

## **Incel violence as a reclamation of masculinity and defence of patriarchy on three distinct levels**

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### **Abstract**

This article analyses discussions of three levels of violence (intrapersonal, interpersonal online, mass) observed in a three-month analysis of two online forums for Incels (short for Involuntary Celibates). It will be argued that, on the surface, Incel-related violence is a reaction to a broad array of anxieties and uncertainties experienced within contemporary society. However, deeper analysis reveals that such violence is related to attempts to (re)claim Incels' threatened masculinity and to defend male dominance. The article will show how Incels perceive women and feminists as an abject Other (Kristeva, 1982) through the discursive construction of the monstrous-feminine (Creed, 1993), thereby justifying violence against them. The article concludes by suggesting 'extraordinary' forms of Incel-related violence are not extraordinary at all when considered within the historical construction of the monstrous-feminine and wider, normalised patterns of violence against women within a patriarchal society.

**Keywords** Incels; Anti-feminism; Misogyny; Violence; Patriarchy; Extremism

### **Introduction**

Male violence against women is not new. Historically, violence against women is a manifestation of unequal power relations between men and women within a patriarchal society. In the #MeToo era,<sup>1</sup> conversations about misogynistic attitudes, harassment and violence against women have been increasingly at the forefront of public debate. Despite such awareness, male violence against women continues to be a particularly nefarious problem. Research has shown that such violence takes on a variety of forms, from micro-aggressions

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<sup>1</sup> The #MeToo movement is an international social justice and empowerment movement that began online in 2006 and is based upon breaking the silence of sexual harassment survivors. It is adopted online as a tactic to empower women through empathy and strength in numbers by visibly demonstrating the numbers of women who have survived sexual assault and harassment.

(Levchack, 2018; Sue, 2010) all the way to atrocities committed in the form of mass shootings specifically targeted against women (McCulloch et al., 2019). On the scale of mass violence, the connections between masculinity, the far right and male supremacist ideologies are becoming increasingly apparent (Ging, 2017; Johnston & True, 2019; Kimmel, 2015; Zimmerman et al., 2019). From 2018, the US Southern Poverty Law Centre and the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START, 2018) began to include male supremacy amongst the ideologies they track. The Anti-Defamation League (2018) also now examines misogynist ideology<sup>2</sup> after several recent instances of ‘extraordinary’ so-called lone-wolf violence were shown to be connected to women-hating ideologies (Hartleb, 2020).

These kinds of events, put in the context of normalised patterns of violence against women, do not appear to be so extraordinary after all. As noted, the use of violence against women is an historical and cross-cultural problem which remains largely invisible and largely unaddressed (United Nations, 1993; World Health Organization, 2010). Victims of such violence are frequently silenced through institutional practices and societal norms (Jordan, 2012). Yet so-called extraordinary events capture the public’s imagination—particularly when it is anti-feminist mass violence.<sup>3</sup> In recent years, several instances of such violence have brought public attention to the anti-feminist subculture of Incels (Involuntary Celibates). This online subculture defines themselves as being unable to find a romantic or sexual partner despite desiring one.

The first online Incel community—Alana’s Involuntary Celibacy Project—was created by a Canadian university student and used by people of all genders to share their experiences of sexual inactivity. Throughout the 2000s, Incel communities across several internet forums became increasingly

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<sup>2</sup> I follow Manne’s (2018) understanding that rather than viewing misogyny as the hatred or hostility that some men feel toward all or most women, it is primarily about controlling, policing, punishing and exiling the ‘bad’ women who challenge male dominance.

<sup>3</sup> I refer to ideology that is rooted in opposition to women’s equality and the feminist movement. The contemporary online anti-feminist men’s movement mobilises men around an amorphous set of discourses and ideological positions that deny feminist theories of patriarchy and believe that disadvantages suffered by women in society are incorrect or exaggerated (Ging, 2016).

more extremist as members began to overlap with other online communities such as 4Chan. Incel communities began to adopt increasingly anti-feminist and women-hating ideas as the edgy and extremist worldviews from other corners of the internet migrated (Ging, 2017, 2019). Mirroring other manifestations of men's rights activism (Messner, 2016), Incel forums became known as a place where men blamed women and feminism for their involuntary celibacy, sometimes encouraging rape and other forms of violence against women (Ging, 2017; Zimmerman et al., 2019). It is apparent the Incel forums have developed an online rape culture through the regular and sustained discussion of rape-supportive beliefs ideas and values from other, anti-feminist 'manosphere' subcultures (Ging, 2016; Gotell & Dutton, 2016).<sup>4</sup>

Mainstream interest in the Incel phenomenon began on 23 May 2014 when the English-born American college student Elliot Rodger released an autobiographical manifesto entitled *My twisted world: The story of Elliot Rodger* and then began a killing spree aiming to punish women for his involuntary celibacy. The rampage ended in the death of six people, the injury of 14 others and Rodger's suicide. Coverage of the event and his online activity painted Rodger as a young man fuelled by loneliness, hatred, insecurity, and intense misogyny (Vito et al., 2018). Following Rodger's example, Alek Minassian drove a rented van through a busy street in the Toronto CBD in 2018, killing ten and wounding 16.<sup>5</sup> It was widely reported that shortly before the attack the following post appeared on his personal Facebook account: "The Incel Rebellion has already begun! ... All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!" (Wendling, 2018, para. 2). Minassian's voice was not alone—other Incels have also taken up the mantle of inciting a 'beta-uprising',<sup>6</sup> mirroring Minassian's calls inciting terroristic action against the perceived existential threat of feminism.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Manosphere' refers to the loosely connected online hub for men's issues. It refers to a myriad of interconnected groups, including the alt-right, men's right's activists (MRAs), pickup artists, MGTOW (Men Going their Own Way), Incels and other male-centric communities (Ging, 2017; Marwick & Caplan, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> On 3 March 2021, Minassian was found guilty on ten counts of first-degree murder and 16 counts of attempted murder. At the time of writing, Minassian is awaiting sentencing.

<sup>6</sup> As discussed later, Incels refer to themselves as 'beta males' because they fail to conform to hegemonic masculine ('alpha male') norms.

In 2020, Tobias Rathjen committed two mass shootings in Hanau, Germany (Caniglia et al., 2020). In the days following, a 17-year-old male motivated by Incel ideology stabbed a female spa worker to death in an attack that also severely injured her female co-worker at a massage parlour in Toronto, Canada (Boisvert, 2020). Three months later, a self-professed Incel opened fire in Glendale, Arizona, injuring three people. A prosecutor later cited that “he was taking out his anger at society, the feeling that he has been bullied, the feeling that women didn’t want him” (Bowling & Vandell, 2020, para. 9).

This article argues that Incel-related violence is related to attempts by male Incels to reclaim threatened masculinity. It contends that this attempted reclamation should not be dismissed as a nefarious quirk of the internet age. Rather, it is a continuation of women-hating ideologies that are historically rooted. To illustrate this, the article draws upon data from a three-month study analysing violent online responses by Incels to social problems. It identifies that Incel responses to different problems lead to calls for violence that exist on three levels: intrapersonal violence, interpersonal online violence (cyberbullying) and chaotic mass violence. However, each problem, different in form and substance, blames a monstrous-feminine Other (Creed, 1993) for Incels’ experiences of marginalisation. This article examines these problems while stressing that such ‘extraordinary’ events are not extraordinary at all when considered in the wider context of violence against women.

## **Method**

This article draws on original data collected for my master’s research, which investigated online misogyny related to Incels (Lindsay, 2020). Over a three-month period between May and August 2019, I collected daily content samples of roughly equal size (two forum posts and their resulting discussion) from two public-facing Incel-related online platforms: [www.incels.co](http://www.incels.co) and [www.reddit.com/r/Braincels](http://www.reddit.com/r/Braincels). I chose the top-commented or pinned thread on each forum, deviating only if the thread was the same as the previous day’s; in this case the next thread was selected. At the end of the data collection

period, I had collected a corpus of 250 threads containing a total of 10,773 comments.

Such a significant volume of data allowed for the identification of ideological and rhetorical tropes. To analyse the data, I read the body and comments of each thread and identified key themes, narratives and ideas. For longer threads, I wrote more detailed summaries and highlighted core passages from the text. Whilst this process was lengthy—and at times frustrating—it provided the opportunity to become intimately familiar with the dataset and Incel worldview. I then utilised thematic analysis through constructivist grounded theory to analyse the data (Charmaz, 2014). This involved coding data into systematically developed and refined codes, which constituted the study's key themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Due to the large dataset and the manual coding technique, themes were identified by calculating rough estimates of the frequency by which a code was mentioned. For example, the code 'feminism/feminist' was routinely found in comment threads, making it a salient theme. This theme was situated within a broader discursive environment of anti-feminism and women-hatred and can be observed within other recent studies of the Incel subculture (Bael et al., 2019; Chang, 2020; Ging, 2017; Witt, 2020). Although it cannot be concluded that *all* Incels are anti-feminist or women-hating, throughout the data collection period it was clear that Incels as a subculture engage in regular and sustained anti-feminist and anti-women discourse.

It is important to acknowledge that it is often unclear in Incel discussion, as in the broader online environment, whether discourse should be read as serious or as a joke. Similar to alt- and far-right online communities, Incels invest a significant amount of energy into 'trolling'; that is, the creation and proliferation of content meant to provoke a response from targeted audiences or for fun (Greene, 2019; Nagle, 2017). The production of comments steeped in ironic 'humour' and trolling is an intentional strategy by which those deploying it can reject accusations of misogyny or racism while actively spreading their ideologies. Serious or not, these discourses openly endorse harassment, violence and discrimination. Such discourse helps to fuel, radicalise and indoctrinate new users into the Incel worldview.

Throughout this article, Incel comments may seem humorous or outlandish, but I argue that such discourse can have very real effects.

Findings are presented across three sections. The first examines Incel narratives that illustrate the hegemonic masculine ideals that Incels desire to live up to. The second presents their explanations as to why they fail in this task and the third shows how this provides space for three forms of violence. In each section, the broader theoretical literature is used to interpret findings. Finally, a discussion section highlights that Incels anxieties and fears are driven by a construction of the monstrous-feminine Other.

### **‘Chad Thundercock’ and hegemonic masculinity**

At their core, the violent narratives and actions discussed within Incel forums are rooted in attempts to liberate Incels from a subordinated position within a hierarchy of competing masculinities. Although contested by Messerschmidt (2019), it is useful here to draw upon Connell’s (1987) concept of hegemonic masculinity, which suggests that the hegemonic masculine subject is embodied by an idealised masculinity whose identity and social location are composed of the attributes that accrue privilege within a particular society (whiteness, able-bodied, socially, sexually and economically successful). As Connell (1987, p.183) highlights, “Hegemonic masculinity is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women.” Hegemonic masculinity forms a dominant and unequal power relation to femininity and non-hegemonic masculinities in patriarchal societies.

In the Incel worldview, hegemonic masculinity is represented by the caricature of ‘Chad Thundercock’ (Nagle, 2016). ‘Chad’ is the label ascribed to the successful performance of the attributes persistently associated with the idealised form of masculinity. In the Incel world, Chad embodies two key performances of hegemonic masculinity: (hetero)sexual ability and prowess and the capacity to enact violence upon others, in part through his physical stature as an Incel forum user suggests:

Love is for Chad only. Chad gets hand-fed grapes by his harem, while a slave fans him with a giant fan. Chad cannot cry (not that

he ever needs to, as his life is literally perfect). Chad cannot have feelings. He must be physically gifted, strong, stoic and never show weakness. He is the ultimate alpha-male.

Of course, within any hegemonic masculine hierarchy there lie groupings of compromised masculine subjects, who are judged by attributes or signifiers such as disability, homosexuality and (non-white) race (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Flood, 2008). In an effort to achieve the hegemonic masculine ideal, subjects continually attempt to perform and demonstrate their masculinity in ways that might allow them to access masculine capital and power (Messerschmidt, 2004). Incels' subordinated status of 'beta males' emphasises their inability to find a sexual or romantic partner and signifies their failure to meet the hegemonic standard. However, Incels valorise Chad's (hetero)sexual prowess and the treatment of women as sexual objects, although this valorisation also appears to have its limitations:

Chad's are not capable of feeling love because they are degenerates who have lost the ability to pair bond. These unintelligent man-beasts are out there pumping and dumping hot thots on a regular basis, but what are they actually contributing to society? Women flock to these idiots and reinforce their aggressive and sometimes violent pursuit of pussy.

If Chad embodies the aesthetic, physical and sexual components of hegemonic masculinity that Incels compare and position themselves against, they also conceive of Chad as a barrier to transcending their state of 'Inceldom' because unrealistic constructions of hegemonic masculinity limit their opportunities for meaningful relationships. Incels regularly repeat the maxim 'alpha fuxx, beta buxx', which purports how women sexually desire alpha males but rely on beta providers for emotional and financial support. Herein lies the complexity (and irony) of Incels' ideas of masculinity: they simultaneously revile Chad yet defend the patriarchal structure that exalts a conception of masculinity of which Incels' are unable to conform. Given they feel isolated and alienated by women who have constantly rejected them throughout their lives, Incel discussions regularly centre on anxieties about their appearance and their inability to uphold the attributes of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Flood, 2008; Kimmel, 2015).

Failure to conform to the hegemonic masculine expectations represented by the caricaturised vision of Chad results in Incels describing themselves as 'beta males'.

### **Explaining Incels' failure to live up to hegemonic norms**

This section suggests that Incels use two key narratives to explain their beta male status, both of which are interlinked.

#### *The Black Pill*

To explain their perceived place within the social hierarchy, Incels have developed a corpus of 'scientific' claims to rationalise the effects of the physically constraining standards of hegemonic masculinity and to explain their lack of sexual success. One is rooted in a highly individualistic, pseudo-scientific philosophy known as the 'Black Pill' (Ging, 2019; Witt, 2020).<sup>7</sup> If metaphorically swallowed, the Black Pill makes adherents aware of the supposed unchanging nature of reality: that the world is stacked against low-status men in favour of women and alpha males; that there can be no personal solutions to systemic oppression and the world was, is and will always be against genetically inferior men; and finally, that women are inherently wired to prefer men with particular physical features.

Underpinning the Black Pill is the idea of a 'sexual market economy', which operates to rationalise Incels' inability to obtain a sexual or romantic partner due to their perceived low 'sexual market value' (SMV). As suggested by Baumeister and Vohs (2004), men and women play different, yet distinct, roles in selecting heterosexual sexual partners, with men typically seeking to acquire sex from women by offering them resources in exchange. According to an Incel worldview, women primarily seek only the most attractive or wealthy alpha males, leaving the less attractive beta males with substantially less access to women. As beta males, Incels consider see themselves as so physically repulsive and socially incapable that they are trapped within a

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<sup>7</sup> Incels have co-opted the analogy drawn from *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999), in which the protagonist Neo is given a choice between taking a red or blue pill. The blue pill disconnects Neo from reality into a delusional, agreeable world, while the red pill awakens him to reality and its hard truths. Alt-right groups believe that the red pill allows men to learn the truths about the world and manipulate them to their advantage.



position of involuntary celibacy (Baele et al., 2019; Witt, 2020). They are hyper-aware of their sexlessness and, for them, social failure within a system that privileges the hegemonic masculine ideal. Referring to a picture of a suspected Incel, one forum user lamented:

Men are clearly broken ... So many of them live lives of misery and quiet desperation. I mean, just look at that guy, the glasses, the haircut, the bland background ... probably poor, overworked but underpaid, maybe living with his parents again, no sex, no romance, somehow looking both older and younger than he is at the same time. And longing for some romance, intimacy, sex, sensuality, flirting with the other sex, he goes online.

Acknowledging Incels' supposed social failure, this quote highlights how Incels hold keen anxieties around body image, particularly when such bodies do not conform to the hegemonic standard. Incels have been noted by Hines (2019) to have engaged in intensive body modification to achieve a more hegemonically masculine appearance. Incels in this study also reported suicide ideation and attempts due to being unable to meet masculine standards of bodily appearance (discussed further below).

Yet, despite this and their lack of sexual partners, Incels still tend to have strong sense of *entitlement* towards sex, leading to a further common explanation for their Incel status: there is something wrong with women for not wanting to have sex with them and, relatedly, with feminism, which they believe has influenced women's attitudes in this regard. Incels' conception of women as 'femoids'—a dehumanising term short for 'female human organisms'—highlights their anti-women *and* anti-feminist ideology. The use of 'femoid' or 'foid' implies that women are not human, that they simply resemble the human form (Chang, 2020). These animalistic constructions will be discussed later in this article but the key point is that these discourses are used to dehumanise women and feminists to shame them into compliance of 'acceptable' femininity and to recapture Incels' subordinated sense of masculinity.

### *The breakdown of civil society due to feminism*

In addition to Incels believing that feminism has led women to invade their personal spaces, they also attribute the breakdown or decline of a decaying western liberal society to growing recognition of women's rights. One Incel user in my study argued, "The west is now a nihilistic, hedonistic, materialistic, degenerate civilisation of which hides all these traits by simply slapping on a 'freedom and progress' sticker on the front." In response, another user claimed, "The common link between all these issues is surely feminism, although it is cause and effect at the same time ... Femoid (((independence)))<sup>8</sup> is always a very costly mistake." Further, Incels in my study regularly asserted that "the family system has disintegrated because of feminism", which was coupled with the idea that "the breakdown and collapse of community is directly tied to the collapse of the family." One user suggested that "socially, we've become increasingly atomized ... Two things that have contributed to disintegration of the community is multiculturalism and individualism caused by feminist activism." These comments broadly reflect a view that the gains made by the ongoing project of women's liberation are tied to western social decline, a narrative that mirrors alt- and far-right worldviews (Greig, 2019). The above comments highlight the ideological congruency between manosphere groups and the alt-/far-right, suggesting a common enemy: feminism.

To Incels, feminism is also understood as contributing to the declining economic positions and precarious job market experienced by many young men:

It's already happening. They've excluded us from the job market (automation is coming, they don't need us anymore), the dating market, our freedom of speech is being limited at each day, and women worship is increasing like crazy. It's over, you can see in the statistics, the number of young men killing themselves is increasing and will increase more with the passing years because there's no way of ascension anymore.

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<sup>8</sup> Triple parentheses are used by the alt-Right to highlight those of Jewish ancestry (see Alt-right glossary, 2021). "Femoid (((independence)))" thus simultaneously blames feminism and the 'Jewish Conspiracy' for progressive gains in women's rights and its efforts to demasculinise white men.

Alongside anxieties relating to lack of sex and adequate performances of masculinity, the fears expressed in the above comment are thus seen as a driver of a so-called crisis of masculinity. Waged work, of course, occupies a central and defining place in the construction of masculinity, offering a key route from boyhood into manhood (Connell, 1999). For many working-class youths in advanced industrial economies, a linear transition from school into employment is increasingly difficult; cycling in and out of short-term precarious employment and making little progress into more stable career options is increasingly commonplace (Furlong, 2006; McDowell, 2020). Particularly for those with poor educational achievement, work may be hard to get at all or confined to occupations such as those in the service sector, where feminine qualities of deference and docility are emphasised alongside demands for high levels of interpersonal skills that Incels claim that they do not possess (Kenway & Kraack, 2004; McDowell, 2020; Salzinger, 2016).

These are legitimate fears about the problems of waged work in contemporary society, which can contribute to male suicide and feelings of social and sexual alienation. They are troubling issues, not for only men but for society at large (Kimmel, 2015; Messner, 2018). However, reiterating broader alt- and far-right tropes, Incels blame feminism and multiculturalism for such problems whilst ignoring the many structural disadvantages that women and Indigenous/people of colour experience with finding gainful employment (Solomon et al., 2019; Yearby, 2019). In framing these and other social problems as a breakdown of society caused by feminism/ists, they evade critical analysis rooted in structural examinations of power. Instead, their narratives reflect broader patterns of backlash against feminist progress (Dragiewicz, 2011; Messner, 2016) by regarding the solution as reasserting patriarchy:

The feminist liberation that makes you sad and alone is virtuous, but the patriarchy that gave you meaning and family is oppression. The natural state of womyn is to perpetuate degeneracy and evil at every opportunity, and it is only the civilising influence of patriarchy that makes them human.

As the next section illustrates, this patriarchal solution is thought to justify violence against women (and others).

### **Three forms of violence**

There is considerable research highlighting how media representations legitimise and valorise forms of (approved) violence (such as sports or state-sanctioned warfare) by drawing on narratives of hegemonic masculinity and reinforcing dominant performances and archetypes (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messner, 1998; Pascoe, 2007; Rugg, 2019). A key arena for the construction of hegemonic masculinity is the media and film industries, which feed the global culture an endless stream of violent male icons. For example, action hero or sports star archetypes portray ideal masculinity as associated with violence, muscularity and competitive aggression (Katz, 2011). In regard to Incels, much attention has been paid to the ‘extraordinary’ mass violence that is discussed in popular media accounts of Incels but my findings highlight that other forms of violence are common.

Incels appear to attempt to heal their fractured masculinity through violence at three levels: against themselves; against each other and women in the digital space; and against general society, although I argue each are interlinked. First, on the level of intrapersonal violence (violence against the self), Hines (2019) has documented several stories of Incels committing suicide, suggesting the extremes some Incels will go to escape the pain of not being able to fulfil the hegemonic standard. Incels being depressed and not satisfied with the hand that life has dealt them, and being encouraged by other users and the Black Pill worldview, led to suicide being a common discussion point throughout the two Incel forums I analysed as users attempted to deal with extreme feelings of loneliness and alienation. For example, in a discussion thread articulating that “being good looking gives you a taste for life to conquer the world”, Incels discussed their various ‘copes’, with one suggesting:

Ugly people or incels are crippled by depression which drastically decreases your productivity ... Imagine years and years of living like an incel vs the good-looking person. The incel ends up with zero social connections and no desire or self-confidence to do

anything ... You don't even have a desire or taste for anything other than vidya [slang form of 'video game'] or suicide.

Second, Incel forum users perform what I consider to be interpersonal forms of violence against other online users. One way is to encourage each other to 'rope' (commit suicide) or undertake other acts of self-harm to cope with their sexlessness. Replying to the above Incel, several users encouraged them to "have a little fun bEfoRe you go"; the capitalisation of the letters 'E' and 'R' implies that the original poster should emulate Elliot Rodger's killing spree. Discussing the idea that if Incels' were good-looking they would be more socially and sexually successful, one user commented:

The worst part is that people won't admit that the reason why these people are doing so well in life is cause of their looks. They will claim that it's their hard work that got them there which is bullshit. That's why I insist that suicide is the best option.

Another form of Incel interpersonal online violence is to abuse and threaten both male and female users who are perceived as a threat. Incels hold the belief that women and feminists are encroaching on 'male spaces' where they like to hang out, threatening their ability to *be* masculine and, ultimately, threatening the privilege associated with masculinity. Particularly within the strictly male-only Incel forums, I found claims that women are increasingly using them. In one thread titled 'this is a male space', the original poster commented:

I'm seeing a sudden influx of women posting dumbshit comments on here, so I just thought I'd remind you that this is a male space. We created this space for ourselves, and don't want you here so fuck off ... You have the government by the balls with a massive social movement dedicated to giving you access to every other space in existence. You have invaded every workplace, every community, every medium of entertainment that men created for themselves, and you have made them all worse and less functional. Why can't you just leave us the fuck alone in the one place we have left?

This user's plea for women to exit male spaces mirrors the backlash caused by the 2014 #Gamergate saga.<sup>9</sup> Responding to the steady increase of women gamers (Casti, 2014) and the perception that game designers were corrupted by a feminist conspiracy to destroy videogame culture (Chess & Shaw, 2015), users from Reddit, 4Chan and other online spaces rallied together and coordinated doxing attacks on feminists involved in speaking out against sexist gaming cultures (Massanari, 2017).<sup>10</sup> This saga in turn shares parallels with broader far-right narratives that justify 'networked harassment', which refers to organised online harassment against a target or set of targets which is encouraged, promoted or instigated by members of a network, such as an audience or online community (Marwick & Caplan, 2018). By constructing feminism and women as villains, and men as their victims, Incels and other manosphere groups utilise networked harassment in order to discourage women from using the internet and to reinforce male hegemony in these spaces.

It is likely that individuals who were involved in #Gamergate also interact in Incel forums, as there are regular references to and discussions of the event in those forums, even over half a decade later. The issues surrounding #Gamergate are clearly within the Incel zeitgeist. The following comment is a response to another user who suggested that Incels and gamers are the most oppressed group within modern society:

Gamers were genuinely bullied into becoming a political group ... Game designers are intentionally going out of their way to make games less enjoyable for their loyal fans (by forcing narratives, squeezing women into combat positions they historically almost never occupied, removing sex appeal for the sake of removing it) ... They were told by random feminists who didn't even play video games, and their journalists who control the companies with public pressure, that the things they want to see are immoral, and that they are being turned into sexists by the media they enjoy ... It's yet another male space corrupted by women and their self-centric ideologies, and it is no longer allowed to be a male space.

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<sup>9</sup> #Gamergate was a targeted harassment campaign against women in the video game industry who spoke out on issues of sexism and progressivism in video game culture (Marwick & Caplan, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Doxing refers to search for and publishing of private or identifying information about a particular individual on the internet, typically with malicious intent.

Mirroring other manosphere groups, Incels consistently frame feminism and politically correct culture as oppressive to men, and women as constantly encroaching on spaces that are portrayed as traditionally white, male-only spaces (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Ging, 2017). As women and people of colour become increasingly visible in such public internet environments, backlash and forms of cyberviolence, such as doxing, rape threats and vitriolic comments, have become common responses (Powell & Henry, 2019). To police and silence groups who are seen to threaten male hegemony online, Incels and other manosphere groups proliferate racist and misogynist discourses, inside jokes and memes (Green, 2019; Greene, 2019). Indeed, the Black Pill narrative constructs feminism and women in general as a target for violence as they are seen to threaten claims to masculine status through denying Incels' sex. Masculinity is therefore challenged by women's empowerment, and it is argued that men now have to 'pander' to women:

When women are empowered because of feminism and allowed to freely choose their sexual partners, beta males will compete with each other in order to pander to them. But if women are the property of their fathers and husbands and don't have any rights, then men don't have any rational reason to pander to them.

The Black Pill narrative uses 'humorous' internet vernacular to appeal to a young, edgy contemporary audience but ultimately justifies the dehumanisation of and violence against women by casting them as a subhuman Other. My study certainly identified regular displays of hatred targeted at women and feminist groups. For example, in a thread discussing feminism's role in facilitating the body positivity movement, one Incel asserted:

I hate landwhales so much. It's 100% their fault they're ugly and they still have triple the SMV [sexual market value] of the average male normie, yet they complain constantly about beauty standards and how unfair they're treated ... Fuck this gynocentric society and fuck landwhales.

But even Incels who positively engaged with feminism were also routinely ridiculed and labelled as 'white knights', 'cucks' and 'social justice

warriors' (SJWs).<sup>11</sup> Alongside the labels attached to such men who publicly state their support for feminist or other progressive causes were regular mocking and cyberbullying. Members of the Incel watchdog group Incel Tears are constantly referred to as effeminate SJWs and are actively disparaged within Incel forums. Male members of this group were particularly derided for being 'soy-boys' and 'cucks', thus dismissed as not holding the prerequisite virtues to keep their sexual partners satisfied. In this way, Incels attempt to reclaim the capital they feel they have lost by failing to conform to expectations of hegemonic masculinity (Witt, 2020). This is a common response from men who do not uphold or conform to hegemonic masculinity (Scaptura & Boyle, 2019).

Third, Incels often expressed the desire for chaotic mass violence to hammer home the point of their grievances. In the following case, it was the plight of the working-class man:

What I want to happen is for there to be a mass shooting/bombing every single day in every single city in the world, ideally targeted at politicians (and their lackeys), media conglomerates, and financial institutions. No one should be allowed to live in ignorance of how the other half lives. "Bring the war home."

Another user supported such calls for domestic terrorism in ways that was both racialised and gendered:

Death is a prerequisite of Life. Brown, White, Black it doesn't matter. Death tends to happen. The thing about murder is that not only does it kill people ... It can also change the course of history. Of course, I would prefer it if Women died. But death happens and I couldn't care less about what their ideology or skin colour is as long as people are dying before their biological death date, that's all I care about.

Such calls for mass violence—whether it be a fantasised uprising, an Incel terror attack like that conducted by Rodger and Minassian or online attacks—all appear to provide a sense of catharsis for Incel members' troubled

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<sup>11</sup> A 'cuck' refers to a man whose wife/girlfriend forces him to watch her have sex with another man. For the manosphere, this often has racist overtones. For an in-depth genealogy of the phrase see Lokke (2019).



minds (Bael et al., 2019). Incels uncritically invoke blame against women, feminists and multiculturalism, and utilise dehumanising constructions of women as femoids to embolden the male victimisation narrative (Chang, 2020). Here, feminism is portrayed as an attempt to brainwash men and attack democracy through advocating for increased rights for women (Marwick & Caplan, 2018).

Incels' belief that a gynocentric order is secretly working to control mankind through media and politics is nourished in tight digital echo-chambers of men who experience a felt alienation from society (Chang, 2020; Ging, 2019). Chang (2020) sees the construction of femoids as scapegoats for broader social problems as reminiscent of the way that the Jewish community was constructed and dehumanized to justify the rise of Nazism. Mirroring the far-right 'Jewish Question', Incels construct women, feminism and Jews as part of a global cabal that is actively causing the degeneration of society. Incels' unifying solution of the reassertion of a patriarchy derives from the Black Pill narrative, which forges 'scientific' justifications to enact violence (Bael et al., 2019). Such violence is constructed as a necessary and emancipatory form of action against the monstrous-feminine Other (Creed, 1993). Necessary for the countering of Incels' self-conceptualization as socially and sexually excluded, constructions of the monstrous-feminine Other—the femoid—are invoked to reclaim the hegemonic masculine label, and thus to affirm dominant forms of masculinity and defend patriarchy. This is discussed further below.

### **Discussion: Construction of the monstrous-feminine Other**

Although this article has highlighted three distinct forms of violence amongst online Incel communities, they are all arguably connected by a desire to meet the standards of hegemonic masculinity and defend patriarchy. Here it is useful to consider the broader historical construction of the monstrous-feminine Other as a cultural archetype used to reinforce and police dominant notions of acceptable femininity (Creed, 1993). Within the "phallogocentric discursive order" (Chang, 2020, p.3), the western cultural and intellectual privileging of a masculinist and patriarchal agenda, the female body appears

as an anomaly against the normative human (male) model. Through what Kristeva (1982, p.2) terms “abjection”, the female body is “radically excluded” and constructed as an aberration against that of the normative (male) model. Kristeva (1982, p.4) argues that the abject is that which does not “respect borders, positions, rules” and which “disturbs identity, system, order”. Abjection is, therefore, an attempt to understand the ways in which patriarchal societies construct and separate the subject, and how the abject (femininity) presents a challenge to the construction of masculinity.

This radical exclusion is (re)produced through cultural traditions that systematically represent women through an angel/monster dichotomy. On one side of the dichotomy, the angel is revered as the perfect women, the socially desirable blueprint which all women are expected to follow. On the other, the depiction of the monstrous-feminine is used to intimidate and police women into conforming to the impossible angelic ideal. As Chang (2020, p.4) highlights, “Such representations demonstrate a fear of women’s autonomy under an order which represents their heteronomy, manifesting in the construction of autonomous women as deviant, dangerous and monstrous”. In other words, those who do not conform to the angelic archetype are framed as not conforming to proper feminine behaviour and as being disobedient and deviant, or as challenging the patriarchal order.

Creed (1993) calls attention to when the feminine is defined as monstrous: this is usually when a woman is delineated in terms of her sexuality, and almost always represented in relation to her mothering and reproductive functioning (or her rejection of those essentialisations). Such a framing predicates a patriarchal subtext rooted in male fears of the monstrous Other and reinforces an essentialist view of femininity defined by the portrayal of women as animal-like. One can find examples of the monstrous feminine within the horror genre and wider cultural tales: monstrous wombs in the film *Alien* (Scott, 1979), the phallic-like representation of Medusa’s snake hair in Greek mythology, and the menstruation-related representations of the blood-soaked body of the female protagonist in the film *Carrie* (De Palma, 1976) are all central to the archetypal monstrous feminine. These representations are folded back into the biological, supporting the idea that the feminised monster

is necessarily the Other in relation to the patriarchal media it serves. Through the abject, such subhuman constructions and metaphors are almost always connected back to the animal-like body of the monstrous Other to intimidate and police women, encouraging them to conform to appropriate expressions of femininity.

These discourses have transcended the horror and literary genres that Creed (1993) and Kristeva (1982) have deconstructed and can now be identified in the online communities frequented by Incels. As Massanari and Chess (2018) and Chang (2020) have also argued, it is impossible to disentangle the contemporary online meme-style humour of the manosphere from older tropes of misogynistic literature and media. Incels are particularly adept at fetishising tropes of monstrous femininity, thus continuing the framing of the feminine as opposing or challenging masculinity. Particularly dehumanising examples such as 'foids', 'femoids' or 'landwhales',<sup>12</sup> as discussed throughout this article, construct women as non-rational and animalistic. Additionally, Incels refer to women as 'whores', 'roasties'<sup>13</sup> or 'holes'. These terms situate women as sexual objects and cast them as only good for sex and reproduction. In turn, women's sexuality is framed as non-rational and biologically driven in order to explain women's sexual rejection of Incels due to their low status within the sexual market economy. This in turn challenges Incels' ability to achieve the hegemonic masculine status they aspire to.

Representations of women as monstrous arguably demonstrate a fear of women's autonomy, which overrides patriarchy's insistence on their obedience and conformity to appropriate or proper femininity. Behaviour outside of such realms of acceptable femininity is thus constructed as alien, deviant or monstrous. Recent research has highlighted that within the subcultures of the broader manosphere such constructions of women as Other and fears of abjection serve to invoke hate speech and further entrench pervasive societal attitudes about women (Chang, 2020; Massanari

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<sup>12</sup> 'Landwhale' refers to an overweight woman.

<sup>13</sup> 'Roastie' refers to a woman who has had sex with more than one partner. It is used to simultaneously body and slut shame women.

and Chess, 2018). Extreme misogyny and hatred of women is evident in almost every comment thread within Incel forums, and the trope of the monstrous-feminine Other has been noted (Bael et al., 2019; Chang, 2020; Ging, 2019). The term ‘femoid’, for example, presents women as an abject Other. Such dehumanising tropes have historically been used to reinforce patriarchal control when women push back against proper feminine behaviours and norms. The policing of women’s behaviour is common within Incel forums and is directly linked to Incels’ unsuccessful romantic pursuits. In other words, the dehumanising framing of women as monstrous or animal-like serves Incel ideology by creating a discursive space where it is acceptable (or even necessary) to blame women for their problems. These discursive tools are not new as they are historically rooted in efforts to protect masculine status and patriarchy.

As noted earlier, the idea of the sexual market economy demarcates the boundaries between Incels and others in terms of entry into and performance within the sexual marketplace. Incels’ belief that the ultimate goal is to attain a mate and reproduce is coupled with claims that women are animalistic (and thus monstrous), and due to natural selection harbour a propensity towards those higher in the genetic and social hierarchy. These notions empower Incels’ dehumanising claims against women and further entrench the construction of femoids as monstrous by casting them as having simplified, irrational and animalistic urges while casting Incels as purely rational beings (Chang, 2020). In this way, Incels construct their sense of social and sexual alienation and perceived powerlessness in society as the fault of women and feminism, both of whom they consider threatening.

### **Concluding thoughts**

The findings presented in this article suggest that Incel-related violence does not merely constitute the extraordinary mass violence that is discussed in popular media accounts of Incels. Inter- and intrapersonal online violence exist within a discursive environment that reinforces hegemonic masculinity and protects the patriarchal order. Incels are reacting to threats of a perceived challenge to male hegemony in a cultural moment when feminist values have

become normalised and popularised throughout western liberal societies. Incels feel marginalised for failing to live up to the dominant conceptions of hegemonic masculinity. To heal their wounded sense of masculinity, Incels lash out—either vitriolically through social media discourse or through corporeal violence. This article has highlighted three levels of harm—against the self (intrapersonal violence), cyberbullying against other Incels and women/feminism (interpersonal violence) and mass violence—that Incels engage in as ways of asserting their masculinity. Incel diagnoses of contemporary social problems are reinforced through interactions within tight online echo-chambers.

This article has argued that, overall, Incel constructions of the monstrous-feminine Other allow them to blame feminism and multiculturalism for the alienation and anxieties they experience. Incel solutions to the issues they experience within contemporary society is to reduce women's rights through a return to a form of patriarchy where hegemonic masculinity is dominant. Such a return will supposedly heal what they perceive to be a decaying society that has developed from the acceptance of feminist values. To achieve such a plan, calls for mass violence to (re)assert masculine hegemony—a 'beta uprising'—are made explicit.

However mad these calls for action, and however reprehensible or shocking the uncommon instances of mass violence seem on the surface, social commentators ought to be aware that such narratives and action extend beyond Incels and misogynist mass shooters. This article has highlighted the normalisation of daily male aggression and violence against women that underpins the contemporary subculture of Incels (and the broader manosphere) and reflects historical patriarchal legacies.

The famous Incel-caused violent events discussed at the start of this article provide society with a face, a scapegoat to point at and direct whatever feelings we possess at (anger, disgust, sadness, empathy, for example). They allow us to imagine that such violence is extraordinary but the normalised daily interactions Incels have with each other and with women online are just one example of daily forms of violence against women, including through a raft of media and cultural narratives that accept and normalise rape culture.

Alongside unpacking the extraordinary events associated with Incel culture, researchers must excavate these daily forms of unremarkable violence in other media. This is because Incel-related violence is an extreme *refraction* of the everyday violence experienced within patriarchy.

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