic research. Essentially, this research provides a deeper understanding of digital communities and how online rhetoric can seep into the everyday vernacular and psyche of impressionable young men and wider society.

Fundamentally, this research, in conjunction with the recent wave of academic interest on incels, will function as a vehicle for engineering social change by exposing the salience and urgency of this phenomenon. This project also has implications for future research on radicalisation and online extremism and adds a new dimension to the criminological understanding of incels and online subcultures. This research further illuminates why action is required to protect women and wider society from men harbouring extremist views and aids in the strengthening of (anti)feminist theory. Moreover, this research has illustrated why so many young men are feeling alienated, emasculated and demoralised and highlights what this reflects about our current Western society. In addition, this research holds significance for non-academic parties (society, public policy and mental health practitioners) as it emphasises the need for greater mental health, community and career support for young people and reveals the dangers of unregulated cyberspace. The findings also offer practical implications for preventing future terrorism, radicalisation, trolling, discrimination, cybercrime and VAW online and offline. Clearly, the potential for more incel related real-world violence is a real and mounting risk and one which must not be dismissed. In light of the literature discussed, this project is instrumental in adding to the existing voices, gaining further insight and offering an ideal foundation for future research in the field. Ultimately, by moving the spotlight onto this corrosive group and offering suggestions to remedy and combat this growing tsunami of hate, future acts of extremism can be curtailed.

Limitations

As this research was conducted using a literature review no ethical issues were involved as information assessed was already in the public domain. Nevertheless, full immersion in disturbing misogynistic content for a prolonged period of time proved challenging particularly as a female researcher. Due to the researcher's personal stance, it often proved difficult to separate personal views and analyse the literature reflexively. Therefore, future research could benefit from the inclusion of a male researcher in order to reduce bias and

offer a more balanced perspective. Nonetheless, the researcher's primary aim to gain an overview of the incel phenomenon regardless of bias was successfully achieved. In addition, the researcher found it difficult to decipher whether incel performance online was more extreme and heightened than in reality or whether the incelsphere was simply a space for individuals to be their true selves facilitated by anonymity. Thus, primary research interviewing incels or conducting focus groups could better evaluate the *true* extent of the incel threat. Essentially, this research highlights why the virtual world is difficult to penetrate as it is characterised by sensationalism, performance and anonymity. Furthermore, an examination of the online tools and psychological techniques which technology companies use to seduce and veer individuals down an extremist path would be interesting yet is beyond the scope of the study. To add, when reporting on incels, commentators are faced with the dilemma of needing to bring this group onto the public radar to incite action to impede its development yet are simultaneously faced with the danger of publicising and subsequently giving credit to violent incel perpetrators which can lead to glorification in the incel community and endorse future attacks. Nevertheless, the researcher felt shining the spotlight on incels outweighed these risks. Ultimately, the feasibility of this research has been dictated by the time and resources available which can be seen as a limitation as this research was conducted in the timeframe of a masters' course within a global Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, greater time and flexibility would allow for more in-depth research in the field.

Recommendations for future research

In terms of further research, comparative studies with other extremist groups would be helpful to see if government strategies and solutions for dealing with other groups could be transferable to incels. In addition, counterterrorism research into incels is integral to help governments adapt to this new form of terrorism. Moreover, a future avenue of enquiry could assess regulation and censorship recommendations for online technology companies and evaluate the role they play in inciting and endorsing online extremism. Further research is also required to establish preventative measures such as greater community and mental health funding to provide a safety net for individuals vulnerable to racialisation. Additionally, a future direction could explore enhancing greater gender education in schools and helping to build platonic relationships between girls and boys at a young age so they grow up feeling

more equal and assimilated. Due to their covert nature, limited primary research on incels exists, therefore greater empirical research would be advantageous to enrich the field and provide a more authentic documentation of incel voices and a deeper understanding of their psyche. Consequently, this could aid in gaining a more empathic understanding of incels which would help provide greater support to help individuals out of incelism. Evidently, this research functions as an ideal springboard for future research on incels which is imperative to propel this hate group onto the forefront of the social and political agenda to limit further mobilisation.

Conclusion

The age of the incel is very much upon us and it is how society acts *now* that will determine the future of this insidious group. Evidently, incel violence is no longer solely contextualised to the online realm but is increasingly seeping into the real world (Baele et al., 2019). Although only a small number of incels have committed extremist attacks, incels routinely espouse virtual, symbolic and real-world violent misogyny and must be regarded as a growing societal threat at risk of future extremism (Ging, 2019; Gotell & Dutton, 2016; Hoffman et al, 2020). Moreover, masculinity is clearly in crisis and has reached a toxic junction where disillusioned young men are being led astray and seduced online by extremist groups. Fundamentally, incels expose the parts of society which are failing and require reconfiguring and toxic/hyper configurations of masculinity will continue to develop until the hegemonic male ideal is dismantled and greater support is provided for young men. In addition, incels represent an extreme microcosm of wider societal issues of VAW and misogyny which require urgent attention and if ignored run the risk of becoming a normalised part of women's everyday experience. Evidently, the outlook on gender equality remains bleak, yet including incels as part of the wider conversation is a significant step forward. Furthermore, it is imperative technological companies take more accountability and implement greater regulation and censorship procedures. Ultimately, time is of the essence, as this insidious disease is infecting the minds of disillusioned young men whose shared ideologies offer them comfort and support in a society where they are being forgotten. Thus, it is imperative that action is mobilised now to halt this group and create greater societal

infrastructures to prevent young men from becoming radicalised and mobilise sanctions to enhance the safety of women online and offline.

Appendices

Appendix A: Incel Incident Table

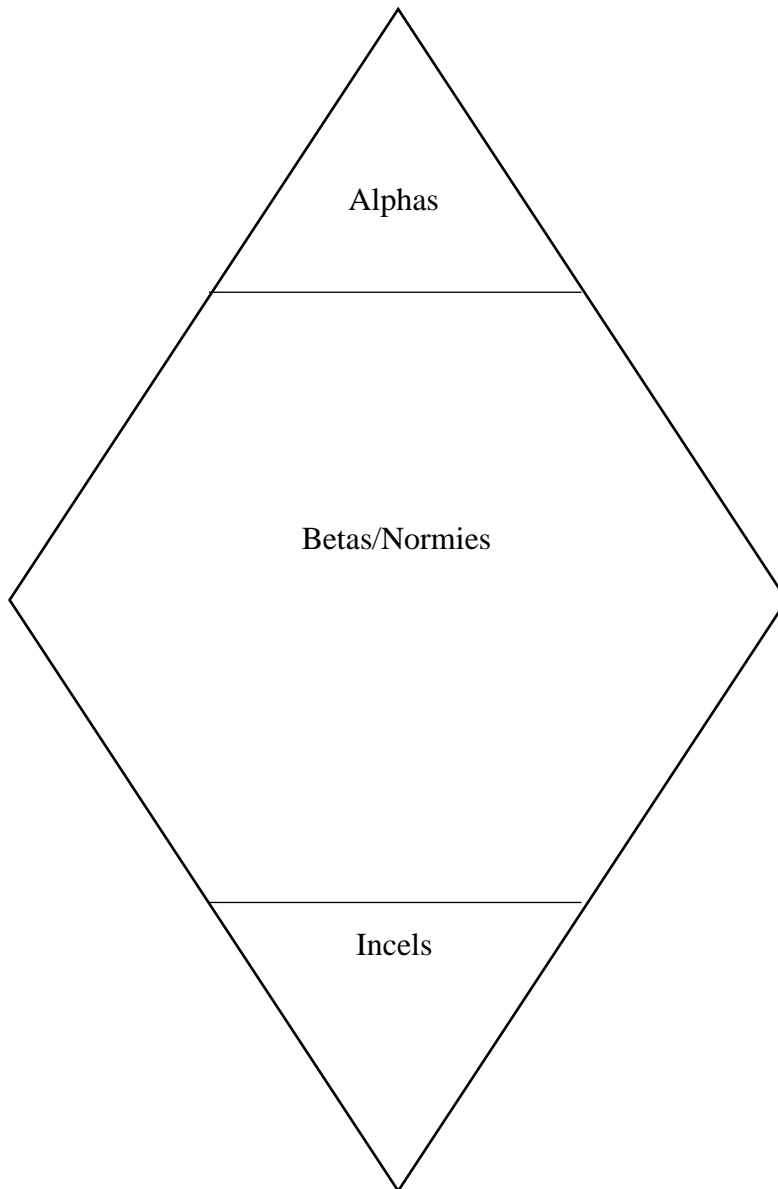
Appendix B: Incel Hierarchy Model

Appendix A: Extremist Incel Attacks

Year	Perpetrator	Death	Injured
2009	George Sodini ¹	3	9
2014	Elliot Rodger ²	7	13
2015	Christopher Harper-Mercer ³	10	7
2017	William Atchison ⁴	2	0
2018	Nikolas Cruz ⁵	17	17
2018	Alek Minassian ⁶	10	16
2018	Scott Beierle ⁷	3	5
2018	Brandon Andrew Clarke ⁸	1	0
2019	Alexander Stavropoulos ⁹	0	2
2020	Unidentified (minor) ¹⁰	1	2
2021	Jake Davison ¹¹	6	0
		Total: 60	Total: 71

¹ Rodriguez (2010)² Witt (2020)³ DeFoster & Swalve (2018)⁴ Levenson & Diaz-Zuniga (2017)⁵ Hoffman et al. (2020)⁶ Baele et al. (2019)⁷ Salecl (2020)⁸ Hassan et al. (2019)⁹ White (2020)¹⁰ Cousins (2020)¹¹ Weaver & Morris (2021)

Appendix B: Incel Hierarchy Model



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