

Interrogating the “Incel Menace”: Assessing the Threat of Male Supremacy in Terrorism Studies

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Following a series of deadly attacks, but particularly since 2014, incels have entered not only the public lexicon but piqued scholarly interest, especially with terrorism studies scholars and CVE programs. However, much of the current analyses largely interpret incel communities as homogenous, and in doing so ignore the complex and often contradictory nature of incel communities. CVE recommendations made by these scholars are founded on these misconceptions of incel identity and community. Through a critical feminist lens, in this essay we argue that the focus on incels should rather be pointed to understanding the role of male supremacy, antifeminism, and misogyny in society. Additionally, we argue against the trend of attempting to classify and securitize “incels” as a unique form of misogynistic violence, and identify the dangers of a lack of focus on male supremacy.

Keywords: incels, male supremacy, feminist analysis, countering violent extremism, misogyny

Introduction

Since the 2018 Toronto Van Attack, pushes to classify incels as a terror threat have been proposed in much of the Western world (Beckett 2021). In addition to this, several recent articles and books have attempted to assess the threat of incel violence and/or incel terrorism (e.g. Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro 2020; Brunt and Taylor 2020; White 2017; Tomkinson, Harper, and Attwell 2020; Cottee 2021), as well as a number of reports by government agencies, policy groups, and countering violent extremism (CVE) organizations.

Although these articles and reports do an apt job at describing the basics regarding the history and trajectory of the incel movement, some also often fail to situate the misogynist¹ incel movement, and the danger they pose, in larger men's movements and misogynistic violence, which is largely normalized (Tranchese and Sugiura 2021; Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016; Southern Poverty Law Center 2021).

In this essay, we argue against classifying and securitizing “incel” as a unique and extraordinary form of misogynistic violence. Much of the scholarship and popular commentary on incel communities tends to treat incels as unique and pathologize the misogyny of the misogynist incel movement rather than treating it as a structural problem (Byerly 2020) and fails to engage with the vast body of literature that addresses the relationship between masculinity, misogyny, and violence (e.g. Pearson 2020; Bridges and Tober 2018; Terry 2007; Jiwani 2011; Pearson 2019; Manne 2017). Certainly, our concerns are amplified by the fact that we are both feminist ethnographers who have engaged in multi-year studies of incel communities.² and through this analysis we attempt to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of this recent literature as well as providing our own observations and critical analysis around the push to securitize and classify “incel” as a terrorist threat. In addition, we feel it is important to foreground that our positionalities as women (one of us a woman of color) gives us a unique perspective into the “incel” phenomenon (Haraway 1988), particularly since our intersecting identities make us not just the targets of incels' vitriol, but also because misogyny impacts our everyday lives.

The focus of our essay is not on the antifeminist or men's rights movement more broadly, which has been written about extensively by scholars such as Messner(1998; 2016),

¹ We distinguish individuals who personally identify with the involuntary celibate or incel label from the male supremacist ideology and misogynist incel movement (M. Kelly, DiBranco, and DeCook 2021). The focus of this paper is on the latter group.

² Although we quote from specific sources like incel forums, manifestos, and other documents, we have chosen to not directly cite those sources in our manuscript in order to avoid further amplifying them with citations.

Ging(2017), Gattel and Dutton(2016)and O'Donnell (2019) but rather to critically assess the state of research on incel communities specifically. We feel that in focusing on misogynist incels, and neglecting to engage in the bountiful literature on misogyny, gender, and violence, some scholars help produce a narrative in which misogynist violence is only valid or only a “threat” when it is classifiable as incel violence. Indeed, recent scholarship like articles by Hoffman et al., (2020), Cottee, (2020), and others are representative of an overall problematic trend in terrorism studies to attempt to typologize, classify, and standardize the “incel menace.” Not only has this led to false classification of misogynist killers as incels (Jasser et al., 2020), but it has also neglects to interrogate the role that misogyny and violence against women play in violent extremism (McCulloch et al. 2019; Vito, Admire, and Hughes 2018; Pearson 2019). In not examining male supremacy as a whole, we risk mis-classifying certain attacks, neglecting misogyny as a precursor to extremist violence and naturalizing the “everyday terrorism” of interpersonal violence (Sjoberg 2015; Pain 2014).

We argue that the threat does not lie in incel communities alone, but rather larger societal and cultural structures that are built on misogyny and heteropatriarchy as their ideological core. Simply put, we are against attempts to classify and securitize “incel” as a unique form of misogynistic violence, and are concerned that these attempts to classify any and all violence against women as being “incel,” obscures the real issue: misogyny, male supremacism, and patriarchy as systems that perpetuate these systems of violence. Per the article’s title, this essay will be assessing the true nature of the threat of the “incel menace,” to add to a larger body of literature that’s previously examined issues of gender, terrorism, and violence(e.g. Enloe 2001; Enloe et al. 2019; Sjoberg and Gentry 2015; Sjoberg 2014; Pearson 2020; Auchter 2012). In doing so, we advocate for a framing of male supremacy to understand misogynist violence, rather than equating all misogynistic violence with the incel movement. Additionally, we identify the dangers of a lack of focus on male supremacy more

broadly, and explore how shortcomings of knowledge and understanding of male supremacist groups can potentially affect CVE efforts, and provide recommendations for future work in the essay's final sections.

Incels on the Internet

The term “incel” (originally “invcel”) was coined by a bisexual Canadian woman named Alana. In the late 1990s Alana created a peer-support network for men and women who had difficulty finding romantic partners via a website and online mailing list (Love Not Anger n.d.). Alana's forum, and later a site called Incel Support, stood in stark contrast to the misogynist incel spaces that are more widely known and researched today, not only in terms of being gender inclusive but also in that they were highly moderated and banned most misogynist and violent content. Additionally, these forums also presented incelhood as a temporary life circumstance as opposed to many current misogynist incel forums which present incelhood as predestined and inescapable for some men.³ While Alana's forum and other spaces banned hateful speech and members that spread it, individuals that had been banned from the non-misogynist spaces soon flocked to more permissive forums that allowed such content such as the Love-Shy forum. Over time the community that had developed on Alana's forum and later Incel Support shrunk, and the forums that had allowed hateful speech gained more and more traction. Not long after, the latter group began to overlap with the Pick-Up Artists, a continuation of the “seduction” industry that had emerged in the 1970s, whom had their own online forums in the 1990s (Marwick and Lewis 2017), and in the mid-2000s were more and more visible in U.S. pop culture, from Neil Strauss's bestselling book

³ Some misogynist incels have started to reframe incelhood as a “life circumstance” or “life situation” on their wikis and blogs, and have claimed that any man that does not have sex for a set period of time is an incel. However, on misogynist incel forums who qualifies as an incel is highly contested and incelhood is still presented as a permanent predestined identity.

The Game, to the VH1 Reality TV show *The Pickup Artist*, to fictional portrayals of pick-up artists and coaches in popular sitcoms and movies (King 2018).

As more men attempted to employ the techniques suggested by Pick-Up Artists to seduce women, a new online community of anti-PUAs began to form filled with men who were angry that the PUA techniques had failed “to deliver the promised results (sex with women)” (Kelly, DiBranco, and DeCook, 2021) This anti-PUA community was populated in part by self-identified incels (who had migrated from the increasingly misogynistic forums), cementing the overlap between PUAs and some incels. Although anti-PUA communities, like the forum PUAhate, claimed to hate PUA gurus and techniques, they continued to share “an ethos and orientation toward women, who remain[ed] an instrument, a target, a reward,”(Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019, 5014). This indicates that the core beliefs of misogynist incels on PUAhate which were “shaped by the sexual entitlement and dehumanization toward women endemic in society” (M. Kelly, DiBranco, and DeCook 2021), and were aligned with Pick-Up Artists and other male supremacist groups more broadly.

In May 2014, a member of PUAhate, Elliot Rodger, who identified as an incel on the forum, killed six people before killing himself in Santa Barbara, California (Glasstetter 2014). Rodger left a manifesto and several YouTube videos identifying his hatred of women and desire to seek revenge upon them for not sleeping with him as the motivation for his attack (Witt 2020). Rodger’s manifesto and YouTube videos helped shape the perpetrator into a martyr to misogynist incels that were creating new forums and blogs across the web. In the years following the Santa Barbara attack, new misogynist incel forums and communities appeared on Reddit, 4chan, and in other online spaces (Beauchamp 2019). Although contested, incels are considered to be a part of the larger “Manosphere,” which is a loosely

connected network of blogs, forums, and other websites that consist of a variety of groups who are bound together by their misogyny.

The Manosphere and Black Pill Ideology

Though Manosphere groups vary wildly and exist on multiple platforms and websites, they do tend to fall into five broad categories of PUA, misogynist incels, Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), RedPillers (of r/TheRedPill subreddit), and Men's Rights Activists (MRAs)(Ging 2017; Ribeiro et al. 2020; Rothermel 2020). While the Manosphere is not homogenous, they are united in male supremacist beliefs, and position men as the true victims of the current gender order, where a “gynocentric” society is overly focused on women at the expense of men. As Wright and colleagues explain though the groups that compose the Manosphere are different they are “bound together by a belief in the ‘gynocentric order’ and Red Pill Ideology”(Wright, Trott, and Jones 2020, 2). Thus, although many articles investigate incel ideology, language, and demographics (e.g. Byerly 2020; Chang 2020; Jaki et al. 2019), many come short in addressing the complex dynamics present in incel forums and in the “Manosphere” more broadly. A key point that data-driven studies miss about the Manosphere is that these groups are at often odds with one another - not all misogynist incels consider themselves a part of the Manosphere, and other Manosphere groups often mock, demean, and ban incels from their ranks (Ging 2017; Marwick and Caplan 2018). Further, the Manosphere is not just merely made up of these communities, but also consists of a large network of online “magazines” and blogs that help to fuel their ideology and rhetoric, like the now defunct Return of Kings blog.

In the Manosphere, these blogs and communities of Pick-Up Artists and RedPillers tend to offer advice to men on how to become “alpha”⁴ males and raise their SMV (“sexual market value”)⁵, and therefore improve their chances with women (Dignam and Rohlinger 2019; Van Valkenburgh 2018). This advice ranges from pick-up lines, and losing weight to plastic surgery and outright coercion in the form of not taking “no” for an answer. While PUAs and RedPillers see potential solutions to their newly revealed disadvantage in the sexual marketplace, many misogynist incels believe that there is nothing they can personally do to improve their chances with women (DeCook 2021). Rather many believe that women only chose sexual and romantic partners based on physical features, and that because these features are genetically determined they are destined to be incels. This belief, which originated on anti-feminist blogs in 2011 and was later popularized in online misogynist incel spaces is known as the “Black Pill”⁶

For further context, the “Black Pill” is an extension of the use of the “Red Pill” metaphor taken from the 1999 dystopian science fiction film *The Matrix*, but it has evolved into a linguistic signifier with its own power. Originally popular with groups in the Manosphere, particularly with the infamous subreddit r/TheRedPill, which is a mix of Pick Up Artistry and Men’s Rights (Dignam and Rohlinger 2019), incels do subscribe to some of these beliefs but ultimately argue about their place in the larger Manosphere. In sum, the

⁴ Alpha is a term that is used across the broader manosphere and is applied to men that are perceived as “dominant” especially as compared to other men or are perceived to be at the top of the dominance hierarchy over omega, and beta men. In the Manosphere alpha males are often positioned as the most attractive men to women, especially in comparison to “beta” males, and are therefore the men that women seek out as sexual and romantic partners

⁵ SMV (sexual market value) is a concept used by members of the Manosphere for both men and women that places an economic premium on certain markers of attractiveness (physical, socioeconomic, etc.) and not on others, meaning that one’s SMV can be “high” or “low” depending on how well they meet these “standards,” and for men in the Manosphere in particular “SMV” is something that can be increased via buying in to these ideologies and Manosphere lifestyle recommendations

⁶ Simply explained, the Red Pill is merely an awakening to the “real world” and the power struggle between genders, but promises solutions and ways to harness this new consciousness for men to regain power in heterosexual relationships; the Black Pill, in contrast, believes in this “new consciousness” but proposes that there is no solution, and that it is hopeless and futile to “fight” against this reality

Manosphere is a complex network that some incels do not recognize themselves as being a part of, and being cautious with these labels is warranted in researching and writing about these communities. To further convolute these discussions, the Red Pill metaphor has been adopted by white supremacists, the far right, and conspiracy theorists (Aikin 2019; Read 2019), and although the “Red Pill” differs across these groups, there are still a number of shared narratives between white supremacists, incels, and the Manosphere in general.

Although taking the “Black Pill” is a critical part of the incel identity, it is not exclusive to people who consider themselves incel, nor is Black Pill ideology a fundamentally novel or innovative way of thinking - the beliefs about women that incels and other Manosphere groups espouse are merely repetitions of long-standing misogynistic and patriarchal beliefs (Southern Poverty Law Center 2021). The creator of the Black Pill concept stated that only mass poverty, and presumably a society in which only men are breadwinners, could “tie” individual women to individual men. And incels.co, the largest misogynist incel forum, previously allowed “Blackpilled” men who did not identify as incels “conditional” membership on the forum. Further, not all incels are necessarily Blackpilled, with many incels on the incels.co forum and other online spaces expressing that they don’t necessarily ascribe to Black Pill beliefs (M. Kelly, DiBranco, and DeCook 2021). Although this does not mean that those individuals who deny the Black Pill do not hold misogynistic beliefs or deny Red Pill beliefs.

Thus, to claim that all incels adhere to Black Pill beliefs or that only incels believe in the Black Pill misses the complexity and conflict within incel forums that make this group particularly difficult to study. Incels are not a monolith, and the generalization of all incels as believers of the Black Pill or of other beliefs presented on their online communities, should be problematized. While the term predates Rodger’s attack, it is interesting to note that, to date, none of the “incel killers” or “incel terrorists” have explicitly referenced the Black Pill

in any manifesto, video or other media left behind after their attack, further demonstrating the complexity and conflict within incel spaces.⁷ To divorce the incel movement from the historical and explicitly more “political” (i.e. engaged in trying to change policy) Men’s Rights movement (Gotell and Dutton 2016; Coning 2020) situates the movement in an ideological vacuum.

To interrogate the roots of much of modern-day incel thinking, researchers must place them in their larger sociohistorical and political context. For instance, violence does not always have to be spectacular and often can take the form of online harassment campaigns that aim to silence women from politicians to everyday users (Sobieraj 2020; Gray, Buyukozturk, and Hill 2017). It has also taken the form of digital mobilization like the “THOT Audit,” where men (including those in incel communities) intentionally bait sex workers into online exchanges to report them to the IRS for tax fraud/evasion (Alptraum 2018). All of these instances are violent and ultimately are aimed at controlling women and their behaviors, speech, and public lives. These logics of misogyny are not about “hating” women per se, but about being able to dominate and punish “bad” women who do not fit the mold of cisheteropatriarchy - these actions are therefore political in nature (Manne 2017; Sobieraj 2020; Southern Poverty Law Center 2018).

⁷ While the 2021 Plymouth attacker, who has been labeled an incel by several media reports, seems to be an exception to this trend, as the attacker described his mental state as “blackpilled”, he did not actually identify as an incel. According to Crawford and Keen (2021), he “appears to have had an ambivalent relationship with inceldom. He did not explicitly identify as an incel”. The usage of the term “blackpilled” does not necessarily indicate that he was an incel, but may indicate how widely the term has spread outside of the misogynist incel communities it was popularized in. Additionally, some of the subreddits where the attacker was active were “watchdog” incel subreddits which are critical of incel ideology. It is difficult to determine the level of involvement the Plymouth attacker had in misogynist incel communities, and even more difficult to determine the influence misogynist incel communities and their beliefs might have had on the Plymouth attacker, but his misogynistic beliefs were clearly present. Individuals can be influenced by these communities even if they do not actively engage with them, and may appear influential as the misogyny that underpins misogynist incel spaces exists beyond the bounds of incel forums. Which is again why we advocate for those who engage with research on incels to consider the impact of misogyny more broadly, and not as only existing in misogynist incel spaces.

Indeed, both Hoffman et al (2020), and Cottee (2020) question whether or not the incel movement is political. Hoffman and colleagues claim that though the “core ethos revolves around the subjugation and repression of a group and its violence is designed to have far-reaching social effects” the “Incel worldview is not obviously political,” (2020, pg 4). Similarly, Cottee (2020) remarks at the supposed ambiguity of the “political content of the incel worldview” claiming that, “they do not advance a clear or coherent political agenda” as “there is no incel position on economics, governance, crime and punishment or anything else of great political importance,” (pg. 4). We are curious as to how these authors came to this conclusion - incels advocate for a variety of very specific, though unfeasible, political changes like enforced monogamy, taking away women’s suffrage, legalized rape and pedophilia, and the legal torture and physical harm of women. These attempts at classifying incels as apolitical not only imply that misogyny and patriarchy are not significant factors in violence against women, but also point to a larger worrying trend that we have observed: attempts to classify “posthumous” incels, and to name previous acts of misogynistic mass violence as “ex-post-facto inceldom.”

“Ex Post Facto Inceldom” and the Classification Problem

Marc Lepine, George Sodini, Seung-Hui Cho, Adam Lanza, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold are among other mass killers that were inspired (in part or fully) by misogyny that have been labeled “proto-incels” or “ex-post facto incels” (Hoffman et al., 2020). This category of ex-post facto incel has been defined by Hoffman and colleagues as past attackers that “the incel community retroactively inducts...into a virtual pantheon of incel heroes” (Hoffman et al., 2020, p. 8). While it is important to note that incels *do* idolize mass killers as “heroes” or “saints,” and may draw inspiration and regularly speculate about whether or not mass killers are “incel,” this categorization is concerning for several reasons. First, while the

aforementioned killers were labeled “ex post facto incels” because incels have labeled them heroes, these killers are not the only individuals included in incels’ categorization.

On the now defunct truecels.org, mass shooter George Hennard, mass shooter Martin Bryant, domestic terrorist Timothy McVeigh, kidnapper Ariel Castro, bullying victim Vangelis Giakoumakis, and serial killer Ted Bundy were also present in the site’s “Hall of Heroes.” While not all of these men committed mass murder (or violence) many did, yet they have not been labeled “proto-incels” or “ex post facto incels.” It is unclear why Lepine, Sodini, Cho, Lanza, Harris, and Klebold were specifically highlighted by Hoffman et. al (2020), as many other incel “heroes” have committed violent acts that, “conform to the patterns of social isolation generally, and rejection by women specifically, that animated subsequent incel violence,” (Hoffman et al., 2020, p. 8) which seems to be the requirement for inclusion in the ex post facto label.

Similarly, the Anti-Defamation League has categorized a number of individuals, including Sodini and Lepine, under the label of “Incel Violence and Plots” on their Education resource page on incels and Diaz and Valji (2019) date “incel attacks” back to Lepine’s attack. While the motivation of both Sodini and Lepine’s attacks were explicitly misogynist neither identified as incel nor participated in misogynist incel spaces online. In 1989, Lepine, specifically motivated by anti-feminism⁸ targeted female engineering students in his attack, as he believed that feminists had “always ruined [his] life”(Diebel 2014), whereas Sodini expressed frustration in his lack of sexual contact with women and had participated in Pick-Up Artist seminars with dating guru Ron D. Steele(Martinez 2009).

Of even more concern is a recent article that creates its own “genesis of what has become the incel movement” (Davies, Wu, and Frank 2021, 8) falsely claiming that Lepine’s

⁸ Lepine sent the male students out of the classroom he entered and as he opened fire shouted “I hate feminists” (Diebel 2014)

attack was the “genesis” of the incel movement and that “Rodger himself recognized Lepine in his manifesto” (2021, 8). Not only does Lepine’s attack predate the use of the term “incel” on Alana’s early non-misogynist forum, but Rodger did not once mention Lepine or his attack in his nearly 140-page manifesto. It is unclear why the authors would invent such a falsehood, but doing so contributes to the concerning narrative that mass acts of misogynist violence can only occur within the framework of the incel movement. We feel that not only is the method of determining who qualifies as an “ex post facto incel” questionable, but also these attempts at classifying “posthumous incels” brings up issues of the political power of classification - as noted by science and technology scholars Bowker and Star, both categorization and who engages in these official activities have moral and social power (Bowker and Star 1999). Imposing categories and classifications onto circumstances and events when those categorizations did not exist blurs and obscures that what drove these violent acts is misogyny and its accompanying entitlement.

To include some killers but not others who espoused misogynistic worldviews is cherry picking to fit a certain research agenda, one that does not understand the different contours and complications of incel forums let alone the power of misogyny and how it drives violence against women (Girard 2009; Sjoberg and Gentry 2015; Tranchese and Sugiura 2021). The ways that researchers come to these conclusions and categorizations is critical, for it helps to shape and typologize other acts of violence and radicalized people. But these kinds of attempts to define clear incel-motivated terrorist attacks in contrast with other acts of violence against women brings us back to our original argument: perhaps the issue isn’t just the existence of incel communities, but male supremacy and misogyny’s deep roots in the modern male psyche (Palma 2019). The hyper focus on attempting to categorize violent attacks that are clearly motivated by misogyny as incel-motivated or as an act of

“incel terrorism” may cloud its political dimensions and gender as a political issue on its own (Stampnitzky 2013; Enloe 2001, 200; Pearson 2019; 2020).

For the sake of brevity, we feel the categorization of “posthumous incels” based on whether they blamed their acts of violence on sexual frustration and loneliness is far too broad and ignores that misogyny motivates most forms of interpersonal, domestic and intimate violence. To claim that these attacks are connected to “incel ideology” is highly problematic, and dismisses decades of research on intimate terrorism and violence (Sjoberg and Gentry 2015; Sjoberg 2015; Morris and Ratajczak 2019). For instance, terrorism scholars who study “lone wolf terrorism” (which is a contentious term and concept) often attempt to pinpoint an exact moment or event that made the would-be terrorist violent (e.g., commit mass murder), often overlooking that many of these “lone wolf terrorists” have a long history of violence (McCulloch et al. 2019). As McCulloch et. al note: "if the lone wolves were violent before they committed acts of lone wolf terrorism, how can their acts of terrorism be said to demonstrate an identity transformation?" (2019, 443). Misogyny and patriarchy fundamentally drive violence against women, and to point to incel ideology as the main root of these beliefs is at best irresponsible and at worst demeaning to victims of misogynistic violence.

This is an important form of distinction and categorization that must be made. By pointing to “inceldom” as the cause and not cisheteropatriarchy, efforts are focused on the wrong threat, and feminist scholarship that has long warned about the dangers of patriarchy is ignored or dismissed. Patriarchy and male supremacism are important frameworks to consider for terrorism scholars who are examining these issues to understand the ways that gender is a key factor in organizing, recruiting, and motivating violence against both women and men. For instance, both Rodger and Minassian both expressed a desire to punish everybody they felt had “wronged” them (Wallace and DeCook 2018; C. R. Kelly and

Aunspach 2020; Vito, Admire, and Hughes 2018). It is clear that incels feel a desire to punish those that they view as participating in a “degenerate society,” and for them it’s also an issue of purity and assuming dominance in the patriarchal male order by not just eliminating women, but “Chads” and “Alpha Males.” What often ties these men together is not just their acts of violence but their shared victim identity, one that is often informed by both racist and sexist beliefs. Racism and sexism are not two distinct spheres of analysis, and draw their discursive power from one another (Eng 2001). To understand incel ideology, we must not only examine the nature of their misogyny, but also more meaningfully engage with how race informs and strengthens their misogynistic beliefs.

Incels and Race

Race among incels, both in the forums and by incel killers, are not problematized by recent scholarship on incels. Incels are not a homogenous group, as mentioned earlier in this essay, and many incels self-identify as ricecels (East Asian men), currycels (Southeast Asian men), Blackcels, Arabcels, and many other ethnic identities that they claim is one of the causes of their incel status. (Kelly, DiBranco, and DeCook 2021). Race is a fundamental component of Black Pill ideology and incel discourse (Kelly, DiBranco, and DeCook 2021). It is present throughout incel forums, and throughout media released by both Rodger and Bierle before their attacks. In the forums, terms like JBW (Just Be White), and members self-identifying as ricecel, blackcel, and currycel abound. There are numerous threads on incels.co where members have ranked different races based on how “truecel” they are, the more truecel you are the less likely you are to get a girlfriend. In this case white men are almost always ranked at the top, hence the refrain ‘just be white’ as a solution to solve an individual’s incel status (Kelly, DiBranco, and DeCook 2021).

Race is integral to incel understanding of the Black Pill and incel self-identity, among other identity markers that go beyond gender. The hierarchies and levels that incels assign to physical appearance and attractiveness are deeply informed by racial dynamics and social conditions and norms that dictate standards of beauty, which are overwhelmingly Western-influenced across the world, and to put it quite bluntly, beauty standards and “sexual desirability” are often the result of white supremacy (Deliovsky 2008). “Stacies” and “Chads” are almost exclusively portrayed as white in memes, and although incel communities have terms for physically attractive men of other racial identities, the white “Chad” is always the default. Rodger often expressed his anger that women did not find him more attractive because he was half white, and was purported to have acted violently towards an Asian man and his white girlfriend while at a party (Louie 2014).

Notably, Rodger also killed his three roommates, all Chinese men, before attempting to attack a sorority house. Rodger hated the fact that he was half Asian, and would often do everything he could to distance himself physically and culturally from his Malaysian Chinese identity. He did not just desire a white girlfriend, he felt that he *deserved* and was entitled to one due to his own half white identity and class status (Louie 2014).

As such, race and class are not only factors in attractiveness (i.e. “Just Be White” and “job/career maxxng”⁹ are often used in the forums), but is also a factor when incels discuss ways for them to “ascend” and leave their incel status. Both within and beyond incel forums, misogynist men recommend that other men travel to impoverished countries of the “Global South” for sex, in particular Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines (M. Kelly, DiBranco, and DeCook 2021). These recommendations pertain to both sex with sex workers but also with local women who are not sex workers. These women are particularly recommended and

⁹ Jobs/career maxxng in incel forums is specifically about trying to attain high paying jobs (and thus, higher class status) to increase the chances of finding a girlfriend

fetishized, as it is believed that they are not only “untainted by feminism,” but also easier to coerce into sex because of the wealth disparity between locals and Western tourists (Pettman 1997). Asian women in particular are fetishized but also denigrated and hated within the incel community, who often debate whether having sex with a “noodlewhore” (a derogatory insult for Asian women) or a Black woman would even qualify as ascension, due to the high premium and value attached to white women (M. Kelly, DiBranco, and DeCook 2021).

In sum, intersectionality is an important framework to consider when examining incel rhetoric and communities - not only in the way that they hierarchize the targets of their hatred, but also themselves. Their participation in sex tourism, perpetuation of white standards of beauty and attractiveness, and the racialized misogyny they engage in are all interrelated. Certainly, sex tourism and adherence to white supremacist beauty standards are just two small nodes in the larger issue of (racial) body politics that incels see themselves as being actively engaged in, perpetuating misogynistic and white supremacist beliefs about sex, race, and power through their forums and the media that they create via wikis, blogs, podcasts, and YouTube videos, to name a few.

The focus on incels and not on larger issues of racism and misogyny highlights what Gentry (2015) referred to as the collective ignorance and minimization of violence against women internationally, but particularly minimized in the Western hemisphere to perpetuate discourses of the superiority of the West (Gentry 2015). We see this minimization not only in attempts to name all misogynistic violence as specifically “incel” violence, but also coinciding with reactions to the rise of white supremacist violence.

White Supremacist Misogyny

Many articles and news reports have attempted to push claims such as that “several recent European far-right attackers have displayed *incel tendencies*, whether in public

statements or in their online profiles” (Hoffman et al, 2020, p. 9, emphasis added). The October 2019 attack on a Synagogue and a kebab shop in Halle, Germany and the February 2020 attack on a kebab shop and shisha bar in Hanau, Germany are often presented as evidence of the link between far-right attackers and “incel tendencies.” But these attacks are not evidence of the connection between incels and the far-right; rather, they are an example of how misogyny, racism, and xenophobia are intrinsically linked (Anonymous 2020; Bliuc et al. 2018; Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs 2020).

The Halle attacker stating that he could not get a girlfriend because of migrants specifically, is often used as evidence of an “incel tendency” -- however, we argue that in this instance, attention should not be paid just to the attacker's lament at his lack of a girlfriend, but also who he places the blame on. Both women and migrants are blamed in this example, but in different ways. In expressing that migrants are the reason that he cannot get a girlfriend the attacker expresses entitlement to these women not only as a man, but specifically as a *white* man. While feeling entitled to women as sexual objects is reminiscent of content on incel forums, this entitlement and fantasy of revenge goes beyond incel spaces, and exists in misogyny more broadly (Kalish and Kimmel 2010; Manne 2017; Palma 2019).

Following his attack, the Hanau attacker was falsely labeled an “incel” and later a “MGTOW” because he had mentioned that he had not been in a relationship for the last 18 years in his misogynistic and racist-laden manifesto (Jasser, Kelly, and Rothermel 2020). While expressions of sexual entitlement and misogyny were present in the perpetrator's manifesto, both scholars and journalists failed to consider that sexual entitlement and misogyny exist outside of the incel and MGTOW movements, and failed to note that his misogyny and conspiratorial beliefs were also intertwined with racism and xenophobia (Jasser, Kelly, and Rothermel 2020). This intertwining of racism and misogyny is also visible in the motivations of Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik, domestic terrorist Dylann

Roof, and other far-right extremists. In his manifesto, Breivik details his hatred of both migrants and feminists, and “issues of gender lie at the core of Breivik’s project.”(Walton 2012, 5). Yet Breivik, who advocated for killing women and re-establishing patriarchy (Milbradt 2013), and whose manifesto blames feminists for harming “Christian Europe” through their support for Muslim immigrants and causing lower European birth rates, is not included anywhere in recent analyses of “ex-post-facto” incels.

This narrative of non-white men “taking” white women was also present in domestic terrorist Dylann Roof’s motivation for attacking a historic Black church in Charleston, South Carolina. Before his attack it’s reported that Roof exclaimed, “you rape our women and you’re taking over our country,” (Wade 2015), and it was discovered during the investigation that Roof had expressed similar sentiments in the online forums he participated in prior to his attack. Ultimately, women are perceived as property, “belonging” to men, thus fueling male entitlement to women’s sexual, emotional, and romantic attention, which we also see present in incel rhetoric. Though on the surface these kinds of claims might not look like misogyny in the vein of the Halle attacker, Rodger, or Breivik, Roof’s claims of “our women” speaks to white supremacist conspiracies like the Great Replacement, which is the belief that white populations are being replaced with non-white populations broadly around the world (Uscinski 2020).

The Great Replacement theory places an emphasis not just on the replacement of whites as a racial group, but is currently underway through the replacement of Christianity as a dominant religion. Indeed, Christian nationalism is a factor in the attacks by Breivik and others, in the name of preserving their Western European heritage (Whitehead and Perry 2020; Davis and Perry 2020) and to also save modern “degenerate” society from itself, which we also saw present in the 2021 Atlanta Shooter’s motivations when he chose to target Asian women who worked at massage parlors to eliminate the source of his sexual desire (DeCook

2021). The Atlanta shooter was not only motivated by his extremist religious views, but also by the prolonged fetishization and dehumanization of Asian women as hypersexual objects (Lopez 2018). Although they appear differently, racism and misogyny in the Halle attacker's, the Hanau attacker's, Rodger's, Breivik's, the Atlanta Shooter, and Roof's self-identities and motivations are intrinsically linked.

We must consider the ways that misogyny and racism function within our society more broadly, particularly in regard to domestic and sexual violence that creates a situation of everyday intimate terrorism (Sjoberg and Gentry 2015; Pain 2014). Moreover, attempting to position Manosphere communities and ideologies as "gateway" ideologies (Diaz and Valji 2019) rather than extremist ideologies in their own right reifies the normalization of misogyny, and hides the pernicious ways that it shapes our online and offline lives (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016; Jane 2017; Manne 2017). We contend that attempts to categorize incels as a terrorist threat furthers the convoluted and turgid project of experts creating terrorism and terrorist threats in an attempt to classify, quantify, and reduce the world into more easily understandable terms (Stampnitzky 2013; Bowker and Star 1999). The CVE strategies that are being proposed are often influenced by these attempts at classification and securitization, and are often fraught with the misconceptions and problematic strategies that come with them.

In sum, many scholars and journalists assume that entitlement to women and lack of a romantic relationship is something unique to incels (Byerly 2020; Southern Poverty Law Center 2021), and so when it appears in the motivations of far-right attackers, it is assumed that there must be an incel connection or incel tendency, further participating in what Gentry (2015) noted as an erasure of everyday violence against women. This connection is what is then used to connect the far-right and incels, but the real background of how these ideologies intersect are more complex. Thus, this kind of sentiment predates the existence of incels, as

misogyny is deeply embedded in white supremacist identity (Bjork-James 2020; Anti-Defamation League 2018; Ferber 2000).

To put it bluntly, misogyny and domestic violence are not considered to be credible threats or predictors of violence until it results in mass murder - and even then, violence against women is not considered “violent” because of how naturalized it is within our cultures (McCulloch et al. 2019; Morris and Ratajczak 2019). This could be best exemplified by the news that in the wake of the public outcry over the murder of Sarah Everand by a London police officer, Prime Minister Boris Johnson was against making misogyny a hate crime because it would be “too much” for police to handle and enforce (BBC News 2021). Notably, the police officer who assaulted and killed Everand was found to have regularly exchanged misogynistic, racist, and homophobic messages with police colleagues (Tidman 2021). The normalization of misogyny and gender-based violence in our cultures and societies extends to every venue of life – from intimate relations to law enforcement and governments, which means to address the “incel problem,” (a symptom of heteropatriarchy), we must contend with and disrupt systemic misogyny.

CVE and Male Supremacism

To begin our discussion of CVE strategies, we would like to first state an obvious solution for counter terrorism experts and organizations: push for stricter gun laws to prevent men who have a history of stalking, domestic violence, and harassment of women from buying and using firearms and ammunition. Of course, this is not a permanent solution, since other kinds of weapons are available - but 97% of mass shooters are men, and a majority also have a history of violence against women (Vito, Admire, and Hughes 2018; Leong 2017). Focusing CVE strategies on initiatives like individual therapy and identifying “at-risk”

individuals doesn't get to the heart of the problem: the cultural, social norms that men are entitled to women, and that rejection is interpreted to be an insult to their masculinity.

Women are regularly subjected to violence, which is inherently subsidized by cultural narratives of manhood, masculinity, shame, and entitlement to women's lives and bodies (Manne 2017; Carian and Sobotka 2018; Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016; hooks 2004; Bridges and Tober 2018). As Pearson explains in her critique of the term "toxic" masculinity, "the exceptionalism of particular men read as both extreme and toxic, and their framing as such in policy initiatives, does nothing to disrupt existing gendered relations," (2019, p 1259). Many members of incel forums report having gone through therapy, and some incel-identified killers had received psychiatric treatment prior to their rampages, and either disparage and mock therapy or believe it is useless in addressing their (perceived) victimhood and incel status (M. Kelly, DiBranco, and DeCook 2021).

Certainly, deradicalization is extremely complex - programs do not work for everyone (Horgan, Meredith, and Papatheodorou 2020), and to take frameworks from Jihadist deradicalization programs and apply them to white supremacists or misogynists is a recipe for failure. Further, therapists are not necessarily equipped to treat ideology, and therapy, although a useful tool, can further contribute to the pathologization of hatred as something that can be "treated" rather than a systemic issue (Gilman and Thomas 2016). In positioning the misogynist violence perpetrated by some incels as the result of mental illness, autism spectrum disorders (like in the case of Minassian's not guilty plea during his trial or even the more recent Plymouth, UK shooter) or as removed from broader societal misogyny, incels are exceptionalized. This exceptionalism then enables a shift in "the focus from patriarchy to the problem of particular men" (Pearson 2019, p 1259).

Along with this, some of the recent CVE strategies and deradicalization suggestions for incels and violent misogynists propose "ascension" (i.e. a sexual or romantic relationship)

as an exit strategy (Jones, Hastings, and Stolte 2020). To propose ascension as a viable solution to address potential violence emerging from the misogynist incel movement not only gives legitimacy to incels' sense of victimhood, but is also deeply concerning and problematic because it does not take into account the harm that a woman who partners with someone who was a misogynist incel may face - as we've seen time and time again, a romantic partner does not prevent someone from being violent or misogynistic (Terry 2007). Additionally, proposing "ascension" as a solution to a violent misogynist ideology shifts the responsibility of emotional labor required to address the support needs of someone leaving a radical movement to individual women that misogynist incels might partner with. This strategy not only fails to address the ideology underpinning the misogynist movement, but helps to perpetuate the misogyny and expectations of women to "fix" men that are endemic in society at large. By also not considering the ways that race, religious identity, neurodivergence, socioeconomic status, and other identity markers are also crucial in constructing a masculine identity (Cazenave 1984; Edwards 2005), CVE practitioners neglect to account for all of the factors that inform "incel" identity.

These solutions also make potentially public violence private, where it cannot be seen, and then it no longer becomes a concern for policymakers or the general public (Sjoberg 2015; Mihalic and Elliott 1997), including CVE programs. In addition to this, some users of misogynist incel have continued to use the forums and Discord servers, identify as incels, and engage in violent discourse on the forums even after they entered sexual or romantic relationships with women. "Ascension," then, is not a viable strategy for deradicalization. In addition, there are some CVE practitioners (and scholars) who push the belief that misogynist incelhood is not a choice (Kelly 2021), which can have deleterious effects, particularly that these kinds of statements validate their victimhood narrative. These kinds of claims also ignore the ways that the movement has evolved over time (previously gender inclusive and

anti-hate), and can also be exploited by members of these communities themselves to distance themselves from violence attributed to their community.

Our final recommendation would be for these organizations and stakeholders attempting to deradicalize and prevent male supremacist violence to start working with organizations that have long worked on the prevention of violence against girls and women. Organizations like The Global Network of Women's Shelters, INCITE!, Futures Without Violence, Hot Peach Pages, Battered Women's Justice Project, Coalition: Against Trafficking, Community United Against Violence, Stop Online Violence Against Women, and Promundo have long addressed gender-based violence. They and other organizations that have focused on prevention of violence against girls and women, and intervention programs for domestic abuse perpetrators are uniquely equipped to address misogynist violence as their programs help “confront beliefs such as male entitlement, strict gender roles, and ownership of women” (Kelly, DiBranco, and DeCook, 2021).

Discussion and Conclusion

In our discussion and during our analysis, we have attempted to identify some of the shortcomings of current incel research and also highlighted research that examines gender and violence more broadly beyond just incels. Thus, it begs the question of what the agenda is surrounding the attempt to securitize, classify, and label all misogynistic violence as “incel” violence, and the dangers in obscuring the role of misogyny, racism, and male supremacy in violent attacks. As mentioned earlier, nearly all mass shooters have a history of domestic violence, stalking, and violence against women, but these are not identified as predictors of mass violence in many instances. In 2017, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a report that found that domestic violence is a major cause of death for women - nearly half of all murdered women in the United States are killed by their current or

romantic partners (Khazan 2017), and estimates from the World Health Organization state that 1 in 3 women worldwide have experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime, and most often perpetrated by an intimate partner (2021). Suggestions to help incels “ascend” to overcome their misogyny are not only misguided, but dangerous, and contribute to the intimate terrorism that is normalized and even celebrated in our media, cultures, and societies. This is prevalent in socialization into gender roles, popular media, and even in the legal and justice system which often have weak laws and enforcement for stalking, domestic violence, rape, and other kinds of intimate violence (Gracia 2004).

As a recommendation to scholars and practitioners alike, the best way to combat “incel terrorism” is to challenge male supremacy and heteropatriarchy in our societies and cultures, to introduce comprehensive sexual education focused on consent, and to rewrite cultural narratives around masculinity, where incels draw direct inspiration to build and support their worldviews. In addition, introducing young boys and men to feminist thought and theories that challenge dominant views of masculinity is also a crucial point of intervention (hooks 2004; Boise 2019). Misogynist incels are a product of toxic and hegemonic masculinity, not something that exists apart from it. There is currently a prevailing solution and framework that is deeply neoliberal and individualist in its approach to fixing the incel problem (by trying to reach out to “high risk” individuals and provide therapeutic services) rather than trying to fix the societal and cultural issues that lead to this kind of misogyny and entitlement in the first place. In addition, the immediate jump to attempt to label any misogynistic behavior as “incel” by scholars and media further amplifies these communities through poorly researched journalism and scholarship, engaging in the “oxygen of amplification” that gives these groups more attention than they should be given, further legitimizing them (Phillips 2018).

Another aspect of this “oxygen of amplification” can be seen in the recent worrying trend of the platforming of active incels by terrorism scholars and some members of the CVE community; where members of incel forums have been listed as co-authors and included on public panels to self-determine the potential threat they pose (Kelly 2021). This not only allows active members of a group that has been considered a potential “threat” to re-center their sense of victimhood, but also to spread and validate their misogynist beliefs and to reframe narratives about the incel community according to their own needs. While it is not uncommon to interview or survey former or active extremists, for an active member of an extremist community to be given such a public platform, has only been applied to incels thus far. We find this trend not only potentially dangerous, but also indicative of a culture that does not take misogyny seriously enough and prioritizes the feelings of men who have done harm (Manne 2017; Jane 2017).

In this essay, we have attempted to highlight strengths and weaknesses of recent research on incels by terrorism scholars, the issues with classifying all misogyny as “incel” related, and proposed directions for future scholarship to incorporate more viewpoints of feminist scholars who have already identified and written in depth about the natures of everyday terrorism, domestic violence, and misogyny and patriarchal violence. We hope that terrorism scholars’ future scholarship on incels not only explores how incels are situated on and informed by the spectrum of misogyny, but that future scholarship also centers such feminist work in terrorism studies.

To conclude, everyday misogyny is often not taken seriously enough, often because it is such a pervasive feature of our societies that it is normalized, hidden, and difficult to see until it violently breaks out and results in physical harm or worse, death. But the impact of this misogyny has very real consequences on the everyday lives of billions of women around the world, in many different forms. Misogyny is political in its many forms, and the

“everyday terrorism” that it inspires is often successful in its attempts “to exert political control through fear,” (Pain 2014, 201). Even in writing about incels, and misogyny generally, we as women scholars are at a greater risk for harassment and other risks to our physical and emotional well being than our male colleagues that write on these topics, and are often even harassed, denigrated, or pushed back against by our male colleagues in academe and elsewhere (Chess and Shaw 2015; Sobieraj 2020). While the misogynist violence enacted by incels should be taken seriously, it cannot be separated from the greater spectrum of misogyny that pervades the lives of women and exerts control over their lives.

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