

Incels and Misogyny; what's so appealing about hatred?

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Abstract

This thesis addresses the, now infamous, incel community. The term *Incel* is an abbreviation of “involuntary celibate”, and is defined by the incel community, as a person who desires, but is unable to obtain a romantic or sexual relationship. Over the last decade incels have gained notoriety due to the unabashed misogynistic rhetoric that is cultivated within the online communities they have created for themselves. Additionally several mass killers have been linked to the group, and as a whole the community is said to be responsible for a death toll of over 47. As such incels have been designated a domestic terrorism threat by, among others, International Center for Counter Terrorism and The Texas Department of Public Safety. Yet, there is still much that remains unknown about incels and the online world they have created for themselves.

In order to broaden this understanding I have performed a netnographic (Kozinets 2010, 2015) study of the website *incels.co*, an international forum site exclusively catering to self-proclaimed incels, and dedicated to the discussion of incelism. Through daily observation of the site and an analysis of over 100 forum threads I have tried to determine the overarching values, beliefs, worldviews, and ideologies present within their discourse. Further, this study attempts to create an understanding of the appeal this community has to its members.

The material collected in this study is first placed within its historical, cultural and material context, in order to understand the circumstances surrounding the resurgence of male supremacist ideology in online spaces. Subsequently the data from *incels.co* is analyzed using political, sociological and psychological theories on radicalization, evaluating the claim made by others that incel terrorism is a growing threat. Findings indicate however, that although the *incels.co* community is engaging in a radicalization of beliefs there is insufficient evidence to support a radicalization of behaviors.

To make sense of the structure and organization that facilitates the radicalization of beliefs, the *incels.co* community is then examined through a subcultural lens. Finding that the site offers a succinct sense of subcultural belonging, providing a community of shared identity, shared meanings, countercultural values, and guidelines and justifications for behavior. Yet, it is also apparent that the notion of involuntary celibacy extends beyond this subculture, and as such I make the claim that not all incels are subcultural, but that a distinct incel subculture exists.

Lastly, this study looks at the collectivist aspects of the incel community and makes the claim that incels.co functions as a platform for extremist beliefs to be cultivated and subsequently internalized by its users. With the help of Interaction Ritual Theory (Collins 2004) the interplay performed online is seen as a ritual engagement, where users will entrain around central ideas and objects, resulting in an experience of collective effervescence, emotional energy and group solidarity. Through such collective focus, ideas, beliefs, moral codes, myths and sacred objects pertaining to women, social hierarchies, and sexuality are cultivated and become part of the groups' social reality.

Overall, this thesis uses theories on radicalization, subculture and interaction ritual in order to make the claim that the incels.co platform is hosting an extremist collectivist subculture that experiences radicalization through a collective entrainment around sacred objects. In doing so this thesis provides new dimensions to work on radicalization as it places an emphasis on shared and collective processes in the cultivation of radical and extremist beliefs.

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
Outline Of The Study.....	4
2. Methodological Choices	5
Choice of Field.....	5
Netnography/Digital Ethnography/Virtual Ethnography	7
Data Collection.....	9
Analysis	11
Limitations.....	12
Ethical Reflections and Considerations.....	14
3. Setting the Scene	17
The Term Incel.....	17
The Manosphere	18
History of The Internet and Online Culture.....	21
Gamergate.....	27
Incels and The Blackpill	29
The Advantage of Attractiveness.....	32
4. Radicalization.....	35
The Link Between Incels, Radicalization and Terrorism.....	35
Who Is Radicalized?	37
The Process of Radicalization.....	43
The Radicalization of Incels	44
Online Radicalization and Offline Violence	46
Internet Facilitation.....	50
5. Are incels a Subculture?.....	52
Subcultures as Sites for Radicalization	52
What is a Subculture?	53
Language as Distinction.....	54
Subcultural Identity and Belonging.....	56
Emotional Subcultures.....	57
Subcultural Capital and Policing	59

6. Interaction Ritual Theory	61
A Departure from a Focus on Individual Agency	61
Collins on Durkheim	62
Collins on Goffman	63
Interaction Ritual Theory	64
The Problem of Bodily Co-Presence	66
Failed Rituals.....	68
Sex.....	71
Creating New Interaction Rituals	73
Sacred Objects, Myths, and Moral Codes.....	76
Conclusion.....	80
7. Conclusion	82
The Crisis at Hand.....	82
The Function of incels.co.....	83
Suggestions for Future Research.....	84
Theoretical Development.....	85

1. Introduction

“The ultimate solution to female infidelity: [...] KEEP WOMEN IN CAGES.”

“The modern western world exclusively produces whores. There is no such thing as a wife material girl. They are all just cumrags.”

“Women are just holes you are rewarded with for having the right genetics.”

These are just a few of the titles assigned to discussion threads on *incels.co*, a popular Internet forum for men who identify as *incels*. The term *Incel* is an abbreviation of “involuntary celibate”, and is defined by the incel community, as a person who desires, but is unable to obtain a romantic or sexual relationship. Theoretically incels can be any gender, but in practice the vast majority of self-identified incels are male, and several of the major web platforms, like *incel.co*, cater exclusively to men. It is within this male dominated online environment that a culture of misogyny has developed and taken hold, as their “sexual failures has filled them with [a] toxic, occasionally murderous rage at women as a collective” (Zuckerberg 2018). On display in the forums we now see misogynistic views so extreme that they have been linked to acts of terrorism (TDPS 2020), and as such forums are routinely monitored by law enforcement (Baele et al 2019). The once obscure Internet community is currently being painted as a growing social threat, but what do we really know about the incel phenomenon? And do we truly understand what their existence signals about our society and culture?

If you mentioned the word “incel” five, or even just two years ago hardly anyone would know what you were talking about; puzzled looks would be the standard response, and a long explanation would have to follow before the topic could be discussed. In 2020 however, the subject of the incel community has become a ‘hot’ topic at parties and across the lunch table at work. In Norway the topic has been raised on prime time television by the national public broadcasting network (Trygdekontoret 2019), articles have been written on the topic by every major newspaper (Dagbladet, VG, Aftenposten), and public discussion forums have been held by the The 22nd of July center (Center for Education on Terrorism). Still there is little formal research that has been published on the subject, and the research that

is being conducted seems to largely approach the subject from the same perspective: are incels violent dangerous terrorists (Baele et al 2019, Bernard & Fasquelle 2019, Reetz 2019)?

This claim certainly has validity to it. In January of 2020 The Texas Department of Public Safety declared incels an “emerging domestic terrorism threat (TDPS 2020, 3). This on the basis of 5 domestic and international attacks conducted by men who posted and discussed incel-related content online (TDPS 2020, 29). The first and most prolific attack attributed to an incel was a 2014 mass shooting in Isla Vista California, killing 6, injuring 14 on the campus of University of California, Santa Barbara. Although the shooter himself, Elliot Rodger, did not claim to be an incel, he left behind a 137-page manifesto titled *My Twisted World*, as well as a YouTube video “Elliot Rodgers Retribution”, where he expressed extreme frustration over his own “loneliness, rejection and unfulfilled desires” as well as his inability to establish relationships with women, sentiments that concur with the incel mindset. Since the shooting Elliot Rodger, often referred to only as ER, has become some sort of a celebrity among incels and is worshipped as a “saint” (Baele et al 2019). He has also been mentioned as an inspiration/been praised by three of the other “incel terrorists” cited in the TDPS threat assessment; (1) Christopher Harper-Mercer, who in 2015 killed 9 people in “a mass attack at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon”, (2) Scott Paul Beierle, who “opened fire at a yoga studio in Tallahassee, Florida”, killing 2 in November 2018, (3) Alek Minassian who pledged allegiance to the “incel rebellion” by driving a van into a predominantly female crowd in Toronto, Canada, killing 10 (TDPS 2019, 29-30). Some estimates have listed that the death toll from incel violence is as high as 47 people (Reetz 2019). In a response to this violence The United States Department of Homeland Security has awarded a \$250,000 grant to Georgia State University “to research the evolution and spread of the growing male supremacist movement referred to as Incel” (Reetz 2019). The research is headed by Dr. John Horgan, who sees “Incel violence against women as nothing less than a new form of terrorism” (Reetz 2019). He sees “the Incel community is one of the purest hotbeds of Internet radicalization [he’s] ever seen” and warns that it’s only “growing in size and confidence” (Reetz 2019).

Reading these numbers, and looking back on the quotes from the beginning of this chapter, it’s easy to understand why people adopt a similar stance to the one Dr. Horgan expresses. Having spent a year on incels.co I too have seen misogyny and hatred expressed in ways so offensive I wished to condemn the entire community. But it is my belief that approaching the phenomenon only from this angle provides little analytical insight. When incels are dismissed as only being hate-fueled violent misogynists, we fail to see the larger

point that their existence signals about our society. We must look at why certain men are flocking to these sites, why they have become so receptive to these ideas, as well as acknowledge that our dismissal of their perceived oppression is not going to lessen the anger and frustration they feel. In addition to being misogynists these are men who are lonely and excluded, who seek companionship and understanding, and whose daily experience of social rejection are not healthy for themselves or for our society. Suicide, or “roping” as it’s referred to, is one of the main topics of discussion on incels.co, as well as depression, self-harm, and substance abuse. Concerns grow as we see suicide rates rising across the world (NIPH 2018), and know that men are at increased risk of death by suicide in most countries (Coleman 2015). These rates have also been tied to a lack of access to hegemonic masculinity, and a so-called crisis-in-masculinity that has resulted from movements challenging the dominant social group; men (Jordan 2019, Scourfield 2005). Considering these are also matters raised and discussed within the incel community, a study of inceldom must move beyond just a critique of their misogyny, and delve further into their understandings of their own oppression and victimhood. Additionally this raises questions about the ways in which mainstream society has failed them. What social needs have mainstream society been unable to provide them? And how has the online community served as a substitute?

In addition to theories on radicalization, I will therefore also attempt to understand the appeal of their online community by analyzing the incel phenomenon through theories of subculture and collective ‘ritual’. Both in academia and media the term ‘subculture’ has been used to describe the incel community (Nagle 2017, Baele et al 2019, Cottee 2018), although incels themselves vehemently deny this claim, and instead describe inceldom as a “life circumstance”. This thesis will look to subcultural scholars such as Hebdige, Haenfler, Holt, and Thornton in order to investigate this disparity, and better understand the social mechanisms at play within the incel community. However, while useful, I have found subcultural theory, as well as theories on radicalization, to be insufficient in explaining the attraction inherent to extremist online spaces. To attempt to fully understand this magnetism I will supplement previous understandings of the incel phenomenon by conducting an analysis of its collectivist dimensions. I look to Randal Collins and Interaction Ritual Theory, viewing all onsite interaction as a ritual performance motivated in achieving the ritual outcomes of emotional energy, solidarity and sacred objects. In doing so I wish to add a new dimension to sociological and psychological understandings of radicalization.

Outline Of The Study

The layout of this work breaks from the traditional thesis outline, as I will not open with an overview of the theoretical perspective used. Instead I will integrate my theoretical explanations and clarifications into the analysis chapters, introducing theories as they are being utilized. The paper will therefore progress as follows. First I introduce the Netnographic method and outline the process of data collection and analysis, as well as the limitations and ethical considerations of the study. Then I provide a contextual frame for the incel phenomenon, situating it within the configuration of Internet culture, Internet history, and online behavioral norms. Subsequently I start my analysis by evaluating incel worldviews, beliefs, actions and social connections in accordance with theories on radicalization, followed by an evaluation of incels as a subculture, and close off this section by utilizing Interaction Ritual Theory to analyze the collective aspects of their online behavior. In the conclusion I present a summary of my main findings, and as well as underline what they mean for our understanding of the incel phenomenon, and their implications of further research on radicalization and online extremism.

2. Methodological Choices

As the incel phenomenon was born on the Internet and exists almost exclusively online, it felt only natural to use the web as my research site. The Incelosphere has a broad reach, but based on volume of posts, membership numbers, site reliability, and their strict focus on the black pill the choice fell on the site *incels.co*. Through an analysis of collected archival data and interpretations made from observation on the site, I will evaluate the claims made by the media and law enforcement agencies that incels are instigators of violence, as well as the claim that they are an Internet subculture. Lastly I will attempt to pinpoint the aspects of *incels.co*, and its accompanying community, that appeal to and attract young men in today's western society through the use of Interaction Ritual Theory (Collins 2004).

Choice of Field

In May of 2019 when I began my work on this project there were several online forums, websites and chat rooms that collectively made up what is known as the online Incelosphere including, but not limited to, r/Braincels and r/Incelswithouthate on reddit, *incelistan.net*, *love-shy.com*, and *incels.co*, along with several other non-English speaking forums. While this is still a substantial number of groups, it is only a fraction of the sites that used to exist, this because Internet hosts and servers have made a point out of banning and disbanding incel forums on the background of hate speech, harassment and bullying. Sites that are now defunct include r/Incels, r/Truecels, *sluthate.com*, *pua-hate.com* (which was closed after it became apparent that Eliot Rodger was a user), and *truecels.org*, among others. The possibility of my research site being shut down or banned was therefore a consideration that I needed to include in my evaluation of which forum to study. In this regard I chose to exclude r/Braincels from consideration. Although the largest incel forum at the time, with 69,760 users as of May 25th 2019 (Høyland 2019), r/Braincels had been quarantined by reddit for misogynistic and hateful remarks. This resulted from a long campaign to ban the subreddit for hating women, promoting rape, and advocating for suicide (Shukman 2018). My suspicion was therefore that r/Braincels was in danger of being banned and was therefore not a reliable field for me to study. A prediction that ended up being true, as r/Braincels was permanently banned from Reddit on September 30th of 2019, for violating company policy regarding harassment and bullying.

The choice instead fell on incels.co. In contrast from reddit threads, incels.co is an online social server created and owned by incels to host user-generated forum content concerning the subject of male involuntary celibacy. My assumption was therefore that they were less likely to be shut down or banned as they have no site host that have corporate policies they follow. This is not to say incels.co has been without trouble, the site has earlier been hosted on the servers .is and .me which both revoked their license to operate, so I still had to take a potential site shutdown into consideration. However, throughout initial observation on the site, I was able to find out that they had a backup host on the server .by. This made me confident that I would be able to finish my research even if incels.co was terminated. Fortunately, the .co server was in operation throughout the entire timeline of the project.

In addition to this my choice of forum to focus on was informed by Robert Kozinets' recommendations for how to choose a site for netnographic fieldwork (2010, 89). His advice is to "look for online communities that are" (Kozinets 2010, 89):

- (1) Relevant, they relate to your research focus and question(s)
- (2) Active, they have recent and regular communications
- (3) Interactive, they have a flow of communications between participants
- (4) Substantial, they have a critical mass of communicators and an energetic feel
- (5) Heterogeneous, they have a number of different participants
- (6) Data-rich, offering more detailed or descriptively rich data. (Kozinets 2010, 89)

In regards to relevancy, incels.co stood out because they were one of the only forums left that set specific incel-related criteria for membership. For while forums such as r/Foreveralone have a larger user base, they allow everyone to join, and even specifically ban self-proclaimed incels. Incels.co on the other hand regulates membership based on strict conditions. In order to register you must prove you are an incel by telling your 'incels story', which is then evaluated by moderators to determine if it is valid enough to garner you membership. It also "encourages users to follow the backpill philosophy", and is said to be "less calm" (ie. more spitefull/filled with hate), and have a more rigid definition of inceldom than other incel sites according to Incel wiki. These attributes make incels.co the most relevant site currently for researching the most extreme parts of the incel phenomenon, as my goal is to understand the mechanisms and motivations behind their hatred.

While smaller than its predecessors incels.co is still a substantial forum, with 11,423 members as of June 6th 2020. It is also active and data-rich as it currently holds 198,747 threads, 4,489,276 posts, and users have spent a combined 22946 days 5 hours and 10

minutes on the forum discussing everything from how to send each other Christmas gifts to philosophical debates about how best to subjugate women and limit their power. The interactivity of the site is built-in as its only function is to be a platform for sharing and discussing content. Although the site is not what is traditionally considered heterogeneous, as it is only for incels, this is a purposeful choice, as including others would have diminished the message of the group. Incels.co explicitly excludes women and queer people from registering on their site. This on the background of blackpill beliefs that see women as always having access to sex from desperate men, and people with same sex attraction are on an equal playing field. They also discourage men who are not incels from joining. The site is however quite heterogeneous in other ways. While incels are often painted as white, American, teenage boys, internal surveys from incels.co show (based on 667 responses) that 45% of users are non-white, only 38% are from North America, and less than 8% are under 18, giving some indication that users of incels.co are diverse in race, nationality, and age. However, the validity of this data and reliability of the survey's methodological design cannot be confirmed. So although racial, ethnic and class background would have been an interesting aspect to add to my analysis I have chosen not to engage with this data.

Netnography/Digital Ethnography/Virtual Ethnography

With the advent of the Internet, social science methodologies have been required to adapt. The Internet has made it easier to seek out and reach research subjects and fields, but has also complicated the researchers position in the field. There is so much available data and information, but knowing how to approach this data can be challenging. To try and simplify this process several researchers have sought to create Internet specific methodologies, most notably adaptations of traditional ethnography to fit online spaces. This method has been given a myriad of names and variations, including, but not limited to “netnography” (Kozinets 2010,2015), “virtual ethnography” (Hine 2014), “digital ethnography” (Varis 2014), and “ethnography of digital media” (Coleman 2010).

While slight disparities exist between the different forms, they all acknowledge that digital media has allowed for the construction of new “sociocultural worlds, group identities and representations, protocols of economic exchange, communicative genres, and phenomenological experience” (Coleman 2010, 496-7). Through the Internet “cultural identities, representations, and imaginaries, such as those hinged to youth, diaspora, nation, and indigeneity, are remade, subverted, communicated, and circulated through individual and

collective engagement with digital technologies (Coleman 2010, 488). Online worlds are every bit as complex as offline worlds. To understand them we therefore need tools for capturing them. In a concentrated, interactive and data-rich space such as incels.co this is best done through an adaption of ethnographic techniques, as we wish to look at more than just the words used, but also the context they are used in. Digital ethnography offers “a means for understanding informants’ [online] life-worlds and their situated practices and lived local realities” (Coleman 2010, 56). Based in traditional ethnographic fieldwork digital ethnography is effectively a mode of discovery and learning guided by the experiences the researcher has in the field (Blommaert & Dong 2010). To learn ethnographically is just “an extension of what every human being must do, that is, learn the meanings, norms, patterns of a way of life” (Hymes 1996, 13). Digital ethnography is then learning the meanings, norms, and patterns of technologically mediated communication and connection.

Robert Kozinets’ Netnography recognizes that the online behavior of the billions of people connects to create an online world that “not only reflects and reveals their lived experiences but is also, itself, a unique social phenomenon” (Kozinets 2015, 1). Netnography is then set up to “help you to understand that world” and “the various contexts that make it possible, the new social forms it advances, and the old forms it replaces” (Kozinets 2015, 1). The context of online actions is also emphasized in Piia Varis’ digital ethnography. According to her “a log of communication only serves as ethnographic data if it is understood in its context” where “contexts should be investigated rather than assumed” (Varis 2014, 57). I therefore spend the initial section of this thesis laying out both the digital and ideological context incels operate within. This broad understanding of context is based on observation and investigation of incels.co, but also on extensive research on incels, the blackpill/redpill, the manosphere, the alt-right, the masculinity-in-crisis narrative, technology mediated communication, and online communities, behavior, culture, and conflict. Through this I attempt to map out how Internet mediated communication is both different from offline communication and interaction, but also connects to the offline world, and signals conflicts that are much broader than just the web-forum it is expressed on.

In order to connect these spaces digital ethnography focuses on the “important notion of indexicality,” which serves as a link “between signs and the macro-level of socio-cultural contexts and meanings” (Varis 2014, 57). Indexicality “is the concept necessary to showing us how to relate the micro-social to the macro-social frames of analysis” (Silverstein 2003, 193). It explores “how both a micro-sociological order and a macro-sociological order are “articulated” through language used appropriately to and effectively in context” (Silverstein

2003, 227-228). In analysis of data through digital ethnography it is therefore not just an analysis of what is being said within the forums, but also what micro- and macro-sociological orders these communications represent. It is therefore important to not only look at what they say, but also the “contextual entailment”, the “creative’ effect or ‘effectiveness” the words have in context (Silverstein 2003, 194). My analysis is then based in both the literal communication in the incels.co forum, but also its “contextual entrainment”. This is also important considering there is no guarantee that the statements made on incels.co are factual or genuine. Internet mediated communication is, as we will see, often based in layers of irony, purposeful deception or lies, but by looking at the purpose of a statement rather than its contents this untrue data still holds analytical value.

Data Collection

While Varis, Hines, Coleman and Kozinets all present legitimate ways to perform an ethnography online, Kozinets’ method of Netnography is the most comprehensive guide describing distinct steps to implement. He describes his method as “positioned somewhere between the vast searchlights of big data analysis and the close readings of discourse analysis” (Kozinets 2015, 4). Where the task of a netnographer is to examine a community, “seeking to learn from them how to live in this community and to identify as a community member” (Kozinets 2010, 96). Netnography is a 5-step method:

1. Defining the research questions, social sites or topics of investigation
2. Community identification and selection
3. Community participant-observation and data collection
4. Data analysis and iterative Interpretation of findings
5. Write, present and report research findings and/or theoretical and/or policy implications (Kozinets 2010).

I have in the introduction fleshed out my development of step 1, and step 2 has been discussed earlier in this chapter. Therefore I will begin here by discussing my data collection and site (participant) observation.

Following Kozinets' Netnography, “data collection does not happen in isolation from data analysis” (2010, 95). Instead Kozinets believes that:

During data collection it is incumbent upon the netnographer to struggle to understand the people represented in these interactions from within the

online communal and cultural context in which they are embedded, rather than to collect this information in a way that would strip out context and present culture members or their practices in a general, unspecified, universalized manner (2010, 96).

He therefore sees data collection as a combination of three different data sources, archival data, field note data, and elicited data (Kozinets 2010). Archival data provides the cultural baseline for the field of study (Kozinets 2010, 104). It consists of “saved communal interactions [that] provide the netnographer with a convenient bank of observational data” (Kozinets 2010, 104). Field note data “involves the inscription of the experience of researcher participation” and is based on traditional ethnography where the researcher takes reflective and observational notes while witnessing the research field (Kozinets 2010, 113). The premise is to “record their own observations regarding subtexts, pretexts, contingencies, conditions and personal emotions occurring during their time online” (Kozinets 2010, 114). Through this process “the netnographer records her journey from outsider to insider, her learning of languages, rituals, and practices, as well as her involvement in a social web of meanings and personalities” (Kozinets 2010, 114). Elicited data comes from the researchers direct interaction with research subjects, and includes communal interaction and online interviews (Kozinets 2010, 106).

In this thesis I have chosen to focus on the first two, for reasons that will be discussed later in the chapter. My archival data was collected on 8 different points in time over a 4-week period during the months of October and November 2019. Twice a week I would enter the site and extract the 10 discussion threads that were last interacted with within the forum titled “Inceldom discussion”. Out of the three active forums on incels.co, this was chosen due to its high volume of threads, and it’s clear distinction as the place to talk about inceldom. Other forums are titled “off topic” and “suggestions”. As of June 2020 there is also a separate category for “must-read content” that collects what the moderators and other users think to be the most important contributions. This could have been considered a site for extraction of archival data, as it highlights what is most important within the community; however, this was not a feature back in October, and was therefore not considered. The 8 points in time were chosen throughout different days of the week and different times of day to try and collect as broad of a reach as possible. This data was then used to set a baseline of what culture and community was like inside of incels.co, without me as a researcher only gravitating towards specific threads or topics.

In addition to this extraction I spent the entire research period (May 2019-June 2020) periodically entering and studying incels.co reading their discourses, examining the site layout and design, observing the users as they interacted, watching/listening to/reading the media that was shared or promoted on the platform, and looking through the Incel Wiki in order to decipher that images, theories, beliefs and vocabulary expressed on the site. Throughout this process I took notes on my observations, findings, and reflections as well as bookmarked the threads, discussions, and statements that provided me with a greater understanding of incels and their community.

Analysis

Throughout my thesis the analytical focus is placed on the mechanisms behind creating community, identity, solidarity and support networks. I have examined the data to try and sketch a definition of insider status, determining what languages, rituals, and practices the incels partake in, and what these actions say about incels themselves and the larger society they exist within. This has been done through a so-called "abductive" approach, seeking to understand, explore and describe the given phenomenon guided by a theoretical framework, seeking to generate knowledge from the individual up (Blaikie 2000). The abductive method allows for my work to be guided by relevant theory while still being sensitive and flexible in the face of my empirical finding. The theoretical frameworks used have been those of radicalization theory, subcultural theory and Collins' interaction ritual perspective. The first two have been chosen to evaluate the current academic literature on the subject of incels, whereas the choice of the third is based on independent observations of incel behavior and ritual.

Further, netnographic analysis builds on both (imaginary or virtual) "observation" and analysis of discourse. Kozinets' discusses the lens through which this data should be analyzed:

Ask yourself about the deeper meaning of this posting. Ask yourself not what it says, but why the poster posted it. Do not aim for description. Aim for explanation. What is the poster of this message attempting to convey in this message? What is he conveying beyond the words that he is using? Why is he conveying this to the members of an online community? Why this online community? What does that say about the community? (2010, 122)

Here the discourse can be understood through the context that is gained through observation and fieldnotes. This data for this thesis has not been specifically coded, but has instead gone through a round of questioning such as the one above.

Additionally the extensive discourses present on incels.co have been analyzed through the work of Johannessen, Rafoss, and Rasmussen on discursive analysis (2018).

Understanding incels means understanding their discourses, as their discourses represent their collective frameworks of understanding (Johannessen et.al. 2018: 58-59). The social reality of incels is represented and created through the symbols, language, and images used in online communication (Johannessen et.al. 2018). These symbols, language and images then have to be analyzed, paying attention to the stories told, the categories and metaphors used, the genre of text, the images distributed, the formality of the language, the medium utilized, the humor portrayed (Johannessen et.al. 2018: 74-75). Once these symbols, vocabularies, images, myths, metaphors etc. are recognized, their social reality is then analyzed in relation to theories on radicalization. Can the worldview present be classified as extremist? What about their actions, their behavior?

However, the analysis does not end there, the symbols, vocabularies, images, myths, and metaphors are then re-questioned, asking again what purpose they serve within the community. This is then analyzed through Interaction Ritual Theory, seeing all online discourse as performed in accordance with ritual. Seeing their discourse not for what it communicates, but what it provides in terms of ritual ingredients. Here I focus on the collective aspect of the site, determining its attraction based on ritual outcomes.

Limitations

Hine (2008), Varis (2014) and Kozinets (2010, 2015) all include a discussion of what it means to be an ethnographer in an online space. This discussion centers around the notion of online observation, or online participation. Traditionally ethnography is based in notions of “participant observation”, where the researcher actively engages with his field of study as a tool to understand its “local practices and meaning-making” (Varis, 2014, 62). In the physical realm this engagement comes naturally as one has to be physically present in order to observe others. Online however, the medium allows for a sense of covert observation, or lurking, where the researchers can “participate’ invisibly and unbeknownst to the people whose activities are being observed” (Varis 2014, 62). This ability has become a topic of great

discussion within the field of virtual/digital ethnography. While some researchers believe that this allows for the collection of truly 'natural' data, undisturbed by interference on the part of the researcher (Paccagnella 1997, Varis 2014), others believe that a lack of engagement inhibits the ability to truly get an 'inside' perspective and develop the cultural understanding necessary in ethnography (Beaulieu 2004, Kozinets 2010, 2005, Hine 2008).

The latter is emphasized in Kozinets methodological development, as "data collection in netnography means communicating with members of a culture or community" (2010, 95). His participant observation was largely based in elicited data, data stemming from direct contact with the field. He sees engagement as a spectrum of actions of varying degree of penetration into the online community, ranging from:

Reading messages regularly and in real time, following links, rating, replying to other members via e-mail or other one-on-one communications, offering short comments, offering long comments, joining in and contributing to community activities, to becoming an organizer, expert, or recognized voice of the community (Kozinets 2010, 96)

Within this range I have participated in the first two, I have observed discussion on incels.co regularly, and I have "followed links" - as in watching/reading/listening to the content they share and discuss - but I have not interacted with the community in any way where they could have noticed my presence. This has been intentional. I simply would not feel comfortable making my presence known on incels.co knowing the way that they treat, and speak to and about women. Additionally, the nature of the site sets up barriers to joining the community, as you must be male in order to have an account, and the process of registering includes a section where you must 'prove' you are an incel. There are undoubtedly ways I could have attempted to surpass such measures, by simply lying, or trying to explain my situation, but as it would be both unethical and disruptive to the research environment, I chose to simply observe and not participate. Because of this I may have missed out on key insights that could have arisen from completely engulfing myself in the culture or becoming a true member, experiencing first hand what they are experiencing. I have however been mindful of Kozinets focus on engrossing oneself in the culture, and have used archival data, real-time observation, following links, and field notes extensively to attempt to understand the community and culture created on the sites.

Ethical Reflections and Considerations

Not actively participating or making myself explicitly visible to the group also poses an ethical dilemma, as the subjects of my research are not able to consent to their participation in the study. This is a common ethical dilemma for online researchers, as the online space creates complicated distinctions between the public and the private sphere. Although material online is posted publicly, for all to see, researchers should be “cautioned against seeing the Web as one big, public database readily and voluntarily produced by ordinary Internet users” (Varis 2014, 60). Internet users may see their online expressions as happening in the private sphere, even if they are posting on channels that are openly available (Varis 2014). This means that it becomes up to the researcher to make case-by-case considerations about the appropriateness of using the given data (Varis 2014, 60).

In order to better understand what these considerations are I have looked to The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committee (NESH) and their *A Guide To Internet Research Ethics*. They provide ethical guidelines for knowing when online content is public, and therefore available for use within research:

In terms of research ethics, the grey zone often involves sensitive information and statements published in open Internet forums where it may be less obvious whether this is a public arena or not. NESH states that in this context, it will be expedient to apply the concept of reasonable expectation of publicity (2019, 10)

In regards to assessing the reasonable expectation of publicity they suggest looking at the “context in which the information exchange or communication takes place” (NESH 2019, 10). Asking questions such as:

How accessible is the service? What is the form of its technical settings? Does it have an age limit or restrictions on access? How many users have access? To what extent is this group or website referred to in traditional media?” (NESH 2019, 10)

In this sense incels.co falls within the grey zone. Although everything that is written is posted publicly, the accessibility of the site is not as easy as other online social media or forum content, it does not automatically appear if you Google ‘incels’ or ‘incel’ rather you would have to do some research on the topic before stumbling across the site. It’s settings are also

quite exclusionary as only members can post and access the full functions of the site. However, there is still a certain degree of expectations of publicity. NESH suggests “the larger the group, the more public the information” (NESH 2019, 11), and at 11,000+ members incels.co encompasses a quite large group. NESH also suggests that “the rules of the forum may provide some indication of the user’s reasonable expectations of publicity” (NESH 2019, 15-16). The rules of incels.co encourage their users to stay safe online one by not posting “personal information (real name, address, phone, email, pictures, etc.), unless you are comfortable exposing that information to the whole Internet”. Indicating that they have an understanding of their own exposure to “the whole Internet”. This understanding is amplified by a specific technical feature of the site called a “bluepill counter”, this counter lets the incels know how many non members are on the site, or are viewing a certain thread, at all times. Often showing bluepillers outnumbering “members online” by the tenfold. This signifies an awareness that their content is not just viewed by themselves and other registered group members, indicating a reasonable degree of expectations of publicity. This notion is amplified as incels consistently discuss and share outside content where their group has been mentioned. They also often make light of the fact that they are being watched by addressing outsiders directly in their posts, or joking that certain posts will aggravate feminists, the FBI, or bluepillers. Additionally, as we have seen, there is also vast evidence pointing to both incels.co and incels as a phenomenon being “referred to in traditional media”.

Yet, the project still raises ethical concerns related to the processing of personal data, anonymity, and consent that must be addressed. According to the American Sociological Association’s (ASA) *Code of Ethics*, in dilemmas of informed consent “sociologists may seek waivers from an authoritative body with expertise in the ethics of social science research” (2018). I therefore contacted the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD) to ensure a proper research procedure. In conversation with NSD they understood that it would be difficult and unsafe for me to try to visibly insert myself into their online environment. We therefore came to a compromise, where the university would post public information about the project – its scope, ambitions and methods – on their website. Here the users of incels.co were invited to reach out to the institute if they wished to be removed from my analysis. To my knowledge no one took advantage of this option.

In regards to anonymity and the processing of personal data NSD instructed that my archival data not include any usernames, profile pictures, or other user data that could identify any online or offline identity. Therefore data collection is not as straight forward as taking a screenshot of the forum discussion. Instead the 80 threads gathered during the

archival data collection were manually copied post-by-post into a document, removing all personal signifiers. These were then saved incase the site was to be shut down before analysis work could be completed. However, the online threads were also saved as online bookmarks and could be used as reference as well. This ensured that no personal data was stored during the project, and neither will it be included in this thesis.

I would also argue that my research falls under the category of “research which is in the public interest, but cannot practically be undertaken if prior consent must be obtained”, and therefore permits a "potential exception" to the “requirement of consent” (NESH 2019, 11-12). As mainstream media, pop culture, and criminal justice institutions continue to focus on incels and paint them as cultural villains, it’s important that proper research is conducted to supplement or counter the cultural image they paint. Media scholar Jørgen Skågeby looks at this ethical dilemma stating that “at the end of the day there is the question of how sensitive the material is judged to be and what potential harms and benefits that can result from the publication of the research" (2011, 414). The topic may be sensitive, but as incels willingly publicize and share their discussions openly on a platform they know is being watched, the added harm from this project is limited. On the other hand the benefit is significant as such research is able to garner a deeper understanding of incels, their communities, their plight, and most importantly what their existence means for us as a society. I have therefore proceeded with the project despite not having been given direct consent by the users of incels.co. Attempting to obtain such consent would have both put myself in danger of threats and harassment – as incels and adjacent groups are known for coordinated attacks on the women who oppose them – and been technically difficult, as site registration is conditioned on being male and an incel. It is also unlikely that I would, within the confined period of this thesis, be able to reach out to and get a response from all the users observed throughout this project. Instead the project was publicized through the university website as explained above.

3. Setting the Scene

This chapter will outline the historical, cultural and material context the incel community exist within, as well as provide an introduction into *the blackpill*, a set of beliefs incels have cultivated, to order their social reality. This is done to set the scene for the theoretical analysis of incels and situate them within a larger framework of misogynistic online subcultural space.

The Term Incel

Involuntary celibacy as a concept is said to have been introduced in the 1700's by Antione Banier in his work *The Mythology and Fables of the Ancients, Explain'd from History, Volume 3*. "He described incelldom as a form of imprisonment which he referred to as 'yoke' as well as a "form of suffering and anguish" (incel wiki - Antione Banier). Since then it has periodically been touched upon in literature, but it wasn't until the advent of the Internet that involuntary celibacy was introduced in academia. In 2001 sociologist Denise Donnelly became the first academic to utilize the term in her study *Involuntary celibacy: a life course analysis*. Donnelly defines "the involuntary celibate as one who desires to have sex, but has been unable to find a willing partner for at least 6 months" (2001, 159). The study was conducted through online surveys, and subjects were recruited through a preexisting online mailing list concerning the topic of involuntary celibacy (Brugges et.al. 2001). Donnelly's study found that although these groups differed in the circumstances surrounding their celibacy, the experience of being involuntary celibate was persistently presented as negative (Donnelly et.al. 2001, 159). The study also uncovered once one had missed out on "making normative sexual transitions" these delays tended to persist, "which in turn perpetuated a celibate life course or trajectory" (Donnelly et.al. 2001, 159).

If we look at the term "incel", in its abbreviated form, it was first coined in 1997 within the context of an online mailing list titled *Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project* (AICP) (it has been theorized that AICP was the mailing list from the Donnelly study, but never confirmed). Alana was a lesbian and a self-described "late bloomer", who started AICP as a site "for those who were struggling to form loving relationships" (Taylor 2018). Alana herself left AICP in 2003 after she felt the community had become too negative, soon after the site was abandoned and incels moved on to other forums. It is currently difficult to

know what sort of discourse around involuntary celibacy AICP consisted of, but according to the Incel wiki the overall tone was quite different; “Incel was not a permanent thing, and women were part of the Incel community. Because of this, fatalistic and defeatist attitudes as well as misogyny and anti-feminism weren’t as pervasive as they are now”. So while the early history of incels belongs to a lesbian woman who “had been reading a lot of feminist writings” the Incelosphere that we see today has developed from a different corner of the Internet, a “darker online underbelly” known as the manosphere (Nagle 2017).

The Manosphere

The manosphere is a collective term for “the many sites, subcultures and identifications associated with [the] anti-feminist online movement” (Nagle 2017), including but not limited to men’s rights activists, the alt-right, pick-up-artists, Men Going Their Own Way and incels (Zuckerberg 2018, Nagle 2017, Schmitz & Kazyak 2016, Marwick & Caplan 2018). The manosphere is joined under the umbrella of the Red Pill, a collection “of extreme, misogynistic viewpoints that blame women, particularly feminists, for the downfall of society” (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016, 2). They vehemently oppose feminism, but more than that they claim that feminists “are malevolent man-haters, attempting to denigrate and oppress men and then deny that they are doing it” (Marwick & Caplan 2018, 554).

The concept of the Red Pill comes from the movie *The Matrix* (1999) and is based upon the scene where Neo (Keanu Reeves) is presented with the option of between two pills, one blue and one red. If he chooses to take the red pill he will be let in on the truth behind our reality, while if he chooses the blue pill the story will end, and he will go back to living in ignorance, not knowing that there ever was another option. In the movie Morpheus, who presents the two pills puts it as:

“You take the blue pill—the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill—you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes. Remember: all I’m offering is the truth. ”
- (The Matrix 1999).

This is what the men of the manosphere believe they have found, the truth. They believe that everyone else is living in ignorance, and that only they truly know how the world really

works. The online manosphere is their Wonderland, a space to explore, portray and discuss how the world ‘really works’.

The main truth explored in the red pill is the “belief that masculine cisgender men are discriminated against by our feminized ‘gynocentric’ society” (Zuckerberg 2018, 11). They believe that male privilege is a myth, and that the rise in feminism, progressivism, and political correctness has become an oppressive force that both causes the problems that men face, as well as uphold a cultural narrative that normalizes and trivializes this oppression (Zuckerberg 2018, Marwick & Lewis 2017). Examples of this oppression (from an American man’s perspective at least) include men being more likely to be victims of violence, men representing more than 90 % of the imprisoned population, men committing suicide at a much higher rate, men being more likely to be victims of fatal workplace accidents, women outnumbering men in education from primary to graduate school, women being given the advantage in custody battles, and men being more likely to be falsely accused of rape or be forced to pay child support for a child they have no parental rights over (Zuckerberg 2018, Nagle 2017). They view these issues, and rightfully so, as negative consequences of the society we live in, and therefore seek solidarity and support from each other to reject the mainstream, likening themselves to other anti-oppressive movements such as the civil rights movement; “Setting up feminism—and feminists—as villains, and men as victims” (Marwick & Caplan 2018, 547).

While some of these claims do hold validity, their methods are much less tolerable. Instead of recognizing that gender-based institutional differences are the result of the patriarchy - the same oppressive force feminists are fighting – the manosphere has chosen to double down on traditional sexism. They center their community around “extreme misogynistic ideological discourse” (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016, 11), and adopt “attitudes and behaviors that foster discrimination against women and perpetuate gender based stereotypes” (Zuckerberg 2018). In doing so they see themselves as “awakening from the blissful mind prison of liberalism to the unplugged reality of societal misandry” (Nagle 2017, 106). Here women are nothing more than “worthless cunts” and “attention whores”, who “ride the cock carousel” instead of respecting themselves and their future husbands (Nagle 2017, 106). Women fighting for their rights become ridiculed, and feminism is seen as a cancer that only serves to promote female domination, and as such justifies a networked harassment of women based in retaliation (Marwick & Caplan 2018). These men feel entitled to invade feminist spaces, and are known for “coordinating attacks to send death and rape threats to outspoken feminists” (Zuckerberg 2018, 10). American classicist Donna Zuckerberg, who

has studied the men of the red pill extensively, draws on Terry Kubers definition of toxic masculinity as she explains how these men embody “the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence” (Zuckerberg 2018, 13). Feminist scholars Melissa Blais and Francis Dupuis-Déri have dubbed this belief system masculinism – believing that the solution to the “crisis and suffering” of men “includes curbing the influence of feminism and revalorizing masculinity” (2012, 22).

The manosphere has developed their ideology “in opposition to the discourse and rhetoric of feminism”, coining the term *misandry* to juxtapose *misogyny* which was used by feminists at the time to denote an ingrained hatred and prejudice against women (Marwick and Caplan 2018, 553). Media researchers Alice Marwick and Robyn Caplan investigate this historical development through the online use and discussion of the term (Marwick and Caplan 2018). Using critical discourse analysis they observed a gradual popularization of the term misandry in online discourses followed by a collective attempt to define it (Marwick and Caplan 2018). Through these discourses the term misandry has taken on a “body of shared understanding” which reinforces a binary between it and feminist discourse (Marwick and Caplan 2018). As misandry is presented as the gender reversed version of misogyny, it allows the manosphere “to appropriate the language of leftist identity politics and claim a victimized stance,” serving as a “call to action to the men who agree with the characterization of feminism as ‘man hating’” (Marwick and Caplan 2018, 550-551). The adoption of the word, served to create bonds between men and solidify their ideological commitment, which in turn served to collect the online manosphere under one umbrella, and position it in direct opposition to feminists.

Sociologist Robert Menzies further explores this trend as he observed the “mascul(in)ists” manosphere, and their “virtual backlash” to feminism in cyberspace (2007). While the manosphere has managed to frame “feminists and mascul(in)ists representing two oppositional sides of a bipartisan, unidimensional, context-free struggle for justice” between equals (Menzies 2007, 87). In reality however “the seemingly endless torrent of hostility, petulance, propaganda, and downright hate-mongering that” cascaded from the virtual pages of the mascul(in)ists evoked visceral reactions in all who were exposed (Menzies 2007, 87). Instead of representing themselves and their true struggle “mascul(in)ist claims to justice are intricately linked to a wider political agenda aimed at thwarting, estopping, and rolling back the advances aspired to and achieved by women” and other vulnerable groups (Menzies 2007, 90). Their ability to reframe themselves as an equally disadvantaged group means their

“extremist material threatens increasingly to normalize itself and shift the boundaries of contestation” in gender relations (Menzies 2007, 87).

History of The Internet and Online Culture

The manosphere as a community exists almost exclusively online, and this location is significant, as it has allowed for a new type of discourse, one that is more unfiltered and extreme. The Internet has provided a platform where anonymity, unlimited availability of resources and individuals to interact with, and a lack of consequences have combined to facilitate a space where users are freed from the bounds of conventional social norms. However, while the platform may provide such a space indiscriminately, certain early adopters of the platform have taken it upon themselves to create their own space within it, with its own linguistic and behavioral norms.

Back in the late 80’s, early 90’s the Internet was a new and unexplored resource not yet available to the masses as it is today. Those who did have access were largely white western economically privileged males, and to them “the internet was a land of endless opportunity, something to harness and explore, something to *claim*” (Phillips 2015, 129). They saw the Internet as something new they could colonize and shape in their ideal image. As privileged white men they had “the inclination, access, and most importantly the internalized sense of entitlement that it isn’t just acceptable to play with whatever toys one has been given, but in fact is one’s right to do so” (Phillips 2015, 131). The space they created was largely based in their ideology of libertarian western values, with a morally and politically sovereignty independent from any “tyrannies” that could be imposed (Phillips 2015, 128). However, while based in values of freedom and independence for all, their corner of the Internet became a place catering to and dominated by white western men and their political ideologies, allowing for their voices, their prejudices, and their views to become the blueprint for early online discourse.

While there has been a vast expansion in the demographic of Internet users, there still exists remnants of this white male space, with a common quip being ‘there are no girls on the internet’ (Nagle 2017, 128). To this day much of the anonymous online behavior, regardless of who the actor is, it is still “gendered male” and “raced as white” (Phillips 2015, 42). This does not include all online behavior, as there are plenty of sites where one can act as oneself, and even ones where it is possible to explicitly discuss the one’s lack of maleness or whiteness. Still, there is a side of the Internet, often dubbed the “authentic Internet” (Nagle

2017), where this tradition is upheld. This space is largely made up of anonymous, or electively anonymous, forum sites, such as 4chan, reddit, tumblr and incels.co. Here anyone can join, post publicly, reply to a post, or just observe others behavior. 4chan, which is notorious for being one of the most unappetizing and boundary exceeding sites on the open web (Krüger 2019), was established in 2003 and helped set the scene for how such platforms we're to work. It was set up to stand as "a radical antitype to commercial social networks" that only cultivates perfection (Krüger 2019). 4chan became a forum where people would post "dumb stuff", and was quickly over-flooded with disturbing images and videos, a practice that became known as "crapflooding", leading 4chan to be known as "the asshole of the internet" (Krüger 2019). The users of these spaces wanted them to stay outside of the mainstream and the more disturbing their posts, the more they managed to keep away those who couldn't handle it. These spaces therefore became sanctuaries where a certain group of Internet users could perform their desired transgression to an audience of only likeminded individuals, presumed to be male and white. "On 4chan women are identified as 'the other' and are meant to be "consumed, not interacted with" (Krüger 2019). Here "women are discussed in a way that presumes their absence, and users seemed to treat the anonymous space as a place where grievances could be aired against women to a sympathetic implicitly male audience" (Nagle 2017, 128). These sites have grown out of the culture created by the early white, male Internet adopters, where their behaviors assume a position of superiority and authority over others. Much of what we today call 'Internet culture', such as vocabulary, humor (memes) and online communities are created and developed on these sites, and subsequently trickle down to more mainstream sites such as Facebook and Twitter. They have provided a whole generation with a new type of interaction that no one has seen before, but one that is based in the original white, male Internet blueprint.

These sites allow for anyone to "put on a mask" and be someone different than who they are. Communications scholar Whitney Phillips relates this to Erving Goffman's concept of 'front', "which represents the emotional and spatial difference between a performer and what is performed" (2016, 35). 'Front stage' behavior is shaped by the setting and the role one plays, and on the Internet people can create situations and roles that they would never play out in real life. This allows for online behavior to be much less self-censored. Therefore allowing for actions that normally would have resulted in social consequences. As a result many Internet users form an understanding of their Internet, or front stage, identity as separate from their 'real self'. Online actions are therefore not so much a reflection of

oneself, but rather the setting they are played out in. In this way Internet actions are a performance for other Internet users, both those who are ‘in the know’ and those who are not.

These online spaces have created a culture of what Phillips calls *lulz*, an adaption of the Internet slang *lol*, an abbreviation of ‘laughing out loud’ (2016). Phillips argues that to some Internet users, dubbed *trolls*, actions taken online are often much more about the response they provoke rather than the actions themselves. Any action is permitted if it serves in getting a response out of someone. This leads to a flood of controversial or offensive statements being posted in these online spaces, as these are the ones that incite the most passionate or aggressive reactions. It is these reactions that trolls derive pleasure, or *lulz*, out of. A troll doesn’t have to agree with the offensive or controversial things they themselves are posting, they just “did it for the *lulz*” (Phillips 2015, 27). In this sense “trolls frame themselves as the sole authority on what their words mean” (Phillips 2015, 97), resulting in an overall feeling of complete protection from the backlash that may result from their words. Because even if they are called out on online they are “protected” by saying that they didn’t mean it, you just fell into their trap, they wanted a reaction, and they got it, so therefore they win. They get the *lulz*, In this sense trolling reveals “the destructive implications of [internet] freedom and liberty, which when taken to their selfish extreme, can best be understood as ‘freedom for *me*’ ‘liberty for *me*’” where ones own actions are protected and excused, but might very much infringe upon the freedom of others (Phillips 2015, 134). “The idea that a person has the right, and perhaps an obligation, to take advantage of others for their own personal gain is the American dream at its ugliest – and is exactly the dynamic that most offensive forms of trolling replicate” (Phillips 2015, 134).

Of course, not all Internet users are trolls. Some, like the men of the manosphere, really do mean the controversial and offensive things they say. However, because of trolling culture, they are protected in much the same way as trolls. If you are confronted with your distasteful online actions, you can simply blame it on the other person not understanding Internet culture. Through trolling, humor and *lulz* online behavior has become fetishized, in a Marxist sense (Phillips 2015). Phillips cites Christie Davies stating “mass mediation engenders emotional distance, and that emotional distance lends itself to detached, fetishistic humor” (Phillips 2015, 117). In the same way a commodity is fetishized and removed from its original context through capitalism, the actions of a troll are removed from the social and emotional conditions surrounding it (Phillips 2015, 30). Just as a consumer can only relate to the product in front of them, a troll can only relate to the *lulz* of their actions, the pleasure they will derive from getting a reaction. The use of offensive slurs for example is widespread

online, but this use has, to the user, no connection to the slurs violent history, it is only a means to an end, the end of lulz. So within this framework where part of the online community are actively *trolling* and in turn detaching their actions from their context, everyone else can also hide their own actions behind this cultural veil. This, coupled with a disassociation of oneself from ones online persona, allows for online actions to be perceived as without consequences, and as a result the anonymous Internet has become the perfect environment for offensive, extremist and taboo discourses.

Through these discourses a certain type of language has become popularized. A language “heavily laced with expletives, profanity and explicit imagery of sexual violence” (Jane 2014, 558). The words used are “calculated to offend, it is often difficult and disturbing to read, and it falls well outside the norms of what is usually considered ‘civil’” (Jane 2014, 558). Media scholar Emma Alice Jane has studied these discourses and the language used and has coined the term *e-bile* (Jane 2012). Claiming that a normalization of e-bile has made it “acceptable to express even the most minor disagreement through the most affronting, offensive and aggressive sexualized venom” (Jane 2014, 566). E-bile is also largely gendered, serving as a new unapologetic articulation of old sexualizing misogyny and homophobic epithets (Jane 2014, 559). E-bile is today so common in online spaces that women say “being harassed by sexist trolls” is just an inevitable part of being visible online while female (Jane 2014, 563), echoing the notion that the internet is not for women. Jane also notes that while it often comes from countless different sources the content and wording is strikingly similar, almost formulaic (Jane 2014). Over and over again men utilize “the rape threat, the snuff fantasy and an endless chain of accusations that yet another ‘slut’ is a ‘dumb bitch-ass cumdumpster’” (Jane 2014, 566). Through this the prevalence and quantity of e-bile “has the effect of erasing the individual and coalescing all these mephitic voices into one” (Jane 2014, 566), making the Internet seem as though it is just one big guy telling you to ‘go back to the kitchen, cunt’.

E-bile is a result of what John Suler has dubbed *toxic disinhibition*, when the Internet allows for people to visit “territories they would never explore in the real world” and exhibit behavior they would never act out in offline spaces (Suler 2004, 321). This is part of a larger theory he develops on the concept of the online disinhibition effect. According to Suler, people have a tendency to act out of character when engaging online. Anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, and a minimization of authority allows users to see online behaviors as both separate from “the rest of their lives”, and without immediate, or any consequence (Suler 2004). People are therefore more inclined to seek out spaces and behaviors that would be

considered taboo or off-limits in normal interactions (Suler 2004). However, Suler stresses that this disinhibition is not “the revealing of an underlying ‘true self’”, rather saying that the unique environment that is created online brings out another “dimensions of that person [...] revealed within a different situational context” (Suler 2004, 325). Thus, trolls may not be as disconnected from their actions as they themselves believe, rather the online space appeals to a different, less restrained, side of them.

Although we may feel and act as though the Internet exists as a separate world than the one we live our everyday lives in, the reality is that the online space very much reflects real, current cultural and social tensions. Phillips makes the analogy that “trolls are in fact the strangest possible canary in the most unexpected of coalmines” (2015, 45), where their behaviors “mirror - and therefore shine an uncomfortable spotlight on – conventional behaviors and attitudes” (Phillips 2015, 115). So while the disinhibition effect complicates the individual’s personal relation to their online actions, they still represent current cultural trends. Hence, a user of e-bile may believe that their misogynistic online rhetoric in no way reflects their true character, they are just trolling, but the prevalence of e-bile online may still signify a resurgence of sexism. Phillips urges us to think of trolls and other controversial Internet users as agents of cultural digestion rather than outliers who do not represent our society. For while they “certainly amplify the ugly side of mainstream behavior” they “aren’t pulling their materials, chosen targets, or impulses from the ether” (Phillips 2015, 168), rather “they unearth the biases, hypocrisies, and deep inconsistencies that compose mainstream culture” (Phillips 2015, 136). Making the quite literal connection to the human digestive system and how our ‘shit’ is an amalgamation of the things we are fed (Phillips 2015).

Phillips goes on to describe how if you want to understand “shifting political, historical and economic sands” (Phillips 2015, 137) you need to “study the content trolls adopt, the jokes trolls make, and the groups trolls most frequently target” (Phillips 2015, 135). As most trollish behavior is characterized as joking its important to understand how humor comes into play in online. Phillips draws on the work of Gershon Legman as she presents the assertion “tell me what kind of jokes you make, [...] and I’ll tell you what kind of world you live in” (Phillips 2015, 38). Not only does Internet humor serve to reflect the state of overall society, it also reflects your own grouping within society, as well as serving a community building function. Hubler and Bell argue that humor “serves a critical ethos function in online communities” (2003, 277) and that group formation comes from “a process of situating individual ethos appeals in relation to each other, so that a common, group ethos emerges” (Hubler & Bell 2003, 287). Essentially stating that group belonging is mediated on

whether or not one can understand and display the same humor as other group members. This, when seen in combination with Phillips' claims means that a certain type of humor can be understood as the glue that seals the group together, but also that this humor is what signifies the groups social, cultural and political standing. And lastly, that the existence of certain groups, with a certain humor is an indication of larger cultural and social mores.

Cultural scholar Angela Nagle conducts an investigation of two such groups in her book *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*, where she addresses the online battle between Feminist social justice warriors (SJW) and the anti-feminists alt-right manosphere. Here she explores how two seemingly niche online communities instigated the "online culture wars that formed the political sensibilities of a generation", and eventually decided the 2016 US presidential election (Nagle 2017, 17). In Nagle's opinion it was not the sole existence of the two communities that created this cultural and political environment, but the interplay between them; each one provoking the other into more and more extreme views and in turn elevating each others prominence.

The online culture war was fought over issues of "feminism, sexuality, gender identity, racism, free speech and political correctness" (Nagle 2017, 9). SJW on the left would gather on platforms such as tumblr to discuss various oppressions and privileges, creating an 'economy of virtue' that ran on being as politically correct as possible (Nagle 2017). They would take every chance they got to call out social injustice, and throughout the years these callouts became increasingly militant. It was no longer enough to just chastise those who perpetuated purposeful misogyny, racism or homophobia. People who mistakenly used the wrong terminology or who were exposed as having said a slur fifteen years ago were penalized just the same, regardless of good intentions or apologetic disposition. Much like the men of the manosphere SJW bonded through distaste for others, especially straight white cisgender men.

Parallel to, and in reaction to this the manosphere was growing. SJW stood in stark contrast to the culture of trolling and lulz that existed in masculinist spaces, becoming the perfect prey for getting those craved reactions. The more tumblr feminists would fret over the manosphere e-bile the more fuel the manosphere got to justify their anti-feminist stance. Although these two groupings represented two outer extremes on the cultural and political spectrum, they each became extreme examples for what the 'other side' stood for. The duality and polarization within politics, especially in America, also furthered this notion. As a SJW you could point to the most extreme misogynistic parts of the manosphere and use that to criticize 'the right', and the manosphere would respond in kind to criticize 'the left'. They

insisted that the liberal establishment was enacting censorship upon them as they were ‘forced’ to speak and behave politically correct. Under the guise of free speech these men would argue that that feminism and the left were threatening their rights, and in response they extending their use of misogynistic, racist and homophobic rhetoric, but now as a form or protest. Nagle describes this as a use of the ‘politics of transgression’ (2017). During political turmoil transgression against an oppressor has long been a tool of political disobedience, used to call attention to injustices (Nagle 2017). For the right, and the manosphere, this was a win, by adopting the “aesthetics of counterculture, transgression and nonconformity” they positioned themselves as the victims in a cultural war against a group who traditionally had taken the role as the oppressed (Nagle 2017, 38).

Nagle’s outline of the online culture wars shows how Internet infrastructure has enabled “the festering undergrowth of dehumanizing reactionary online politics” (2017, 142), but also how these politics have real consequences in the offline sphere. Just as Phillips theorizes, online behavior is not in fact separate from the real world. Nagle’s case shows how “trolls’ actions highlight the more ambivalent aspects of the dominant culture” (Phillips 2015, 50). The blossoming of far right and far left online spaces were not isolated obscure communities, but rather a premonition of the direction in which western politics and culture were to progress. They signaled the discontent that people felt with the status quo, and served as an alternative to mainstream media, that no longer represented the population. This discontent materialized in the US as the 2016 shock election presidential election of nonconformist candidate Donald Trump (Nagle 2017). What many thought was an isolated Internet problem that needed to be contained, turned out to be a mechanism forming the political sensibilities of a whole generation (Nagle 2017). The “trolling problem” turned out to be a “culture problem” and by mistaking the “symptom for the disease” its effect was greatly miscalculated (Phillips 2015, 153). It is therefore important that even through the perceived separation of ones online self and ones real self, we as academics regard what happens on the Internet as going on in the real world, reflecting real problems and having real consequences.

Gamergate

One of the main victories of the manosphere, known as #Gamergate (GG), was played out in 2014. GG was an “online campaign in which male gamers and [the manosphere] used social media to systematically attack feminists, female video game critics, and developers”

(Marwick and Caplan 2018, 547). Videogames had long been culturally categorized as belonging to a masculine space, and “GG was a backlash against the diversification of gaming from a mostly-male base” (Marwick and Caplan 2018, 547). GG “participants adhered to a normatively white masculine subject position that viewed itself as being under attack from SJWs and feminists, and thus justified harassing behavior through a mantle of victimhood and appropriation of the language of identity politics” (Marwick and Caplan 2018, 547). And through victimizing themselves these men adopted a position of ethical superiority where they justified aggressive, sexualized attacks against women as reasonable, even moral modes of argumentation (Mortensen 2018). So while some claim they were having a civil debate about the “ethics of video game journalism”, a 2016 study by Media scholars Jean Bruggess and Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández of the #gamergate hashtag proved that it was mostly used to present content related to spreading misogynistic ideas, anti-feminist sentiments, and harassing women.

GG became an example of how these online communities were able to organize and mobilize, even without formal structure or leadership. The resulting performance became known as *networked misogyny* (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016). One of the early targets of the manosphere and its networked misogyny in the lead up to GG was games critic Anita Sarkeesian. Sarkeesian chose to speak out against the sexism within the gaming industry, prompting immediate backlash from gamers, eager to protect *their* space. She became the ‘villain’ to hordes of online gamers and redpillers, and has because of this “endured years of jaw-droppingly dark and disturbing personal abuse” (Nagle 2017, 29). Not only was she bombarded with online hate comments threatening to rape, violate and murder her, but “pornographic images of her being raped by video game characters were created” as well as a “video game in which players could punch Anita’s face until it was bloodied” (Nagle 2017, 29). Her address and other personal information were also leaked to the public, and threats were sent to public venues where she was set to appear (Alberty 2014). At the XOXO conference in 2014 Sarkeesian reflected on the situation by stating that the perpetrators of her abuse “do not see themselves as perpetrators at all” but rather as “Noble Warriors” who will “deny that women are being threatened at all” (Newton 2014). Within this mindset lays the danger of the manosphere. By appropriating victimhood and borrowing the “language of systemic oppression from social justice movements” the manosphere “intentionally [obfuscate] the issues at stake” and introduce “confusion about who, precisely, is being oppressed” (Zuckerberg 2018, 41). This serves to negate much of the abuse they perpetrate, and misrepresent the situation as a fair fight.

Sarkeesian herself theorized that the social component of online networked misogyny is a “powerful motivating factor that works to provide incentives for perpetrators to participate and to actually escalate the attacks by earning the praise and approval of their peers (TEDx Talks 2012). GG was the proof that this system of escalation worked. Eventually GG became so big that it was no longer understood where it had started and who were responsible (Nagle 2017). Because of the reach and anonymity of the Internet women were daily being bombarded with threats and harassment, without knowing where it was coming from. Even when knowing the identity of some of the perpetrators it did not matter, when 100’s of others were doing the same thing one could not personally blame these individuals. It had become too big to contain. GG proved that when desired these communities could expand their reach to an uncontrollable level, and there was true power in that.

It also served to “politicize a broad group of young people, mostly boys,” who previously had little interest in politics (Nagle 2017, 33). The ability of GG to present feminism as a threat to something these boys held dear (videogame culture), allowed for them to engage a previously politically uninterested group to “organize tactics around the idea of fighting back against” the oppressive ‘left’ (Nagle 2017, 33). In painting the situation as if “women, gays, blacks, Asians, and the disabled” were going to directly “ruin the life-source of their [white cis male] subcultural identity” the perpetrators were able to engage those outside of the manosphere core (Krüger 2019). This rise in engagement also served to bring “gamers, rightist [4chan] culture, anti-feminism and the online far right closer to mainstream discussion” (Nagle 2017, 33). GG proved that what many had dismissed as just niche ironic trolling and edgy online humor was actually real misogynistic, anti-feminist and reactionary political views that could cause real damage (Krüger 2019). Through GG the manosphere marked themselves as a growing political/cultural threat within a self-imagined progressive society.

Incels and The Blackpill

It is within this online cultural environment that we find Incels. What started out as AICP, one woman’s search for solidarity in her struggle of being involuntarily celibate, has mutated through its interaction with masculine Internet culture, the online disinhibition effect, and conflict with online feminism to become what Donna Zuckerberg describes as “one of the darkest corners of the Red Pill world” (2018, 179). Incels have taken the misogynistic

worldview of the red pill manosphere to its extreme, positioning themselves at the outer boundaries of an environment that already falls way outside of the norm (Krüger 2019). With the Internet providing them an anonymous sanctuary for their e-bile, provocative debates and anti-feminist self-victimizing propaganda incels have blossomed into an “extremist group that embraces misogyny as ideology and treats women as despicable objects” (Gentile 2018, 703). In the subsequent chapter I will expand upon the radical, extremist, and violent aspects of incels.co, but first I explore the worldview they have created for themselves.

Although part of the manosphere, incels do not adhere to the redpill. Rather they have adapted the pill analogy to develop another, more nihilistic, set of beliefs known as the blackpill. The blackpill is a “cruelly superficial” theory of social interaction and contemporary mating behaviors based in a hierarchy of looks. Incels believe that their physical appearance leads society to mistreat them, and that being unattractive has doomed them to a life of isolation, loneliness and misery. This hierarchy is fixed and the blackpill states that no amount of skill or self-improvement will change the way women and society look at you. In “taking the blackpill” incels admit to themselves that “its over”, that no amount of effort will change the way they are perceived, and that they may as well give up and LDAR (lay down and rot). Under the blackpill ones entire world is narrowed down “to a harsh, suffocating plane of power dynamics, in which sexual attraction determines all” (Hines 2019).

Incels have an understanding of contemporary mating behaviors as a capitalist market. Everyone has a sexual market value (SMV), which determines what you have access to in society. Under the blackpill it is believed that only a certain amount of men have enough SMV to attract women for sexual and romantic relationships, and that those who are left are therefore involuntarily celibate. Using their own adaption of the Pareto principle¹ incels believe that there exists an 80/20 rule within sexual dynamics, where 20% of men have 80% of all sex with women (Castle 2019), leaving only 20% for those with inferior SMV, dubbed ‘normies’, and eventually 0% to incels who have 0 SMV. This rule has also been contested and disputed among the users of incels.co, some stating that the rule is closer to 95/5 or 99/1, where the majority of sex is allocated only to an elite few men. Within the Incelosphere these elite few are known as ‘Chads’. Chad is a caricature of a sexually attractive man, he is tall, he is muscular, and has a strong masculine bone structure.

¹ The original “Pareto Principle (or the 80/20 rule) is named after Italian economist Vifredo Pareto’s observation that 80% of the land in Italy was by 20% of the population” (Castle 2019)

According to the blackpill Chad is always handed sex upon a silver platter by every women he engages, as a result of her biological urge to reproduce with only the best male specimens. Incels are highly preoccupied with categorizing attractiveness on a ten-point scale, and believe that every heterosexual has a 'looksmatch' in the other sex. If you are a 3/10 then you should be able to, and deserve to, have sexual relationships with another 3/10. However, incels believe that women exercise *hypergamy*, where women who are 3/10 will only sleep with men who are 4/10 or higher. They believe that this innate predisposition in women prevents incels from being able to engage sexually with their looksmatch. As Chad is taking up 80% (or 95% or 99%) of the sexual market, normies are starved of sex and will therefore go below their looksmatch to get it, allowing for women to always have sexual options. As such, it is impossible for women to be incels.

Incels believe all normies to be 'cucked', a term adopted from the pornographic fetish of cuckolding, where a man derives pleasure from the humiliation that comes from watching his girlfriend/wife have sex with another man. This practice serves to degrade the man, and incels believe it is this feeling women are placing upon the normies they have relationships with, as a woman will never truly want to have sex with anyone but Chad. Therefore when she settles for a normie this is only to manipulate and use him. Incels summarize this as "AF/BB": 'Alpha fucks/Beta bucks', where chad is 'alpha' and normies are 'beta', implying that a beta will only 'fuck' if they pay 'bucks' for it (Krüger 2019). Not just referring to the idea of hiring a sex worker, but that a beta will have to 'pay' something to be in a relationship with a woman. A woman who dates a beta will make him a cuck buy cheating on him, allowing him to raise and financially provide for here children, and 'divorce raping' him (a common incel term for a woman receiving assets after a divorce). She will also always have disrespected her current beta partner by spending her youth serving as a "cumreceptacle" for Chad. Incels see a woman's sexuality is a form of disrespect to her future husband/partner, and as such incels believe that within our current society most men are trapped as cucks, and are doing themselves a disfavor by allowing women to take advantage of them in this way.

To this ideal Incels often romanticize sharia law and its oppression of freedoms for women, and they see western progressivism as an enemy that has allowed women to make their own choices at the detriment of society. There is also a romantication of the developing world, and especially South-East Asia, where the financial despair of some women make them inclined to join controlling relationships with western men. This tendency is known as 'SEAmassing', and the women are degraded as 'noodle whores'. Even more disturbing is the notion of the 'lolipill', where some incels will claim that prepubescent girls, ages 12-13, or

younger, would be the best “girlfriend experience” because as a child she would still need to rely on them to provide and would desire to serve them, so that they can live out their masculine role as the provider.

Being exposed to the incel mindset can be shocking and may seem outrageous at first, or even second, glance. However, it’s important to remember that incels and their worldviews have not just appeared out of thin air, but resulted from an “intense feeling of sexual and social powerlessness” (Krüger 2019). The incel community is culmination of insecure, lonely and emotionally stunted boys who’s access to available masculine ideals has been limited over time, and who have instead grown up surrounded by an offensive, ironic, anti-feminist culture of lulz. Incels have grown up online, engaging with “crapflooding” and trolling from an early age, becoming desensitized to the Internet’s e-bile, misogyny, racism, and vile rhetoric. In this space nothing has been off limits, and many have felt protected under the guise of heavy irony and humor. However, as more and more people have engaged with content meant to be deeply veiled in irony, this veil has been lifted to reveal true misogyny and racism in these online communities (Krüger 2019). These issues have only grown as the community has mobilized in opposition to SJWs and political correctness culture, and have become normalized through their adoption and appropriation of victim mentality. According to Jodi Dean (2009), a researcher within the field of communication, the role as victim holds two social functions. Firstly, the victim is always on the morally correct side, as no one is able to deny them their suffering (Dean 2009). Secondly, the victim has no political responsibilities, as their suffering makes them too weak and wounded to take responsibility (Dean 2009). This role allows for incels to negate their own malice through a framing of their own victimhood and oppression, and in doing so rationalizing and forgiving themselves for their own misogyny and hatred. Because they believe they are at the bottom of the social hierarchy they allow themselves to disrespect anyone, defining this as a rebellious act of social transgression towards an authority. As Dean writes, a victim is never to blame for the violence committed in their name (2009).

The Advantage of Attractiveness

Statistics from 2018 show that 28 % of young men between the ages of 18 and 30 in the United States have been celibate for 1 year or longer (Ingraham 2019). Current research in Norway shows how almost 1-in-4 men are childless by age 45, compared to only 13% of women (Jensen & Østby 2014). This, despite the fact that both genders express equally that

children are an important part of life, and few choose to intentionally stay childless (Amundsen 2014). One theory to explain this disproportion is that women vastly outperforming men in the completion of higher education (Buchmann & DiPrete 2006), and because of this they are in a much better position to provide for themselves, and make mating choices out of desire instead of necessity. This has led to what Lichter, Price and Swigert call a mismatch in the marriage market (2019). Women in 2019 have a “large deficit in the supply of potential male spouses” (Lichter et.al. 2019), as their preference is to find a man with a higher educational level than themselves (Neyt et.al. 2019).

Additionally, incels theorize, attractiveness does have a say in both relationship status, as well as social and economic status. In 1972 Dion, Berscheid, and Walster, studied the “beauty is good” hypothesis, finding that as humans we attribute positive qualities to more attractive people, and negative qualities to those we deem unattractive. A 2000 study expanded upon this theory, proving that not only do we evaluate attractive people more positively, but we also treat them better, and in turn attractive people “exhibit more positive behaviors and traits than unattractive” people (Langlois et.al. 2000, 390). Still, physically attractive individuals believe more strongly in the just-world hypothesis (Westfall et.al. 2018). So while attractive people are being treated objectively better because of their physical appearance, they are still more likely to believe “that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get” (Westfall et.al. 2018). Attractiveness as a teen/young adult has also been linked to higher income, higher employment status, and the likelihood of owning a house, as well as being a being predictor for if one was married by age 36 (Benzeval et.al. 2013). Men who are tall are also more likely to be in a higher socioeconomic class, as well as more likely to have one or more long term romantic partners, and be less likely to remain childless (Nettle 2002).

However, in 2008 only 10% of men reported that they had been celibate for the past year (Ingraham 2019), indicating that something has shifted within the last decade. One likely explanation, at which incels often point, is the advent of visual dating apps, such as tinder and bumble. In 2019 “meeting online” has become the “main way heterosexual couples in the United States meet” (Rosenfeld et.al. 2019). On a dating app the selection is virtually endless, and although most people present a visual representations of themselves, information about personality is scarce. Incels claim this has effectively lowered their dating chances to 0, as behavior on dating apps is highly gendered. While men use dating apps like tinder to cast a wide net, “liking” as many people as possible to maximize their ability to get a match, women are highly selective in who they “like”, only choosing to “swipe” right on, on

average, about 5% of the men they see (Neyt et.al. 2019). This has created a disparity in the dating market where women are showered with “likes”, while men find that they get little response back. This has given way to an online discussion of “tinder data”, where men will post the statistical breakdown of their swipe, like, match, and date history, to visualize their lack of success in such a dating medium (Peake 2020). As such, this data is used by incels to support the “it’s over” hypothesis, than even if one where to swipe thousands of times, a relationship is out of reach if you are not one of the 5% women choose to swipe on.

4. Radicalization

Radicalization as a theoretical concept exists as an “analytical paradigm to interpret and explain the phenomena of political violence” (Malthaner 2017, 369). It looks at the “cognitive and ideological transformations” at the individual level that lead to the “gradual adoption of ‘extremist’ ideas that promote and eventually lead to acts of terrorism” (Malthaner 2017, 370). On a more general psychological level radicalization is conceptualized “as a dimension of increasing extremity of beliefs, feelings, and behaviors in support of intergroup conflict and violence” (McCauley and Moskalenko 2008, 415), with “terrorism [as] the ultimate consequence of the radicalization process” (Silber & Bhatt 2007, 16). The term also refers to the “process through which individuals adopt increasingly extreme ideology”, where an ideology is “an organization of opinions, attitudes, and values—a way of thinking about man and society” (Pelletier & Drozda-Senkowska 2020, 2). Throughout this chapter I will present and evaluate the claim that young men, through online interaction with the incel community, are being radicalized into adopting extremist ideas that promote political violence.

The Link Between Incels, Radicalization and Terrorism

From an outsider perspective the overall narrative *about* the incels has largely been one-dimensional. Both within academia and the mainstream media, as well as the political sphere, the incel phenomenon has been presented as a dangerous issue of domestic terrorism and online radicalization (Baele et.al. 2019, Bernard & Fasquelle 2019, Cottee 2018, Valenti 2018, DiBranco 2020). Within the last couple of years both UK and US counter-terror forces have begun looking into incels as potential national security threats (TDPS 2020, Evans 2020). In addition, earlier this year, the International Center for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) – classified incels as a dangerous example of a male supremacist terrorist threat, “primarily in the US, but also in Canada and Europe” (DiBranco 2020). In the ICCT rapport Alex DiBranco, the cofounder and executive director of the Institute for Research on Male Supremacism, presents incel-related terrorism and makes the claim that “misogyny and aggrieved male sexual entitlement” has become a “driver of violence” within incel communities (2020). She points to Elliot Rodger, Alek Minassian and Scott Beierle as examples of such violence, noting that Rodger, who killed six and injured fourteen at the

University of California, Santa Barbra in 2014 left behind a manifesto in which he waged a “war on women” to “punish all females for the crime of depriving [him] of sex” (Rodger 2014). Minassian is also known to have pledged support to “the incel rebellion”, as well as Rodger himself, in his 2018 attack where he vowed to “overthrow all the Chads and Stacies” by driving a van into a crowd in Toronto, Canada, killing ten and injuring seventeen (DiBranco 2020). DiBranco likens these attacks to that of Anders Breivik, a right-wing extremist who killed 77 people in Oslo and Utøya in 2011, citing his manifesto, which described “radical feminism” as a “key, or even a dominant element” in the leftist cultural “threat taking over Europe” (2020), DiBranco’s uses the example of Breivik to connect incel ideology – which she denotes as male supremacy – to known violent and extremist ideologies such as Breivik’s white supremacy.

This incel ‘worldview’ is examined in the work of political scientists Stephane J. Baele, Lewys Brace and Travis G. Coan. By undertaking a qualitative and quantitative content analysis of the posts on incels.me (a past iteration of incels.co that has since been transferred to the .co server), Baele, Brace and Coan, conclude that the discourses on the site “constitute a very specific shared worldview that has all the features of an extremist mindset” (2019, 2). The authors believe that this worldview presents a “support and motivation for violence” which “results from the particular structure [it] presents in terms of social categories and causal narratives” (Baele et.al. 2019, 1). As we have seen previously, the social categories present in the incel worldview consist of a three-tiered hierarchy, where “alpha” Chads and Stacies are at the top, “beta” “normies” are in the middle, and incels fall to the bottom of the status ladder. This hierarchy is static and without permeable boundaries. Such a worldview is categorized by Baele, Brace and Coan as an “authoritarian foreclosure”, where a “dichotomized ‘us versus them’ thinking” has the potential to spur violence (Schwartz, Dunkel, and Waterman, 2009, 544, in Baele et.al 2019, 3). Thus, “some groups are perceived as ‘friends’, others as ‘enemies’, with no possibility of a grey zone” (Baele at.al. 2019). For incels this grouping of friends and enemies is then placed within a narrative of oppression, “with nefarious actors involved in a conspiratorial agenda against them” depriving them of sex, relationships, and social connection (Baele at.al. 2019, 16). Lastly, Baele, Brace and Coan claim that this oppression narrative “rationalize[s] their predicament” and serves to justify a desire for retaliation, retribution, and revenge toward the oppressive social group, thus inciting and condoning violence.

The arguments made by Baele and colleagues serve to further paint incels as potential violent terrorists, while also beginning to explore the mechanisms by which this violence can

emerge. The adoption of a worldview such as the one Baele, Brace and Coan lay forth can be referred to as radicalization. Throughout the remainder of this chapter I will take a deeper look at the process of radicalization, and how it's theoretical models may be applied to the community I have observed on incels.co.

Who Is Radicalized?

In the year 2020 over 4.5 billion people are living with Internet access (statista.com), and theoretically all 4.5 billion of them have access to the same websites, sources and communities that incels, and other online extremist communities have access to. However, only a miniscule fraction of Internet users come to join these groups, adopt their ideologies, and claim their identities. This, because the nature of the content, and its hateful and violent message, will only appeal to a certain few. Works on radicalization explore the nature of such susceptibility.

A certain past of personal or identity crisis may make people more inclined to seek out and be susceptible to radicalization – “the gradual adoption of ‘extremist’ ideas” (Malthaner 2017, 370). In his book *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West*, author and researcher on Islamic movements, Quintan Wiktorowicz sketches out the individual pathways that open one up to an extremist worldview. When speaking on Muslim extremists, Wiktorowicz lays out a framework of the mindset that allows these individuals to become radicalized; initially a *personal crisis* makes the subject vulnerable and will produce a *cognitive opening* that allows for the individual to question their previously held beliefs and begin a process of a search for new meaning (2005). This quest for meaning is referred to as *religious seeking*, as in the case of Muslim radicals they choose to seek out meaning through religion (Wiktorowicz 2005). This concept can be extended to include other non-religious extremists as well, where their personal predispositions instead lead them towards alt-right ideas, or Internet subcultures. Of course, this is not to say that every person who goes through a personal crisis will turn to or be open to extremist ideologies. Rather it's presented as a “risk- and background-factor that can under certain circumstances make individuals vulnerable to radicalization” (Malthaner 2017, 383)

This notion is furthered by psychologist John Horgan, as he discusses the primary risk factors to radicalization. These include a sense of personal identification with victimhood and dissatisfaction with ones current occupation or pursuits, as well as “the presence of some emotional vulnerability, in terms of feelings of anger, alienation [...], and

disenfranchisement” (2008, 84-85). These are psychological vulnerabilities that “increase the likelihood of involvement with violent extremism” (Malthaner 2017, 383). Such psychological vulnerabilities may lead to a distancing of oneself from previous social and psychological ties, and place the individual with a need for new meaning, identity, and spaces of belonging (Malthaner 2017, 383). This stage is described by Silber and Bhatt, senior intelligence analysts at the NYPD intelligence division, as “pre-radicalization”, “the life situation” prior to radicalization, but in which the individual becomes vulnerable to extremist ideology (2007). This vulnerability comes from a dissatisfaction with one's personal status-quo. Feelings of alienation, anger, victimization or disenfranchisement in one's current position will foster a need for something new, a new belonging, a new identity, a new belief system. Here extremist ideology comes in to try and provide that belonging, identity and belief system.

“Pre-radicalization” incels are consumed with their own feelings of failure regarding sexual and romantic relationships. They are highly dissatisfied with this situation, and they experience this failure as a personal crisis. In his article on Alek Minassian, criminologist and terrorism scholar Simon Cottee sees “the sense of shame from not being able to perform a culturally approved sex role” as “a key to understanding his murderous rage” (2018). Cottee makes this argument by referring to sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer. To Juergensmeyer “nothing is more intimate than sexuality, and no greater humiliation can be experienced than failure over what one perceives to be one's sexual role” (2003, 198). He perceives acts of terrorism as “forms of symbolic empowerment for men whose traditional sexual roles—their very manhood—is perceived to be at stake” (2003, 198). Cottee goes on to explain how incels have “internalized” their lack of sex as a “grave personal insult” and therefore “feel unfulfilled and indignant, and also weak and unmanly” (2018). These personal failures are heightened by the societal belief in clear-cut and traditional gender-roles, and, not least, by their personal fixation on sex. Incels believe that everyone else is constantly having sex, and see sex the main driver of social action. On incels.co every discussion is eventually brought back to sexuality. The men who frequent the forum express how they are unable to enjoy nonsexual pleasures such as friendships, a new job, Christmas or birthday celebrations, or even their favorite “2D media” because their failure in the sexual market is all-consuming to them. This sexual frustration – perceived as unjust – becomes the main focus of their lives.

Ariane Bernard and Enzo Fasquelle, doctoral students at l'École Doctorale of Political Science in Paris, examine this sexual frustration in relation to that of Muslim jihadists, claiming that much of the same sexual frustration can be seen there. They begin by defining

frustration as resulting from a gap between expectations and realities, continuing to say that incels and jihadists both experience a disconnect in sexual expectations (Bernard & Fasquelle 2019). Sexuality is both an intimate issue experienced individually, but also a societal issue, governed by evolving discourses and standards that are internalized during socialization processes (Bernard & Fasquelle 2019). In our society everyone is socialized to desire and seek out sex. However, incels and strict Muslims are unable to fulfill these desires. For incels this is about their own perceived unattractiveness, while for Muslims their religion forbids this form of action. On an individual level, this sexual frustration contributes to a more general feeling of humiliation, but when faced with a justifying ideology this personal feeling of humiliation can turn into a source of collective mobilization (Bernard & Fasquelle 2019). Bernard and Fasquelle echo Juergenmeyer's point by outlining this frustration as an obstacle to their manhood and societal role, stating that this may make individuals susceptible to violent ideologies, as violence becomes an instrument to reclaim a masculine and sexual power.

These personal frustrations and humiliations serve as individual pathways towards radicalization and involvement with extremist groups. However, specific social groups can also have certain vulnerabilities to radicalization. When exploring background factors to radicalization it's therefore important to also examine the social environmental conditions within the society the extremist group inhabits. The effects of repression by and confrontation with other social groups and countermovements make particular social groups vulnerable to radicalization and the use of political violence (Della Porta 1992, 1995). Psychologists McCauley and Moskaleiko believe that group radicalization "may be associated with a syndrome of beliefs about the current situation and its history" (2008, 416). A social group will position themselves within a certain societal structure claiming, "we are a special or chosen group (superiority) who have been unfairly treated and betrayed (injustice), no one else cares about us or will help us (distrust), and the situation is dire—our group and our cause are in danger of extinction (vulnerability)" (McCauley and Moskaleiko 2008, 416). Within this mental framework the group perceives themselves as experiencing a form of discrimination, oppression and marginalization that allows them to vilify and detest the dominant social group, rationalizing a violent revolt against them.

Psychologists Milan Obaidi and colleagues looked at this concept of group marginalization as they examined endorsement of extremism in Western-born Muslims, finding that "group-based relative deprivation" was a key factor in such endorsement (Obaidi et.al. 2019). Western-born Muslims saw "members of their group" as having "less than what

they are entitled to”, in comparison to their non-Muslim peers (Obaidi et.al. 2019, 597). Building upon previous research on group injustice and violence Obaidi et.al. concluded that this “experience of group-based relative deprivation” when “accompanied by anger or contempt” lead to a “greater endorsement of violence” (2019, 602). French political scientist Olivier Roy theorizes that these Western-born Muslims are experiencing an isolating ‘otherness’ when growing up in Europe. The “cultural disconnection” between their western lifestyle and the “traditionalist perspective of their parents” combined with their “particular experiences of discrimination and marginalization” (bases in religion and ethnicity) leads them to be drawn to the “powerful notions of belonging and meaning inherent in radical Islamism” (as cited in Malthaner 2017, 384). Here Roy connects the feeling of being socially isolated as an ‘other’ with the propensity to seek out a feeling of belonging by identifying with a victimized group.

In further work on radicalization, Iranian-French sociologist and author Farhad Khosrokhavar theorizes extremism as a result of the “long term [effect] of stigmatization, humiliation, and insidious forms of rejection or exclusion” on a disadvantaged population (2015, 14). Extremism is motivated by a desire for activism towards a perceived oppressor, and will take a stronghold within a group whose victimization is felt strongly by its members. Radicalization within groups must therefore be studied and understood through the “broader social, cultural and historical context” in which the group is positioned in (Malthaner 2017, 384), “or, more precisely, the situation they *believe* they are in” (McCauley and Moskalenko 2008, 430). Therefore to understand the radicalization of incels, we must look at the social, cultural and historical context they place themselves in.

Sociologist and masculinities scholar Michael Kimmel explores the current social, cultural and historical context for young men in his work *Globalization and its Mal(e)contents* (2003). Kimmel argues that globalization has emasculated lower- and middle-class men in the economic North by removing the traditional masculine role as the breadwinner (2003). These men’s “world seems to have been turned upside down, their entitlements snatched from them, their rightful position in their world suddenly up for grabs” (Kimmel 2003, 617). In order to comprehend this, men have looked to those who are moving up in society, women and racial-minorities, and drawn the conclusion that these people are the ones “stealing their rightful place at the table” (Kimmel 2003, 617). As they are unable to go against the transnational geopolitical institutions responsible for their economic displacement, they instead look to “re-establish and reassert domestic and public patriarchies” (Kimmel 2003, 605). By violently restoring patriarchy “they seek to restore

[their] unquestioned entitlement, both in the domestic sphere and in the public sphere” (Kimmel 2003, 605). Kimmel argues that these men perceive what they have experienced as a “terror of emasculation” and thus may rationalize far-right terror as retaliation of this corruption. Echoing notions from Jurgensmeyer and Bernard and Fasquelle, Kimmel notes that “it is from that gendered shame that mass murderers are made” (Kimmel 2003, 617).

Kimmel’s paper, which surfaced already in 2003, seems today almost as a form of divination of the arguments posted by incels and in the manosphere more generally. As we have seen in chapter 3 the incels have proved that they are willing to rationalize misogyny by self-victimizing; this is clearly seen, for instance, in the *Gamergate* where violent harassment of women in general and Sarkeesian in particular was justified by claiming an attack was being made upon their masculine gaming community. Kimmel also saw very early how “these movements look backward, nostalgically, to a time when they [...] were able to assume the places in society to which they believed themselves entitled” (2003, 605). Such ‘politics of profound nostalgia’ (Zuckerberg 2018), are rife and widespread in the incel worldview. In their discourse the time-period right before the emergence of feminism and civil rights is often highlighted. Incels long for a time when women were still socially and financially dependent on men, and men – white men in particular – were still able to take part in the masculine ideal of blue collar labor, coming home to their doting wives every day. They believe that without this traditional dynamic “there’s literally no other reason to work”, that the only reason to participate in the labor market, or “wagecucking” as they call it, is if “you have a [girlfriend] to provide you with constant sex” at home. If not “you are practically slaving away to maintain a hellish existence as an incel”. This leaves incels to feel as though they “have no stake in this society”, that they are just “building and maintaining infrastructure that women who wouldn’t even touch you with a pole will benefit from”. The use of the word “wagecuck” is telling as it directly relates the action of working to the subject position of being a cuck. Just as a cuck is humiliated and disgraced through seeing his wife have sex, incels see themselves as humiliated and disgraced by having to work and support a system that only benefits the people who oppress them. As Horgan envisions, this causes an intense dissatisfaction with one’s occupation or pursuit. The incels see themselves as pawns in a society that has taken everything from them, yet only provides goods and services to those who have rejected and oppressed them: women. Incels view society as one big conspiracy against unattractive, unsuccessful ‘beta’ males; a scenario which they in turn rationalize as a justification for the misogynist hate they spew.

Just as Kimmel predicted, it seems as though many young men of the 21st century are emasculated and experience a “gendered shame” through their inability to step into the traditionally masculine provider role. Instead of adapting to the new global environment they focus on the disconnect between what they are able to have and what they believe they are entitled to. This is viewed not only as an exclusion from a desired social role, but as an *individual* failure. Young men’s inability to succeed has humiliated them, and this in turn opens up their minds to feelings of emotional vulnerability, anger, alienation and disenfranchisement, emotions that according to Horgan create the perfect breeding ground for susceptibility to extremist ideologies. These ideologies remove some of the personal burden of failure and instead externalize the blame.

What exacerbated this susceptibility was, as Della Porta suggested, a clash with the dominant and opposing social groups and counter movements. As we saw in chapter 3, the rise of the manosphere was in large part paralleled by the rise in radical feminism, strict PC culture, and SJWs. As men were experiencing emotional vulnerability as a result of the loss of their entitlements, society was increasingly becoming unreceptive to their plight. What these young men experienced as a deep and aggrieved loss, others were writing off as just a rightful leveling of the playing field. Men’s grievances were therefore largely dismissed or shamed, which in turn only strengthened their anger and self-perception of oppression and persecution. In her article for *The Atlantic* Angela Nagle explains how this dichotomy became a win for the extremist online alt-right:

While everyone else was telling these young white men to check their privilege, the alt-right was speaking powerfully to their millennial woes – their diminished place in society, their dwindling economic prospects, their growing alienation (2017b, 71)

Although the incel movement is only a small part of the extremist right-wing online space, they benefited from the same emotional mechanisms as Nagle describes. As a space that serves to explain and rationalize male oppression, its appeal was apparent to those whose feelings of oppression, exclusion and stigmatization had largely been dismissed.

The Process of Radicalization

Up until this point I have tried to give an account of why young men in today's Western society are vulnerable to extremist ideologies, going forward I wish to look at the process through which these boys are being radicalized. Pre-radicalization, these boys are aware of their own feelings of isolation, failure, humiliation and frustration, but they have yet to understand these emotions within the context of the extremist ideology. At this early stage the boys are vulnerable and on the lookout for a sense of meaning, understanding and closeness which they lack in their current state. Their initial goal is not to seek out extremist ideologies, rather the path towards extreme ideological start out as a common search for camaraderie and tribe (Nagle 2017b).

This search is the second step presented in the work of Silber and Bhatt, and is referred to as "Self-Identification". Self-identification is the process where the individuals "gradually gravitate away from their old identity and begin to associate themselves with like-minded individuals" (Silber & Bhatt 2007, 6). This process is likened to Wiktoriwicz's concept of religious seeking (2005). These "likeminded individuals" will often have experienced the same frustrations and vulnerabilities, and strong bonds will form based on a shared sense of oppression and injustice. These "close personal bonds" then "generate personal trust and loyalty that sustain commitment" to the group, even under immense pressure (Malthaner 2017, 377). "The process of radicalization itself, then, takes place as a group-process" among these individuals, where their intergroup dynamics transform the individual's perceptions, attitudes, values, and identities (Malthaner 2017, 380). Once these new perceptions, attitudes, values and identities are adopted the individual has reached stage 3 of Silber and Bhatt's "phases of radicalization": *Indoctrination*. Once indoctrinated the individual has fully embraced the radical ideology. Malthaner further categorizes this embrace as "cognitive radicalization", and explains how this cognitive shift "is intimately linked to social processes of dense interaction in radical networks and groups" (2017, 377).

The adoption of extreme beliefs is then a social process that happens to several individuals at once. Italian political sociologist Donatella della Porta theorizes that this adoption happens through 3 steps. (1) *Competitive escalation*, "the dynamic of competition between different groups within the same movement" (2) *Organizational compartmentalization*: "patterns of increasing social isolation and detachment" (3) *Ideological encapsulation*: "a cognitive dynamic that triggers a shift towards a more exclusive ideological framework" (Della Porta 2013, as cited in Malthaner 2017, 374). What

these steps do is create strong boundaries between the radical group and outsiders, as well as strengthen the bonds within the group. A key aspect of radicalization is this boundary between ingroups and outgroups. “What specifically characterizes extremist worldviews is their structuration around highly impermeable, sharply differentiated social categories” where ‘we’, the ingroup, is set in direct opposition to ‘they’, the outgroup (Baele et.al. 2019, 3). The worldview will motivate “individuals to think in clear-cut dichotomous categories”, where one is either good, and part of the ingroup, or bad, and part of the outgroup (Baele et.al 2019, 3). This dichotomy will then serve to justify hatred and a violent stance against the outgroup (Malthaner 2017).

The Radicalization of Incels

If we observe incels through this radicalization framework we can begin to see how the blackpill theory was formed. Displaced, vulnerable and frustrated young men came together on the Internet to seek camaraderie and understanding. Here a logic of reasoning was created to help explain their predicaments; the empowerment of women and minorities were to blame for the loss of their male entitlements. Feminism thus became the enemy, and incels stood in stark opposition to this enemy. Initially misogyny and hatred was shaped through the common lens of the Red Pill narrative, the belief that cisgender men are discriminated against in our ‘gynocentric’ Western society (Zuckerberg 2018). However, this conceptualization of society was not satisfactory to the men who would eventually become the Incelosphere. To them the Red Pill narrative was unable to explain their sexual and romantic rejection, as it still proposed that through enough manipulation and self-improvement all men could work against hypergamy. Incels therefore, in a process of competitive escalation, began the development of their own “pill”, the blackpill. This became the basis for their distinct worldview, and served to separate them from the rest of the manosphere, moving these former allies also into the category of outgroup. Currently incels view other manosphere groups as cucks, who still naively believe that there is a way that they can manipulate society and women to accept them. This leads to a stark distinction drawn by the incels between them and the larger manosphere, resulting in organizational compartmentalization.

Once isolated within their own communities incels are left to themselves, only receiving input and feedback from the people who already share their frustrations, feelings of oppression, and adhere to the explanatory logic of the blackpill ideology. This triggers an ideological encapsulation and shifts the incels ideological framework further away from the

rest of the manosphere – and even further from the mainstream. This notion is developed further by communications scholar Magdalena Wojcieszak as she “assesses the links between participation in radical and ideologically homogeneous online groups and opinion extremism” (2010, 638). Her findings indicate that “participation in radical and ideologically homogeneous online groups will increase opinion extremism among the respondents” (Wojcieszak 2010, 639), and that “people who lack exposure to oppositional views may be unable to form balanced or open-minded views” (Wojcieszak 2010, 649). Through an evaluation of neo-Nazi online communities Wojcieszak observed that:

Members polarize because they are susceptible to informational and normative influence: that is, online forums offer arguments that rationalize and reinforce members’ perspectives. Members also receive rewarding or punitive replies to their posts and, through normative pressures, might adjust their views to the norm prevalent within the group (2010, 649)

These mechanisms only serve to move the group ideology further towards the extreme, radicalizing the group, as well as the individuals within it. An example of this within the blackpill community was the discussion of the use of the words “woman” and “female”. After a senior member of the site had observed many “newcels” utilizing these terms, he created a thread categorizing such words as bluepill terminology that was not to be used on the site. The argument delivered by the senior member was that in so doing they were “suggesting [women] are somewhat on our level”. This prompted a lot of site users to apologize for their use of this terminology, and to promise to “be more careful” in the future. The proposed terms to use instead were "foid", "femoid", "roastie", "hole", "whore", and “cumdumpster”, essentially limiting the discussion and definition of women to that of disgraceful objects. This served to further dehumanize women within the incel ideology, and served to radicalize, discipline and align new members. In addition, by presenting the claim that ‘women are somewhat on our level’ as something ridiculous, the senior user clearly defines women as part of the outgroup. Further, the objectification of women designates them as something not worthy of respect and trivializes any form of mistreatment against them.

As such, the metaphor of ‘taking the blackpill’ is a perfect depiction of the process of radicalization. Dissatisfaction with your old ‘bluepill’ life and understanding of the world leads you to seek out information about a different reality, one that better explains the difficulties and problems specific to your life. In comes the Incelosphere, ready to provide

you with “arguments that rationalize and reinforce” the notion that everything is someone else’s fault, and explain exactly why you have ended up in the predicament you’re currently in (Wojcieszak 2010, 649). Now, once you’ve taken the pill, your world is only depicted a certain way, and as you continue to consume all content through this lens, it further confirms everything that you already believed.

Online Radicalization and Offline Violence

Despite scholars such as Wojcieszak observing links between the online radical communities and opinion extremism, the concept of online radicalization has been a hotly debated topic within academic theory on terrorism and political violence (Conway 2017). Currently, no sufficient evidence has been presented to directly tie “consumption of and networking around violent extremist online content [on the one hand] and adoption of extremist ideology and/or engagement in violent extremism and terrorism [on the other]” (Conway 2017). However, “high and increasing levels of always-on Internet access and the production and wide dissemination [...] of large amounts of violent extremist content online” has lead many scholars, policy makers and publics to believe that online radicalization is a rising threat (Conway 2017). This field of violent political extremist online content has long been the topic of choice for Dr. Maura Conway, Professor of International Security at Dublin City University. Conway feels strongly that “the Internet is playing significant and diverse roles in contemporary violent extremism and terrorism”, and that further research must be conducted to try and understand this role (Conway 2017, Conway et.al. 2019, Scrivens et.al. 2019).

According to Conway the difficulty “is no longer if the Internet has a role to play in contemporary violent extremism and terrorism, but” rather “determining its level of significance in contemporary violent radicalization processes” (Conway 2017, 81). She argues that just because there hasn’t been found evidence of a direct and causal link between participating in online radical milieus and cases of political violence, it does not mean that these Internet communities do not pose a threat. Conway believes that the Internet is “affecting the conduct of contemporary violent extremism and terrorism, citing research that finds “Terrorism cases in the UK without a ‘digital footprint’ are increasingly rare,” (Conway 2017, 81). However, inadequate research has been conducted pertaining to “what is going on” in these milieus, or “why its going on” (Conway 2017, 78). What we do know is that several prolific violent extremists have left behind extensive digital footprints. Anders Behring Breivik, had online contacts with the English Defence League, as well as being a registered member of a white supremacy web-forum (Conway 2012, Scrivens et.al. 2019).

Similar online histories were found for Dylan Roof, perpetrator of the Charleston church shooting, and Brenton Harrison Tarrant, who was responsible for 51 deaths at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand (and who meant to live broadcast his atrocities online) (Conway et.al. 2019, Scrivens et.al 2019). The power of strong online radical milieus was also demonstrated in August 2017 as the ‘Unite the Right’ rally joint together several different white supremacist, neo-Nazi and far-right online communities in a physical march through Charlottesville VA and The University of Virginia (Conway 2020). This rally proved that online right-wing extremism was not just a virtual threat, but that they were also capable of mobilizing ‘in real life’, in offline spaces.

The ‘unite the right’ rally also served to blur the lines between the dark online humor, irony and memes that flourish online and serious threats of violence. During the rally a counterprotestor, Heather Hayer, was murdered as James Alex Fields Jr. drove his car into a crowd of people who had come to oppose the rally. Month prior Fields had shared an instagram meme showing “a car driving through a crowd of people” “captioned: ‘You have the right to protest, but I’m late for work’” (Conway 2020, 2). As was explored by Phillips and Nagle (chapter 3) such memes are not at all uncommon in online spaces and have long been legitimized as ironic and just for fun. Those who have dared to point out their morally or politically problematic nature have been dismissed as humorless and not in tune with Internet culture. However, the Charlottesville attack shows how a humorous legitimization or dismissal of the violent nature of such content is a mistake. The majority of those who view or share such memes are in no way inclined to the violence depicted or otherwise implied in the joke, but their participation in sharing and enjoying such content will in the mind of a violent extremist serve to condone such behavior. Conway notes that “together, the memes, specialized jokes, and jargon dominating these spaces serve as a constant stream of highly distilled ideological thought, reinforcing these virtual communities’ beliefs, while also acting as a means of identity creation and formation for users both new and old” (Conway et.al. 2019, 12). So while humor provides the guise of a lighthearted and unthreatening discourse that “taken separately” cannot be “interpretable as terrorist content” (Conway 2020), the jokes and memes that are shared serve to radicalize those who participate in its formation and distribution. Allowing “users to continue to insist that their online activity is largely in jest and ironic, while at the same time giving those users familiar with the boards’ sub-cultural languages the opportunity to immerse themselves in RWE (right wing extremist) communities of support and emulation” (Conway et.al 2019, 14)

Conway here makes clear that the distribution and contribution of specific types of online discussions is what strengthens group dynamic and pushes a certain ideology. In order for this to be considered radicalization, the ideology that is pushed must be conducive to a support for and promotion of acts of terrorism or political violence (Malthaner 2017). This becomes the last step in Silber and Bhatt's process of radicalization "Jihadization", where the individuals "self designate themselves as holy-warriors" and prepare to commit acts of violence (2007, 7). This furthers the extremist belief, and extends it beyond just the distinction from, and hatred of, other groups and adds the element of violent justification to the process of radicalization. Several other radicalization theorists also include this as a necessary final step in their models of radicalization. In the staircase model of radicalization, Psychologist and Terrorism Scholar Fathali M. Moghaddam, describes the willingness to commit an extreme act of violence as the final step on the narrowing staircase that symbolizes the radicalization process (2005). Prior to this the individual's engagement with the extremist ideology has aggressively pitted 'us' against 'them', and introduced a psychological distance that leads to moral disengagement and justifies violence (Moghaddam 2005). Once this process has been completed, it is thought that the 'radicalization of beliefs' has facilitated a "radicalization of behavior" (McCauley and Moskaleiko 2008).

However, this is only achieved through an intense socialization process that builds relationships stronger than any that the individual experiences with the outgroup (Malthaner 2017). It is here that the beliefs of online radicalization skeptics come into play. It is not that these people do not believe that extremist material on the Internet cannot influence people's beliefs (c.f. Wojcieszak 2010), rather they argue that online socialization is not strong enough to form the bonds necessary for the social process of radicalization (Conway 2017) (similar to what we see later with physical copresence in chapter 7). In studies on western foreign fighters joining jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq the results showed that "while the Internet plays a role in 42 % of the cases, it does so mainly in combination with social settings and only very rarely on its own" (GTAZ 2015, as cited in Malthaner 2017). The Internet alone was not enough to radicalize foreign fighters.

One theory is that the internet is not able to facilitate the small, intimate groups that are necessary for terrorism to occur (McCauley and Moskaleiko 2008). Such skepticism can be extended to incels.co. With over 11,000 members, who are all allowed to comment and interact in the forum, they cannot claim to be neither a small group nor an intimate setting. Although hostile beliefs and attitudes towards women and the outgroup are formed and spread, connections cannot be said to be intimate enough for members to incite violence

within each other. When it comes to incels it seems more as though they are stuck in the staircase, not quite having reached the final step. Incels openly express resentment towards the outgroup, and have created a massive ideological distance between themselves and mainstream society, but their position and self-identification as ‘holy-warriors’ has not been set. Essentially their beliefs have been radicalized, but their behaviors have not.

A critique of this rests on the misidentification of lone actor terrorists. Malthaner, joined by political scientist Lasse Lindekilde, explores this notion as they see lone actors not as self-radicalized, but rather radicalized through weak ties such as the ones in virtual communities (2017). As such “lone-wolf” perpetrators serve as proof that radicalization happens in the absence of strong social ties, rather than being a separate “type” of terrorist or violent criminal. When investigated further these perpetrators, such as Breivik or Roof, only appear to be solitary when viewed exclusively offline. Malthaner and Lindekilde see *virtual relationships* as legitimate tools for radicalization, and claim that the proof lies in the actors that we have normally dismissed as lone actors (2017). As such, incel actors such as Rodger, Minassian and Beierle can be seen as having been radicalized through weaker virtual relationships.

Yet, most incels have a complicated relationship to violence. When observing the forum, violence is commended, such as celebrating “St. yogacel day”, the day Scott Beierle attacked a yoga studio in Florida, or stating that the “Coronagod is bringing good results” by killing 291 people in Spain. They seem to find glee in the suffering of others, but despite this they do not see terrorism or political violence as a solution to their problems. When venting about how bad their life is, the normal response is always something along the lines of “that’s just the way it is”, “its over”, or “just rope bro”. To rope, or roping, is used as a symbol for suicide, and is often presented as the only way for incels to get away from their “hellish existence”. The incel ideology is nihilistic, and does not include a pathway for things to get better, and their relationship to violence is therefore not as a political tool, but rather a final solution to end their own suffering. In this sense they claim that swallowing the blackpill is much more dangerous to someone who is an incel than to others.

How should we then conceptualize those incels who *have* become violent? Just because incels do not actively promote violence as the solution to their problems does not mean that the incel ideology did not play a part in the deadly attacks perpetrated by Eliot Rodger, Alek Minassian, Scott Beierle and more. Just like the right-wing extremists studied by Conway, these men had engaged with the online Incelosphere and used the internet to espouse their own abhorrent beliefs. Criminologist Jenifer L. Murray studies the

commonalities between serial killers and mass killers, using Eliot Rodger and George Sodini as examples of mass killers. Murray's findings "unearths similar fantasy propulsion [in both groups,] full of rage, hatred, and sadistic revenge toward women" (2017, 735). Just as for incels "the psyche for both serial and mass murderers is marked by low self-esteem; real and perceived rejection; and despair, powerlessness, and self-loathing" (Murray 2017, 735). For those who go on to become violent these "feelings of anger, inadequacy and humiliation" are "projected onto others", and their victims serve as representatives for their failure (Murray 2017, 738). Violence is then seen as "a gratuitous, liberating act of revenge" (Baele et.al 2019), but also a form of sexual gratification (Murray 2017).

The findings discovered by Murray do not serve to lessen the threat posed by incels, but rather show how their violence is less political and terrorist and more inclined with the role of mass killer. Mass killers are not born from the incelosphere, but rather they recognize their own pain and suffering in the worldviews, attitudes and ideologies of these communities. Then, through radicalization processes, their anger, inadequacy and humiliation grows, and their desire for revenge increases, until they one day "snap". Incels express that they understand this tendency to snap, but that in reality it's useless, and they should not "go ER" (stands for Eliot Rodger and is used as shorthand for a mass shooting), instead every man just has to take it until he ropes. Eliot Rodger himself noted in his manifesto that the community he once felt a part of on pua-hate.com over time ended up not being extreme enough in its hatred (Murray 2017, 740). In this instance Rodger was ready to take the last step up the radicalization staircase, but the ideology was not with him.

Internet Facilitation

In ones online life radicalization is exponentially accelerated through the algorithms created to provide you with content. Several studies have shown that internet algorithms are set up in order to provide you with new content that is both similar to what you're already consuming and also more extreme (Papadamous et.al. 2020, Ribeiro et.al. 2020). This leads to Internet users only viewing content and interacting with people who are similar or more extreme in their ideology that you are. This tendency creates ideologically homogeneous online groups such as the ones Wojcieszak studied. Such groups are often referred to as echo-chambers. When discussing the radicalization of incels, Baele et.al describe the role of echo-chambers:

The role of the Internet in enabling the formation and radicalization of this community through echo-chamber dynamics is evident: without a way to relate and discuss, these individuals would have had no way to recognize themselves as “Incels” and learn the culture and particular idiom that cements the Incel worldview (2019, 20).

As such, the ability to find, interact and communicate with others who both share your frustrations, and beliefs, serves as one of the main pathway in which the Internet contributes to the radicalization. Such collective dynamics will be explored further in Chapter 6.

However, the Internet also complicates things. “The “online dis-inhibition effect,” in its “toxic” form, means that discussion of violent action and even direct threats of violence are so prevalent online” that to patrol them is rendered useless (Conway 2017). So while incels and their blackpill ideology serve to host real threats of violence, it is almost impossible to distinguish these threats from the rest of the misogynistic e-bile, and celebration of suffering, that is spewed out by its members. As most vitriolic trolling is “ultimately benign—or at least not directly resulting in ‘real world’ violence” (Conway 2017) it’s hard to say whether the online “radicalization of beliefs” happening to young men can be seen as a real violent threat in the form of more mass killers, or if their declarations of “Eliot Rodger is a God” are only a baseless joke meant to vent frustrations about the difficulty of being a sexless social outcast.

5. Are incels a Subculture?

As I have attempted to establish in the previous chapter the incel community is engaging in a process of the radicalization of beliefs. In order to further understand this process I will now look to the social environment that this radicalization occurs within. Employing sociologist Ross Haenfler's definition of subculture as "a relatively diffuse social network having a shared identity, distinctive meanings around certain ideas, practices, and objects, and a sense of marginalization from or resistance to a perceived "conventional" society" (2013, 16), I will evaluate the claim that has routinely been made by the media (Bosman et.al. 2019), political and cultural scholars (Nagle 2017, Baele et.al. 2019) and Wikipedia (as of June 2020) that incels are an online subculture.

Incels themselves assert that such people are erroneous in their claims; inceldom is neither a subculture nor an identity to claim. Rather it is a life circumstance that applies to all individuals who desire, but are unable to obtain a romantic or sexual relationship. Technically they are correct in these statements, since being involuntarily celibate is a state anyone can occupy (Donnelly et.al. 2001). Wanting to have a girlfriend, wanting to have sex, and wanting to be desired are very human emotions; they are not specific to the incel community, nor are they conducive to subcultural participation. However, this emotional longing and denial has, for some, manifested in such a way that they seek out subcultural spaces where they are provided with a community of shared identity, shared meanings, countercultural values, and guidelines and justifications for behavior. Through this assessment I make the claim that not all incels are subcultural, but that a distinct incel subculture exists.

Subcultures as Sites for Radicalization

From McCauley and Moskaleiko (2008), we noted that radicalization is the "increasing extremity of beliefs, feelings, and behaviors in directions that increasingly justify intergroup" conflict and violence (416). Criminologists Holt, Freilich and Chermak connect this concept to the study of subcultures as they argue that "terrorism shares common characteristics of deviant subcultures," as "both are driven by ideologies that are in opposition to that of their targets" (2017, 855). A subculture "in a criminological and sociological context [refers] to groups with values, norms, traditions, and rituals that are odds with the dominant culture" (Holt et.al. 2017, 858), and is often associated with 'deviant' behavior (Haenfler 2013). This

is not to say that all subcultures are radical, or dangerous, but that subcultural spaces may be stages for radicalization if the beliefs, values and norms of the subculture are extreme enough. Holt et.al. argue that radicalization is “essentially the same process as the acceptance of a subcultural belief system” if that belief system is conducive to extremism (Holt et.al. 2017, 861). It is therefore important to understand the subcultural characteristics of a radical community in order to better understand the process through which they are radicalized. By integrating subcultural theories in our understanding of radical communities we “can aid in the proper causal ordering and specification of the ways that individuals become involved in [...] extremist groups” (Holt et.al. 2017, 865)

This notion is also echoed by Malthaner as he presents the “subcultural milieu” as a platform to provide and develop the “close personal bonds” needed for the radicalization process (2017, 377). An extremist subculture can therefore serve as what Conway describes as a “violent radical milieu”, a “social space in which” “violent radical ideas are generated, tested, and refined” (2012, 3). Conway’s concept is based upon the theory of the “radical milieu”, coined by Waldmann (2008). What distinguishes Waldmann’s “milieu from simple sympathizers” is a “form of social structure responsible for the ingroup cohesion” (2008, 25), this structure is as we will see provided by the subculture. Waldmann’s theory also allows for us to conceptualize between subcultural incels, who are part of the radical milieu, and non-subcultural incels.

What is a Subculture?

The conceptualization of subcultural theory in sociology is largely attributed to the, so-called, Birmingham School, working out of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham from the 60’s to the 80’s. A representative work is *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* by Dick Hebdige, which is often considered as a paradigmatic work in European style youth subcultural theory. Hebdige argues that subcultures are born out of resistance against mainstream culture (1979). This resistance is shown through creating “noise”, displays of otherness (Hebdige 1979). In his work Hebdige claims that this is done through a purposeful use of exaggerated (clothing and music) styles that serve to set participants apart from the mainstream, as well as establish a subcultural identity. This was studied through the observation of overtly visual subcultures such as punks, mods, and skinheads – thus while incels.co does not facilitate a display of personal style through

clothing, hair, or makeup, many of Hebdige's ideas still apply. Their opposition to mainstream culture or "normal" society is obvious through their clear condemnation of normies. Normies are people who have not taken the blackpill, and hence are living in alleged ignorance of how the world truly works, and how it oppresses men. Normies are therefore painted as dupes, while incels – who have understood and adapted the blackpill ideology – are labeled "high IQ". Incels will constantly hate on themselves for their own unattractiveness, or bad personality or mental health, often calling themselves "personalitycels" "mentalcels" or "autismcels". This prefix is used to denote what about them makes them an incel, and is used to highlight their own bad qualities and create borders to outsiders. Thus, interestingly and ambivalently, while stigmatizing themselves for their looks and emphasizing their fragile psychological condition, they still see themselves as superior to other social groups because of their discovery of 'the truth'.

Language as Distinction

Moreover, if we a bit creatively, parallelize Hebdige's focus on "spectacular styles" as a way of resisting the mainstream with the linguistic transgression performed within the Incelosphere, new and interesting analogies emerge. While incels do not dress or visually distinguish themselves in the offline sphere, their Internet behavior and expression is far outside the mainstream. Their custom of offensive racial and sexist language, imagery, and humor is used to set themselves apart from the mainstream. Just as punks saw no need to conform to the conservative conventions of traditional class values (Hebdige 1979), incels have no desire to conform to the values of political correctness, feminism and racial empowerment, as these are values they see as oppressive. The use of such transgression has flourished in incel communities online over the past couple of years, and as they have embraced offensiveness, they have also developed their own style of communication. A new language has emerged, one that will sound completely foreign to anyone who's never been inside the manosphere. Women are no longer women, they are "foids", "toilets", or "cumdumpsters". Men are not just men, but they are placed into descriptive categories such as "chads", "gigachads" "normies", and "incels". Incels themselves are also divided into hundreds of categories, "ricecels", "heightcels", "slavcels", "truecels", "fakecels", "newcels" etc. to name a few. Their "new" language also serves to provide a certain worldview. Incels believe they are oppressed by an institutionalized "looksism" that discriminates based on how one looks. They've also developed a word for hating incels, "incelphobia". When describing

an activity that you do to better oneself they use the suffix “maxxing”, e.g. “gymmaxxing” (Becoming fit), “jestermaxxing” (becoming funnier), or “wagemaxxing” (becoming rich). As well as several acronyms that will tell you how the world really is, “AWALT” (all women are like that), JBW (just be white, referring to white privilege in mating choices), “NPC” (non player character, referring to feelings of not being in control of one's own life). These are just some examples of the vast vocabulary developed within the subculture, illustrating an important way in which they have distinguished themselves from mainstream society.

This development and use of vocabulary is an example of a subcultural argot, “a specialized and secret language within a subculture that serves multiple functions within the group, such as communicating the structure, norms, and values of a given subculture to its members” (Holt 2010, 467). By examining the argot of a group the scholar becomes acquainted with the “values, norms, and beliefs of a group”, as well as develop an understanding of the boundaries and hierarchy that form the subculture (Holt 2010, 477). Looking to incels we see the argot demonstrating a devaluation of women. Best-case scenario women are denoted as inanimate objects, incapable of rational or independent thought, as the use of “foid” or “femoid”, which likens a woman to a robot/*android*. In the most radical scenario they are contemptible and soiled things to be disposed of, such as “cumdumpsters”. This indicates a subculture structured around the misogynistic values of degrading and dehumanizing women, and a belief that women are neither comparable to men nor capable of the same cognitive and intellectual processes as men. Notions also present in the multiple threads on incel.co detailing how women should not be allowed to have free choice. Such categorizations will often be defended as hyperbole and rationalized as purposeful insurrection by the incels themselves. But as such language and values become the norm, it narrows the group's understanding of women, a woman is an objectified infantilized caricature, and AWALT.

The incel argot also serves to paint a specific worldview through its development of new social groupings. Separate from women, men are categorized into a strict hierarchy based on “looksism” where “chads” reign supreme, supported by clueless, ‘cucked’ normies, and incels suffer at the bottom. This allows for incels to paint themselves as victims to a cruel and unjust world, justifying their transgressions as revolt against a practice of ‘incelophobia’. Returning to Haenfler's definition of subculture as “a relatively diffuse social network having a shared identity, distinctive meanings around certain ideas, practices, and objects, and a sense of marginalization from or resistance to a perceived ‘conventional’ society” (Haenfler 2013, 16), I argue that it is here incels develop the “sense of marginalization” needed for

subcultural categorization. As a group of straight, majority white men they may not at the face of it be considered marginalized, but they have internalized a narrative that allows them to view themselves as such. Here conventional society is then painted as a place of misandry. By creating incels as a category, and lookism as a discriminatory force, they are able to construct a worldview in which they are marginalized, and therefore justified in their resistance against 'conventional' society.

Subcultural Identity and Belonging

The creation of the incel social category is also an instrumental step in the creation of a subcultural identity for incels. If incels are a group of men who are unable to obtain romantic and sexual partners because of systemic discrimination based on looks, then to a man who is unable to obtain a sexual and romantic relationship, the identity of incel removes personal liability from this "life circumstance". As a self-identified incel they are provided with an institutional explanation to a personal failure, removing the emotional burden of self-blame, as well as allowing them to stop putting grueling work in order to better themselves. This may be highly appealing to people who are already prone to self-esteem issues, feelings of failure, depression, and self-loathing. A thread on the subreddit r/AskReddit asks those who had previously identified as incels to look back at their motivations. One man's describes the allure of the community as such: "a very large group of like minded people telling me it isn't my fault?!?! I can stop moping and start hating? Fantastic! I'm in!". Others gravitate toward the community for allowing them to protect themselves from their pain by substituting it with anger. Most state that they we're miserable and lonely before finding the incel community, one stating that he "had previously felt like an incomplete person because of [his] inability to connect with anyone". The identity as an incel gave them an explanation to all their woes, and allowed them to place the blame and anger onto someone other than themselves. This is freeing.

Being able to connect with other people who identify the same way you do, and sympathize with, and understand your plight is another huge appeal of the incel community. People who feel alone have a place to go. Another post from the r/AskReddit thread describes it as:

The forums were full of people thinking the same, it made me feel secure, like I was *right*. I didn't have to walk the hard way to improve myself, they told me I could just let go. Nobody will ever love you so why try?

For this individual the incel community was able to provide them with three things sought after. A confirmation that he was not alone in his struggles or rationalizations, a community that would be there for him, and permission to stop adhering to the norms thrust upon him by mainstream society. In subcultural theory this is connected through a notion of shared meanings (or shared symbols, styles, objects, argot), which develop strong bonds between participants, creating meaningful community, and provides an affirming space to people who feel like outsiders among their peers (Haenfler 2013). People are driven by a need to feel included, and a subcultural space will provide this to people who do not fit in elsewhere.

Emotional Subcultures

Subcultures can also serve as blueprints for emotional expression. They provide emotional norms, as “membership within a [subculture] depends on knowing how to talk, act, *and* feel [italics in original]” (Kolb 2014, 1229). Sociologist and emotions scholar Kenneth H. Kolb explores such groups in his work on emotional subcultures. According to Kolb “emotional subcultures indicate their collective identity by abiding by a shared set of norms regarding how members should feel”, and subcultural belonging is reliant on experiencing the same emotions (2014, 1229). “Adhering to the same feeling and display norms helps bind people together”, creating the subcultural environment (Kolb 2014, 1229). He outlines emotional subcultures by evaluating four dimensions of subcultural identity work according to Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock: defining, coding, affirming and policing (1996). These dimensions represent mechanisms through which subcultural identity and solidarity is formed.

‘Defining’ refers to the process of selecting “a name or label for a new category of people” as well as determining “what it means to be a member” of this category (Kolb 2014, 1232). Within emotional subcultures membership means knowing when, where, and how to express emotions, and most relevantly which emotion to express (Kolb 2014, 1232).

‘Coding’ refers to the creation of an “agreed upon code of conduct” that “becomes the litmus test for membership” (Kolb 2014, 1233). To become a subcultural insider requires learning and performing these codes of conduct. In addition emotional subcultural membership also

“requires learning the more subtle emotional rules” meaning also being able to feel “the right kind of way” (Kolb 2014, 1233). Here the subculture provides “emotional strategies” to deal with the “jointly experienced problems” (Kolb 2014, 1232). ‘Affirming’ refers to the process of being able prove that you know the codes of conduct, and can employ the emotional strategies (Kolb 2014). “Moments of affirmation offer members a stage upon which they can signify that they belong” (Kolb 2014, 1234-1235). Lastly ‘policing’ refers to “the protection of the meaning of an identity and enforcement of the code for signifying it” (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock 1996, 123). In policing, members of a subculture remind each other how one should act, or feel, through the communication of rewards and penalties (Kolb 2014, 1236). Those who affirm are rewarded through the engagement and encouragement of others, and those who fail to do so are punished, the harshest punishment being a drop from insider to outsider status (Kolb 2014). Emotional subcultures extend this practice to those who fail to perform the correct emotional norms as well as behavioral norms (Kolb 2014).

In regards to incels we have already seen the value self-identification and categorization has in providing shared meanings and community. But the subculture also provides them with an emotional strategy for responding to their predicaments. By conveying a narrative that places the blame outward on a lookist and incelophobic society, the subculture gives incels something to direct their emotions towards. Additionally the normative emotional responses are coded directly into the online medium. Discussion threads that are posted on incels.co are usually denoted by a label, which is chosen by the user that creates the thread. These labels include “RageFuel”, “SuicideFuel”, “It’s Over”, “JFL” and “LifeFuel” to name a few. The label attached to the thread will indicate how the users are to emotionally respond to the information being discussed within it. A RageFuel thread will present a situation that is supposed to enrage the incels, such as thread named “I fucking hate those beta cucks that marry cum dumpsters”. A SuicideFuel or ‘It’s over’ thread will try to elicit anger, but also demands a feeling of helplessness, pessimism, and nihilism. Such threads will often describe a situation where an incel has personally been rejected or mistreated, or alternately a situation where other men are able to experience the sexual or romantic activities that incels desire, often through *chad fishing* in which an incel pretends to be a *chad* online to “prove” how easily other men get female attention. These situations are supposed to build up under the narrative that “it’s over” for incels and that they will be miserable forever. JFL stands for “just fucking lol” (lol is internet terminology for laughing-out-loud), meaning the coded response is to ridicule the situation or person the thread concerns, and the emotional response will be to find glee in the stupidity of other people, and

their “low IQ”. Finally, a LifeFuel thread will most likely deal with the suffering of other people, and incels will be expected to find glee in their despair. An example of a LifeFuel thread is titled “Whore crying because her chad bf murdered (*sic*)”, where a woman’s boyfriend was killed in a terrorist attack and incels responded saying “lmao cry little whore”.

Subcultural Capital and Policing

This online forum and these threads are the stages of affirmation. Within the threads incels are able to signify their belonging to the subculture, by following the normative emotional and behavioral patterns set up by the thread labels. By expressing anger at a man who does not disapprove of his wives promiscuity, or stating that you feel depressed by hearing about another mans ‘easy’ and undeserved sex-life, incels are affirming their status as subcultural insiders. This use of subcultural knowledge can be referred to as a display of *subcultural capital*. The concept of subcultural capital was coined by sociologist Sarah Thornton in her study of club and rave culture in the 1990’s. It refers to the understandings, behaviors, and knowledge acquired by the members of a subculture that help indicate belonging to the subcultural milieu (Thornton 1996). This may include knowing which haircut to get, using the right subcultural argot, or understanding what emotion you’re meant to convey. Displaying subcultural capital indicates to other subculturalists that you are one of them, as well as distinguishing the subculturalists from the mainstream (Haenfler 2013).

Within these groups affirming and policing is performed through the evaluation of members’ subcultural capital. For an incel a display of subcultural capital can be as simple as denoting oneself as a “heightcel” because you believe your shortness is the cause of your inceldom. Or it can be a more intricate post adding new dimensions to the blackpill by describing, in detail, how the fall of Byzantine Empire lead to a devaluation of the Sexual Market Value of “Brownish mediterranean people”. The latter both displaying and creating subcultural capital and knowledge. However, subcultural spaces do not just absorb all knowledge that is pushed into them, rather members police each other’s content in order to collectively create a “shared identity” and agreed upon “meanings around certain ideas, practices, and objects” (Haenfler 2013, 16). Although there is room for discussion, and different interpretations, members will not tolerate arguments that go against the blackpill, arguments that present women in a sympathetic or good light, or any discussion of past romantic or sexual encounters. An incel “caught” behaving in such a way will endure various levels of punishment. In expressing any attitude beyond the “it’s over” narrative, or refusing to believe AWALT, the incel is denoted as “coping”, a negatively charged label indicating

that you have yet to completely swallow the blackpill, and are therefore naïve and “low IQ”. If this notion is furthered by the “coper” into support for the “redpill”, which encourages self-improvement to get out of incelldom, you may be labeled a “fakecel”. A fakecel may also be someone who outs themselves as having experienced romantic or sexual activity, such as kissing or holding hands. A fakecel no longer shares an identity with other incels and can therefore no longer be classified as subcultural participant. The online nature of the forum also allows for a virtual exclusion of those who have lost subcultural status, thus fakecels are often reported and banned from the forum, becoming physically unable to continue their subcultural participation.

However, just because these men no longer participate in the incels.co web forum does not mean that they are no longer in the life circumstance of being involuntarily celibate. This creates the distinction between subcultural incels, those who adhere to the shared values, norms and behaviors, and those who do not. On incels.co the criteria for becoming a member are stricter than just being the definition of an incel. One must identify as an incel, one must have swallowed the blackpill and thus must perceive oneself as marginalized by mainstream society, and one must continue to display and acquire subcultural capital. These criteria serve to separate subcultural incels from life-circumstance incels, while simultaneously providing us with a better understanding of the appeal of the incel subculture.

6. Interaction Ritual Theory

While theories on radicalization largely approach the subject from a psychological standpoint – starting with the individual and their personal motivations for seeking out radical ideas, which subsequently lead them to find solidarity among the likeminded – a collectivist sociological approach can help expand upon work on radicalization by adjusting the angle through which the issue is looked at. By centering focus on the appeal of community, rather than on the appeal of ideas, it is possible to add new dimensions to our understanding of the magnetism of radical online subcultures.

Through subcultural theory we begin to see the appeal of shared meanings, shared styles, shared argot, and shared emotions of subcultural groups, but as it puts the focus on the *meanings, styles, argot, and emotions*, it fails to truly explore the *shared* dimension. In doing so we may miss the collectivistic sentiments that entrain subcultural members. In this chapter I will therefore present an additional theoretical lens that addresses this aspect, Interaction Ritual Theory (Collins 2004). Through interaction ritual theory I will attempt to outline the mechanisms through which incels are both detached from mainstream society – its culture, moralities and beliefs – and create their own entraining emotional connections, feelings of solidarity, moral codes and sacred objects.

A Departure from a Focus on Individual Agency

Interaction ritual theory is a theory based in “momentary encounters among human bodies” (Collins 2004, 3). In his theory Collins places his emphasis of social life on the situational interactions that happen within society, rather than focusing on the individuals that partake in them. Meaning it would be an error to identify “agency with the individual” as they are merely “transient fluxes charged up by situations” (Collins 2004, 6). To him “individuals are unique to just the extent that their pathways through interactional chains, their mix of situations across time, differ from other persons’ pathways” (Collins 2004, 4). An individual is nothing more than the chain of interaction rituals one has partaken in. However, all situations do not shape the individual equally. All successful interaction rituals are charged up with an *emotional energy*, “a feeling of confidence, elation, strength, enthusiasm and initiative in action taking” (Collins 2004, 49). Through joining in the ritual the individual gets to experience this emotional energy, and as “intense moments of interaction ritual” are

internalized they “give meaning to our personal biographies” (Collins 2004, 43). In addition to an internalization of certain ritual meanings, the intensity of the energy resulting from the ritual will determine the attractiveness of the ritual, predicting whether a participant will seek out similar rituals in the future. Collins sees life as “structure around the contrast between successful, socially magnetic ritual situations with their high degree of emotion, motivation, and symbolic charge, and situations of lesser ritualism” (Collins 2004, 51). Additionally his theory offers an outline for the “combination of ingredients” needed to grow the interaction ritual “to differing levels of intensity”(Collins 2004, 47), but first he delves into the sociological history shaping his theory, and so will I.

Collins on Durkheim

The theory of interaction ritual is a continuation of the work of the late Emile Durkheim, which was further developed by Erving Goffman, to define ritual as “a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention producing a momentarily shared reality, which thereby generates solidarity and symbols of group membership” (Collins 2004, 7). Durkheim began this work on rituals when investigating of the ‘essential case’ of religion in *The Elementary forms of Religious Life* (1912/1965). He found that group ideas, group morals, symbolic meanings, social trust and group solidarity all stem from a participation in rituals. Through ritual assembly and performance individuals are stimulated in unison, “animated by common passion” becoming “susceptible [to] acts and sentiments of which we are incapable when reduced to our own forces” (Durkheim 1912/1965, 241). This produces a “certain sort of physical energy” (emotional energy for Collins) that produces captivating feelings of psychological wellbeing (Durkheim 1912/1965, 238). The energy builds through experience and cultivation of the shared, in a process where every person’s energy is intensifying and feeding off of the energy of others, leading to a collective, shared emotional arousal Durkheim calls *collective effervescence* (Durkheim 1912/1965). Collective effervescence then gives way to the formation of a *collective consciousness* through imitation, as “it is by uttering the same cry, pronouncing the same word, or performing the same gesture in regard to some object that [people] become and feel themselves to be in unison” (Durkheim 1912/1965, 262-263). The “homogeneity of these movements” then “gives the group consciousness of itself” as a group, as a collective (Durkheim 1912/1965, 262-263). Collins calls this a “condition of heightened intersubjectivity” (2004, 35). A ritual that achieves such a condition produces strong emotional responses in the participants, and as this feeling is

echoed and enhanced by the people around them connections begin to form between the individual and the group, solidifying group solidarity.

Durkheim thus emphasizes ritual focus, anything that stands at the focus of a ritual becomes attached to the collective effervescence of the ritual, elevating its status and importance within the group. In this way, rituals not only solidify group solidarity, but they also solidify group ideas, objects, moral beliefs and symbols (Durkheim 1912/1965). Rituals are “large-scale forms of collective synchronization, [that] bestow actuality, attraction and importance upon certain objects and thus help to center our perception, our emotions and our intellectual landscapes” (Schiermer & Carlsen 2017, 172). These objects are in Durkheim's terminology sacred objects. Through an adaption of this concept, Collins sees sacred objects becoming ubiquitous to all groups, transcending the religious setting altogether. Through ritual focus, collective emotions are projected onto these sacred objects, giving them extraordinary importance and value, becoming “sacred”. The object is then given this enigmatic surplus that draws attentions and helps assigns a significance much higher than its objective value. This importance is then rationalized through shared myths and theories. This process extends the ritual focus toward the sacred object, ensuring that it is constantly charged up with energies. In this way these symbols serve to prolong the sentiments present in the initial ritual, as well as connect the individual back to the group when not physically co-present (Durkheim 1912/1965). They also serve to embody the solidarity, identity and symbolic meanings of the group by creating a tangible object to represents the intangible sentiment of collective effervescence (Collins 2004, 37). So what Durkheim essentially tells us is that consciously or unconsciously “certain parts of our material or immaterial reality – the parts at the center of collective attention” – are given a heightened cognitive and emotional status “at the same time as it [strengthens] collective ties” (Schiermer & Carlsen 2017, 172).

Collins on Goffman

Goffman depicts rituals as the “bindings of society” that provide opportunities for individuals to “affirm the moral order” and demonstrate their belonging (Goffman 1956/1967, 90). Goffman's interpretation of ritual rests on the notion that all “activity, however informal and secular, represents a way in which the individual must guard and design the symbolic implications of his acts” to fit in society (Goffman 1956/1967, 57). There is a lack of individual agency; instead the situation itself will make demands that the individual must

follow, and in this “each individual’s self is being enacted or constructed in the situation” (Goffman 1956/1967, as cited in Collins 2004, 16). Collins calls this “the construction of self under social constraint” (2004, 16). Where ‘fitting inn’ becomes determined on following socially constrictive rituals.

Collins then condenses Goffman’s main contributions to the theory of interaction ritual down to five main points:

1. “Rituals take place in a condition of *situational copresence*” (Collins 2004, 23).
2. “Physical copresence becomes converted into a full-scale encounter by becoming a *focused interaction*” that produces a shared reality (Collins 2004, 23).
3. “There is pressure to keep up *social solidarity*,” as rituals exert a “pressure towards conformity” (Collins 2004, 25).
4. “Rituals do honor to what is socially valued, what Durkheim called *sacred object*” (Collins 2004, 25).
5. “When ritual proprieties are broken, the persons who are present feel *moral uneasiness*” (Collins 2004, 25).

Interaction Ritual Theory

By combining the earlier theoretical work of Goffman and Durkheim, Collins begins to articulate his own overarching sociological theory concerning interaction ritual chains. Interaction ritual theory attempts to “give a theory of individuals’ motivation based on where they are located at any moment in time in the aggregate of [interaction ritual] chains that makes up their market of possible social relationships” (Collins 2004, xiv). The most “intense interaction rituals” with the highest degree of intersubjectivity and mutual focus, will “generate the most powerful emotional energy and the most vivid symbols” (Collins 2004, 44). The strength of the ritual is dependent on “feedback cycles reinforcing [the interaction ritual] process” (Collins 2004, 233), meaning every intensification of bodily animation, ritual focus, or emotional exhilaration is met with a similar intensification in your ritual partner. This is what makes a relationship and an interaction ritual pleasurable and desirable for its participants. This pleasure is felt through energy, so the more intense the emotional energy the more intensely the individual will be attracted to the ritual, and more willing to internalize its meanings and moralities. The intensity of the energy felt will also determine the connection and trust the individual feels towards the group undertaking the ritual and determines the groups’ level of solidarity (Collins 2004, 41). Emotional energy is not only

the force created through ritual participation, but also the defining feature of the ritual that works to sustain willing participation, as well as produces solidarity, trust, symbolism – shared and cultivated objects – and the individual’s emotional pleasure. An interaction ritual chain therefore becomes a historical account of what rituals have produced what levels of emotional energy, and all motivation for further ritual participation is based on an evaluation of this history.

Further Collins condenses his theory into one central mechanism:

The central mechanism of interaction ritual theory is that occasions that combine a high degree of mutual focus of attention, that is, a high degree of intersubjectivity, together with a high degree of emotional entrainment—through bodily synchronization, mutual stimulation/arousal of participants’ nervous systems—result in feelings of membership that are attached to sacred objects; and result also in the emotional energy of individual participants, giving them feelings of confidence, enthusiasm, and desire for action in what they consider a morally proper path (Collins 2004, 42).

Which can be condensed further into stating that an interaction ritual has four main ingredients (Collins 2004):

- 1) Group assembly or physical copresence
- 2) Barriers to the outside
- 3) A mutual focus of attention
- 4) A shared mood.

These four elements combine to produce collective effervescence, and this collective effervescence then produces a collective consciousness that again is defined by four central ritual outcomes (Collins 2004):

- 1) Group solidarity, a feeling of membership
- 2) Emotional energy for the participating individuals
- 3) Sacred objects
- 4) Standards of morality.

The mechanisms behind the production of solidarity, emotional energy and the creation of symbols, should be pretty evident by now, but would like to expand upon the collective outcome centered around standards of morality. Morality has to do with what is right and wrong, but such distinctions do not adhere to a given order. Within interaction ritual theory

an individual will feel “moral when he or she is acting with the energy derived from the heightened experience of the group” (Collins 2004, 39). The actions that enhance collective effervescence feel ‘right’ because they are done in unison with others and hence confirmed by your peers and their engagement. Conversely, to most people, it is draining to do or mean something that others will condemn you for. In this way “the heightened experience of intersubjectivity and emotional strength in group rituals” generates positive emotions that confirm that what is happening is ‘good’ (Collins 2004, 39). Similarly it sets up actions that are opposed to the ritual as “what is evil” (Collins 2004, 40). These are “transferred to symbols and sacred objects,” and “the concept of moral good is then attached to beliefs” of right and wrong (Collins 2004, 40). The objects, symbols, ideas or people who we then recognize moral authority within appear this way because “a certain sort of physical energy is immanent in the idea that we form of [them]” (Collins 2004, 40), an energy that is given through ritual focus. These then become part of the beliefs of the group, and hence interaction ritual serves as “a set of processes that produce beliefs” (Collins 2004, 33).

The Problem of Bodily Co-Presence

Although incels.co can be said to be an arena for group assembly, it does not obey Collins’ added criteria for bodily co-presence. He believes that a key factor in successful interaction ritual is physical bodies coming together in a physical space (Collins 2004). According to Collins “there is a buzz, an excitement, or at least a weariness when human bodies are near each other” (Collins 2004, 53), and that this buzz adds to the construction of emotional energy.

Bodily presence makes it easier for human beings to monitor each other’s signals and bodily expressions; to get into shared rhythm, caught up in each other’s motions and emotions; and to signal and confirm a common focus of attention and thus a state of intersubjectivity. (Collins 2004, 64)

If we follow this notion this would mean that online spaces cannot be sites for successful interaction rituals, as emotions could never be strong enough or focused enough to garner true collective effervescence. This would mean that incels.co is unable to provide sufficient emotional energy to incite “feeling of confidence, elation, strength, enthusiasm, and initiative in taking action” (Collins 2004, 49), as well as create solidarity, symbols, or feelings of

morality. Yet, people involved in the online community note that their “lives have improved having spaces like this. To relate, to socialize, to make friends, to have a laugh, to cope”. In seeing this we must acknowledge that the forum is giving them something, something that any other interaction ritual has not been able to incite in them.

In order to understand this, we must look to Collins’ discussion of what a non-bodily co-present ritual looks like. In 2003 the most immediate form of online correspondence was e-mail. E-mail Collins argued lacked “the flow of interaction in real time”, and there was “little or no buildup of focus of attention” (2004, 63). He hypothesized that “the closer the flow of emails is to real life conversational exchange, the more possibility of a sense of collective entrainment”, but was still skeptical that “strong feelings of solidarity could be built up, or the charging up of symbols with collective significance” (Collins 2004, 63). However, I will argue that the current Internet, or Web 2.0 as it is often denoted, has moved us closer to achieving this. The Internet is now seen as a social platform that not only provides information, but also allows for connection and collectivity. It allows for the feedback cycles that help reinforce and intensify emotional energy. Sites such as incels.co not only allow for an immediate flow of conversation between a large group of users, but also serve to specifically create community around one focused subject. The barriers to entry, or rules for registering, make sure that the participants conform to the group’s identity, and rules for who’s banned or reprimanded serve to continue adherence to this identity. Incels.co is presented as a blackpill forum that exists purely to “discuss your experiences, vent, or share anything related to incelism”. This naturally focuses the attention of participants and allows for the entrainment of emotions and collective effervescence, which eventually becomes stored within the ideas, beliefs and sacred objects of the incel community. Receiving a notification on the site is described as being given a “dopamine rush” indicating that interaction between users truly does have an emotional bodily effect. A notification is seen as a sign of support, understanding, and solidarity allowing for the user to be validated and accepted, a feeling he lacks in the offline realm. A site such as incels.co harnesses the frustrations, sadness and anger of a young generation of men and lets them revel in these emotions until they become the principal drives in their lives.

I therefore make the claim that incels.co does operate as a space for collective interaction ritual, and has the opportunity to garner collective effervescence and collective consciousness. However, no matter how social the Internet becomes the buzz felt between bodies is absent. Although incels have online connections, they still report feeling lonely, depressed, and even suicidal. They recognize that the online forum is not enough, after all no

matter how many incels gather on incels.co it will still ‘be over’. They still crave the physical interaction rituals such as sex, family, and being a part of social life, but as these rituals fail they stick to the safe and confirming, albeit less intense, interaction rituals that take place online. This lack of fully realized bodily co-present interaction rituals may also serve as – as we saw with radicalization of behavior – a deterrent from most incels receiving the intense “initiative in taking action” that may lead to acts of violence such those of Eliot Rodger.

Failed Rituals

As everything else in interaction ritual theory moral designations and beliefs are only sustained through continued successful ritual participation. The symbols, beliefs or ideas of a group “are respected only to the extent that they are charged up with sentiments by participation in ritual” (Collins 2004, 37). Similarly they also only exist as long as rituals continue to work, as in continue producing enough emotional energy to attract participants. Rituals who fall flat in this regard are known as failed rituals. Failed rituals fail in that they are unable to produce intense enough levels of collective effervescence. This happens when the ritual ingredients are either not present, or not powerful enough in their strength. There is either insufficient group assembly, not enough barriers to the outside, a lacking mutual focus of attention, or no shared mood. Such rituals will then achieve no ritual outcomes, meaning “little or no feeling of group solidarity; no sense of one’s identity as affirmed or changed; no respect for the group’s symbols; no heightened emotional energy” (Collins 2004, 51). Instead, as much as “successful rituals are exhilarating; failed rituals are energy draining” (Collins 2004, 53). A failed ritual will at best give you “a flat feeling unaffected by the ritual, or worse yet, a sense of a drag, the feeling of boredom and constraint, even depression, interaction fatigue, a desire to escape” (Collins 2004, 51). Such rituals are alienating. As a result these rituals will be avoided, and excluded from an individuals interaction ritual chain.

It is these exact emotional experiences incels feel in their interactions with people – women in particular – in mainstream society. They have participated in failed rituals, rituals that produced negative emotions instead of collective sentiments, solidarity, friendship and emotional energy. More often than not incels are social outcasts, generally they no longer participate in many interaction rituals. Many speak of experiences of bullying and social exclusion from a young age, and some even mention suffering abuse as they grew up. One profile caption (which are like taglines for the individuals’ online profile) reads: “mentally crippled by lonely teen years”. This sentiment seems to be shared by many of his incels.co

peers, as people tell stories of never being chosen for friend-dates, sleepovers or sports teams. In the most extreme of cases, such as those of abuse, these experiences can put individuals off from ever engaging in intimate social interaction ever again, for fear of experiencing the negative consequences they've learned to associate with them. However, less serious incidents of social discomfort will also put an imprint on your interaction ritual chain, and cause you to associate certain (intimate) genres of interaction rituals with negative emotions, and therefore avoid them. E.g. if you're the friend always being left out of the soccer team during recess, you'll eventually decide to no longer ask to play soccer with the other boys. This metaphor extends to larger social life, where incels will express their desire to no longer partake in society, through bleak exclamations such as "existence is a nightmare", and "I'm longing for the sweet embrace of death". Their interaction ritual chains have been unable to provide them with the emotional energy to desire continued participation, and they are left with a somber view of their own existence.

Also when speaking about minor past social experiences, Incels often described them as derogatory, and/or anxiety and depression inducing. When interacting with others they feel as though emotions and focuses are never shared. One incel says everyone he meets only addresses him with "cold one word answers looking at anywhere but me, let alone at my eyes", and finishes by describing it as "such a simple but brutal thing". Another recounts how he feels like a ghost in society, and that everyone walks right past him without noticing his existence. In these interactive rituals the conditions for collective effervescence are not achieved, as the incels are incapable of creating intense interactions with people who are unwilling or unable to share prolonged physical copresence, mutual focus and emotional synchronization with them. However, it is not just situations of outward rejection that affect incels interaction ritual chains, they are also highly skeptical of interactions where they are "being nice-treated" as their belief is that "it's not genuine" and they're secretly being laughed at and teased behind their back. This situation is also a case of misalignment of focus and emotion within the interaction ritual. Just here, the incel is the one incapable of aligning their focus and emotions towards a mutually pleasant ritual, as their belief is that the other participant can't possibly have positive intentions. This belief again comes from experiences within the individuals' interaction ritual chains, which as we will see later in the chapter include rituals confirming the idea that society has "completely abandoned" and rejected incels. Hence, the outward appearance of the ritual is not the focus of the interaction ritual theory, but rather it rests on the perceptions the participants have of what is being reciprocated in the ritual. Incels can therefore individually view their interaction ritual chain

as filled with negative situational experiences regardless of how they have actually been treated. This lends support to the notion that incels feel victimized by a society that institutionally favors them as cisgender heterosexual men.

Through such experiences Incels will be unlikely to purposefully seek out and participate in the mainstream interaction rituals that fail them. One incel describes his plight saying: “I don't know how to make friends, I'm awkward as all hell and I know people can tell, they can probably tell that I'm a virgin too”. In doing so he is admitting he doesn't have the ritual experience to know how to act in friendship rituals, a therefore is unsuccessful in creating these bonds. Without social rituals incels end up lonely, depressed, and with a desire to escape. Many incels report that they have “no friends”, “no hope” and “no stake in this society”, and they see society as having “nothing but animosity” towards them. This is the result of unsuccessful and failed rituals that make up their interaction ritual chains. Another incel explains the exact failed interaction ritual that made him retreat from society. He said he was blackpilled one year on his birthday, when after he had spent the entire year making sure he personally congratulated everyone he knew on their birthday, no one congratulated him on his.

I remember how hollow I felt waiting the whole day for at least one message, that never came. broke (sic) down at the end, felt like a huge cuck for trying, Swore to never be "nice" to any normie ever again.

A salutation of “happy birthday” is a verbal ritual that indicates a certain level of intimacy and connection between the people interacting. It recognizes that the individuals have enough respect for each other to remember an important date, and that they wish to make the other aware of this respect. In the situation described this respect was only one-sided, making the congratulations a failed ritual. The ritual attempted to set up solidarity and acknowledge relationships with other people, but without the feedback loop that intensifies the ritual, it fails. Incels have been unsuccessful in creating the social and emotional bonds necessary for successful interaction rituals and relationships, and in response they ended up isolated and aggrieved, reluctant to partake in the future rituals that could allow them a new shot at emotional energy and social solidarity.

Unable to participate in the rituals that society reveres, incels are designated to become social outcasts. As exempt from societal rituals they are unable to learn the moral codes of society, and therefore often also become the disruptors of ritual proprieties, and in turn the perpetrators of feelings of moral uneasiness. As a result society pushes them further

away from the norm, in order for the majority to uphold their rituals, their symbols, and their solidarity. We have seen this clearly with incels being ridiculed online, denoted mentally ill by mainstream media, and branded dangerous terrorists by the justice system. In this sense the isolation from rituals becomes a cycle that amplifies itself; experience with failed rituals leads to social isolation through a desire to shield oneself from further unsuccessful rituals, not participating in interaction rituals causes one to miss out on learning the codes of conduct in society, and not knowing the codes of conduct in society further isolates the individual from society and ensures they won't experience successful interaction rituals in the future. It is clear that incels, their beliefs, and their morals position them in opposition to mainstream culture, and therefore stands in great offense, but this opposition begins, and is furthered, by failed interaction rituals that involve social circles much larger than just the incel community.

The less incels participate in the interaction rituals of mainstream society, the less connected they feel to their communities and cultures. According to Collins, culture – its beliefs, moral codes, symbols and solidarity – is upheld through a continued enactment of the rituals that direct energy into them (2004, 31). In this sense ritual participation both creates and maintains culture through its choice of ritual focus. We then define the society, or the cultural community, as those individuals whose consciousness has been flooded by the “shared emotion and intersubjective focus” of the particular culture. As incels and their individual interaction ritual chains move further and further away from participating in these culture-defining rituals they stop feeling connected in the same way to the beliefs, moral codes, symbols of, and feelings of group membership to ‘normal’ society.

Sex

One of the most obvious interaction rituals that incels are exempt from is sex. By definition incels do not have sex. According to Collins sex is a powerful example of interaction ritual where “interaction-generated excitement” determines the success of the ritual (Collins 2004, 235). He recognizes that sex is a biological drive, but believes this to be too simplistic an explanation to justify the human desire for sex. Sexual pleasure is not merely the result of genital stimulation, rather it “is experienced as a collective achievement” (Collins 2004, 234), a situation that is heightened by “rhythmic synchronization” and “emotional entrainment” (Collins 2004, 227). Successful sexual rituals include high levels of physical copresence, boundaries to the outside, mutual focus of attention and emotional interchange, and therefore

have the potential to “produce the strongest of all forms of solidarity” and emotional energy (Collins 2004, 234). “Sexual access” is a “key boundary marker” in society and a “primary test of loyalty” between individuals who wish to develop the most intimate of relationships (Collins 2004, 235). In this sense taking part in such a ritual requires two equally engaged and enthusiastic participants. Incels have been unable to obtain such a dynamic, and have instead experienced failed interaction rituals when attempting to procure them.

In interaction rituals where incels are engaging with women there may be bodily copresence or even barriers to the outside, an extreme example being an incel having been set up, but still rejected in an arranged marriage situation. Yet, collective effervescence and emotional energy is not achieved as these rituals are missing a mutual focus and/or a shared mood. In situations of sexual or romantic rejection, one person is attempting to move the verbal and physical behaviors towards intimacy, while the other has no such focus and therefore breaks the interaction ritual chain that would eventually lead to sex. In this setting the feedback cycle is broken, and the ritual fails. As incels have never experienced a successful sexual ritual their interaction ritual chains have no previous knowledge of how to successfully complete such a ritual, and it then becomes harder and harder to acquire. Many report that they genuinely don’t know, or have no conception of how to begin initiating sexual intimacy, and without having any such knowledge their rejection continues. Normally this is learned through a process of trial and error, where you’re your future ‘moves’ are determined by the extent of ritual outcomes they have produced in the past. But if none have been successful, you have no code of conduct to go by, no feedback cycle to learn from. Hence you end up in a cycle of not being able to participate in these rituals, not desiring to participate in these rituals, and building up under the narrative that “it’s over” for incels.

One sexual opening that incels do have available to them is prostitution. However, many incels do not see this as a legitimate form of “ascension”, their term for moving out of the state of incelhood. Through the use of interaction ritual theory we can begin to understand why this is. From an outsiders perspective it might look as though incelhood is purely about being a virgin, or not having had sexual intercourse, but in reality it is not the act of sex incels are missing, it’s the interaction ritual of sex. Going to a prostitute will only give you the former (Collins 2004, 229). Sex is about much more than just having your genitals stimulated. It’s about the collective experience of reciprocated actions, rhythmic entrainment and shared mood, that in turn define the socially magnetic ritual situation and provides a high degree of emotion, motivation and symbolic charge. This ritual outcome is only possible when the participants are equally engaged in the ritual with similar emotional commitment.

This does not happen when one part sees the ritual as a service they provide in exchange for money. The focus of the sex worker is to make a living, which does not match up with the focus of the client whose wish it to 'get off'. Incels themselves echo this as they claim "sex isn't just about penis in vagina, it's a lot of things coming together". They don't just want a woman to have sex with they want mutual desire, mutual enjoyment, the development of emotional energy and the solidarity, trust and loyalty that comes with a successful intense sexual interaction ritual. After a lifetime of rejection, failed rituals and moral uneasiness they long for emotional connection and a sense of belonging.

However, the incels understanding of sex comes not from personal experience, but from separate interaction rituals that have established it as a sacred object. In its physical absence, sex has gained a heightened importance. It has become so significant that these men have created entire identities around not having it. Sex is no longer just a physical act; instead it's been given symbolic meanings through interaction ritual. As incels gather on incels.co to discuss their lack of sex, sex becomes the main focus of a ritual. Through the ritual the energy of the group is projected onto sex as a concept, giving it added value. This value is cultivated and reinforced through the users feedback cycles, and as they all entrain around it, sex becomes marked a sacred object. To incels sex is not just one of life's many desires, it is the only desire worth caring about. As they see it, life without it is not worth living. In order to justify this stance incels have built up a myriad of additional myths and meanings around sex. They believe that one's ability to have sex, or one's sexual market value (SMV), determines most everything in life, from job prospects, to quality-of-life, to how your friends treat you. SMV is therefore the ultimate social currency. They also see sex as a tool employed by women to either reward or subjugate men based on arbitrary looks categories, and believe there to be a societal hierarchy differentiated only by the amount of sex one has access to. As incels have collectively entrained around sex, sex takes on a new significance based in its status as a sacred object.

Creating New Interaction Rituals

Sex is only one example. As their connection to the outside world weakens incels have retreated into a separate world, one where they create their own separate sacred objects, moral codess, and collective consciousness. Incels.co serves as an alternative arena for alternative interaction rituals. As a platform it serves to provide all the ingredients necessary for successful interaction rituals and collective effervescence. The site itself is a space for

group assembly, in order to be a part of the ritual and interact with other users an individual will have to seek out the website and log themselves in. The process of creating an account on incels.co involves ‘proving’ your inceldom by “explaining your situation”, and you will be rejected if the story you tell isn’t convincing enough for the moderators. This serves to create staunch barriers to outsiders, as well as sets a definition for who is an insider and who isn’t. Only those whose story is ‘good enough’ will be welcomed into the fold. Once registered on the site its very format facilitates collectivity. Once logged in the users have the option to either start their own threads or comment on threads other users have started. The goal of both is to engage with other users around a common topic/focus. A thread will usually start off by describing or illustrating (through photos or videos) a situation, a personal experience, a news story or a blackpill theory that the thread starter believes will engage other incels.co users. Subsequently other users will respond within the thread by giving their opinion on the subject in question. A shared mood is then created as the group entrains around the subject of the thread, and begin to place their collective energies towards it. These processes reinforce each other, as the focus is sharpened and synchronized, the energy and emotions are also intensified, and hence felt more strongly by the participants. As we spoke about with theory on emotional subculture there is often a predetermined emotional response, and when the users all synchronize their mood towards the group ideal their engagement with the material also becomes more intense, and produces a sacredness.

Let’s look at an example: a thread labeled “Holy shit the fucking confidence hot cunthumans have”. Here the original poster describes a situation in which a “hot chick” from his class challenged the professor’s correction of her during class. He believes that her appearance has made her so confident and has given her such good social skills, and that she unfairly excels above her peers despite being “dumb as fuck”, concluding that “all hot cunts are like that”. This sets the other users up to place their focus on women, and how unfairly advantaged they are. They respond in kind: “They have absolute power in our society and are acting like a bunch of high on power dictators”, “It’s their world now, we just live in it”, “Foids are our slavemasters only because cucks allow them to be”, “It’s the result of constant undeserved validation and adulation” etc. They incels here manage to reciprocate the anger and feelings of injustice first presented by the original poster, and as they interact, the mood intensifies as others join in in agreeing with the sentiment and validating the emotions that are expressed. The thread culminates as one of the participants utters “God I hate foids so much”, which seems to be the consensus reached by all users from this particular interaction ritual.

Through this thread a seemingly harmless situation that happened between a woman and her professor has been construed to serve a broader purpose. It gives the incels something to gather around, something to express their emotions upon, and to enact ritual onto, and allows users to perform predetermined and prescriptive ritual roles. The initial poster sets up the focus of the ritual, which in this case is women, and their undeserved advantage in life. Once the focus is set, other users perform their ritual roles by giving emotionally confirming responses that both endorse and escalate the original posters feelings of anger and frustration towards women, affirming the shared focus and shared mood.

Through this example we also begin to see the specific ritualistic practices utilized within incels.co to draw boundaries to outsiders, which underwrite and reinforce the shared collective consciousness. Firstly, the use of argot excludes subcultural outsiders from fully understanding or taking part in the ritual, drawing borders between participants and non-participants. Secondly, the transgressive nature of the title reinforces the separation from ‘normal’ society, and ‘normal’ morality, and sets the poster up as an incel ‘insider’ by acknowledging the distinct group morality, which celebrates such transgressions. This morality is confirmed, and becomes reinforced, as others join in on the transgression (by e.g. likening women to slave masters). These statements and responses are clear overreactions to and exaggerations of the situation presented. What starts out as one persons anger at a classmate, is cultivated and magnified through the synchronization of collective energies and focuses. Resulting in an otherwise unfounded amplification of the original anger among all participants, to the point where the emotion is no longer connected to just the original woman discussed, but all women.

While this is not a cultivation of a traditionally positive emotion, the ritual still serves to center collective energies, and therefore still produces a pleasurable and attractive emotional energy. Successful rituals can focus on either positive or negative emotions, as its success depends not on how happy one feels, but how strongly one feels and connects with others. Its sacred objects can therefore also be either positively or negatively charged (or both), depending on the energy produced and myths drawn. Its sacredness depends not on how positive its associations are, but how focused and energetic the rituals have been as they engage with the object. The collective cultivation of negative emotions such as anger, hatred, unfairness, resentment and frustration therefore serves as a solidarizing force for incels. Sharing their anger through synchronization with others serves to create strong social bonds. Incels will therefore assemble on incels.co with the purpose of angering themselves and others. Threads will focus on and illicit anger at anything from a “feminist landwhale” boss,

women who are bisexual, a woman who wrote in her diary about a “chad” she liked, a new dating app that lets women report on men, Jordan Peterson, the byzantine empire, to normies who get married. Through an entrainment around these topics, incels will hyperbolize and escalate any minor situation to become a rationalization for shared feelings of anger.

To further their internal group solidarity incels also participate in rituals of pathos. Here the goal is to focus on what is missing in their own lives, to cultivate sadness around these experiences. By discussing their loneliness, victimhood, and alienation from mainstream society they turn their own social isolation into a sacred object, entraining around it. We can therefore see even their discussions of other failed rituals as ingredients in new successful rituals. The communication of misery, if acknowledged and reciprocated, creates a ‘safe space’ that builds intimate bonds based in shared emotions. Threads will start discussions around topics such as: “Can you actually remember the last time you were genuinely happy?”, “Have you ever had a single friend?”, or “Incel trait: crying/depressed on your birthdays”. These illicit sadness and sympathy for each other, and build up under the notion that inceldom is a joyless existence. This will provide them with further reasons to be sad, and serve as constant reminders of that sadness, which in turn escalates the initial emotion of each participant. Through this incels are bonded and form group solidarity in their collective misery. They are also, through a cultivation of their loneliness, partaking in a border drawing process between themselves and those offline who have driven them to isolation. This only furthers the feeling of collectivity, as it now stands in opposition to an outside force. Essentially they have replaced their traditional cultural narratives with a narrative of victimhood, which allows them to form their life around this oppression and create a culture/society/group of their own. As one incel.co user puts it: “friendship is not truly necessary when you have internet forums”, meaning they have replaced their real life (offline) relationships and social connections, with a solidarity that encompasses the user base of incels.co.

Sacred Objects, Myths, and Moral Codes

An overwhelming amount of the threads on incels.co direct their emotional energy toward women, and as a result they become the main ritual focus on the site. Incels’ incessant misogyny and fixation on women, has both removed women’s individuality as human beings, but also created ‘the woman’ as an overarching sacred object charged up with collective energies. As the woman is ‘made sacred’ through ritual focus, she receives a prominent status

within the collective consciousness and through a cultivation of narrative myths and storytelling, properties and attributes are assigned to her.

As with religion, sacred objects, as well as moral orders, are rationalized through the use of myths. Through the cultivation of myths and narratives groups define their “symbolic structure” (Collins 2004, 28). Borrowing on work from anthropologist and ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, Collins emphasizes the role of narrative and myth in creating the symbolic structure of groups. “Myths structure the world into categories” and serve to provide a group “code organized on binary dichotomies” (Collins 2004, 28). The “systems of myths” “lays down the frames of thinking, as well as marking boundaries of what is permissible and what is monstrous, and therefore implicitly who is a proper social member and who is not” (Collins 2004, 28). Thus, the stories that incels tell serve to frame their social realities. As incels share their own tales about how women are “slave masters” and all non-incel men are brainwashed cucks to obey them, their reality becomes one of power, oppression and victimhood. They’ve created a clear dichotomy based on gender², where women are given power as gatekeepers of the social currency of sex. As such ‘the woman’ is framed as both desired and hated, filled with both positive and negative energies. Mythically women are revered, as being with them is presented as the ultimate goal in life, but just as strongly they are despised for choosing to deny this from certain men. Women are blocking incels from their utmost dreams, and because of this their image is loaded with negative energies despite being the object of these dreams. The designations placed upon women within incels.co are also reignited within the incels when they see women offline. Incels report on several occasions that just seeing a woman walking around can be enough to incite rage within him. Additionally a confirmation-bias will make incels see all female behavior as hostile towards them, regardless of the women’s intentions. Once women have been mythicized as the enemy, their behavior will always be viewed through this lens. Whether she is just getting off a bus without looking at him, or responding to a question in class, the incel will see this as an offense, reigniting the negative sentiments cultivated around women in the interaction rituals.

Additionally through ritual and myth, men have been placed in sub-categories, and positioned within a moral order. Just as ‘the woman’ has been made sacred through ritual focus, so have ‘the chad’, ‘the cuck’ (‘the normie’), and ‘the incel’. While the categories are based in looks, narratives have assigned them all additional attributes and properties. Chad is painted as the pinnacle of success, and as such the incels long to be like him. Threads about

² Incels do not recognize gender as a concept extending beyond the traditional biological “binary” of sex, male and female.

Chad will place emphasis on how the world is catered towards him, and how easy and problem free his life is. Chad is resented for his ease in life, but ultimately he is not to blame, as he cannot control his own SMV, as it is up to women. A cuck on the other hand, as we have seen, is charged with negative energy. Cucks are the ones who have inflated women's egos, allowed them to gain power, and willingly let themselves be controlled by women. Cucks gave women the right to vote, to work, to leave the home, and as such they have destroyed the ties that constrained women and bound them to the men in their lives. Along with 'the woman', 'the cuck' is the mythical villain. The incel however, is the mythical hero, a brave crusader in a world that works against them. For while they recognize and constantly condemn their own appearance or social skills, these faults are not seen as personal shortcomings, but rather categories that have been used to oppress them. Instead they entrain around their own "high IQ" and celebrate themselves as the only proprietors of the truth. They believe that:

Due to being incel we can look at the world objectively, the truths that get posted on this forum are absolute and universal.

We can explain everything from why Hitler invaded Poland to why Jupiter is the biggest planet in our solar system

Just as with 'the woman', the Chad, the cuck, and the incel are not so much reflections of human beings, but objectified caricatures in a world based in myth. When viewed as such it becomes easier to see the link to traditional Durkheimian notions of religious ritual, religious symbols, and religious myths. These caricatures can be likened to saints or gods; symbolic characters placed at the center of rituals and charged up with significance, sacredness and meaning. And who convey moral standards and social structure through the mythical narratives and stories attached to them.

Another important symbol of representation is the image of the blackpill. The blackpill stands as a sacred object that represents the group as a whole, but also the belief system of the group. While not a physical text, I would argue that it serves in much the same way as Holy Scripture. 'The blackpill' is used to denote a set of beliefs and myths that promote a certain worldview and structures the social reality of incels, but it is also a physical image of a pill that is black. Just as "the concept of moral good is attached to beliefs in religious beings" and "transferred to symbols and sacred objects" (Collins 2004, 40), the concept of moral good is for incels related to the blackpill. As with a sacred text such as the

bible, the image of the text itself is sacred, representing every belief, theory, myth and moral code the text conveys. Thus, when the blackpill image is shown it has implications beyond the simple image of a black pill; it marks the user as an incel insider, as well as conveys the entire message of the blackpill theory. The blackpill stands as an identifier for incels to recognize each other - to identify and signal that an intimacy and solidarity is present – and conveys that there is a common belief system without having to divulge the intricacies of entire interaction ritual chains. Just as with ‘the woman’, the blackpill is a vital focus of attention in interaction rituals on incels.co. As we have discussed, the blackpill theory is continually being discussed and developed through interaction rituals as focus is placed on different dimensions of the theory, but the symbolic meaning of the object stays constant as the image of the black pill is continually referenced in conjunction with incel ideology.

As incels move more of their rituals into the online space of incels.co the beliefs, ideas, and moralities of ‘normal’ society is shunned in favor of a morality that puts the new social group, and the new social myths is the center of focus. When detached from society they no longer adhere to its moral codes. On incels.co referring to women as cumdumpsters and assigning value based on her sexual past is not ‘bad’. On incels.co it’s acceptable to call each other and others faggot or the n-word. On incels.co there is no notion of misogyny, racism, and homophobia being ethically ‘wrong’ as this is only a morality upheld through the participation in mainstream social rituals. Instead a new morality is formed. Through “the heightened experience of intersubjectivity and emotional strength in group rituals” incels generate a new “conception of what is good” and what is evil (Collins 2004, 39-40). The moral order is generated from the feelings of emotional energy (EE), where anything that produces EE is essentially ‘good’. On incels.co EE, or “a feeling of confidence, elation, strength, enthusiasm, and initiative in taking action” is created when ones anger and self-pity is recognized, validated and returned in kind. As an incel receives confirmation that his anger at his “feminist landwhale” boss is justified, and as he sees others join him in his anger, the confidence and strength behind his emotion increases, as well as his and the groups enthusiasm for the cause. The interaction ritual may also incline the original poster, or others in a similar situation, to stand up to their boss, as the intersubjectivity and support drives their initiative in taking action. In this particular example the morality produced has to do with the justification of anger, confirming the original posters designation of right and wrong. The boss is designated a perpetrator, while the incel employee is the victim, and therefore morally superior. This is then adapted into the collective consciousness of those who participated,

now elated with common anger and a narrative of victimhood under female bosses. This narrative is then placed within the larger collection of beliefs represented by the blackpill.

Conclusion

Incels are not inherently evil beings that purposefully perpetuate misogynistic hatred for the sake of hatred. They are boys and men who feel a sense of disconnect to and rejection from mainstream society, as their interaction rituals have failed to produce successful amounts of emotional energy, solidarity and collective effervescence. This alienation has made them long for a new community, one where rituals succeed, and they are able to experience the energy and solidarity that comes with collective entrainment. They are young men in search of community, understanding, and sympathy, and incels.co provides them that. The community then serves to replace much of the connection that incels have to offline society, as they move away from participating in these rituals, and in turn serve to remove them from the codes of conduct and moral proprieties of these cultures. Instead a new morality is cultivated, where incels, and their feelings of anger and unfairness, stand as moral goods, and women, feminism, political correctness, and the men who support them stand as moral evils.

While there is no denying that incels willingly participate in the cultivation of these beliefs, the collectivist approach emphasizes that their attraction to the community stems from a longing for belonging, rather than a desire to engage with hateful rhetoric. Instead of approaching the issue of incels as young men being drawn towards misogyny, they are young men being drawn towards other young men with whom they are able to create something shared, and misogyny happens to be a part of it. What is shared is less important than the collective action of sharing. As such it is beneficial to look not only at their discourses, but also at how the discourses are used to fulfill social needs in the lives of alienated young men.

However, while the new community serves to provide the desired solidarity and emotional energy, the new moral order they've created, and the behavior and beliefs that come with it stands in stark opposition to their expressed goal of having sexual and romantic relationships with women. Once an incel has 'taken the blackpill', he is initiated, he is part of the group, and hence he internalizes their symbolic meanings. At this point he becomes convinced that women are undeserving of his respect, and should not be shown any affection or esteem. This only serves to perpetuate the unsuccessfulness of interaction rituals with women, and hence continue the life circumstance of incelhood. In this sense incels perpetuate their own perceived oppression through adopting a moral order that stands in opposition with

the objects they desire, and the society they exist within. A site such as incels.co therefore then serves both as a site of belonging and solidarity, but also serves to isolate and segregate incels further.

7. Conclusion

Throughout this thesis my overarching goal has been to gain a deeper understanding of the incel community. In order to do so I have both looked at what their discourses say, as well as how these discourses are utilized to produce group solidarity and collective energy. Through theories on radicalization, subculture and interaction ritual I have presented incels.co as a platform hosting an extremist collectivist subculture centered around countercultural beliefs, moral codes and sacred objects. In a parallel to the works of Whitney Phillips (2015) and Angela Nagle (2017) I have made the claim that it is a mistake to see this Internet phenomenon as unaffected by and isolated from mainstream society. Rather they are reflections of larger social and cultural fluctuations, and serve as signals for broader public conflict that extend beyond the confines of Internet subcultures.

The Crisis at Hand

As a part of the larger online manosphere incels as a group have united as a response to and adversary of the progressive feminist movement that has advanced women's rights over the last several decades. As women and society at large move away from relying on the traditional nuclear family unit with a male breadwinner, men's role in heterosexual relationships has shifted. This, coupled with vast technological developments that have increased women's mating choices, has resulted in certain young men falling outside the confines of traditional romantic, familial and sexual relationships. Along with shifts in relationship prospects, the last couple of decades have seen the development of a so-called, 'crisis-of-masculinity' (Jordan 2019). This crisis builds on a notion that men in the western world are suffering as they are subject to a traditional hegemonic masculinity, which stunts emotional literacy as well as emphasizes aggressiveness and competitiveness (Scourfield 2005). High male suicide rates, lack of male friendship, addiction rates and mental health struggles among men are often cited as evidence of such a crisis (Jordan 2019).

Additionally, men in the west are growing up in an increasingly individualistic society, which can be alienating and difficult to navigate. As Kimmel (2003) predicted globalization has removed many of the traditionally masculine roles in western societies, and left men looking for explanations and someone to blame. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman theorizes that we are currently living in a state of *liquid modernity*, where the stability and

structure of society has been diminished (2000). Instead there is a focus on the responsibility of being individuals (Bauman 2000). Humans are in a constant state of self-improvement, which leads to distress, anxiety as we are never “done” catching up to our potential, or our peers (Bauman 2000). Instead of being connected to other people we see ourselves as in competition with them, leading to feelings of alienation. Further, social media has made it increasingly easy to compare oneself to the seemingly ‘perfect’ facades. As such, digital media scholar Dr. Kaitlyn Regehr (work not yet published) has identified a “clear correlation between the rise of social media and the rise of the Incel community” (Peake 2020). She theorizes that visibility into the lives of others serves to create an image of everyone having fun without you, contributing to a feeling of isolation and loneliness (Peake 2020).

The Function of incels.co

Inceldom – the mere physical state of being involuntarily celibate – has in itself, no direct connection to blackpill ideology, misogyny, suicidal ideation or hegemonic masculinity. There is nothing inherently wrong or deviant in desiring sex, relationships, a family, or feelings of being desired and loved. This sentiment is universal, and does not in itself disconnect incels from the rest of society. Rather being an ‘incel’ is about much more than just not having sex. When the media, law enforcement or scholars speak about incels we are referring to a certain online community, a radical collectivist subculture that share and engage with extremist material and beliefs. Throughout this thesis I have made the claim that incels.co functions as a platform for these beliefs to be cultivated and subsequently internalized by its users. As such the site provides a space for the radicalization of beliefs.

Incels.co welcomes young men who are feeling vulnerable due to loneliness, and provides them with a network of support that seemingly understands and recognizes their plight. It collects young men who feel left out due to social isolation, rejection, missing developmental milestones, and a lack of connection and recognition from the opposite sex, and facilitates for collective rituals focused around quasi-sacred objects. As these rituals succeed the group is entrained in the emotional energy generated, and their experiences become not just their own but they become shared. In the experience of *the shared*, collective energies serve to cultivate a new social reality, with its own attached solidarity, standards of morality and sacred objects. Individuals who’s ties to mainstream society are frail, from years of weak and failed rituals will experience these rituals at an intensity they are unaccustomed to and internalize its outcomes even stronger. This serves to have the strongest

attraction on those whose offline connections are the weakest, allowing for a medium such as the Internet – usually critiqued for creating weak ties – to have a profound effect on producing solidarity.

It is then through the process of collective entrainment around sacred objects that incels become radicalized. As incels come together to fixate on the women who reject them, or the Chad they will never be, their emotions focus, synchronize, and entrain to charge up the object with emotional energy, heightening its importance and value within the group. The blackpill is then cultivated to specify mythical and narrative understandings of this importance, providing attributes and properties onto women, chads, and the various other sacred objects incels have nurtured. These also become placed in the moral order of the group based on the emotion of the energy directed towards it. This is where we begin to see extremist beliefs such as violent misogyny appear. Incels.co – with its discourse on the blackpill, the right to keep women in cages, discussions of whether or not rape should be legal, and celebrations of mass killers and COVID-19 deaths – may not be instantly attractive in isolation, but as these discussions become a part of a larger chain of magnetic and entraining interaction rituals. Here the shared solidarity, emotional energy, moralities and sacred objects become the appealing factor, not necessarily the discourses in and of themselves. As incels choose to gather on incels.co they are seeking collective and interactive experiences that provide them with emotional energy, whether this is done by bashing women, wallowing in one's own loneliness, or something completely different is essentially irrelevant. In this way the importance lies not in what they say, but the context in which it is said.

Suggestions for Future Research

If we are to further understand incels and their beliefs through the framework of interaction ritual, we must also see them as transient, sustained only through ritual practice. An incel will only feel solidarity with other incels as long as they continue to participate in interaction rituals. They will only adhere to the moral codes, and find importance in the sacred objects for as long as they continue to gather in seclusion, and focus their energies and emotions along with their peers. As Collins himself says: “when the practices stop, the beliefs lose their emotional import, becoming mere memories, forms without substance, eventually dead and meaningless” (2004, 37). In order to test such a theory it would be interesting to try and contact members of the now defunct r/Braincels, or slut-hate.com to see how they are

currently identifying and/or thinking. If they have not gone on to join other incel communities, do they still consider themselves ‘incels’? Do they still adhere to the blackpill? Are they still involuntarily celibate? Has their view on women changed? What subcultural characteristics do they still display? Do they still use the argot?

Alternatively, such as with the thread on the r/AskReddit subreddit, a study could be conducted interviewing men who have previously identified as incels but no longer do, about their initial attractions toward the community as well as their reasons for distancing themselves from the group. Also investigating their current ritual engagements and how they have served to either change or failed to change the subjects solidarities, moral codes, sacred objects. It would also be interesting to see what blackpill ideas, if any, still resonate with men who have gone on to have sex, girlfriends, families and wives.

Theoretical Development

Through including Interaction Ritual Theory in my analysis of the extremist subculture of incels, I have attempted to add a new understanding to research on radicalization. By focusing on the appeal of successful rituals within these communities, I move away from an understanding of radicalization as a cognitive process that draws individuals toward radical ideologies. Rather, individuals are drawn towards the collective effervescence, solidarity and emotional energy present in interaction rituals within extremist groups. Radicalization is instead understood as a collective process that occurs when a group entrains around a sacred object. As these objects become sacred, a new social reality is formed around them through a cultivation of myths and narratives. Along with a designation of standards of morality, these myths are fixed within the collective consciousness of the group, and become part of their ideology.

As such, this provides a new framework through which to view extremist groups, not through what their ideology provides them, but by what their rituals provide them. By searching for the four ritual ingredients: (1) Group assembly, (2) barriers to the outside, (3) a mutual focus of attention, and (4) a shared mood, one can identify the rituals they partake in, as well as determine their level of success. The level of participation and effervescence can give an idea of the group ties, the members’ investment in the group, and their adherence to the group moralities, beliefs and values. When fully engaged in these rituals members will internalize these moralities, beliefs and values, and can therefore – depending on the extremist nature of the ritual focus – be considered radicalized. In addition, the notion of

failed rituals can also be extended to assess the personal risk of radicalization for an individual; the less successful individuals are in conventional mainstream rituals the more open they are to alternative rituals, and in turn vulnerable to radicalization.

By painting interaction rituals as forces for radicalization this thesis has attempted to provide a mechanism through which we can understand the process of adopting radical beliefs and behaviors. As such, this mechanism should also be able to be identified within other radical groups, such as white supremacists or Islamic jihadists. Further research should therefore be focused on trying to identify interaction rituals and sacred objects within these groups as well. If confirmed this can have implications for how deradicalization is handled. If rituals are responsible for the cultivation of extremism, prevention of the enactment of further such rituals is the first step in deradicalization, followed by attempting to reintroduce radicalized individuals back into mainstream rituals, for them to reconnect with the solidarity and moral codes of society.

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