



Lost Boys and Incel Forums: Mental Health and Masculinity in the Age of Loneliness

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) is entirely my own work, that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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List of Abbreviations

AIN = Alternative Influence Network

AMA = Ask Me Anything

AWALT = All Women Are Like That

BLM = Black Lives Matter

BPD = Borderline Personality Disorder

CBT = Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

CDA = Critical Discourse Analysis

EAV = Emerging Adult Virgin

EDL = English Defence League

EP = Evolutionary Psychology

FDS = Female Dating Strategy

LGBTQ+ = Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and others

MGTOW = Men Going Their Own Way

MRA = Men's Rights Activist

MRM = Men's Rights Movement

NEET = Not in Education, Employment or Training

NFT = Non-Fungible Token

NSFW = Not Safe For Work

NT = Neurotypical

RVE = Radicalisation into Violent Extremism

PTSD = Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

PUA = Pick-Up Artist

SPLC = Southern Poverty Law Center

TBQHNL = To Be Quiet Honest, Not Gonna Lie

TFL = True Forced Loneliness

TRS = The Right Stuff

Abstract

Lost Boys and Incel Forums: Mental Health and Masculinity in the Age of Loneliness

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Incels are involuntarily celibate men who believe that they are unable to form romantic relationships as a result of factors outside of their control. The phenomenon has grown in recent years in terms of platform membership and has attracted increasing media attention. To date, much of the research on incels has relied on content analysis of incel forums. There is a dearth of scholarship which relies on first-hand accounts. This research is among the first studies to step into this gap. This research comprises 12 interviews with both current and former self-identified incels, investigating why some lonely men choose to identify as incels. Interviewees were asked to share their “blackpill stories”, and invited to discuss experiences which they felt played an important role, so that common features could be identified. This research identifies three key points in an individual’s journey to “taking the blackpill”, which will be of benefit to those designing interventions targeted at incels.

First, it is found many incels are socially isolated. A number of factors are found to contribute to this isolation, including being “off-time”, neurodivergence, and a belief that they are unfairly persecuted for their beliefs. The concept of the “Lost Boy” is introduced to describe young men who find themselves in this situation, and who may be at particular risk of radicalisation, as they seek answers to various complex questions at an especially vulnerable stage of their lives. Secondly, it is found that in the absence of supportive networks, Lost Boys resort to the internet for advice and guidance. At this point, it is likely they will be exposed to content that could reasonably be described as ‘Red Pilled’ – an ideology that is arguably less extreme than the blackpill, but supported by the same undergirding logic. However, a number of factors prevent the Red Pill from offering satisfactory answers or solutions to many of these ‘seekers’, and the typical trajectory observed is a progression to Blackpill ideology. Finally, this research finds that incel communities function as affective counterpublics, which reinforce and affirm member’s grievances, by consistently evoking negative emotions. Although this may provide some transitory community and catharsis, the torrent of negative content shared on these spaces only serves to instil feelings of hopelessness in members, as the community offers no vision of meaningful change at an individual or collective level.

Chapter 1

Incels, Misogyny, and Terrorism

The objective of this research is to investigate why some men choose to identify as incels. Answering this question will benefit those wishing to design interventions to deter young men from engaging with these kinds of communities in the first place. An effective intervention will require an understanding not only of the individual experiences that can motivate someone identify as an incel, but also the societal and cultural issues which can leave them vulnerable to such extreme ideologies. Although this research focuses on incels specifically, it is likely that these findings will contribute to our understanding of the factors that contribute to young men engaging in misogynistic spaces online more broadly. This research comprises 12 interviews with 10 current and two former self-identified incels. Interviews took place via zoom between April and September 2021, and ranged in length from 28 minutes to over three and a half hours. Interviewees were asked to share their “blackpilling stories”, and invited to discuss experiences which they felt played an important role, so that common features could be identified.

Before proceeding, it is important to acknowledge that there are fundamental aspects of inceldom on which there is significant disagreement, not just within academia, but among incels themselves. Even incredibly rudimentary concepts – such as who technically “qualifies” as an incel, or what exactly “the blackpill” is – are contested. In order for this research to progress, it will be necessary to investigate these disagreements, and establish where this research positions itself in these debates, so that the reader can be confident in what is being discussed at every stage. This chapter will draw from the existing literature on incels to establish working definitions for these important concepts.

Over the course of this chapter it will be established that inceldom is a choice, as it is associated with an extreme worldview. This is important, as many incels

argue that incelness is a “life circumstance” and that incels should be treated with the same sympathy, and receive the same supports, as other marginalized groups. This chapter also establishes that incel misogyny is an extension of societal misogyny – not a unique or distinct phenomenon. Finally, this research takes the position that although some incels have committed acts of terrorism, incel communities are not terrorist groups. However, it is argued that the blackpill can still be considered extreme in an ideological sense, and thus incels can be understood to be radical, albeit in a non-violent way.

This first section of this chapter ‘Defining Incels’, will introduce and define key concepts relating to incelness, and provide a rationale as to why certain decisions were made. This will be followed by a section titled ‘Literature on Incels’, which will begin with a broad overview of the current state of incel research, before moving onto more in-depth analyses of the two disciplines which have produced the most literature on incels to date – ‘Gender Studies’ and ‘Terrorism Studies’. Finally, this chapter will conclude by noting that although the research that has been produced on incels to date has been invaluable in helping to understand incel communities and their worldview, the methods most commonly used – content analyses of forum posts, subreddits and manifestoes – have certain limitations. It is proposed that in order to answer the research question – why do some men choose to identify as incels - a method which engages more directly with incels, such as interviews, is better suited.

1.1 Defining Incels

Incel communities have a vernacular that is rich in neologisms and slang terminology that can at times make these communities almost impenetrable to outsiders. However there is a lot of flexibility in how certain terms are used. Definitions of important concepts can vary from incel to incel. Indeed, in this research, it was notable that definitions of certain terms appeared to change over the course of a single interview. This sets an impossible standard for

academic work to accurately capture what is happening in incels own words. In an effort to mitigate this, this research will begin by establishing definitions that will be consistent within this research.

Defining incels is a notoriously difficult task. Speckhard et al. (2020) find “when offered a list of potential requirements of incelhood, incels themselves were not in agreement with regard to what constitutes incelhood” (p103). Incel communities are filled with in-fighting and gatekeeping about who technically qualifies as an incel, and who is a “fakecel”. Broadly speaking, Incels are men who have formed an identity around their failure or inability to form romantic relationships, and the resulting frustration they experience. They believe they are oppressed by a society which is favourable towards women, and is unsympathetic towards men. Sara Brzuszkiewicz explains “Incels interpret and experience this deficit not just as a private source of sexual frustration, but as a shame-inducing moral wrong inflicted on them by women and genetics” (2020).

In a 2019 essay framed as a response to sensationalist media coverage, “Alexander Ash” (a pseudonym used by the Admin of incels.is, the largest incel forum online) attempted to put a more respectable face on incelhood, by distancing incels from violent attackers who he disqualifies for being mentally ill or too attractive. Another argument of this piece however, was that because incel’s lack of romantic success is the result of factors outside of their control, incels should be understood as “victims of circumstance”. Incelhood can thus be understood as a “life situation”, rather than a movement or political subculture. Defining being an incel as a “life situation” is obviously beneficial, as it helps to conflate incels with involuntarily celibate men more broadly, and absolves incels of any responsibility for choosing to identify as a member of a community in which misogynistic and violent discussions are common. It also allows them to portray their critics as cruel - it is not uncommon on incel forums to see criticism of incels equated with criticisms of single or lonely men in general, a comparison which completely ignores incels agency in embracing this identity. The idea that any man who wants to have sex, but can’t, is an incel (whether they know it or not), is not entirely satisfactory. Implicit in the label

of incel is an associated ideology – The Blackpill - which is grounded in misogynistic beliefs.

The Blackpill is a supposedly scientific collection of beliefs that affords a veneer of scientific legitimacy to the incel worldview. Despite its importance, there is again no strict definition of “The Blackpill”. Throughout the manosphere, and indeed beyond, being “pilled” is commonly used in reference to being awoken to specific truth. It’s usage in incel spaces generally refers to the realization that looks are the most important factor when attempting to attract a partner. Upon this realization, individuals can choose to take “The Red Pill”, a path of “self-improvement” that usually involves addressing ones appearance or mind-set, through exercise, grooming, coaching, etc. Alternatively individuals may become “blackpilled” - the form of pilling most associated with incel communities. Taking the blackpill is a more nihilistic and defeatist option, wherein the individual has decided that their situation is inescapable, and any attempts at addressing or improving ones circumstances are understood to be futile. Brzuzskiewicz (2020) connects “being blackpilled” to a tendency to externalize ones locus of control, which contributes towards feelings of powerlessness and exclusion. Again, this is useful for absolving incel of any personal responsibility, and facilitating what she describes as “the slide towards antisocial behaviour and radicalisation” (p13).

As well as being used as a verb that describes coming to hold certain extreme beliefs (e.g. “taking the blackpill”) the term the blackpill, is also used as a noun to reference the ideology that provides illusory authority to the incel worldview under a veneer of scientific objectivity. This authority is grounded in “blackpill science” which posits that concepts like hypergamy (the idea that women always want to “marry up”) and lookism (the idea that unattractive people are discriminated against), have brought about men’s structural subordination to women in contemporary society. These truths are universalized through an explanatory framework that draws heavily from evolutionary sciences and biological essentialism which allow incels to claim “All Women Are Like That” (AWALT). Although much of the evidence shared on incel forums is anecdotal, the support for phenomena such as hypergamy

and lookism occasionally have some root in literature from the evolutionary sciences. However, incels will often misrepresent findings, overestimate the scope of the research, or repeat findings with a degree of conclusivity and finality not present in the original paper. This reflects a tendency among incels to catastrophize their circumstances, and to portray their situation to be inescapable. Thus, “taking the blackpill” is often used to describe the situation in which an individual has accepted the most fatalistic interpretations of this science and given up on the idea that their situation can ever improve. This is often framed as preferable to living a life of rejection and disappointment.

1.2 Literature on Incels

As incels are a relatively recent phenomenon, it is unsurprising that the vast majority of research which has investigated the community to date has been exploratory in nature. The following section will provide a brief overview of this research, highlighting the methodologies most commonly used, as well as briefly acknowledging the disciplines which have produced the most literature focusing on incels thus far.

To date, the research which has looked at incels done an excellent job of introducing researchers to incels and the blackpill ideology, and revealing the norms, values, attitudes and beliefs within these communities, frequently employing qualitative methods in order to analyse data collected from forum posts (Ging 2019; Jaki et al. 2019; Baele et al. 2020; Brzuszkiewicz 2020; Speckhard et al. 2021; Cotee 2021; Fowler 2021; O’Malley et al. 2022; Preston et al. 2021; Pelzer et al.; Thorburn et al. 2022), subreddits (Jaki et al. 2019; Helm et al. 2022; Brzuszkiewicz 2020; Chang 2020; Pelzer et al. 2021; Maxwell et al. 2020; Gothard et al. 2021; Tranchese and Suguira 2021) and the manifesto left by Elliot Rodger (Vito et al. 2018; Witt 2020; Lopes 2021; Menzie 2022). Researchers have also attempted to track incels in the context of the manosphere, finding that older, less extreme communities such as MRA’s and PUA’s are increasingly seeing members migrate to more extreme communities

like MGTOW and Incels (Ribeiro 2021). The core disciplines from which the majority of this work has emerged includes, gender/masculinity studies, terrorism studies, media/internet studies, criminology/cybersecurity, and linguistics.

Unsurprisingly, misogyny is frequently found to be present in these communities in various forms. Cottee (2021) finds the key subcultural values of incel communities to be misogyny, victimhood and fatalism, while O'Malley et al. (2022) conclude that incel communities centre around five related ideas – “the sexual market, women as naturally evil, legitimizing masculinity, male oppression, and violence” (p19). Maxwell et al. (2020) similarly identify “a constructed trope of women, the patriarchally-informed male ideal, hypocritical approaches to gender,” to be key parts of incel identity (p1852). Other hateful discourses are also found to be present in incel communities. Jaki et al. (2019) identify an abundance of hate speech and violent rhetoric within the community, involving not just misogyny, but also speech that is racist and homophobic in nature, while Kelly and Aunspach (2022) observe that popular discourses surrounding sexuality which they observe in incel communities, are similar to those frequently found in fascist, white supremacist and alt-right spaces.

An area of agreement throughout much of this research, is that there is very little new or novel about the misogyny observed in incel communities. Building on feminist critiques and research on digital behaviours, Tranchese and Suguira (2021) conclude that incel misogyny is just one of the many faces of societal misogyny. They find that “It is rooted in the same misogyny of ordinary sexist jokes, assumptions, everyday division of labor, and media representations, including mainstream pornography and, for this reason, should not be conceptualized as exceptional or unusual” (p2728). Chang (2020) similarly finds there to be nothing new or unique to incel misogyny, noting “there is hardly an epistemic break between pre-internet misogyny and the misogyny expressed online by these incels; the former paved the way for the latter” (p14). She explains that extreme misogyny is embedded in the religious and mythological heritage of western societies, and suggests that

“rather than being unique to online spaces, the misogyny expressed on /r/Braincels is linked to and enabled by broader social practices that similarly position women as inferior Others” (p1). Because of this, Chang (2020) argues that although they may position themselves as a countercultural or transgressive group who have been ostracized from society, incel’s are in fact a group whose actions and attitudes are largely condoned by mainstream culture - any differences, (incels’ brazen obscenity for example), are purely aesthetic. She explains that western society has always othered women, and attempted to portray them as “subhuman” through reference to reason, morality, and animality. The persistence of these ideas in mainstream society empowers incel ideology.

In her conclusion, Chang (2020) warns that the focus on the idiosyncratic elements of incel beliefs and communities risks overshadowing the fact that the ideologies which inform their discourse were present long before the advent of the internet. She writes “while the explicit misogyny of “femoid” may be shocking to the postfeminist sensibility of (ostensible) gender equality, to treat it as an isolated incident normalises sexist structures that have shaped contemporary culture and informed these points of view” (p13). Tranchese and Suguira (2021) also caution against focusing on the features of incel communities which make them appear extreme or different, as this will likely distract from the many similarities between incels and the broader attitude of male-supremacy or femme-phobia which continues to be prevalent throughout society. This contributes to an idea of misogyny as an issue that is contained to certain individuals or groups, in specific circumstances. Focusing exclusively on incels as a unique phenomenon will not allow researchers to capture the scope of the issue, nor to see the broader structural causes. Tranchese and Suguira (2021) raise the important point that “while some members of the Incel community have committed acts of VAW, informed by their misogynistic attitudes, most crimes against women are not performed by members of this community, but by the mainstream majority” (p2728). DeCook and Kelly (2021) also argue that in order to deal with the threat posed by incels, it is necessary to address the misogyny in mainstream society - “The

current prevailing solutions and frameworks for understanding incels”, they claim, “are deeply neoliberal and individualist in their approach to fixing the incel problem, focussed on 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” (p14). Rather than acknowledging the complex and contradictory nature of incel communities both demographically and ideologically, the authors identify a tendency in existing incel literature to treat incels as a homogenous group. Such an approach may give rise to “one size fits all” interventions which assume incels to be monolithic. DeCook and Kelly (2021) continue, cautioning against approaches that involve the securitisation of incels, suggesting instead that attention should be paid to the broader, and more pertinent issue of male supremacy, of which incels are just one example. Their proposed approach to tackling incel violence is multifaceted, involving the need to “challenge white supremacy and cisheteropatriarchy 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” (p14).

1.3 Incels and Masculinity

A number of researchers have proposed hegemonic masculinity, as a lens through which incels attitudes and behaviours can be understood and explained. This section will look at the complex relationship between incel and hegemonic masculinity, and conclude by discussing hybrid masculinities, which can reconcile the non-alpha or “beta” qualities of inceldom, while still recognizing incels potential to reinforce the norms of hegemonic masculinity.

Maxwell et al. (2020), suggest incel beliefs may be a response to a perceived threat to an idealized form of hegemonic masculinity. Recent gains for women in workplaces, recognition of the damaging aspects of hypermasculinity, more widespread acceptance of homosexuality, and the consequences of

deindustrialization are evoked by members of incel communities, and indeed the manosphere more broadly, as examples of masculinity in decline. Similarly Daly and Reed (2022) describe some of the drastic actions incels take in order to better embody the norms of hegemonic masculinity, which include travelling to South-East Asia (where there is an expectation among incels that it is easier to find a sexual partner as beauty standards are different) and seeking cosmetic surgery in order to improve one's looks. The authors argue that these efforts contribute to the legitimization of hegemonic masculinity among incels, as incels feel they can overcome their subjugation through adherence to dominant masculine ideals. Menzie (2022) investigates how incel rhetoric constructs and reinforces ideas surrounding femininity and hegemonic masculinity, concluding that systemic femmephobia is reproduced in incel through references to symbolic actors such as Stacys (who are seen by incels to be "performing" gender for a male audience), the interchangeable usage of terms like women and sex, and archetypes like Stacy and Becky being employed to devalue femininity for its "failure" to meet their patriarchal expectations of what femininity should be. Through a thematic analysis of Eliot Rodgers' manifesto, Vito et al. (2018) find that Rodgers reproduces hegemonic masculinity by equating masculinity with physical and sexual prowess. Conversely men who lacked these attributes, including Rodgers himself, are understood to be inferior. The authors suggest that as a result of this failing, Rodger chose to engage in compensatory masculinity, a form of masculinity more concerned with qualities that could be described as "gentlemanly". However, in his manifesto, Rodger's laments that society did not always view these gentlemanly qualities as masculine, which the authors suggest contributed to a crisis of masculinity, which ultimately contributed to the anger he directed at women and people of colour. They conclude that Rodger's mass murder and subsequent suicide was an attempt to demonstrate his manhood and reclaim masculinity.

Other researchers looking at incel communities have observed the unusual relationship between incels and hegemonic masculinity, and highlighted some of the negative consequences this strained relationship can have on the incels

themselves, as well as those around them. For example Scheuerman (2021) reviews the existing literature on incelism, finding that incels both conform to, and reject hegemonic masculinity – “They conform in their aspiration to acquire goals that align with what is typically thought of as masculine—such as assertiveness or sexual dominance—while believing they are unable to do so because of their inadequacies” (p2). This failure to live up to the masculine archetype creates a disconnect, and can contribute to a defeatist worldview and mental health problems. Scheuerman (2021) notes that this defeatist worldview is something that separates incels from non-incel men, and suggests this may explain the high rates of self-destructive and violent behaviours in incel communities. This is supported by Daly and Laskovtsov (2021), who in their analysis of incel suicide posts, find that failing to achieve the prescribed standards of hegemonic masculinity may contribute to suicidal behaviour. Similarly, Scaptura and Boyle (2020) find that “stress in one’s inability to live up to norms of masculinity and endorsement of “incel” traits are associated with violent fantasies about rape and using powerful weapons against enemies.” (p278). They examine a number of “incel traits” such as “hostile sexism, masculinity threat, gender role stress, and toxic masculinity” (p279) and reference literature which links these attitudes to a number of issues, including a proclivity towards rape and violence directed towards spouses. “In particular”, Scaptura and Boyle (2020) write, “studies show that men who feel threatened by the social progress of women, and men who feel threatened by women in their lives and workplaces, are more likely to hyper-conform to masculine identity traits and exhibit anger and aggression toward women” (p279). Having established this through a comprehensive literature review, the research goes on to find that men experiencing gender role stress are more inclined to fantasize about mass acts of gender based violence.

Hegemonic masculinity is often associated with alpha-masculinity, which venerates dominance, sexual prowess, heteronormativity, physical strength, confidence and success. This understanding is one which does not necessarily fit with the common conception of incels. Ging (2017) proposes hybrid masculinity as a lens through which incels can be understood. Hybrid

masculinity accounts for a number of non-alpha masculinities which can help groups like incels to reconcile feelings of oppression with hegemonic masculinity. One such non-alpha masculinity, is beta-masculinity, which has been adopted by groups such as incels, geeks, gamers, and any other men who display characteristics considered less traditionally masculine (e.g. physically weak, unassertive, romantically unsuccessful, etc.). Brzuszkiewicz (2020) also understands incels as embodying “hybrid-masculinity”, finding that incels view themselves as the victims of women, who are consistently portrayed as promiscuous and unreliable. She explains that incels are not hostile towards women out of a sense of superiority, but rather, their misogyny is motivated by a position of inferiority, as they understand women to have control over the sexual marketplace.

Non-alpha forms of masculinity have been defended by some as more progressive forms of masculinity. Anderson (2009) argues non-alpha masculinities challenge hegemonic masculinity and suggests this “inclusive masculinity” is to be celebrated, as it allows men to be more emotionally expressive, and contributes to a lessening of the homophobia. Similarly, Nagle (2017) rejects the idea that beta-masculinity can be hegemonic, citing an acceptance of gender bending pornography, bisexual curiosity, and a lifestyle that promotes an extended adolescence, as being incompatible with patriarchy. However, O’Neill (2014) is sceptical of these progressive claims, noting that Anderson’s (2009) inclusive masculinity depoliticises gendered issues by adopting an overly optimistic view of gender power relations, reminiscent of the narratives proposed by postfeminist scholars. Ging (2019) is similarly critical, observing that despite distancing themselves from traditional signifiers of hegemonic masculinity and embracing a self-deprecating style of humour, the desire to achieve dominance over women remains a feature of hybrid masculinities, albeit it in a form that is less overt, and slightly more difficult to critique - “self-positioning as victims of feminism and political correctness enables them to strategically distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity, while compounding existing hierarchies of power and inequality online” (p651).

1.4 Incels and Terrorism

Another important discussion in the literature on incels to date, is whether incels should be considered to be terrorists. The following section will unpack both sides of this debate, concluding that although some individual incels have committed acts of terrorism, incel should not be understood as a terrorist group. Nevertheless, this research can still be justified in drawing from the literature on radicalisation, provided it recognizes that in most cases, incel radicalisation is ideological and non-violent.

A policy brief by Zimmerman et al. (2018) published in the aftermath of the Toronto van attack, argues that “the nature of Incel violence meets the requirement of the U.S. State Department’s description, which defines the term ‘terrorism’ as “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents.” (p2). In their assessment of the threat of incel violence Hoffman et al. (2020) argue that the attacks perpetrated by Elliot Rodger, Alek Minassian, and Scott Beierle should be understood as “Clear incel-motivated terrorist attacks” (p569). Given their predominantly online and decentralised structure, the authors find that incels do not adhere to traditional models of terrorism. However, they argue that incel violence is politically motivated, noting that a core part of the ideology is concerned with the subjugation and repression of a specified group, and that violence is used as a tool to affect far-reaching societal changes, and so “incel violence arguably conforms to an emergent trend in terrorism with a more salient hate crime dimension” (p565). They conclude “the violent manifestations of the ideology pose a new terrorism threat, which should not be dismissed or ignored by domestic law enforcement agencies” (p581). Although they stop short of calling incels terrorists, Tomkinson et al. (2020) advocate securitizing incels in response to misogynistic violent extremism. They recognise that such a call may appear provocative to some, and that such an approach has the potential to be used for recruitment, or indeed further radicalisation, but make the pragmatic argument that it is “a necessary first step in unlocking the resources and

political will for tackling the threat that Incel poses” (p152). Securitisation of incels, they argue, will elevate the threat beyond the realm of “gender wars”, ensuring that the issue is prioritised with regards to resource allocation, and enable those working on the issue to draw from pre-established policies which have been utilised in response to threats to public security. They suggest that taking this step will also help to shift public perception of misogynistic violence as a private issue, and reframe it as a public threat. In doing so, they see the securitisation of incels as a possible first step in tackling the larger issue of misogynistic violence.

Notably however, much of the recent literature on incels has shifted away from viewing incels as a new terrorist threat. Cottee (2021) argues against categorizing incels as terrorists, explaining that there is nothing inherent to the ideology that justifies or affirms committing acts of violence against women. Similarly Phil Gurski, a senior security analyst at the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, argues that due to a lack of evidence that any incel attackers have been motivated by ideology, these attacks should be understood as hate crimes, and not terrorist acts (Moskalenko et al. 2022). Brzuskiewicz (2020) suggests that a terrorism designation is not sufficient to capture the complex and dynamic nature a community as heterogenous as incels. Instead, she suggests that incel communities should be understood as a “radical milieu” – an environment which may share important aspects of terrorist perspective and experiences, but is not itself physically violent – “In this way, radical milieus provide the breeding and recruiting ground, as well as direct and indirect support to those individuals who might continue their process of radicalisation to the point of committing actual attacks” (p8). The radical milieu comprises individuals who may not be violent, or radicalised, but are drawn to the group for the community it provides, and for its ability to legitimate individual’s grievances. Such a community may be particularly appealing to incels who feel isolated and alone. Brzuskiewicz (2020) explains the notion of the radial milieu may play a key role in helping to identify processes of incel radicalisation as “It is in this milieu that demands for recognition and legitimacy are voiced and the gradual separation from the out-

group — i.e. mainstream society — takes place, as the in-group sees itself as increasingly vulnerable and threatened by the out-group” (p9)

DeCook and Kelly (2021) recognize a problematic trend in terrorism studies, in which misogynistic violence is only taken seriously when it can be connected to a “valid” threat, which researchers can typologize and standardize, such as “the incel menace”. This trend ignores much of the previously discussed literature regarding misogyny, gender and violence, and can contribute to the misclassification of misogynistic killers as incels. Such research is unlikely to address the misogynistic underpinnings of groups like incels, which as previously discussed, exist throughout society. Barcellona (2022) explains “while for other forms of terrorism, societies appear to unequivocally condemn not only the attack itself, but also the ideological roots at the basis of it, the grounds of Incel ideology appears to be in some way confirmed by the society we live in, as gender inequality and sexism are still widespread and, to some extent, still socially accepted” (p181). Leidig (2021) explains that existing counter-terrorism frameworks, (many of which were created in response to the threat of Islamic terrorism, and are intended for groups with more traditional, hierarchal structures), are outdated, and ill-suited to addressing incel violence. She explains that “Identifying and tracking groups is inadequate when the threat can no longer be neatly classified into groups, or when individuals choose whether to self-identify with labels at any given moment” (p4). The example is given of the Plymouth shooter who appears to have never self-identified as an incel, despite frequenting incel spaces online, and using incel terminology in content he produced. A designation of terrorism, she argues, should not be dependent on explicit group affiliation, but rather on the content of the networks and subcultures in which the individual is enmeshed. This will help to avoid the phenomenon of difficult to categorise acts of violence being given the vague and occasionally inaccurate designation of “lone-wolf” attacks.

Herath and Whitaker (2021) note that radicalisation is a contested term in the academic literature, and that disagreements often center around whether radicalisation should be understood as a process that ends with the individual

holding extreme beliefs, or the individual engaging in extreme behaviours. While it is plainly the case that the vast majority of incels will not commit acts of violence, or knowingly facilitate their execution, it is also the case that many incels, at some point, will come to hold beliefs that can reasonably be described as extreme. The process of “taking the blackpill”, in effect, describes the process of becoming ideologically radicalised. This research will draw heavily from literature on radicalisation, paying particular attention to non-violent or ideological radicalisation, in order to help understand the processes and contributing factors that can facilitate some lonely men’s pathway, from holding relatively mainstream beliefs, to choosing to identify as an incel, and taking the blackpill.

1.5 Conclusion

Despite some incel’s claims that incelhood is a life situation, and that any man who is involuntarily celibate is an incel, this research recognizes incelhood as a chosen identity. This is important as incels have a misogynistic worldview which can reasonably be described as extreme, which is unlikely to be held by the vast majority of men who are simply involuntarily celibate. This research also recognizes that the extreme misogyny that characterizes the incel worldview is by no means unique to incels, but is an extension of the everyday misogyny which is seen throughout society, not distinct from it. This chapter has also established that because incels typically embody a non-alpha form of masculinity, hybrid masculinities are a suitable framework through which they can be understood. Finally, this research takes the position that, although some individual incels have clearly committed acts of terrorism, incels are not a terrorist group. However, given that the incel worldview can be described as extreme, literature on radicalisation will be a useful for constructing a framework to help us understand why some men choose to identify as incels.

This research comprises long-form interviews with 10 current and two former self-identified incels. Whereas much of the research discussed in this chapter

has relied on analyses of forum posts, subreddits, and manifestoes, interviews allow for further interrogation of interviewees thought processes and histories, and present an opportunity to collect more biographical information, including information about their offline lives and their lives prior to becoming incels, which can be difficult to collect on incel forums where privacy and anonymity are the norm. This research is among the first to involve direct engagement with incels themselves. The following chapter will look in detail at the few other examples which exist to date, paying particular attention to how their novel approaches provide access to data and insights, which would be far more difficult to acquire via more removed methods.

Chapter 2

Direct Engagement with Incels

First person accounts and stories shared by incels can offer new perspectives and insights which more removed methodologies may not be able to access. Answering why some men choose to identify as incels will benefit from an increased understanding incels' inner world, as well as biographical information about their life lives outside of incel communities. Approaches and methodologies that involve direct engagement with incels are well suited for collecting this kind of data. Both the academic literature which has taken this approach, and much of the journalistic coverage which preceded it, has demonstrated an ability to access more personal and sensitive data, which incels may be unwilling to disclose elsewhere. The following chapter will discuss the emerging sample of literature on incels in which incels have been engaged directly, unpack the methods used, and examine the kinds of data researchers were able to access.

The chapter will begin by looking at some of the early journalistic coverage of incels which took this approach, to learn more about the lived experiences of the kinds of people who join these communities. This will be followed by an in-depth look at the academic literature in which incels have been engaged with directly, which will be divided into two parts. The first will focus on the methodology, paying attention to methods used, sample sizes, data collected, and how participants were approached in the first place. The second part will discuss some of the key findings of this research, with a focus on three important areas – mental health, feeling “off-time”, and loneliness – which will be discussed in the context of relevant literature. Despite the frequency with which incels discuss mental health and loneliness on their forums, these have rarely been areas of focus for those researching incels. Given their prominence

in the literature discussed in this chapter, these areas are likely to be relevant to this research.

2.1 Journalistic Engagement

At a time when academic coverage of incels was still largely focused on analyses of extent content shared on forums and subreddits, more journalistic mainstream coverage was beginning to engage directly with them. While there was plenty of mainstream coverage at the time that took a more sensationalist approach, focusing on incel violence and suggesting they posed a terrorist threat (particularly in the aftermath of the Toronto van attack), articles which invited incels to share their own experiences and perspectives were incredibly valuable for illuminating the conditions in which many incels lived. The following section will look at some of these articles in detail, and highlight the kinds of insights these articles provided which weren't being discussed elsewhere.

In "This is What an Incel Looks Like" (Reeve 2018), published in August 2018, Vice journalist Elle Reeve interviews a 23 year old incel named Joey. The piece briefly touches on the Rodger and Minassian killings, but is much more interested in Joey's background as well as his day to day experiences. Joey opens up about his education, his history of mental illnesses, his NEET¹ status, and the fact that his mom pays his rent. While none of this is atypical of the kinds of personal details shared by incels on the forum, it is rare for it all to be gathered together in a single text, which can be easily attributed to an individual. This immediately gives us a rich sociological profile of Joey that would be more difficult to piece together through analysis of incel forums, where these kinds of details would likely be spread across multiple posts over time, if shared at all. Interviews also give incels an opportunity to discuss inceldom and the blackpill ideology with more remove. We see that Joey is

¹ Not in education, employment or training

aware of some of the inconsistencies and hypocrisies of his beliefs. For example, he feels superior to everyone else, but also knows that deep down he wishes he could be a 'normie'. Joey also shares that he sometimes thinks he does not want a girlfriend, because it will mean he will have to leave behind all his friends in the community. These are sentiments he would likely not risk sharing online, as they could get him branded a 'fakecel'. However, by engaging with incels outside of their community, the discourse becomes less performative, giving us access to richer data, and insights that appear to be the result of genuine reflection. Reeve acknowledges there is an observer effect when engaging directly with Joey and his friends, although it is clear she has gotten at data more removed methods simply could not.

Although not looking at incels specifically, another example of this kind of coverage can be seen in "I was a Men's Rights Activist" (McDermott 2016) published by Mel Magazine in 2016, which shows the slow process through which Edwin Hodge came to identify as a men's rights activist, as well as the reasons he eventually decided to part ways with the community. Being able to tell the story in his own words means Hodge can include a number of details which a researcher may not think to seek out. He explains, for example, that he was drawn to a book titled "Spreading Misandry" because he thought it seemed edgy and countercultural, and because he thought the cover (a white man hanging himself by his necktie) seemed "cool". He talks about how a chapter which addressed the oafish portrayal of men in sitcoms resonated strongly with him. While reflecting on this, he admits that at the time he looked down on people he considered to be less intelligent. These details help to create an informed picture of his journey to identifying as an MRA, highlighting the significance of experiences which may otherwise seem inconsequential, and which may be more difficult to ascertain outside of an interview setting.

The heterogeneity and variety of experiences of incels is made clear in 'The Secret World of Incels' (Rawles 2019) which aired on BBC3 in August 2019. The documentary featured extended interviews with three men who identified as incels, each of whom appear to be drawn to different aspects of the

community. Matt, an incel from New York who rejects violence, sees the forum as a source of comfort, as it shows him he's not the only one having trouble dating. James, an incel from Northern Ireland, claims he is interested in the "looksmaxxing"² aspect of the community, although he also non-chalantly shares music and lyrics he wrote which celebrate Elliott Rodger and contain graphic descriptions of violence against women. The most extreme incel featured in the documentary is the masked Catfishman, who uses photos of male models to arrange dates with women, and then films himself berating these women when they show up to the dates and realise they've been deceived. He refers to himself as a legend in the incel community, and justifies his behaviour by saying it's retribution for the hundreds of rejections he's gotten. He describes the encouragement he receives from other member of the community as being "better than sex" and defends the actions of Elliott Rodger, saying "Maybe if Elliott Rodger wasn't bullied by females, none of that would have happened (...) If these females aren't treating these guys with respect, they're gonna kill them... That's just life." These first-hand account of incels experiences are interesting, not just because they offer rarely seen longform interviews with incels, but also because they demonstrate the variety of members present in the community, something that is not always acknowledged.

The Podcast "Incel" also exemplifies the variety of experiences present in incel communities. Host Naama Kates regularly interviews members of incel communities, often focusing on experiences that helped to shape their worldview and led to them identifying as an incel in the first place. The podcast has a large fanbase among incels, many of whom view it as one of the few opportunities for incels to have their experiences shared and grievances acknowledged outside of incel communities. Kates' work has been beneficial in giving incels a regular platform through which they can discuss the issues they believe to be important to the community, but which are ignored by much of the mainstream coverage. A common theme is that the mainstream media

² Looksmaxxing is an approach which suggests individuals can "ascend" from incelhood by improving their physical appearance.

are eager to discuss the violent threat posed by incels, and to label incels as a terrorist group, while largely ignoring the discussions of mental health which are prevalent throughout the incelosphere.

Vox culture reporter Aja Romano's 2018 article "What a woman-led incel support group can teach us about men and mental health" is another early example of mainstream coverage which involved direct engagement with incels, which discusses the relationship between incels and mental health in nuanced way. Romano explains that "The incel community is notorious for rampant misogyny, violent rhetoric, and fatalistic attitudes toward modern life (...) but it's also rife with depression, a nihilistic communal celebration of low self-esteem, and a widespread resistance to seeking therapy and getting treatment for mental illness". This analysis leads Romano to suggest that a meaningful approach to addressing issues around incel extremism and violence, could involve addressing the mental health needs of young men more broadly. The piece involves interviews with five incels, two of whom are female, who explain that the blackpill offered an alternative to the banal, often vague advice and encouragement available from more mainstream sources – that "everyone deserves to be loved", or that appearance is unimportant in dating and that it's personality that counts most. While the incels interviewed appreciate that people who share these sentiments mean well, they do not reflect their experiences, or their beliefs – e.g. that there are some people who are too unattractive to be in relationships. The blackpill is celebrated for giving incels "harsh truths", which are considered helpful insofar as they allow the individual to alter their lives accordingly, and find happiness elsewhere. One interviewee explained – "It is liberating to think that way in a sense (...) You can stop worrying about improving yourself, stop worrying about the years passing by and your chances getting slimmer, stop worrying about what will happen in the future, because you are certain of your place in the world and what is going to happen". Despite this supposed benefit, interviewees also reported being more depressed, anxious and having more intrusive thoughts since joining incel groups, although they generally believed the benefits offered by the community were worth it. Romano concludes that none of this

is harmless, and that the kinds of ideas reinforced within incel communities likely pose a threat to their own members, as well as others. She calls for a mental health approach to addressing the issue of incelism, although she acknowledges this is far easier said than done, noting the general dissatisfaction and distrust among interviewees and incels more broadly of mental health supports, as well as the difficulties in reaching a group as isolated and withdrawn as incels.

As well as differences in beliefs and experiences, direct engagement can also help to understand demographic differences among incels, something which is not always evident as anonymity tends to be the norm in Incel communities. Hussein Kesvani (2019) has written about the unusual dynamics at play for non-white incels, who are often forced to withhold their identities, in order to be taken seriously in a community that exists in such close proximity to the alt-right. One of the incels with whom Kesvani makes contact in the piece, worries his grievances relating to liberalism and feminism won't be taken seriously by white members of the community, who believe Indian men are "naturally" lacking in sex appeal, and that "being an incel in India is normal, (...) most men are incels there so it doesn't count." (2019). Kesvani also discusses the internalised racism expressed by some people of colour who identify as incel, sometimes referred to as currycels, ricecels, and blackcels. Some incels believe it is their race alone which is preventing them from finding a romantic partner, and accept this as natural and inescapable. The article includes one comment, shared by western born incel of South Asian descent, who complains that white incels have it easier because western women have much lower standards than Indian women. The piece ends with the interviewee saying he'll continue being involved in the incel community, even if they consider him "a curry", because it's the only place he feels understood.

Finally, engagement with former incels has also proven to be an effective means for getting at information that would not be found on incel forums. The closeness and immediacy between the author and the subject is useful for answering more complicated questions about the motivations of young men

who have left these communities, and how their relationship with these communities evolved over time. This is seen in 'Not as ironic as I imagined: the incels spokesman on why he is renouncing them' (Ling 2018) published in The Guardian, and 'The Unmaking of an Incel' (Jeltsen 2018) from the Huffington post. Both articles are in-depth interviews with former incel Jack Peterson, who decided to leave the community in the wake of the Toronto attacks. Both articles focus on the conditions in Peterson's life that drove him towards the incel community in the first place, and are rich in sociological information about Peterson's background, as well as detailed descriptions of how frequenting pickup artist forums and imageboards such as 4chan, eventually led to him discovering the r/incel subreddit. He discusses how his willingness to engage with reporters in the aftermath of the Toronto terror attack brought him out of these insular communities, and forced him to reflect on the events. This led to a realisation that identifying as an incel was having a predominantly negative impact on his life.

There are of course practical reasons why direct engagement with incels was apparent in mainstream coverage of incels long before it could be seen in academia. The quick turnaround of media coverage is clearly an advantage compared to the relatively slow pace of producing academic research, which can take months, if not years. It is also worth noting that many of these examples are interviews with just a single subject – something from which it would be unwise to draw any broad conclusions. Nevertheless, these pieces all exemplify the rich personal data that can be collected by engaging directly with incels and former incels, which will be invaluable when attempting to understand why some men choose to become incels.

2.2 Academic Engagement

Although this approach to incel research still very much in its early stages, it is becoming increasingly common to see academic research that involves direct engagement with incels. This section will provide an overview of this research,

divided into two parts. The first part will look at the methodology employed - how they made initial contact, the methods used, sample sizes, and the kinds of data these researchers have been able to access. The second part will analyse the findings of this research in greater detail, identifying three areas of particular interest – mental health, feeling “off-time”, and loneliness.

2.2.1 Methodology

One of the earliest pieces of incel research, Donnelly et al. (2001), began after the first author received an email from a member on an incel community enquiring about academic research regarding involuntary celibacy. After reporting back to the community about the dearth of existing literature a number of forum members volunteered to participate in interviews with a research team, and engage with the process of designing research tools. The incels involved in this research differ significantly from the contemporary incels, both demographically and ideologically. Rather than being defeatist or nihilistic for example, this group encouraged members to view the cause of their incelhood as something internal, which was within their power to address. The group also comprised males and females, although the authors acknowledge that females appeared to be underrepresented (they believe this may have been a result of a greater social pressure on young men to lose their virginity at an earlier stage and to have more sexual partners). People of colour, the elderly and people from lower class backgrounds are also noted as being underrepresented in the study, although this may just reflect the kinds of people more likely to be online circa 2001. In total, 82 incels participated in the research (60 male and 22 female). The group was 85% white, 70% resided in the US, and 12% identified as bisexual, homosexual or confused. Married individuals, and individuals in long-term relationships who considered themselves celibate, also participated in the research, making up 28% of total respondents. Participants were given an online survey which comprised 58 open ended questions, covering topics such as childhood experiences (including teen and early adult years), past and current relationships and

sexual experiences, non-sexual relationships, and the consequences of their celibacy. Donnelly et al. (2001) explain “the utility of our research lies in the rich descriptive data obtained regarding the lives of involuntary celibates, a group about which little is known” (p162). A key finding of the research was that most participants reported a feeling of being “off-time” relative to their peers, and viewed this as a self-perpetuating barrier to further sexual experiences. Developing a sense of being off-time was found to negatively affect participant’s self-perception and confidence. The authors write “Despair, depression, frustration, and a loss of confidence were commonly reported” (p167). Male respondents were more likely to view their environments (e.g. education and workplaces) as the most prominent barrier to being in a relationship, while for female respondents, the primary barrier was understood to be their own bodies. Although the incels who participated in this research differ significantly from the kinds of incels who participate in incel communities today, Donnelly et al. (2001) demonstrate that there is a willingness for individuals to participate in research that covers potentially sensitive and personal information, which would likely be difficult to collect without the subjects’ participation.

Daly and Reed (2022) conduct semi-structured interviews with 10 self-identified incels, in order to identify emergent themes about incels beliefs, attitudes and experiences. The interviews took place via social media messaging and Discord calls, over the course of weeks, or in some cases, months, as the conversations continued beyond the initial questions, or participants contacted the researchers to share new thoughts or insights which emerged. The authors highlight that the research questions they are addressing are ones that would be difficult to conclusively answer through more removed methods. For example, although there is certainly no shortage of examples of shit-posting³ to be observed in these spaces, there is very little reflection or meta-commentary on why members engage in this behaviour, or what function it serves. By engaging directly with incels and asking them to

³ Deliberately posting provocative or off-topic comments on social media

reflect on these behaviours, the authors conclude that shit-posting can be understood as a response to feelings of emasculation, as well as a means to creating and reinforcing a shared worldview. The authors also note that the negative feelings interviewees associate with their incelhood spills over into other areas of their lives, such as education and employment, wherein success is often tied to masculinity. Daly and Reed (2022) go on to find that adherence to the blackpill ideology proved to be a significant barrier to overcoming negative emotions, as it deters members from pursuing mental health supports, and offers an incredibly limited list of actions individuals can take to ascend from incelhood and improve their lot in life, many of which are not realistic or achievable for the majority of incels. The authors conclude by calling for future researchers to continue engaging with members of incel communities – “if academics and researchers aim to truly understand the factors that lead to incelhood and the community, then we must include incels in the process rather than relying on a snapshot of their online behavior or persona” (p18)

Speckhard et al. (2021) collaborate with incels.is founder and admin Alexander Ash to conduct a survey of members of Incels.is. The project was interested in assessing the extent to which two distinct events – The outbreak of Covid-19 and subsequent lockdowns, and the Canadian governments designation of incels as a terrorist group – had impacted incels lives, and specifically sought to answer whether these events had made incels more or less isolated or resentful. The survey was shared on incels.is from the 1st to the 8th of August 2020 and received 427 Respondents. The results indicated that approximately one third of participants felt more isolated as result of quarantines (34.6%) and the terrorism designation (33.9%). Similarly 30.2% of incels reported feeling increased resentment as a result of quarantines. Over half of the respondents (50.8%) reported that the Canadian governments’ decision to designated incels as a terrorist group increased feelings of resentment.

Morton et al. (2021) and Speckhard and Ellenberg (2022) draw from the results of a 68 question survey shared with 272 self-identified incels between December 7, 2020 and January 2, 2021, again conducted in collaboration with Alexander Ash. The questions comprised a variety of formats including short and long lists, checklists, and multiple choice, covering a wide array of topics including social lives, personal experiences, and attitudes towards incel ideology. Morton et al. (2021) specifically seek to better understand incel grievances, as well as attitudes towards violence, finding that the vast majority of incels do not approve of acts of violence, although participants who identified as staunch misogynists had an increased likelihood of endorsing, or desiring to commit, acts of violence. Speckhard and Ellenberg (2022) focus on incels' mental health. The authors ultimately find that although self-reported psychological diagnoses, including depression, anxiety, and autism, were higher among survey responders than would be expected from a general population, incels were generally reluctant to seek out mental health supports, often out of concern that mental health practitioners would blame them for their inceldom.

Drawing from the results of this same 68 question survey, Moskalenko et al. (2022a) assess incel ideology, mental illness and radical intentions among incels, finding that the majority of incels reject violence, while many report mental health problems and psychological trauma as a result of bullying or persecution. The researchers are specifically interested in the correlation between incel ideology and radicalisation, which they find to be very weak, although this correlation increased when certain variables relating to mental health were present. Following this, Moskalenko et al. (2022) conducted further survey research, this time with incels who reached out to Naama Kates' incel podcast. This survey was specifically shared with incels who expressed interest in counter-programming, and was shared between June and October 2021. In total 54 incels took part. Again, this survey focused on the relationship between ideology and radicalisation, coming to many of the same conclusions as Moskalenko et al. (2022a).

Finally, Regehr (2022), employing a documentary approach, uses video-ethnography and analysis of long-form interviews, to examine the experiences of young men in incel communities, to understand the processes through which they become indoctrinated into misogynistic extremism. Regehr (2022) explains that the producer of this documentary was in contact with over 50 incels, although just 5 are highlighted in the article. Rather than beginning with a birds-eye view of the incel phenomenon, Regehr (2022) explains “I begin small, examining the personal experience of individuals in order to better understand the common patterns and processes shared across digital Incel indoctrination” (p139). Rejecting the idea of a lone-actor incel terrorist, she proposes a process through which lonely, socially isolated men become angry and potentially violent as a result of their involvement in incel communities.

2.2.2 Findings

Looking at this research, it is clear that mental health is an issue many incels were eager to discuss, as well as an area of interest largely absent from the more removed research discussed in the previous chapter. Investigating the prevalence of mental illness among users of incels.is, Speckhard and Ellenberg (2022), find more self-reported formal cases of anxiety, autism, BPD, depression, PTSD, and substance abuse than would be expected from a random sample of males in the general population. While some of these disorders could be a consequence of the individuals’ experience of incelhood, there are some like autism, which are certainly antecedent. An important finding of this research is the reluctance among incels to engage with mental health supports, due to negative prior experiences – “they were cynical about and disappointed in psychotherapy experiences, which many felt unfairly blamed them for their incel situation rather than showing an understanding of the psychosocial factors also involved such as the prevalence of online dating, a ‘lookist’ society, and women’s empowerment” (p15). Moskalenko et al. (2022a) also observe that incels self-report notably high rates anxiety, depression, autism, and psychopathology, compared to what has been found

in nationally representative surveys of American adults. They similarly note that those who have received formal diagnoses of psychopathology generally did not have success with mental health services. The research also finds that 86% of incels reported having been bullied, while 37% reported being persecuted for identifying as an incel. While the authors note that it is possible that individuals with mental health issues who have been bullied and feel isolated are more likely to be drawn to the community offered by incel forums, they also suggest that “it is possible that the Incel online experiences, alienating and colored by hopeless rhetoric, exacerbate any existing mental health problems” (p19). They conclude that longitudinal studies will help researchers to understand these processes, but that either way, incels will almost certainly benefit from mental health supports.

Other authors who have covered the phenomenon of mental health in incel communities include Grace Sharkey (2022), who notes that despite mental illness being an incredibly common topic of discussion on incel forums, the area has been largely ignored by much of the literature to date. Looking at specific designations in incel communities, such as “mentalcels”, “depressioncels” and “autismcels”, she suggests that these complicate the common narrative that incels are simply men with an intense hatred of women. Stijelja and Mishara (2022), who review the existing literature on incels in order to provide a snapshot of incel mental health, also suggest this is an area that requires further attention, noting that “Discussions and survey data collected on incel forums highlighted issues regarding negative body image, shyness, anxiety, social skills deficits, autism, bullying, sexual and romantic inexperience, loneliness, depression, and suicide.” (p2). In their analysis of over 80 “suicide posts” left by members of incel communities Daly and Laskovtsov (2021) argue for the importance of drawing from research on mental health when studying incels, stating “while many people may find online incel spaces to be hateful, toxic places, this research can potentially reframe incel issues and potential for violence to include issues of self-harm and suicide” (p23). The authors discuss the various “copes” employed by incels which they turn to as an alternative to traditional mental health interventions.

Some, such as video games, may be a positive in so far as they are something from which the individual can derive enjoyment, although they are unlikely to address the root problems which give rise to the individual's unhappiness. Others, such as looksmaxxing and gymmaxxing, are described as being more "problem-focused", but often draw from existing masculinity ideals, which reinforce alpha masculinity and put pressure on individuals to conform to gender norms and expectations which may not be achievable. Failure to achieve these ideals may contribute to negative emotions and perhaps suicidality,

The idea that failing to achieve culturally prescribed standards of masculinity can negatively affect mental health is supported by the concept of Gender Role Strain (Pleck 1995). These standards, which are often rooted in gender stereotypes, are often contradictory and inconsistent, making them impossible to adhere to. The discrepancy between the socially constructed ideal of masculinity and the experiences of everyday men can result in psychological stress for some. It is not the failure to meet these standards of masculinity that causes psychological stress (most men do not meet these), but rather an inability to deal with the resultant anxieties in a healthy manner. Yang et al. (2018) suggest that men who experience gender role strain are more likely to report anxiety, depression and low self-esteem, while Mesler et al. (2022) observe that they are less likely to engage in healthy social relationships and are less resilient to stresses. Borgogna and Aita (2020) draw from gender role strain theory, observing a correlation between strict enforcement of traditional gender roles, and mental and interpersonal problems. They give the hypothetical example of a man who holds extremely sexist beliefs, and as a result, lives his life with the irrational fear that women are attempting "take" power from him for themselves – "such beliefs could limit the number of valued interactions with women, in-turn leading to loneliness, depression, and in extreme cases bitterness (such as seen in INCEL cultures)" (p3).

Another phenomenon reported in the literature which engages directly with incels, but rarely discussed elsewhere, is incels reporting "feeling off-time"

relative to their peers, particularly in regards to their sexual development. Donnelly et al. (2001) take a sociological approach, engaging directly with incels via an open ended questionnaire, to better understand their backgrounds and experiences. Using a life course perspective, they find there is a significant contingent of the community who feel they have 'missed their chance' - because they didn't have sex or form romantic partnerships in their teens, they were forever and irrevocably out-of-sync - "Pervasive in our respondents' accounts was the theme of becoming and remaining off time in making normative sexual transitions, which in turn perpetuated a celibate life course or trajectory." (p159). Frustration and loss of confidence were reported as a result. The more these emotions were felt, the less likely respondents were to take the necessary steps to initiate sexual activity. Both genders reported feeling "trapped". The idea of being "off-time" is also observed by Stijelja and Mishara (2022) who find a feeling of being off-time relative to one's peers, with regards to sexuality, to be a common psychological trait among incels.

Although their research is not concerned with incels specifically, Leroux and Boislard (2022) conduct semi-structured interviews with 29 "Emerging Adult Virgins" (EAVs) to understand the problems such individuals may face. The authors note that rites-of-passage which occur "off-time" are often stigmatized, and that EAVs are more likely than their "on-time" peers to report feelings of "distress, low self-esteem, loneliness, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and stigma" (p2). Male EAV's were found to experience these difficulties more than their female counterparts, which the authors attribute to the double sexual standard which shames women for promiscuity, while celebrating and expecting such behaviour from men. The authors also note that many adult virgins struggle socially, have difficulty maintaining interpersonal relationships, and feel negatively about their late virginity. Importantly, Leroux and Boislard (2022) find that the lack of support for EAVs is a factor which may drive some individuals towards spaces that offer more red pill solutions to their problems, such as The Manosphere - "Indeed, because of its saliency when searching the Internet for "late virginity", there is an abundance of information available on the manosphere for EAVs, even

though it is not always accurate, especially since some “pick-up artists” and Incels affirm that the main goal of any late virgin man is to have sex, which will solve all their problems” (p3). The authors suggest that visiting such spaces may compound feelings of guilt and shame in the individual by suggesting that their virginity is their own fault - the result of their failure to behave in certain ways, or to develop specific physical attributes or social competencies. However, in the case of incels, an argument can also be made that visiting such spaces may alleviate feelings of guilt and shame, by providing a narrative in which blame does not lie with the individual, as their incelism is a result of a number of forces outside of their control, such as feminism, social media, evolutionary psychology, etc.

Sharkey (2022) is careful to avoid vilifying or demonising incels, seeking instead to understand their position in the world, and how they came to find themselves in their current position. She conceptualises incels as being in a state of extended adolescence or arrested development, describing them as “boys” who can’t grow up”, a description which tracks with the popular image of the incel as that of a young man who rarely leaves their bedroom, spends too much time online, and is almost singularly obsessed with having sex. There is of course also a symbolic connection between losing one’s virginity and achieving manhood. Incels’ obsession with sex is understood as an aspect of their arrested development, as well as source of much frustration. Because of incels’ failure to grow up, they are unable to access their idea of “the good life”, which Sharkey (2022) describes as “one of marriage and mortgages, a life that incels feel is no longer in reach for men like them.” (p39). The world no longer necessarily provides the conditions which guarantee “boys” opportunities to progress and achieve manhood. Drawing from Berlant (2011), Sharkey (2022) identifies the “cruel optimism” offered by the community as a key aspect of the incels arrested development. Incel communities do not help young men form romantic relationships. In fact, for the young men who internalize the ideas and rhetoric prevalent throughout these forums, these communities are likely an obstacle to these men achieving their goals. This is almost inevitable in a community where the causes of one’s failure are understood to be external,

and projected onto vague opponents like “feminism” or “society”. As a result, these communities appear to be largely constructed around embracement of failure. Embracing failure allows the incel to avoid any serious reflection on themselves and their situation that could make them feel discomfort, but which may otherwise play a role in motivating development into adulthood. Sharkey (2022) explains, “It would seem their sense of endurance in the position is at least in part due to the recognition they receive from other incels, in the drama of shared failure (...) they are sustained by their aggressive performance of collective failure”, and concludes that “Attachment to failure is a cruel attachment, filled with promise, but enigmatic in its rewards.” (p47).

Bratich and Banet-Weiser (2019) also believe failure to progress may be an overlooked aspect of incels’ experience. Like Sharkey (2022) they note that whatever supports incels require to progress to their next stage in life, they are unlikely to find it in incel communities. They connect inceldom to the failure of the neoliberal promise – the promise that so long as they have the right skill set, knowledge, and attitude, anyone can succeed - and observe that when incels experience difficulties functioning in the modern world, and progressing towards the next stages of life, there are very few legitimate supports which may offer any kind of support. In their absence, incels are drawn to solutions such as pick-up artistry, or looksmaxxing, which are unlikely to address underlying issues. The authors refer to incel communities as a kind of “anti-social support”, which rather than help these men progress and function as contributing members of society, are more likely to facilitate members disengaging from and rejecting of society.

Finally, another key finding of Speckhard and Ellenberg (2022) is that incel communities play an important function, by providing community for incels, who may otherwise struggle with issues such as isolation and loneliness. However, the overall benefits of this are debatable, as this research also observes a correlation between forum participation, and symptoms such as despair, suicidality, and anger directed towards women. Leroux and Boislard (2022) similarly find loneliness to be a common characteristic of emerging

adult virgins. However, there is no literature which discussed incelism in the context of the broader social phenomenon of “loneliness”. Given its proximity to incelism, it may be of benefit to pay attention to this area, and how it is discussed by interviewees going forward.

2.3 Conclusion

The analysis of the literature which directly engages with incels has revealed a number of findings which will be key to this research going forward. It is clear that this method is well positioned to access biographical information about incels that is significantly more difficult to ascertain from forum analysis. As noted, this is an approach that was initially only seen in by non-academic, more journalistic sources, although is increasingly being observed in academia. In both cases it is evident that the work produced by those who engage directly with incels can give us a more rounded and nuanced understanding of the kinds of people who make up these communities, and provide unique insights about their beliefs and experiences.

An important finding is the prevalence of mental health issues throughout incel communities. Despite this being a popular topic of discussion on incel forums, it is only recently that academia has taken an interest in this facet of incel communities. Another important finding, which dates back to some of the earliest research on incels produced by Donnelly et al. (2001), is how frequently feelings of being “off-time” were reported by participants. Although the concept of being “off-time” is rarely discussed explicitly by members of incel forums, its effects – depression, anxiety, lack of confidence, loneliness, isolation, and feelings of frustration and being “trapped” – are likely familiar to many. Loneliness was also found to be a common feature of the incel experience, although there has been very little literature to date which discusses loneliness in the context of incels specifically. Given their prominence in the research discussed in this chapter, these are areas likely to be relevant to this project.

While this chapter has demonstrated the advantages of engaging directly with incels, it has also demonstrated the limitations of certain approaches. Much of the research discussed has relied on survey data. The appeal of survey research when engaging directly with groups like incels is easy to understand – they are asynchronous, quantifiable, can be distributed on mass, and make it easy to protect anonymity. Although surveys have been able to highlight the prevalence of mental health issues and neurodivergence, feelings of being off-time, and loneliness in incel communities, they are limited in their ability to follow up on these areas, and explain the role they play in incelism. We can see that they are often co-present, but are given little indication about the precise nature of their relationship, for example, if there is a causal relationship, or if their onset is concurrent. Interviews are better suited for answering these kinds of questions as they are more dynamic, and can allow the researcher to pursue areas of interest, some of which the researcher may not have thought to address prior to the interview beginning. They also make it easier for the subject to provide more detailed and nuanced responses.

The research by Leroux and Boislard (2022) on EAVs is particularly valuable as it demonstrates that negative experiences of virginity can be separated from incel ideology. The problems incels are facing today are not unique to incels. The fact that the areas highlighted in this chapter – mental health, feeling off-time, and loneliness – are commonly observed in broad swathes of the population, suggests that these variables alone not sufficient for answering why some young men choose to identify as incels. An explanatory framework that can satisfactorily explain why some men choose to become incels, will also need to be answer why so many don't. The following chapter will locate incels in the broader contexts in which they exist, while also looking at features of radicalisation that may be particularly pertinent to the case incels.

Chapter 3

Incel Radicalisation

As there are currently no theories or frameworks that elucidate how ideological radicalisation occurs in incel communities, this research takes an inductive approach, inviting interviewees to share their “Blackpill stories”. However, while interviewees will likely be aware of certain key events in their own blackpill story, the complex and multifaceted nature of radicalisation means that there will almost certainly be key events or influences that it won’t occur to the interviewee to share. It is also possible that the interviewee may have normalized certain misogynistic ideas long before the point where they recognize their blackpill as having begun. Given the open nature of this approach, it is incumbent upon the researcher to be well informed about areas that may be relevant to the “blackpill process”, so that areas of interest can be identified and further probed as they arise.

There are some important areas that it will be of benefit to examine in greater detail in advance of the interviews. As previously discussed, the misogyny in incel spaces is an extension of the misogyny that exists in mainstream society. It will thus be important to examine this societal misogyny, the forms it takes, and the factors that give rise to it. It will also be of benefit to examine the literature which has looked at The Manosphere, the misogynistic online milieu in which incels are embedded. Particular attention will be paid to the features of the manosphere that distinguish it from the men’s rights movements that came before. Attention will be paid to areas of continuity, and indeed divergence, between incel communities and the broader manosphere, as these may help to illuminate certain factors that contribute to an individual’s decision to identify as an incel. This chapter will then devote a significant amount of time to examining the literature on radicalisation, focusing on areas that are more likely to be relevant in the case of incels ideological

radicalisation, and how radicalisation occurs in post-organisational, non-hierarchical communities.

This chapter is divided into two broad sections. The first looks at misogyny, paying attention to both the broader societal misogyny, and the factors that give rise to its current iteration, including neoliberal globalisation, the prevalence of postfeminism, and the culture wars. This will be followed by an examination of The Manosphere, which will pay particular attention to two important features which define it – an increased focus on rationality and science, and a preoccupation with victimhood and persecution. The second half of this chapter will then look at the literature on radicalisation in order to identify factors and processes which can further explain why people may find themselves moving from towards inceldom. Radicalisation literature focusing on areas likely to be relevant to incels – such as feelings of injustice, mental health, and the internet – will be discussed. This will be followed by a discussion of the cultic milieu, a framework through which ideological radicalisation that takes place online can be understood.

3.1 Misogyny

As discussed in the introduction, the misogyny that exists in incel communities is not novel or unique, but is an extension of the everyday misogyny that can be seen throughout society. The following section will unpack this area, and pay particular attention to factors that can explain why this misogyny appears to have become more virulent in recent years. Following this, attention will be paid to the manosphere, the misogynistic online milieu in which incels are embedded, and two important features – the prevalence of “victimhood” narratives” and the reverence shown towards “rationality” – will be discussed.

3.1.1 Societal Misogyny

The misogyny observed in incel communities is not a discrete or unique phenomenon, but rather an extension of the misogyny that already exists in broader society. The normalization of this “everyday” misogyny may lay the groundwork for individuals to be receptive towards more extreme iterations. Any attempt to answer why and how some men choose to become incels will benefit from examination of the literature attempting to identify the conditions and beliefs that give rise to this societal misogyny.

Michael Kimmel’s sociological work on masculinity has been beneficial in helping to understand the root causes of misogyny today. He argues that there has been a disconnect between white men’s conceptions of themselves in the early 21st century, and their lived experience. Despite historically being a privileged and dominant group, many young men do not feel the benefits of this privilege in their day to day lives. Kimmel (2013) identifies an archetype of the angry white male, who feels economically disenfranchised, but does not necessarily understand the causes of their economic anxiety. In place of a sophisticated critique of neoliberal capitalism, which for many remains an elusive concept, scapegoats are provided to explain young men’s downward mobility. These scapegoats often come in the form of more visible, marginal social groups such as immigrants and women. The reinvigoration of white supremacy and men’s rights movements are given as examples of ways the aggrieved entitlement of the angry white man has manifested itself in the modern world. Kimmel (2013a) addresses the perceived “crisis of masculinity” and narratives regarding “the end of men” which emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, arguing that they were largely the result of a tendency to conceptualise gender relations as a zero-sum game. While the hardships of the post-recession period were felt by most, the idea of the ‘Mancession’ began to emerge due to the fact that 75% of the jobs lost between 2007 and 2009 were held by men. At the same time, media narratives celebrating the gains of women in society were also present. Kimmel (2013a) unpacks this however, finding that although narratives about women’s

increasing representation in workplaces and third level education were not inaccurate, they did not tell the whole story. In many cases, gains were experienced by both men and women, although women's gains appeared more pronounced, due to their comparatively low representation in certain areas to begin with. Despite this, an idea that women's gains came at the expense of men's persisted.

Baker (2019) similarly discusses a small but growing demographic for whom she coins the term "left-behind men", who do not benefit from the expanding economic options of neoliberal globalisation in the same way others, women and minorities for example, do. Society has provided no substantial resources or supports, or satisfactory explanations through which these men can make sense of their situation. It is up to these "left-behind men" to identify the causes of their loss of status, and to figure out how best to address them. Baker (2019) argues this has resulted in a cultural fragmentation which has contributed to the emergence of post-truth and promoted scepticism of experts. This post-truth world is dangerous, as there are countless websites and blogs which provide narratives, which rather than a systemic critique, provide openly misogynistic and sexist accounts of how the rightful or natural place of men in society has been usurped, and needs to be returned – "A most prominent example of such communications happens on Reddit, on which posts can be anonymous and left-behind men complain about everything from the inability to find sexual partners (as in the case of the INCELS, or "involuntarily celibate males") to the belief that affirmative action and feminism have deprived men of jobs and employment they would otherwise receive" (p15). The networked nature of these spaces creates fertile ground for the emergence of communities to perpetuate the grievances, bigotry and anger felt by these members, and facilitate the spread of hateful ideologies.

Writing about the origins of the men's rights movement, Michael Messner (2016) identifies three historical shifts which may have contributed to our current "moment" of gender relations - "the professional institutionalization of feminism; the rise of postfeminism; and neoliberal transformations in the political economy" (p16). He contends that ideas of masculinity being in

decline, combined with postfeminist narratives suggesting gender equality has already been achieved, have made the efforts of feminists appear to be an over-correction, or even a power-grab, at the expense of men. Gill (2007) describes postfeminism as an entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas. While it portrays itself as a philosophy that empowers women in society, postfeminism portrays traditional feminists as harsh, punitive and irrational, or as ascetics who deny themselves any form of joy. Issues which disproportionately affect women are no longer understood as being political or systemic, but are instead treated as cultural or individual. The empowerment promised by postfeminism comes not from any collective efforts to affect structural change, but rather from a pervasive neoliberal idea that the only thing holding women back are their own attitudes and determination to succeed. Gill (2017) refers to this as “gendered neoliberalism”, which she claims has become so interwoven with everyday life, it is often viewed as “common sense” thinking that’s difficult to distinguish as a distinct ideology. Ging (2019) suggests the mass diffusion of this sensibility into everyday life has laid the groundwork for the manosphere to frame any continued efforts on the part of feminists to address gendered issues in society as opportunistic attempts by feminists to capitalise on their success, and create a new social order where men were the oppressed class.

Angela Nagle (2017) suggests much of the misogyny seen today can be understood as a product of the online culture wars. It is suggested that broad opposition to vague concepts like ‘political correctness’, ‘identity politics’ and ‘wokeness’, have brought together a coalition of trolls, pranksters, hackers and self-identified geeks, whose rejection of mainstream progressive attitudes allows them to position themselves as a countercultural movement. These groups are less concerned with traditional, political, causes of men’s rights movements, and are not tied to traditional conservative online spaces, but rather transgressive or “edgy” spaces like 4Chan, an imageboard where the prevailing political ideology is a form of pseudo-libertarianism and free-speech absolutism. Nagle (2017) argues that being unable to discuss certain issues without receiving backlash from feminists, progressives, or other

“woke-scolds” has exacerbated the feelings of persecution present within these groups. This claim is frequently made members of these communities themselves, but should be treated with scepticism, as it presents an overly-sanitized image of communities which routinely harass and abuse women.

3.1.2 The Manosphere

While the literature investigating the factors that give rise to societal misogyny has been beneficial for providing a macro-context, examining the literature which has addressed ‘The Manosphere’ will help further contextualise incels at a more granular level, by unpacking the more immediate misogynistic networks in which incel communities exist. The Manosphere is a loosely defined collection of online communities who share concerns about men’s place in the modern world, and believe feminism is damaging not just to young men, but to all of western society. It is an umbrella term which covers a number of groups, including Incels, Men’s Rights Activists (MRA’s), Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), Pick-Up artists (PUA’s), and a host of other anti-feminist online subcultures connected by the red pill ideology. Dickel and Evolvi (2022) describe the manosphere as “a detached set of websites and social media groups united by the belief that men are oppressed victims of feminism [...] not a homogeneous network but a cluster of misogynist networks characterized by different viewpoints and degrees of violence, and entangled with racist, homophobic, and far-right ideologies.” (p1). The authors explain that although it has existed since the early 2000s it has grown in size and its ideology has developed significantly in recent years. This is attributed to a perception among its members that there is a need for counterbalance as feminist discourses become more visible online in the wake of movements such as #MeToo.

A key finding present in much of the literature looking at The Manosphere is the esteem with which rationality, reason, logic and intelligence are held within the community. Just as incel community’s beliefs are legitimised

through reference to the blackpill, the undergirding logic for the manosphere is provided by the red pill, which draws from much of the same pseudo-science, but does not embrace the fatalism and nihilism. The red pill ideology is seen as clear and unambiguous. It positions itself as a positivist worldview derived from scientific findings and deduction and so appeals to those who believe in an extant truth which can only be accessed through an objective analysis of empirical data. This sets the manosphere apart from feminists and social scientists, whose arguments are dismissed by members of the manosphere as subjective, intangible, overly reliant on theory, and grounded in opinions, feelings and ideology. Van Valkenburgh (2018) observes that red pill beliefs reinforce a series of dichotomies, with “the conservative, scientific, pragmatic, objective, and masculine on the one hand; counterposed against the liberal, religious, idealist, subjective, and feminine on the other” (p7).

Just like the blackpill, the red pill is largely grounded in the controversial science of Evolutionary Psychology (EP). EP posits that there are essential differences between the genders which explain apparent gendered behaviours, (e.g. why men are considered more aggressive, or why women are considered more empathetic). However, the validity of the hypotheses proposed by EP are widely disputed within the scientific community, with some likening it to a form of determinism which ignores a multitude of genetic and social factors that influence an individual’s psychological development (Plotkin 2004). EP has also been criticised for producing untestable hypotheses, and for its reliance on “just-so stories” - the idea that because something is one way, it “ought” to be that way (Gould 1978). As the claims of EP are unfalsifiable, it does not meet the requirement of an “empirical” science as defined by Karl Popper (1963). This, combined with the fact that EP legitimizes many of the attitudes and behaviours observed in the manosphere, suggests its appeal within the community may be motivated more by ideology than scientific rigor.

In the introduction to a special issue of Australian Feminist Studies specifically focusing on feminist encounters with EP, O’Neill (2015) writes “EP concepts and theories not only rely on and reproduce normative gendered assumptions,

but are routinely invoked elsewhere to maintain and justify gender inequality” (p9). This issue contains a variety of critiques from a number of theoretical backgrounds, including linguistics (Cameron 2015), neurophysiology (Roberts 2015), and neuropsychology (Donaghue 2015). Donaghue’s (2015) account pays attention to the reasons evolutionary psychology has proven to be such a compelling narrative, even for those outside of the scientific community, explaining that not only does EP appear to provide “‘scientific’—apparently apolitical—account of the ‘natural’ differences between women and men” (p.363), it does so in a simple, intuitive way that aligns with postfeminist ideas about sex and gender. By treating these differences as inherent and natural, as opposed to contingent and sociocultural, EP naturalizes the idea that there are essential gender differences which cannot be overcome. This allows members of the manosphere to “scientifically” legitimize and universalize a number of claims supporting their narrative, (e.g. that men naturally make better leaders (Beilby 2017), or that men desire sex more than women (Symonds 1979)), many of which are already assumed to be true by large swathes of the general population. The naturalization of these ideas also allows the manosphere to portray attempts to address gender inequality as attempts to interfere with the “natural order” of things, allowing them to avoid having to engage with the more nuanced critiques provided by feminists.

McCaughey (2008) finds that this aggressive embrace of rationality and EP encourages men to be “sucked into a view of women as attractive commodities, and then rationalize their view by referring to their evolved nature” (p72). This is most visible in the ‘Seduction’ or ‘Pick-Up Artist’ (PUA) community, whose ideas have spread throughout, and in many cases beyond, the manosphere. Seduction has become an industry in which teachers provide seminars or one-to-one guidance, promising to equip men with the knowledge and skills that will help them in their romantic efforts (O’Neill 2015a). PUA’s attempt to make a science out of courtship through a neoliberal commodification of the process in which various elements are reduced to numerical values so that they can be viewed through a rudimentary economic framework in which individuals are discussed in terms of their “sexual market

value” and are understood to be competing “sexual marketplace”. This market can then be manipulated using a set of tools and techniques known as “Game”. Van Valkenburgh (2018) describes Game as a form of “applied EP” (p10), primarily concerned with the evolutionary explanation for why women might be attracted to certain traits and behaviours. Game promises to teach men how to cultivate these traits, or at least fake them convincingly. PUA’s incentivise young men by promising to improve their success in certain quantifiable areas, for example, how to get more sexual partners, or “higher value” sexual partners (this generally refers to attractiveness as rated on a scale of 1 – 10), with little attention paid to improving the quality of sexual encounters or relationships

Bratich and Banet-Weiser (2019) draw parallels between the PUA community and the “Neoliberal Promise” that anyone can succeed provided they put in sufficient effort, insofar as both ignore the reality that there are certain material factors that affect an individual’s chance of success, many of which are outside their control. Success and failure are individualized. The authors describe PUAs as “ideal masculine neoliberal subjects”, who assume their success rates with women can be improved through certain transactional relationships – dating coaches, seminars, workshops, etc. While a minority of those who are failed by the promise of the seduction community may persevere regardless, Bratich and Banet-Weiser (2019) observe that after being failed by the neoliberal promise of the seduction community, most individuals quickly lose confidence in the approach and become critical, often suggesting it is a scam that exploits lonely men. This disillusionment reinforces feelings of victimhood, and once again leaves men in a space where there are no clear “next steps” to be taken. In the absence of any social supports, the authors explain that failed PUAs can resort to “anti-social supports”, such as incel communities. Incels are described as “mutated entrepreneurs” who in the absence of productive, pragmatic goals, are motivated by nihilism and negation.

This research builds on Bratich and Banet-Weiser’s (2019) analysis somewhat, and introduces the term “Neoliberal Masculinity”, to refer to the depoliticised

and individualised form of masculinity that pervades the manosphere. The coaches, seminars, and workshops Bratich and Banet-Weiser (2019) identified as aspects of the PUA community can now be observed throughout the more red pill spaces of the manosphere more broadly. Amid panics around the feminization of society, declining levels of testosterone, and falling birth rates, and a pervasive belief that these “issues” cannot be addressed via political means, the manosphere largely embraces solutions that attempt to address them at an individual level. The advice proffered includes going on extreme diets, such as raw meat diets, or diets which eliminate seed oils and phytoestrogens, or engaging in unusual therapies such as testicle tanning. These solutions ignore any structural or material causes that may explain why, for example, men’s sperm rates seem to have been dropping in recent decades, instead treating it as an individual issue. The red pill manosphere is filled with masculinity entrepreneurs and success influencers, who sell supplements, as well as courses that suggest success is achievable to anyone, and is primarily an issue of “mindset” above all else. Although in many cases their worldview can be described as “red pill”, these influencers are often visible in the mainstream, and are not always explicitly affiliated with any specific manosphere community. The focus on “Mindset”, “Grind” or “Hustle”, suggest that in many ways, neoliberal masculinity can be understood as a reflection of postfeminism, a parallel which is reinforced by the conspicuous absence of solidarity, and the fact neoliberal masculinity uses the language of revolution, suggesting you can effect change through self-care or by consuming the right products, while trafficking in discourses and iconography that promote disordered eating and body dysmorphia. More recently, the kinds of solutions offered in these spaces have relied heavily on amassing wealth via cryptocurrencies, NFTs, and buying property.

Another key feature which distinguishes the manosphere from the anti-feminist groups that came before, is the aggressive embrace of victimhood at the hands of radical feminists, female hypergamists, and a “woke” society. Male victimhood is not a new concept, and has been discussed in academic literature covering masculinity prior to the emergence of the manosphere. Although by

no means an exhaustive list, examples can be seen in Savran's (1998) analysis of performative texts, which finds the trope of white men as victims to be present in a number of plays, films, poems etc., or Gill (2003), who suggests lad culture can be viewed as a backlash against feminism. As previously noted however, the presence of hybrid-masculinities in the manosphere, combined with the mass diffusion of postfeminist sensibilities, have allowed narratives of male victimhood to spread and thrive with greater ease.

By framing themselves as victims of feminism and portraying their communities as support groups, members of the manosphere have been able to portray themselves as righteous underdogs, allowing them to adopt the rhetoric and tactics of oppressed and marginalised groups in society. Previous cases put forward by the men's rights often drew from figures relating to family court verdicts and the suicide rate among young men, although many of these arguments have been thoroughly deconstructed and repudiated. In the absence of any real evidence supporting their political positions, the men's rights movement has turned to heightened emotion as proof of men's victimhood. Allan (2015) explains that "Men's rights activists use affect not to express genuine anxieties or fears (...) but rather to manufacture a crisis and a state in victimhood in which men are victims of women's violence and feminist tyranny." (p37). The lack of substance in these affective arguments makes them more difficult to deconstruct. They also make it harder to portray the men's rights movement as a group defending the interests of a dominant group in society. Marwick and Caplan (2018) write "By saying "You're not the victim, I'm the victim!" the MRA (...) is able to adopt a defensible position as the suffering victim, turning feminist (or queer, or anti-racist) activism on its head and re-framing it as oppressive" (p12). Schmitz and Kazyak (2016) identify a subcategory of members of the manosphere - 'Virtual Victims in search of Equality' - who use a number of tactics to legitimise their victimhood status, while simultaneously minimizing women's suffering. For example, while using the language of activism (e.g. talking about justice, inequality, institutional discrimination, etc.), virtual victims argue that women aren't oppressed, and that feminism is damaging to society. They make their case by misrepresenting

the core tenets of feminism, while discussing other topics in isolation (e.g., male suicide rate, child custody, etc.) in a way which ignores more pertinent social factors at play. Similarly, Gotell and Dutton (2016) discover a set of related myths shared throughout the manosphere, which flip fundamental claims of feminism in order to portray feminists as powerful aggressors, who are either blind or indifferent to the suffering of men. These myths include; “that sexual violence, like domestic violence, is a gender-neutral problem; that feminists are responsible for erasing men’s experiences of victimization; that false allegations are widespread; and that rape culture is a feminist-produced moral panic.” (p65). Gotell & Dutton (2016) go on to highlight the ability of these narratives to prey on the anxieties of young men, stating “within MRA rhetoric on rape, it is young men, rather than fathers, who are being depicted as being feminism’s principal victims” (p76). Similarly, Schmitz and Kazyak (2016) describe these narratives as having a “predatory” function, claiming that “ideological conversion will be most likely among men who already feel disempowered” (p12). Another way in which feelings of victimhood can draw men to these communities is identified by Marwick and Lewis (2017), who describe the tendency for otherwise disparate online groups to coalesce in opposition to a common oppressor. The authors highlight examples of this in the coalition-building which took place during Gamergate. The manosphere attracted and mobilised members due to its “well-developed set of rhetorical strategies that portray men—especially geeky or socially unsuccessful men—as victims of radical feminists.”(p47). While it may seem as though the goals of Incels, PUA’s and MGTOW’s are not necessarily aligned, the red pill successfully unites them with a common understanding of how the world functions, and in many cases, who is to blame for their woes.

The perceived victimhood of the manosphere also plays an important role in justifying the abuse and harassment perpetrated by its members. Marwick and Caplan (2018) recognize its ability to make overt sexism, objectification, and harassment of women appear morally justifiable, by framing them as rational responses to the oppressive culture of mainstream feminism. Similarly, Lilly (2016) finds that these narratives allow members of the manosphere to

portray themselves as heroic warriors fighting for freedom and true equality. These men are fighting for the “freedom” to be real men, free from the “pussification” of modern society which feminism has wrought. Lilly (2016) identifies an idea of traditional femininity celebrated in these communities, one that allows women the “freedom” to assume more feminine, domestic roles. In these examples, the idea of freedom is invoked as a virtue of paramount importance, making harassment of feminists permissible and ultimately noble. Massanari (2017) similarly finds victimhood narratives help members of the manosphere to frame their actions as noble, allowing them to avoid having to confront the morality of their actions. She points to the axiom “It’s about ethics in video game journalism”, which became popular during Gamergate, as an example of how these tactics can be used as a means of making unambiguously negative behaviours appear virtuous by framing them as a broader ethical issue.

Another feature of the manosphere, which distinguishes it from the misogynistic and anti-feminist groups which preceded it, is the increasing role emotion and affect have come to play in helping to form movements and articulate beliefs. Ahmed (2004) refers to the politicization of the personal which has given rise to this as “the cultural politics of emotion”. She looks at the relationship between emotion and rhetoric, and suggests that emotions should be understood not as psychological states, but rather a form of cultural practice, which connects individuals with political ideologies and forms communities. These emotions can intensify over time, further cementing the individual’s identification with these ideologies and communities. In this way, emotions play an important role in laying the groundwork for social movements. Ahmed (2004) focuses on four emotion in particular – fear, disgust, shame, and love – showing the unique effect each one can have on how a community is organized, and how those inside the community relate to others. She concludes that feelings towards others are of paramount importance when attempting to understand why certain individuals find themselves aligned with specific groups. Ahmed’s (2004) research on affect

also identifies a political functionality of pain and suffering, which can be used to construct identities and justify intervention.

Papacharissi's (2014) work on affective publics is similarly concerned with online communities mobilized by affect, and the effects public displays of affect produce when employed as political statements. She finds that emotion is a key factor when it comes to explaining how networked publics come to coalesce around certain political ideologies. Ging (2017) draws a link between the idea of affective publics, and the proliferation of red pill ideology throughout the manosphere, noting "a compelling cultural motif has succeeded in balancing emotion and ideology to generate consensus and belonging among the manosphere's divergent elements" (p8). In this case, an affective consensus is formed around the idea that men are suffering as a result of feminism. Papacharissi (2014) concludes that the constant, cumulative flow of content online amplifies the expression of affect, allowing members of these publics to feel more intensely. However, it should be noted that while affect may have an effect on the intensity of an individual's relationship to a particular issue, it does not necessarily have any effect on how deeply they understand the issue, nor does it necessarily increase the likelihood of the individual taking any practical actions. Papacharissi (2016), building on this research regarding affective publics, cautions against overstating their revolutionary potential, suggesting that "Perhaps they constitute no more than an imparting of a sense of being there, a feel for the tone and the mood of the moment. Possibly, they help publics collaboratively reimagine a shared future. Overtime, and together with systemic and contextual factors, they may progressively lead to change" (p321). Finally, Paasonen's (2019) work on "networked affect" also shows an awareness of the importance of networked emotional resonance online. She finds that emotional resonance, which can be brought on by a range of emotional responses, including sexual titillation or political passion, creates an "affective stickiness", which contributes to the ability of certain online spaces, or pieces of content, to hold an individual's attention. "Without resonance, connections fail to be formed; no stickiness accrues (...) and no affective intensity of the kind necessary for mobilizing

collective action, online or offline, emerges. Without affective resonance of some kind, things simply do not matter (...) attachment to them remain faint fleeting and momentary” (p.13).

3.2 Radicalisation

Although the majority of incels are not terrorists, the blackpill ideology can still be considered extreme. The process of coming to hold extreme beliefs, even in the absence of violence and acts of terrorism, is radicalisation. As such, literature which looks at radicalisation, particularly non-violent or ideological radicalisation, will be relevant to this research. This section will begin by introducing the concept of radicalisation, followed by an in-depth review of the literature surrounding radicalisation, as it relates to a number of areas relevant to the incel context, such as injustice, mental illness, and online radicalisation. This will be followed by a discussion of the concept of the cultic milieu, which is argued to be relevant to this research, as a framework through which ideological radicalisation that occurs online can be understood.

The concept of radicalisation was largely absent from terrorism studies until the early 21st century. Horgan (2012) says radicalisation became “the holy grail” of terrorism studies in the aftermath of 9/11, while Githens-Mazer and Lambert (2010) note that its popularity seems to have begun in the aftermath of the Madrid bombings in 2004 and the London attacks in 2005, as the discipline turned its attention towards home-grown terrorism. Attempts to define radicalisation in absolute terms have generally been unsuccessful, largely as a result of an inability to agree on the relationship between radicalisation, ideological extremism and violent extremism. Bartlett and Miller (2010) define radicalisation as a process through which “individuals are introduced to an overtly ideological message and belief system that encourages movement from moderate, mainstream beliefs towards extreme views.”. Radicalisation, in this case, involves an individual moving away from, or rejecting the status quo, although not necessarily to the point of endorsing

acts of violence - “Some radicals conduct, support, or encourage terrorism, whilst many others do no such thing, and actively and often effectively agitate against it.” (p2). Borum (2011) refer to a shift in ideology to a point where violent actions become permissible as ‘Radicalisation into Violent Extremism’ (RVE), but cautions against a linear understanding which portrays radicalisation as a precursor to acts of terrorist violence. Instead, it is suggested that radicalisation should be understood as a set of diverse processes – “Most people who harbor radical ideas and violent justifications do not engage in terrorism, just as many known terrorists—even many of those who carry a militant jihadi banner—are not especially pious and have only a cursory understanding of the radical religious ideology they claim to represent” (p30). This suggests that understanding why certain individuals become radicalised requires an understanding that goes beyond ideology alone.

3.2.1 Injustice

Perceived injustice is frequently observed in incel communities, as well as the manosphere more broadly. We have seen the strategic and rhetorical advantages being able to present oneself as a victim of an oppressive or indifferent mainstream can have, particularly for those assumed to be in more privileged positions (e.g. white, male, straight, etc.). Research has also demonstrated that feelings of injustice and victimhood can be powerful drivers in radicalisation.

Bal and van den Bos (2017) find that feelings of injustice act as powerful motivators in the rejection of dominant social systems, driving individuals to more fringe, and likely extreme, alternatives, such as radical groups and even terrorist organizations. Van den Bos (2020) observes this perceived injustice can play an important role in Islamic, far-right and far-left radicalisation. However, he recognizes that feelings of being treated unfairly are in most cases not sufficient for motivating individuals to adopt extreme beliefs or engage in radical behaviours, and so set out to discover important co-factors. Ultimately,

it is found that the potential of these feelings to facilitate radicalisation is particularly acute in individuals who are experiencing some form of uncertainty about themselves or their place in the world, and among those who have difficulty controlling their strong defensive reactions (e.g. externally oriented negative emotions like anger, hate and contempt) to others – “personal uncertainty and insufficient self-correction can dramatically enhance rigid thinking, strong defensive reactions toward different cultures or subcultures, and violent rejection of law and democratic principles.” (p566).

Another related area, which has been well covered in the literature, is the affect perceptions of relative deprivation can have on radicalisation. Franc and Pavlović (2021) identify a probable positive correlation between socio-political inequality and ideological radicalization, although they stress that actually experiencing inequality is neither necessary nor sufficient to explain radicalisation and terrorism. Pavlović and Franc (2021) build on this research, to examine the role of individual dispositions (paying particular attention to the “dark triad” personality traits – narcissism, machiavellianism and psychopathy) and other contextual factors in radicalisation, concluding that “although deprived individuals and those high on dark personality traits seem to be more supportive of political violence, the most supportive individuals seem to be the ones high on dark personality traits which feel deprived” (p20)

In their qualitative analysis of over 8000 posts shared by over 700 users of two prominent incel forums, O’Malley and Helm (2022) identify two common themes among individuals who join incel communities – perceived injustice and a need for esteem. Incel communities may be particularly appealing for disenfranchised young men, as they appear to be able to address both issues, at least superficially. Rather than being two distinct pathways to inceldom, it is suggested that perceptions of injustice and need for esteem work in tandem. The authors describe the complicated process incels go through when acknowledging their inceldom, as both painful and enlightening. Although choosing to identify as an incel can exacerbate feelings of pessimism and mental distress, it is also seen as “a form of liberation that separates incels from the larger population and is viewed as a positive, yet painful, form of

esteem.” (p7). Whereas the outside world is understood to be unjust and unfair to incels, incel communities offer members a sense of esteem, by portraying them as knowledgeable free-thinkers, who are not as easily misled by mainstream narratives and fads as normies. Rather than being a source of shame, embracing ones inceldom becomes a source of liberation and enlightenment, as struggles and frustrations are validated by the community. The authors discuss incels embracement of being NEET as another example of this “As evidenced by their discussion of NEETing as a source of agency, adopting incel ideology reframed their alienation from employment or educational opportunities as a form of resistance to what they see as an oppressive, unjust society” (p13). O’Malley and Helm (2022) also explain that identifying as an incel, and joining an incel community, can shape members perceptions, and can lead them to re-interpret key events in their lives, through a more ideologically extreme lens, which exculpates them of responsibility for their situation. As the barriers to manhood are understood almost exclusively through an extreme misogynistic lens, woman are portrayed as greedy and shallow and are understood to be responsible for men’s celibacy, a view that is reinforced the longer incel remains incelibate.

O’Malley and Helm (2022) also argue that the strong negative emotions experienced by incels as a result of their perceived injustice, such as pessimism and hopelessness, may drive those who feel “left-out” of contemporary society to search for a community of men with similar experiences and understandings of how the world functions. They explain that “Perceptions of injustice are often sourced from personal experiences of victimization and incels’ perceived marginalization from conventional manhood” (p12). The authors note that this marginalization from manhood is overwhelmingly rooted in perceptions of gender inequality, but is also related to a number of other concerns, including concerns about appearance, being off-time, social competency, or feeling they lack agency. “Thus” the authors write “identifying as an incel and participating in incel forums online may be attractive for those who already hold male supremacist beliefs, but feel marginalized by masculinity. (p12).

The sense of injustice felt by many incels is exacerbated by their belief that being an incel is a choice, and not a life circumstance. By viewing their situation as a life circumstance, rather than a choice, incels can view themselves as simply being unlucky men who for reasons outside of their control, have been left out of the dating market. Brzuszkiewicz (2020) explains that this reasoning is what justifies incels demands to be treated with the same empathy as other marginalised groups – they believe they are in their situation as a result of external factors over which they have no control. Brzuszkiewicz (2020) describes incel's "institutionalised external locus of control" as a core component of communicative exchanges, as well as a pillar of incels broad theoretical framework, that can foster feelings of exclusion and powerlessness, which she explains "further undermines the notion of personal responsibility, which might otherwise provide a brake on the slide towards antisocial behaviour and radicalisation." (p13). The idea that they have no ability to affect the conditions that have caused their inceldom, contributes to a radical nihilism. The resulting frustration often goes beyond criticisms of Chads and Stacys, instead becoming more profound critiques of society more broadly, which can give rise to accelerationist sentiments. Brzuszkiewicz (2020) draws from Kimmel's (2013) "aggrieved entitlement", noting that perceiving a dramatic loss of something you believed you were entitled to, such as the privileges historically enjoyed by men, can be a devastating and humiliating experience, and one which has the potential to give rise to violence – "In line with their external locus of control, broader social forces, such as greater gender equality and women being more selective in their choice of partners, stop men from acquiring perceived rewards, resulting in a sense of reduced privilege in society." (p14). To many men, this loss of privilege is experienced as oppression. In extreme cases violence is seen to be necessary to restore their dominance and pride.

3.2.2 Neurodivergence

Due to the apparent prevalence of mental illness and developmental disorders among incels, research looking at the relationship between radicalisation and mental illness, mood disorders, and autism, will likely be relevant to this research.

Bhui et al. (2014) investigate the extent to which depression, psychosocial adversity, and limited social skills can offer protection against, or suggest vulnerability to, the process of radicalisation, finding that “depressive symptoms independent of psychosocial adversity were associated with sympathies towards violent protest and terrorism” (p5). The authors distinguish between “low moods”, “feelings of hopelessness about the future” and “suicidal feelings” that are “adaptive” (e.g. a response to structural factors and social and economic injustices), and those that reflect depressive illness, absent of any history of such injustices. They explain that “Although depression and aggression can be present from an early age and have genetic and neurochemical origins, depression can also be a consequence of chronic adversity, and can lead to maladaptive behaviour, social strain or abnormal personality development” (p5). The authors also find social isolation to be a potential risk factor for radicalisation, noting that those who appeared to have more social contacts were the most likely to condemn the use of violence.

Al-Attar (2020) examines some of the traits associated with autism, and explains how these may act as push or pull factors in an individual’s radicalisation. One of the facets discussed is how difficulties associated with social interaction and communication can make social life difficult to navigate and potentially anxiety inducing. The online world, where communication is generally text based, without subtle, non-verbal cues, may feel safer in comparison. As a result, autistic individuals may avoid offline social situations altogether, choosing instead to retreat into solitude. This can result in these individuals missing out on social, educational and academic opportunities. However, Al-Attar (2020) also explains that the primarily text based nature of the web may present its own issues, which are exacerbated by traits commonly

associated with autism -“difficulty in reading others and appraising their agendas, the tendency to take others and what they say literally (...) and the tendency to copy and mimic others and rote learn social scripts in order to relate socially and form a social identity and friendships” (p939). The author suggests that autistic individuals who come across extremist websites and forums may have difficulties observing “the bigger picture”, recognising propaganda or misinformation, or deciphering the intentions and agendas of extremists. He describes this as a social naivety, which could leave them vulnerable to exploitation and radicalisation. Al-Attar (2020) goes on to suggest that difficulties with social interactions and communication can also play a more indirect role in radicalisation, noting that adversities experienced earlier in life (such as bullying or loneliness), can contribute to distress, resentment and anger that continues throughout adolescence into adulthood. These negative feelings and emotions may act as a push factor towards certain extreme ideologies.

Faccini & Allely (2017) argue that feelings of isolation, alienation, and a desire for social connection commonly experienced by many autistic individuals, as well as a tendency to hyperfocus on areas of interest, may make them more vulnerable to radicalisation. Writing in Spectrum, an online resource that tracks research on autism, Brendan Borrell (2020) similarly notes that “Certain traits of autistic people — a heightened response to perceived slights, a strong sense of social justice and difficulty understanding what others are thinking and feeling — may make them amenable to extreme views”. He highlights the fact that for many young men with autism, the internet acts as a conduit to the outside world, providing one of their few social outlets. Unfortunately this also increases their likelihood of being drawn into toxic communities. Borrell (2020) writes that “The amateur psychology proffered in these forums is catnip to anyone who embraces black-and-white thinking, to which autistic people are particularly prone”. He concludes that although autism may potentially play a role in creating grievances and promoting radicalisation, it is likely not the “critical factor” that leads to the adoption of extreme beliefs.

3.2.3 Online Radicalisation

Given that incel communities exist primarily online, the literature which has looked at the internet's role in radicalisation will be a key part of this research. It is found that radicalisation can certainly be facilitated by the internet, but rarely occurs absent offline factors. It is also noted that although earlier research may have overstated the role played by the internet in radicalisation, recent research suggests radicalisation is coming to play a more important role likely reflecting the increasing role the internet is playing in many areas of day to day life.

Gill et al. (2015) identify a tendency in research on radicalisation to look for mono-causal explanations which over-simplify the process, and caution that in recent years the internet has emerged as one of these. Criticising these reductive narratives which over-determine the internet's role in radicalisation, Borum (2011) argues that "Different pathways and mechanisms of terrorism involvement operate in different ways for different people at different points in time and perhaps in different contexts" (p7). Meleagrou-Hitchens and Kaderbhai (2017) similarly conclude that "the Internet alone is not a cause of radicalisation, but a facilitator and catalyser of an individual's trajectory towards violent political acts" (p6). Conway (2017) also calls for the area to be treated with more nuance, arguing against viewing the internet's role in radicalisation in terms of an online/offline dichotomy, and suggesting it should be understood as a spectrum where the internet is likely to play some role, although the significance of this role can vary greatly. Although terrorist's use of the internet is an important area for radicalisation, Whittaker and Herath (2017) caution that "a persistent focus on online activity may cause researchers, policymakers, and the media to overrate the importance of the internet at the expense of offline factors, believing phenomena like "online radicalisation" are present and persistent problems". Of 231 cases of radicalisation examined, the authors find just five which they believe can reasonably be described as examples which occurred solely online. They account for the persistence of narratives of pure online radicalisation by

noting that when trying to piece together an individual's radicalisation journey there is an availability bias towards online data. It is often public and persistent meaning that this data can potentially be collected years after the fact, even in situations where the individual is unwilling or unable to cooperate. In contrast, data concerning offline events or interactions, unless specifically documented and shared by the individual or others involved, can be much more difficult to collect.

One of the most comprehensive attempts to understand the relationship between the internet and radicalisation comes from Von Behr et al. (2013), whose research draws on primary data collected from 15 radicalised individuals, against which the team tested a number of hypotheses which, although largely unexamined, were often present in the literature. The authors conclude that the internet appears to create more opportunities for individuals to become radicalised and attribute this to the internet's widespread availability, and the ease with which individuals can find communities of likeminded people. Responding to a number of news outlets reporting that the Christchurch shooter had been radicalised on YouTube, Whittaker and Herath (2020) argue that offline factors were equally important in his radicalisation. They highlight a number of real world influences including several psychological stressors from an early age and a number of incidents which occurred closer to the time of the attack, which are flagged as potentially contributing to his radicalisation. The authors conclude that although it is difficult to quantify the extent to which online and offline experiences contributed to his radicalisation, the media's framing of the Christchurch shooter as a case of online radicalisation is an oversimplification of a more nuanced situation, which may draw attention from more relevant areas which need to be addressed in order to prevent individuals being radicalised.

Although much of the existing literature on online radicalisation cautions against over-determining the role played by the internet in radicalisation, Kenyon et al. (2021) observe the internet to be playing an increasingly important role in radicalisation, likely as a reflection of the central role the

internet has come to play in many areas of day to day life. Extremists who were found to have been primarily radicalised online were more likely to socially isolated, and to have some form of mental illness or personality disorder. However, those who were primarily radicalised online were also found to be the least willing and capable of actually committing acts of violence. The authors conclude that the internet should be understood as an environment where extremist socialisation can occur, but that it is still important to pay attention to offline environmental factors.

Another area that has received significant attention in recent years, and is likely to be relevant to this research, is the phenomenon of algorithmic radicalisation. Whittaker et al. (2021) investigate the role recommendation algorithms and “filter bubbles” may play in facilitating the amplification of extreme content online. Their research specifically focuses on the far-right, and looks at the extent to which the recommendation algorithms of three different platforms – YouTube, Reddit and Gab – promote extremist content, at the expense of more moderate voices. Of the three, YouTube is the only platform found to amplify extreme and fringe content. Similarly, in their systematic audit of YouTube’s recommendations algorithm which involved using 100,000 sock puppets accounts to identify ideological bias, Haroon et al. (2022), find that YouTube’s recommendation algorithms do indeed direct users to ideologically biased content. This effect was observed on both the homepage, and the “up next” features that autoplays another video whenever another video has ended. The effects were found to be particularly pronounced for users who were already “right leaning”, and the content being recommended was observed to become increasingly radical over time.

Some of the coverage of online radicalisation reported by the mainstream media has been particularly good for explaining why these biases exist on certain platforms. In an article published in June 2019, New York Times journalist Kevin Roose shows how a number of changes to YouTube’s recommendation algorithm have helped to facilitate the political radicalisation on the platform since 2012. In March of 2012 the recommendation algorithm was redesigned to prioritise total watch time over number of views, in an effort

to encourage creators to produce videos that viewers would want to finish, as opposed to producing “clickbait” videos with exaggerated or salacious titles and thumbnails, which ultimately left users disappointed and frustrated. YouTube also allowed all users to run ads before their videos in return for a small portion of the generated revenue. Roose explains that far-right content producers were well positioned to capitalise on these developments as many were already producing lengthy video essays, or uploading their long form podcasts as videos. He writes “Their inflammatory messages were more engaging than milder fare. And now that they could earn money from their videos, they had a financial incentive to churn out as much material as possible”. In 2015, Google introduced a new A.I called Reinforce, which was designed to figure out ‘adjacent relationships’ in the recommended content, further maximising user engagement over time by attempting to predict how their interests would develop and pre-emptively introducing them to new ideas they may not otherwise have been exposed to. It was a success, and was credited for increasing total watch time on YouTube by 1%. Roose (2019) again notes that far-right YouTubers were quickly able to benefit from this as they were used to introducing viewers to new ideas - “They knew that a video calling out left-wing bias in “Star Wars: The Force Awakens” might red-pill movie buffs, or that a gamer who ranted about feminism while streaming his Call of Duty games might awaken other politically minded gamers”.

Daniels (2018) begins by addressing the effects algorithms have had on political extremism - their tendency to deliver search results that confirm users pre-existing beliefs, affirm racist notions and connect like-minded racists - before demonstrating how the libertarian underpinnings of the early web, which framed it as a neutral space distinct from the real world, have created a space in which the far-right can thrive. She describes the tech industry as being “run by boy-kings steeped in cyberlibertarian notions of freedom, racelessness, and an ethos in which the only evil is restricting the flow of information on the Internet (and, thereby, their profits)” (p65), observing that the reverence paid to this idea of “neutrality” has contributed to a culture of free-speech absolutism. This cyber-utopian ideology

championed by figures like Howard Rheingold and John Perry Barlow in the 1990s, has led to a reluctance on the part of platforms to intervene to address issues of hate speech and violent threats for fear of being seen to police users or implicitly decide which ideas are “acceptable”. As a result, many platforms employ a hands-off approach to moderation where certain key-words are flagged and the onus is on users to report inappropriate content. Daniels (2018) explains that the alt-right have used a number of methods to successfully work around these moderation algorithms without explicitly breaking rules, including employing symbolism, dog-whistles and hiding behind a veil of irony. She suggests that the alt-right’s tactical use of ambiguity to sneak hate-speech onto mainstream platforms has contributed to a rightward shift of the overton window.

Lewis (2018) however, argues that concerns over algorithmic radicalisation may be overblown, suggesting that even without recommendation algorithms, the social features of the web are sufficient for facilitating radicalisation. Lewis (2018) analyses data collected from 65 political influencers to better understand how online radicalisation is facilitated by the ‘Alternative Influence Network’ (AIN), which she describes as “an assortment of scholars, media pundits, and internet celebrities who use YouTube to promote a range of political positions, from mainstream versions of libertarianism and conservatism, all the way to overt white nationalism” (p1). One of the central concerns of Lewis’ research is the “cross-promotion” which takes place on these accounts, not only of individuals, but also ideologies. Rather than platforming a diverse range of ideologies, members of the AIN typically engage with individuals whose ideologies can be described as reactionary. These personalities function as political influencers, providing an alternative to mainstream news sources, who they perceive as being untrustworthy. The AIN demonstrate their trustworthiness through accountability, authenticity, and relatability, framing themselves as underdogs, unafraid to speak the truth in the opposition of a dishonest mainstream media and irrational left-leaning pundits. One way in which Lewis (2018) observes the AIN facilitating radicalisation, is through moderate hosts and personalities uncritically

engaging with guests who hold more extreme views, but are aligned in their reactionary opposition to vaguely defined opponents such as the mainstream media or the “woke” left. Viewers who are trusting of the hosts will likely feel it is safe to explore the content created by these guests. As this process continues, individuals may find themselves exposed to increasingly extreme content over time. This incremental exposure may make extreme rhetoric which would have initially been off-putting, more acceptable.

One way we can learn more about the role of the internet in facilitating radicalisation is by collecting and examining data from individuals involved in extremist communities discussing their own radicalisations. In 2018 both Robert Evans of Bellingcat and Cassie Miller of the SPLC independently conducted research projects that involved collecting first-hand accounts of radicalisation or red-pilling stories shared by members of right wing extremist communities online. Evans (2018) looks at data collected from thousands of archived posts from Discord servers used by right wing extremists, and examines the “red-pilling” stories of 75 “Fascist Activists”, while Miller (2018) collected data from 74 respondents over two threads posted on the white nationalist forum The Right Stuff (TRS), where members were asked to share their radicalisation stories. The two pieces of research made a number of similar findings. Miller (2018) identifies two main pathways to the alt-right present in these threads – participation in politically incorrect, transgressive spaces like 4Chan and the consumption of content produced by authoritative figureheads in the community – both of which feature prominently in Evans’ (2018) investigation. Miller explains “Within alt-right spaces like TRS, these two fibres of the movement are woven together — resulting in an ironic, meme-ified version of old-school race science — and embellished with anti-Semitism”. She explains that less extreme members of the community (e.g. alt-lite figures such as Gavin McInnes or Milo Yiannopolous) can use humour and ironic detachment to gradually introduce their audience to more extreme ideas, while also exposing them to more extreme figureheads like Jared Taylor or Richard Spencer. Evans (2018) similarly finds that the content produced by right-wing alt-lite personalities and figureheads on easily accessible platforms

like YouTube can act as a gateway to more extreme content. Evans (2018) quotes one member of the discord who stated that as his worldview moved further right he began to dislike these figures, although he expressed appreciation for the function they fulfilled, admitting that “if we just had the Fascists, we’d never convert anyone”. Miller (2018) notes that another route through which individuals get drawn into the Alt-Right is through concepts like ‘Race Realism’, endorsed by charismatic and prolific YouTubers like Stefan Molyneux, who speaks with authority and conviction despite relying on unsound, and frequently debunked pseudoscience. Other users claimed that they were drawn in through the sceptic movement and individuals like Sam Harris who rely heavily on flawed science to argue controversial ideas under the guise of “scientific objectivity”. Importantly, 36 of the 75 respondents in Evans research claimed their red-pilling occurred offline. There is significant diversity in these experiences, including four individuals who cite experiences with LSD as being the primary cause, others who attribute their red-pilling to reading Mein Kampf, Anders Breivik’s manifesto, or watching Hitler speeches and documentaries, and some who claim to have been red pillled simply by living in a diverse areas. However, Evans notes that even though their initial indoctrination occurred offline, the internet still played an important role in “deepening” these “new converts” beliefs.

Although specifically avoiding using the word “radicalisation”, Marwick and Furi (2021) investigate the process of “taking the red pill”, which they define as “coming to believe something counterfactual to mainstream consensus” (p2). The authors begin by explaining that although the internet clearly plays a role in spreading fringe political beliefs, other factors, such as the political, economic and emotional variables that draw people to certain online spaces and content in the first place, are ignored, in favour of explanations that suggest that exposure to certain content and spaces, such as YouTube, Parler, 4Chan, etc. cause people to adopt extremist beliefs. The authors conduct a critical discourse analysis on a number of posts and messages collected from a number of far right and fringe spaces, in which red pilling is discussed in order to answer the question “what are people red pillled by”. A wide range of

contributing factors and potential pathways are identified, including specific media texts, influencers, ideologies (e.g. feminism), events (e.g. Covid-19, BLM protests), and exposure to knowledge/facts, that altered their view on social or political matters. The authors also investigate how members of these communities describe red pilling, observing that it is generally not treated as a dramatic shift, but rather, an ongoing process as individuals gradually come to hold certain beliefs, and become more receptive to new ideologies. This process is understood to be difficult, but necessary, and is often used to justify prejudice. The authors conclude that the process of red pilling, in many ways, resembles the processes of socialization into an online community or social movement, explaining ““online radicalisation” is an ongoing process in which people come to believe extremist viewpoints by consuming far-right content, participating in far-right internet spaces, viewing interpersonal interactions through an ideological lens, and interacting with friends and family with similar views” (p3). A similar, gradual, social, process is observed by Munn (2019). In his analysis of video testimonies and chat logs of alt-right members, he identifies three key, occasionally overlapping, phases in an individual’s ‘journey’ to identifying as alt-right - normalization, acclimation and dehumanization. He recognizes the dynamic online environments in which the alt-right exist can have a transformative effect on the individuals’ psyche, describing members of the alt-right as “ordinary people who — exposed to an environment over time — have arrived at ideas they regard as common sense, self-evident” (p4).

3.2.4 The Cultic Milieu

Finally, this chapter will end by briefly examining that phenomenon of the Cultic Milieu. It is proposed that this concept may be useful for offering insights about ideological radicalisation, specifically how it occurs online, and how individuals can become exposed to fringe beliefs in the first place, as it is well positioned to capture the complex and non-linear nature of this process.

Whitsel (2001) describes the cultic milieu as a cohort of broad, porous, mercurial groups whose beliefs and ideas run counter to the dominant ideologies of mainstream society. He explains that the concept can offer insights into the ideological mutations which occur in these groups, and how the beliefs of individuals can shift, and indeed radicalise, over time. One area in which all the esoteric subcultures that comprise the cultic milieu can find agreement, is that institutions which traditionally function as gatekeepers of knowledge – academia, science, governments, media, etc., – are corrupt, or at least unenlightened. This shared scepticism of mainstream narratives helps to consolidate trust between these groups, while their porous and occasionally overlapping nature means that ideas can easily spread from one group to another. Whitsel (2001) explains “Since groups in this social network are fundamentally protean and malleable, their ideological boundaries are subject to reconfiguration” (p99). It is not simply the case that groups adopt beliefs that conform to their worldview – group’s worldviews can shift to accommodate new beliefs. This is particularly true of beliefs which have purchase among closely related groups within the milieu. Not only do these ideas have an effect on the groups who subscribe to them, the groups themselves, likely unconsciously, shape the ideas so that they conform to their worldview, and suit their narratives. Because of the tendency within the milieu to reject the truths offered by the “conventional wisdom” of science, academia or the media, the mutations these ideologies go through trend towards a more radical, extremist worldview over time. Whitsel (2001) explains “once having descended into this cultural underground, the extremist group is likely to adopt an increasingly idiosyncratic worldview as its belief structure becomes synthesized with other currents of society-rejecting thought” (p100). Explaining the popularity of the cultic milieu today, Davies (2019) suggests it is a response to social disruption brought about by rapid innovation, explaining “Such episodes lead to a feeling for many people of social disconnection and displacement and bring what are seen as serious social costs. Ideas that reject received opinion then become attractive to many people as well as more accessible“

A similar phenomenon is observed by Ward and Voas (2011), who coin the term “Conspirituality” to identify a convergence of conspiratorial and new age communities online, which they diagnose as the result of the popularity alternative worldviews and increasing political disillusionment. It is suggested that the anti-authoritarian nature of these movements facilitates further cultural pessimism and political disillusionment, which in turn have the ability to fuel anxieties of “hostile elites and hidden threats” (p113). Ward and Voas (2011) warn that these uncertainties and anxieties could leave the individual open to being radicalised by more extreme ideologies. Although few are likely to be drawn into the movement by the ideas that exist at the extremes, the authors note that there is an “extensive middle ground” which has spread out into mainstream culture, which could act as a gateway. Language is described as being a leveller which can facilitate radicalisation. Terms like ‘illuminati’, ‘new world order’, ‘shadow government’, ‘military industrial complex’, ‘global elites’ etc. can be used more or less interchangeably, but allow for common ground to exist between someone who’s a fan of the music of Muse, whose lyrics often allude to conspiracy theories (often in a tongue-in-cheek way), and somebody who sincerely believes 9/11 was an inside job - “The multiple meanings of these terms provide practical benefits: flexibility of definition confers inclusiveness (...) the terms ‘shift’ and ‘waking up’ can refer to psycho-spiritual or socio-political processes, relative or objective” (p116). The potential of an extensive “middle ground” to facilitate movement between groups, often in a more extreme direction, is also discussed by De Zeeuw et al. (2020), who identify a similar process they call “normiefication”, a dynamic “whereby initially subcultural objects travel from fringe platforms across different Web spheres to reach networked publics unfamiliar with their original (sub)cultural context”. They note that in the context of digital networks, which are often decentralized, it does not necessarily make sense to conceptualise the fringe and the mainstream as being two distinct, static, entities. They suggest that it is more beneficial to understand them as hybrid, ephemeral, constellations in a constant state of flux. The authors note that the process of normiefication is “not a straight unidirectional line but going back

and forth between different Web spheres in a highly volatile manner”. Ging and Murphy (2021) explain that such a process can already be seen to be occurring with incels, as terms which initially began as incel lexicon – blackpill, cope, chad, stacy, etc. – are increasingly being found in non-incel spaces.

3.3 Conclusion

The process of coming to identify as an incel will likely vary significantly from incel to incel. However, there may well be broad similarities that will emerge over the course of the interviews. Drawing from what has been revealed in the previous chapters, this chapter has attempted to anticipate areas that will likely be of interest. A number of factors have made mainstream misogyny more virulent (postfeminism, neoliberal globalisation, culture wars). At the same time, red pill ideas are increasingly being shared in spaces that don't make explicit reference to red pill ideology or terminology. A lot of this is done under the guise of being self-help content directed at young men, and is often legitimized through references to evolutionary science. This can make these ideas appear natural, scientific, and apolitical. This has helped bridge a gap, by creating an extensive middle ground that can make the transition to more ideologically extreme spaces effortless and even unnoticeable.

The fact that the same misogyny which exists in incels spaces is also ingrained in mainstream society, albeit in a somewhat less extreme way, means that individuals may be well primed to understand and identify with certain incel grievances long before the individual comes across incel communities in the first place. This can help us to understand radicalisation as something that likely begins prior to the individual's awareness of the incel community. Importantly, there are some individuals who may be more vulnerable to the more extreme kinds of messaging – those who feel victimized and are experiencing feelings of injustice, as well as those who lack a social group. It is also noted that neurodivergent individuals, who are more likely to be socially isolated to begin with, may be particularly receptive to extreme messaging,

which tends to be more black and white. The internet has also provided far more opportunities for individuals to come across these kinds of messages in the first place.

The research discussed so far suggests that the journey to identifying as an incel is likely complicated, and may well vary from individual to individual. Nevertheless, by collecting more data about these complex trajectories common themes may begin to emerge. As noted in the previous chapter, the data collected via survey research includes very little qualitative detail about incels experiences. Understanding the interplay between factors like mental health, being off-time, and loneliness, and the misogyny discussed in this chapter, may help to identify important dynamics in incels “blackpilling”. Research to date has also been limited in its ability to provide information about the offline lives of incels - material conditions, real world experiences, and any other biographical details which can tell us more about the difficulties and anxieties these men are experiencing. Given the anonymous nature of incel communities, it is unsurprising that such stories are rarely shared on the forums in any significant detail. The best way to collect this data, as previously noted, is to engage with incels directly, ideally using interviews. However, there are obviously practical reasons, why this approach is so rarely taken when it comes to incels. These will be addressed in greater detail in the following chapter.

Chapter 4

Interviewing Incels

Throughout incel forums, it is not uncommon to see members discuss an individual's "blackpilling". Although occasionally used in reference to a singular event or realization, the term is more commonly used in reference to the process through which an individual comes to view the blackpill as true. This process is often understood to be temporal, and to have number of contributing factors. Individuals may well have a number of formative realisations and experiences which play important roles in their blackpilling. The term functions almost identically to radicalisation, although it holds much more positive connotations. Given their belief that the blackpill is grounded in science, most individuals would probably reject the idea that they have been "radicalised". Becoming "blackpilled" however, means that an individual has been awoken to certain truths that change how they understand the world. It is a liberating and enlightening experience, and one which may have significant overlap with an individual's decision to identify as an incel. Interviews are well suited for acquiring information relating to an individual's "pilling story", which will likely include not only their ideological progression, but also contemporaneous developments in their real world lives. Probing question can help connect these two areas.

The following chapter will begin by examining the literature in which academics have conducted interviews with members of extremist groups. It is decided that an open, ethnographic style of interviewing is best suited for this research, as it can be useful for building rapport, and lessens the chances of interviewees feeling they are being "interrogated". It also allows for the interviewee to share information about experiences and areas the interviewer may not have thought to be relevant. This will be followed by a discussion about critical discourse analysis (CDA), the tool that will be used when analysing interview transcripts. CDA is useful for going beyond the words

which are shared at a textual level, and uncovering underpinning ideologies, and beliefs which are taken for granted, which the interviewee may not be conscious of. Following this, this chapter will discuss some of the ethical issues regarding this research, particularly the potential risks to participants, as well as the risks to the researcher, and the steps which can be taken to minimize these risks. Finally, this chapter will conclude by describing in detail the steps taken to conduct this research, including recruitment, the interview process, and the data analysis. The unexpected issues which arose will be discussed, as will the actions that were taken to address these issues.

4.1 Interviews

As interviews are particularly well suited for capturing the complex and varied experiences that contribute to an individual's radicalisation, and accessing data which may otherwise be difficult to collect, the following section will look at some of the literature discussing interviews with members of extremist groups, and make the case as to why open, ethnographic questions are appropriate for this research. Again, it is important to clarify that this research does not take the position that incel communities should be understood as terrorist groups (although there are some incels who commit acts of terrorism). However, much of the research which discusses research in which members of extremist communities are engaged with directly, focuses on terrorist groups. As it offers valuable insights, this literature will be discussed and quoted throughout this chapter.

Although they recognize the value of the quantitative research which has used large datasets to give us broad understandings of terrorist actors, trends in activity, and demographic information on perpetrators and victims, Morrison (2020) explains that more in-depth, qualitative approaches are necessary for providing a different kind of data which quantitative approaches cannot get at. He explains that "First-hand interviews are hugely important in the establishment and development of our understanding of terrorist actors and

their motivations” (p3), and that these approaches do not require large sample sizes to provide significant insights. Horgan (2012a) similarly discusses the ability of semi-structured interviews to allow for detailed, rich, first-hand accounts which capture the nuances and complexities of individuals’ radicalisation, but only in the case where the researcher is comfortable and familiar with the domain. The loose nature of this approach also allows for the interviews and the questions asked to be more reflexive. Werner and Schoepfle (1987) explain that as more interviews are conducted and new themes emerge, the questions should change to reflect this, allowing the researcher to pursue relevant topics. Reflexivity is also important, they explain, as inexperienced interviewers have a tendency to blame their informants if a questions misses its mark and fails to produce the data which had been sought, often ignoring whether there might be an issue with the question itself. The phrasing of questions should be negotiated throughout the data collection process, as questions which seem inherently clear and sensible to the researcher, may not appear as such to the interviewee.

Ortiz (2003) writes that ethnographic interviews are particularly well suited to exploratory research investigating cultures about whom little research has been conducted, and that the data collected using this method can help to guide future, more targeted research. He notes that because ethnographic interviews seek to uncover perspectives of the informant which are informed by the social context in which they are situated, they are useful for generating “discussions about race, gender class and other sociohistorical forces on the experiences of participants and the meaning made by those experiences” (p37). This data can be analysed to reveal both broad, collective understanding and assumptions within the community, as well as diverse perspectives, and perhaps internal schisms. Dornschneider (2021), describes ethnographic interviews as speech events that resemble friendly conversations, which are unobtrusive, and allow for the interviewees to highlight any factors they feel to be relevant to their beliefs and behaviours. Similar to Ortiz (2013), she explains that they “They contribute micro-level knowledge about the psychology underlying political behaviour, adding to external factors, such as

economic conditions, political institutions, social networks or political events” (p15). She highlights a number of practical barriers researchers will likely face when using ethnographic interviews while researching terrorists and non-violent extremists, which may explain why this approach is so rarely utilized. These include difficulties conducting the interviews themselves and making contact with interviewees. Schuurman (2020) similarly notes that the main obstacle to performing this kind of research and collecting primary data is time, and suggests that because of this, this kind of approach is particularly well suited for postgraduate researchers.

The more open style of questioning commonly seen in ethnographic interviews may also function as a means of accelerating the building of rapport, which is important when interviewing a community like incels who are inherently suspicious of outsiders. Spradley (1979) specifically mentions the ability of ethnographic questions to build rapport, particularly in cases where the interviewer and interviewee are from different cultures or hold differing worldviews. He explains that better data is collected through interviews when a rapport and trust exists between the interviewer and informant, and suggests that the most natural way to build rapport is to avoid closed questions which may produce single sentence, or perhaps even single word answers. Asking open questions about personal experiences invites the informant to “tell their story”, preferably in their own vernacular. To facilitate a relatively uninterrupted flow of conversation, familiarity is required on the part of the researcher, as they need to be able to understand how meaning is shaped by the culture and history of the community being investigated, as well as the differing perspectives contained within. It is also important that the purpose of the interview is stated in advance, as this will help the interviewee to structure their answers, and keep to relevant topics. Another way rapport can be built during the interview, is to keep the interviewee talking. This can be achieved by asking the informant to expand on a particular point or to explain relationships between actors, or contexts in which decisions are made, and again, should be done in a way which avoids prompting an answer or inviting short answers. According to Spradley (1979) exclusive use of direct

questions, or introducing them too quickly, will quickly evaporate rapport, and may give interview participants a feeling of being interrogated. In order to get the interviewee comfortable speaking for extended periods of time early in the interview, he recommends that the researcher begin by introducing themselves and giving a little bit of background (e.g. telling their own story), as a way of inviting the story of the interviewee. He also suggests asking longer questions which include more context, as this establishes a norm of longer uninterrupted speaking times, and gives the interviewee an opportunity to collect their thoughts and plan their answer.

Although these open, ethnographic questions are useful for building rapport, there are obviously some limitations to such a loose, informal style of interviewing. The most obvious is that by giving the informant so much control over the kind of data that is being shared, the interviewer risks missing out on important areas which the respondent may have no interest in discussing, or may not consider pertinent to the research. This obviously risks leaving enormous blindspots in the collected data which could negatively affect the quality of the research, ultimately wasting the time of all involved. This is particularly true if the interviewer is unfamiliar with the terrain and takes a more passive role in the interview as a result. Although the interviewee will ideally speak uninterrupted for an extended period of time, the researcher may be required to interject in order to guide the conversation towards topics more relevant to the research. In such cases, Spradley (1979) recommends demonstrating familiarity with native language, and repeating vernacular phrases back to the informant, as an indirect way of showing that they are on the right track, and encouraging them to open up on certain topics. This also allows the interviewer to "gradually takes more control of the talking, directing it in those channels that lead to discovering the cultural knowledge of the informant" (Spradley, 1979, p59), while lessening the likelihood that such a move might be perceived by informant as authoritarian. Familiarity can be achieved through frequent immersion in these settings over a prolonged period of time, something Conway (2018) has noted most researchers investigating online terrorist communities are likely already doing. Although

asking more direct questions with the explicit aim of addressing areas the interviewer believes to be important may be viewed as asking leading questions in the context of an ethnographic interview, Khalil (2019) defends such an approach, arguing that the consequences of doing this are outweighed by the benefits, as it allows the interviewer to capture data that investigates areas that may otherwise have remained undiscussed. This is particularly true in later interviews, as patterns begin to emerge and the interviewer may wish to begin testing emerging hypotheses. Some areas that may otherwise be overlooked may not emerge organically or seem relevant by those immersed in the community.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the relatively high prevalence of autism within the incel community may present unique challenges to those wishing to engage with members, and may require researchers to appraise or adapt their approach over the course of the interview. Al-Attar (2018) provides a detailed overview of some of the issues researcher may run into when interviewing extremists who have autism. Although this paper specifically addresses conducting such interviews in an “interrogation setting” much of the advice is relevant to those engaging with extremists with autism in more informal settings. The piece focuses on facets of autism which may affect how the interview is conducted, or the kinds of responses the interviewer may receive. Al-Attar (2018) suggests a clearer understanding of the experiences of terrorists who have been diagnosed with autism is important for the small cohort who do exist, as well as those required to engage with them. One area of autism highlighted, is the social and communicative difficulties many autistic individuals experience, including “difficulty in appraising others’ agendas, the tendency to take information literally, the tendency to talk a lot about own interests, and the tendency to copy and mimic others and rote-learn social scripts in order to relate socially and form a social identity” (p327). He also cautions that such individuals may be inclined to talk over the interviewee or to talk at great length. In order to avoid these issues, Al-Attar (2018) suggests asking succinct questions and avoiding metaphors, instead choosing literal and direct phrasing.

4.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

Once interviews have been conducted and transcribed it will be necessary to analyse them. Incels are a community whose ideology is incredibly rich in dogma, often communicated through esoteric colloquialisms and abbreviations (e.g. AWALT, Cope, Alpha Sux Beta Bux, Dualistic Mating Strategy, etc.), which can make their forums almost impenetrable to ‘normies’. This language is loaded with inherent judgements and values, which can make their motivations and justifications indecipherable to those attempting to understand the community from the outside. The legitimacy conferred on these concepts by ‘blackpill science’ allows them to be accepted by most incels as irrefutable truth. As a result, incel discourse is effective at rejecting ideas that don’t align with blackpill orthodoxy. The following section makes the case as to why critical discourse analysis is particularly useful for analysing interview transcripts of interviewees whose answers may be more ideologically motivated than the interviewee realises, and so cannot necessarily be taken at face value. This section will end with a brief discussion of the ethics of such an approach.

In his guide to interviewing terrorists, Khalil (2019) identifies a tendency among researchers to take interviewee’s answers at face value. This is of course an issue with all interviews, but is likely to be a particularly relevant when conducting interviews with a members of a deviant community with an extreme ideology, who are inherently distrustful of academia, and who view their portrayal by the mainstream media as unfair and inaccurate. Khalil (2019) notes that it’s important for the interviewer to maintain a critical lens as members of such communities may present opinions as facts, may downplay beliefs which they have found are not well received outside of the community, and may be misinformed or have flawed memories. Another concern of Khalil’s (2019) is that respondents may overstate the extent to which structural grievances motivated them to become involved in these kinds of communities. Further, interviewees may be unaware of what motivated them, or be reluctant to share political or cultural grievances which they

believe may come across is ignorant or petty to an outsider. The job of the researcher is to, as much as possible, fact check these kinds of claims during the course of the interview. However, out of respect to those who have volunteered their time to participate, it is important this does not come across as an interrogation, or devolve into debate. Once interviews have been recorded and transcribed, it is important that researcher has an analytical tool which can go beyond the literal text, to reveal more about how the interviewee understands the world.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) reveals how ideology is embedded in, and reproduced by, discourse. Discourses reflect worldviews that exist prior to an act of speaking or writing. They are also a means by which these views are spread and reinforced. Ideas can become “common sense” by virtue of being shared and repeated many times throughout certain communities. An idea becoming accepted as common sense shapes an individual’s understanding of how the world operates. This can have a profound effect on how the individual understands their place in the world, what forces they believe they are subject to, and what options they believe are available to them. CDA asserts that language is not neutral. It is a social practice that conveys and creates control in society. Discourses that become mainstream and naturalized are often to the benefit of those in positions of power, a process that tends to go unnoticed and is therefore difficult to challenge. Norman Fairclough describes CDA as a method for demonstrating “how texts are constructed so that particular (and potentially indoctrinating) perspectives can be expressed delicately and covertly” (1989 p57). Rather than just describing texts, CDA can interpret them and examine their underlying ideology, to explain why certain discourses emerge. These added layers of analysis also help to mitigate some of the issues highlighted by Khalil (2019), as well as some more general issues when conducting interviews which are not specific to extremists – e.g. interviewees may be misinformed, memories might be flawed, and opinions may be stated as facts. By allowing for insights that go beyond what is shared at a textual level, the researcher doesn’t necessarily need to take what is being shared by the interviewee at face value, allowing them to more easily avoid challenging

what the respondent has shared. This kind of pushback has the potential to make the interviewee feel as though they are being interrogated or debated, which may make them more defensive and less open, ultimately affecting the overall quality of the research.

This research will use Norman Fairclough's model of CDA. As well as the text itself, Fairclough's (1989) CDA requires the researcher to consider the discursive and sociocultural contexts in which the text was created. Fairclough's (1989) CDA involves three stages. The first is the 'descriptive' stage of analysis, which takes place at the textual level. This involves paying attention to the grammar, structure and choice of language of the text. Use of metaphors, slang, abbreviations, humour etc. should be noted as they may reveal ideas and attitudes the not shared explicitly. Similarly, language that suggests certain ideas to be taken for granted (e.g. "obviously", "we know" "that is fact"), as well as statements about "truth" or "reality", will reveal ideas the interviewee believes to be common sense. They may also suggest values and judgements which aren't explicit in the text itself, and may not be obvious to those unfamiliar with the community. Prescriptive language (e.g. "should"), equivalences, and anecdotes shared to illustrate points will all also be analysed in detail.

The second stage of analysis is the interpretive stage, which occurs at the discursive level, and is concerned with how and for whom the text is produced, distributed and consumed. In the case of this this research project, interviews will take place via-zoom, with cameras turned off to preserve anonymity. The interview structure will be loose and informal, and interviewees will receive no pushback over any ideas shared. It will also be important to maintain awareness of the fact that although the interviewee has willingly agreed to participate in this research, incels are generally distrustful of academia. This may affect the kinds of information that is shared and how certain topics are framed. It may also influence the kinds of members who agree to participate in the first place – it is possible that more extreme members of the community who may be more hostile towards outsiders will be less inclined to participate in the first place. Interviewees may represent a more moderate cohort. There

may also be a social desirability bias as interviewees may wish to put a respectable face on incelism, to help demonstrate the legitimacy of their grievances. This will also be taken into account.

The final level of analysis, the explanatory stage, considers the sociocultural practice that surrounds the text, and the influence the rules, norms and assumptions this social structure may have. At this level the text will be analysed in light of the interviewee's position as a member or former members of the incel community. That interviewees will likely come from a range of countries, and be active in a variety of different incel communities to varying degrees, will also be important to recognise. How this position relates to mainstream society will also be taken into consideration. Here again, it will be important to recognize that incels generally believe they have been unfairly portrayed by most mainstream coverage. Familiarity with the community on the part of the researcher is required to conduct effective analysis at this level. The significant time I've spent on incel forums, consuming incel content (predominantly YouTube videos, blog posts, and podcasts), and listening to interviews with incels will be of tremendous benefit here, as will the extensive literature review of academic literature looking at incels and related areas previously discussed.

Van Leeuwen's (2007) approach to CDA is particularly concerned with the processes by which legitimation of ideas is constructed. This can be useful for explaining how individuals rationalise certain beliefs and behaviours. This approach is compatible with Fairclough's model, primarily taking place at the textual level. Van Leeuwen (2017) identifies four processes through which legitimation can occur – authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis. Authorization can be observed in texts when legitimation is conferred directly via individuals and institutions in whom a significant level of trust is vested, or through reference to laws, norms, customs, traditions, etc. Legitimation via moral authority is more subtle, occurring through reference to moral frameworks and value systems – these could be religious, political, ideological, etc. In incel communities this will likely be the blackpill. Rationalization occurs when legitimation is conferred by appealing to goals

and outcomes deemed to be important within the community. Behaviours and beliefs may appear extreme in isolation, but they can be legitimized by being framed as ultimately being in service of a greater good. Finally legitimation via mythopoesis is found in narratives where “legitimate” actions are rewarded and “illegitimate” actions are punished.

It is worth noting that the ethics of using CDA to analyse interview transcripts is an issue that has been discussed by some researchers. In these kinds of interviews, it could be argued that the purpose is generate examples of discursive practice, as opposed to eliciting information about the interviewees’ subjective experiences. Rather than being an expert with whom the research is being conducted, the role of the interviewee becomes that of a representative on whom the research is being conducted. Hammersley (2014) notes that failure to highlight this in advance could potentially be understood as deception. However, alerting the interviewee of the kind of analysis that will take place will likely affect the kinds of answers they provide – they may become self-conscious and begin to self-edit. This is particularly true when researching sensitive topics, such as prejudice. Hammersley (2014) defends such an approach, noting that awareness on the part of the interviewee will disrupt that natural state which is required to conduct this kind of research effectively, and goes on to explain that although gaining fully informed consent is generally desirable, treating it’s absence as disqualifying has the potential to ultimately do more harm than good - “the most important ethical concern should be the minimization of harm, albeit recognizing that harm and its assessment are not straightforward matters” (pp36). In the case of this research, the potential for harm to the individual is minimal. However, the potential benefits of this kind of research, which it is ultimately hoped will help deter young men from identifying as incels, are significant.

4.3 Ethics

Ethical approval was sought from the Dublin City Universities research Ethics Committee and approved in February 2021. The following chapter will discuss two key areas that were discussed throughout this process – the potential risks to participants as well as the potential risks to the researcher – and the steps that were taken to mitigate these risks.

Incels can be described as both vulnerable and a threat to others (e.g., as perpetrators of online misogyny and, much more rarely, of violent attacks). The very nature of incels, a community for which the only pre-requisite for membership is that the individual is dissatisfied with the state of their romantic life, makes them a community of potentially vulnerable men. They are frequently treated as objects of ridicule, particularly online where the word incel has become almost synonymous with “loser”. Some incels openly discuss their mental health diagnoses on incel forums, most commonly anxiety, depression, and autism. In some extreme examples, members will talk about ending their lives, although this kind of extreme rhetoric is the foundation of a lot of incel humour. It’s also in-line with an “ironic nihilism” that has become a popular source for humour throughout online youth cultures. Nevertheless, it is something that was taken seriously both during and after the data collection process.

Despite the vulnerability of the community, it was felt that engaging members directly was safe and justifiable, so long as the wellbeing of the interviewees was prioritised at every stage. This research is a necessary step for collecting first-hand information, which will be relevant when it comes to identifying and addressing the issues in incels’ lives that have brought them to the community in the first place. As well as furthering our understanding of the processes through which incels become radicalised, it is also hoped this research will provide insights into the broader socio-economic, cultural and social-psychological factors that cause incels to withdraw from society, and that make extreme ideologies like the blackpill appealing.

4.3.1 Risks to Participants

Taking steps to protect participant's anonymity was crucial in this research. The identities of incels are largely anonymous to begin with, as most go by a screen names and it is uncommon for a profile picture to actually contain an image of the individual. Interviewees were given the opportunity to decide how they would like to be addressed throughout the process (screen name, pseudonym, or any other preferred name). These details were pseudonymised in the notes, transcripts and finished research project, to offer an extra level of protection and further dissociate individuals from the data which has been provided. Interviewees were not people I had engaged with prior to posting the recruitment, nor was I familiar with their online presence. Any potentially identifying information that emerged over the course of the interview was removed from the finished project. Where identifying information was felt to be relevant it was kept as vague as possible. For example, names of school, colleges and universities are not included, although the fields of study are referenced. Specific places of employment are not included, although general industry is acknowledged. Locations are referenced general (Country, Urban/Rural). The size of the incel milieu also helps to maintain anonymity. Before being shut down, the subreddits r/incels and r/braincels each had over 40,000 members. Current popular incel spaces such as Incels.co and r/Incelswithouthate each have over 10,000 members today.

Making sure interviewees were informed and prepared was also important. Although incels are potentially vulnerable, much of their lives are spent online, communicating publicly, albeit pseudonymously, about their identity, emotional state and lack of sexual success. It was therefore felt to be unlikely that they would become upset during interviews, which covered similar areas. The kinds of information I hoped to collect was mentioned to participants in advance in the recruitment notice and the plain language statement. They were also be given an opportunity to flag any areas they did not wish to discuss in advance of the interview taking place. Other efforts were made to ensure interviewees were comfortable throughout the interview process - they were

told at multiple points that they did not have to answer any questions that they were uncomfortable with, and that they were free to withdraw from the research at any time up until the research is submitted. All interviews ended with a quick debriefing session to ensure that the participant was feeling well and had not been upset by any aspect of the conversation. Of course, when interviewing members of a community like this, there is always a potential for something to come up that participants may find upsetting. In order to minimise the chances of this occurring I remained vigilant of the interviewee's emotional state throughout the interviews. When I sensed a particular topic may have been uncomfortable for the respondent, I quickly ended that line of questioning and guided the interview in a different direction. At times it was also necessary for me to check in with them to make sure they were happy to continue. If I felt the interviewee was still upset, I would end the interview and immediately move to the debrief, which involved asking if they were comfortable with what they had shared, if there is anything they had shared that they would prefer was left out of the research, and reminding them that they are free to drop out, or request certain details are removed, at any point up until the research is submitted. Immediately following the interview I emailed participants thanking them for taking part and wishing them well. This email also include contact information for emotional support services and an invitation to email me again at any point in the future if they had any questions or concerns about the research.

Although unlikely, potential risk to participants were felt to be justified by the fact that incels pose a potential threat, most immediately to women, but also to all members of society. As previously mentioned, incels represent a small subset of the manosphere, but are overly represented among the terrorists who have emerged from this loose online confederacy. As well as being of benefit to the potential victims of incels, preventing young men from joining these communities would almost certainly be of great benefit to would-be incels themselves. The incel community does not appear to offer any support or guidance to its members, and in many cases it appears to compound their misery and further their isolation. While it has never been my intention to

persuade members to leave the community or debate their ideology, it is hoped this research will lay the groundwork for future research aimed at creating interventions that prevent and dissuade young men from joining this community in the first place, as well as interventions that help existing members to exit the community.

4.3.2. Risk to Researcher

A unique aspect of interviewing extremists, as highlighted by Dolnik (2011), Massanari (2018) and Nilsson (2018) is that the traditional researcher/respondent power dynamics may be flipped. It is not necessarily safe to assume the researcher is in a position of power over the interviewee. As is the case with all interviews, it's important for the researcher to build rapport, but they also need to be careful about how much they divulge. I had to be careful not to share any potentially identifying information which may have put myself, colleagues, family and friends at risk, while still attempting to maintain a certain amount of transparency with the interviewees. The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR): Ethical Guidelines 3.0 (2020) draws attention to the potential psychological risks for researchers who are exposed to extreme content. As I was already very familiar with the extreme rhetoric produced by these communities, I felt it was very unlikely that anything which arose in the interviews would cause me distress. AoIR: Ethical Guidelines 3. (2020) also highlights the importance of protecting researchers, as well subjects and informants, when conducting research online, specifically noting the new risks which exist for researchers studying extreme communities, such as trolling, doxxing, and other forms of online harassment.

Massanari (2018) looks at the effects the emergence of large, angry, networked, technologically proficient, political subcultures has had on social media researchers, particularly the implications for researcher safety, explaining "while we have traditionally viewed researchers as holding more power than their research participants, these hate groups complicate and, at

moments, radically shift these dynamics”. She draws on Foucault’s work on panopticism and Laura Mulvey’s writing on the male gaze, to theorize the concept of ‘the Alt-Right Gaze’, to help conceptualise how the alt-right engage in surveillance of others. Massanari (2018) recommends understanding the alt-right as having a gendered and racial subjectivity, which is constantly engaged in constructing a particular social reality, and discourages engaging in deceptive or covert research with these communities. She also draws attention to the fact that unlike other kinds of research, the risk can remain, long after the data collection has ended, and may never go away. This risk may go beyond the individual or their institution and spread to their personal or professional networks. Towards the end of this paper Massanari makes a case that interdisciplinary research may be safer, specifically citing as an example the benefits of reaching out to social media researchers who may have a better understand of how these kinds of groups make use of social media to threaten and harass, and how researchers can protect themselves and minimize these risks. Massanari (2018) advises academics who are researching these communities to use their own judgement when it comes to sharing findings with participants, but cautions that it may draw unwanted attention. There is always the possibility that results shared with participants may spread throughout the community to more extreme and potentially hostile members who may have been opposed to participating in the first place. In the interest of minimizing the possibility of this occurring, I decided against sharing findings with participants directly.

Massanari (2018) also acknowledges that white, male researchers are significantly less likely to find themselves targeted, abused or harassed by these groups, observing that the risks posed by researching these kinds of communities disproportionately affect marginalised and vulnerable groups. Barrat and Maddox (2016) note the being female in a predominantly male environment resulted in them receiving far more abuse, particularly abuse that was sexual in nature, than a male researcher would likely have received, while Conway (2021) similarly observes that “While nobody is a priori exempt, depending on the online extremist or terrorist community they are focused

upon, researchers with certain identity markers are more likely to be the targets of online hate and harassment than others” (p370). She specifically notes that when researching right-wing extremists there is a greater risk of harassment for researchers who are black, Jewish, Muslims, immigrants, refugees, LGBTQI+ individuals, and women. Regardless of identity characteristics, Massanari (2018) recommends that all researchers covering extreme political subcultures make an effort to minimise and hide any digital presence prior to beginning their projects, and for some time after. Marwick, Blackwell and Lo (2016) also recommend using alias e-mail addresses that are specific to the research project, and removing or temporarily hiding social media accounts, personal websites, and any mention of public talks or videos. The authors go on to recommend using secure passwords, being mindful of any correspondence looking for security information from a suspect account, and regularly scanning your computer for malware. In advance of initially approaching incels, new phone numbers, e-mail addresses, and Skype/Zoom profiles were set up and existing social media accounts were made private and anonymised. Alias e-mail addresses and secure passwords were used that are specific to the research project. I was also in contact with Dr. Kaitlyn Regehr, who was involved in making the BBC Three documentary *The Secret Lives of Incels*, who further advised me on best practice regarding risk minimisation to both researcher and participants. As well as providing guidance on how to safely make an initial approach, Dr. Regehr also recommended I hide or delete all social media accounts, location apps (e.g. running apps), and remove myself from all listserves (e.g. grocery shopping apps). All of these actions were taken.

4.4 Method

This chapter will end with a detailed descriptions of the steps that were taken once ethical approval was approved in February 2021. Recruitment posts were first shared in April 2021 and interviews took place between April and September of that year. Analysis began once transcription was completed in October 2021. This analysis was an iterative process, and ended in April 2022.

4.4.1 Recruitment

Current incels were recruited through a series of posts shared on the most popular public incel communities at the time⁴ - Incels.net, Lookism.net, blackpill.club, looksmax.me, Love-shy.net, forum.looksmaxxing.com and the subreddits r/BlackPillScience, r/leftyincel, and r/incelexit. The posts invited interested parties to contact me via an email account used exclusively for this research. As well as providing contact details to potential interviewees, these posts gave an overview of the research project and an idea of the kinds of information I was looking for. Further information, such as background information about myself, expected time commitments for interview, and answers to any other questions were discussed via email or answered in the plain language statement participants were given. Attempts were made to contact the admins and mods of these spaces before any posts were shared, in order to introduce myself and the research I hope to undertake. Barratt and Maddox (2016), whose work involved a digital ethnography of dark web drug market Silk Road, note that their relationship with the moderators helped to legitimize them and protect them from abuse. In most cases the messages did not receive a response, with the exception of the admin of Incels.co who said that such posts are not allowed on the forum, and a mod from another forum who said they did not mind, but that they themselves were not interested in participating. The admin of another forum did not respond to my message, but banned my account from posting until the year 3021.

The sharing of recruitment posts was staggered across April 2021, starting with the smallest communities, so that I could respond and adapt to criticism of my wording, or how I presented myself or my research. I was concerned that very small details I had overlooked could be more significant than I had assumed, and potentially get me shut-out from specific communities. For example, on one community I contacted early on, I used the word “data” in reference to the responses I would get during interviews. One user quickly

⁴ The admin of Incels.co, the largest incel forum at the time, was also emailed. Although supportive of the research, he responded that he did not allow these kinds of posts on his forum.

pointed to this as evidence that my research was removed and clinical, and would not treat participants as human beings, a sentiment which was supported by other forum users. Message length was another issue. Early versions of my message were about 400 words, but were criticized for being too long. One user, for example, wrote “lol @ expecting us to read that wall of autism”. An early draft leaned heavily into the fact that no academic research to date had engaged directly with incels, and that even in mainstream media there are few opportunities for them to be heard in their own words. A revised draft with a main body closer to 300 words put less emphasis on this fact, but received less backlash relating to the posts length on the subsequent communities in which it was shared. Another common concern from incels was that I was working for the CIA, the FBI, MI6, Mossad or law enforcement more broadly. This was a difficult accusation to defend against, as anything I said could quite reasonably be considered what somebody in the intelligence community might say if they were trying to deceive incels. A number of incels urged other forum members not to participate as the research was clearly a fishing exercise to collect identifying details for an imminent crackdown on incel communities. One forum user wrote that “Anyone who even thinks of taking part in this needs to get their fucking head examined”, while another suggested I would be using “vocal recognition software” to identify participants;

“This whole "study" is BS, the fact that you insist on voice conversations with random strangers that are known on the internet to cause violence baffles me. The only reason I can think of is that you wish to record our voice and run voice recognition software to identify our real names. Because the term "incel" is now synonymous with "domestic terrorism"”

To address these concerns, I decided to lean into the fact that I was an Irish person doing this research from Ireland, by including these details in my username (Irish_PhD_Researcher) and profile picture (the Irish flag), as I believed this may deter members from associating me with these American, British and Israeli organizations. Reassurances that privacy would be protected were also clearly very important. Despite wanting to keep the word

count low, I decided this was an area which merited a slightly more detailed description of the steps which would be taken. The message was edited to include specifics – that at no point would they have to reveal any identifying information, that burner accounts and pseudonyms could be used throughout, and that at no point would I have to see their faces. It was these messages that ultimately proved most successful (*for finished draft see appendix 1*).

Former incels were contacted more directly, often via direct message on Reddit or Twitter. Only those who had posted threads openly discussing their pasts as incels were contacted. The majority of these were found by searching the terms “Incel” and “Former Incel” on the r/AMA subreddit. The direct messages explained who I am, the purpose of this research project, the kind of information I would be looking for, and give them the opportunity to ask any questions they might have.

Despite trying my best to concisely explain what was different about my research it was clear I did not always succeed. A common response from current incels was that there was no point in this research as everything anyone wanted to know about incels could already be seen online. Users would often link to the articles about lookism, the blackpill and hypergamy. Others shared a paragraph or two explaining what they believed the blackpill to be. There was also a number of forum users who said they would be happy to take part, but would rather not do an interview over zoom, suggesting instead the research should employ surveys and questionnaires. Some also responded by telling me about their experiences with the community, although there was very little detailed personal information shared.

Many commenters expressed genuine concerns (often relating to how privacy would be protected) and asked questions in good faith. Others appeared genuinely curious as to whether I myself was an incel. In these cases I answered promptly and honestly. As expected many of the responses were abusive, or attempts to troll me. These were generally generic and impersonal. Many also seemed to assume I was female – commenters suggested I would be contributing to society more by getting pregnant – “stop wasting our time with

stupid academic papers and go get pregnant so you can at least be useful” - or that while I was doing this research, my husband was out sleeping with other women. Many forum members also posted about how this research was evidence of the state academia was currently in;

“Anyone who helps with this is mad. Odds are the conclusion of this research has already been written, with the evidence cherry picked to match that conclusion and that conclusion will be one that is not favourable to incels. That isn't to say Irish_PhD_Researcher will be doing that deliberately, they are probably unaware that they don't know how to conduct research properly. It isn't Irish_PhD_Researcher's fault that he/she is an academic in humanities subject, which have laughable research standards. There is a good chance the lecturers in Irish_PhD_Researcher's are completely clueless about how to do research properly, let alone the PHD students.”

Others felt that while some people worked hard for their PhDs in Maths and Science, I was getting mine for free – “it's insane how much work a phd in maths/physics/chemistry is. And then you get guys like this one here, who gets his degree for free, asking stupid questions on an incel forum”. One commenter suggested that the fact I was doing a PhD on incels was evidence of the “Brainwashing” that goes on in academia, while another said there was no point in taking part as my conclusions were just going to be that “more feminism” is needed;

“Tbqhngl I would enjoy being interviewed but I don't trust people who do that. I just know they'd butcher the interview to make me look as bad as possible and give some "incels are dangerous" or "this is why we need more feminism" conclusion to the whole shit”

Attempts at trolling all took place on the threads themselves, although one forum user emailed the email address I had provided to say “Thanks for the e-mail - will make sure a lot of porn is sent to it. Lets hope you don't employ stupid administrators”. There was no follow up to this threat.

In total I received messages from 25 individuals interested in participating, 10 of whom stopped responding after being sent the plain language statement and the informed consent form. This group included 1 femcel. A further 3 potential participants sent back completed informed consent forms, but did not show up for interviews, or withdrew before the interviews could take place.

4.4.2 Participant Profile

Interviewees comprised 10 current and 2 former members of English speaking incel communities.

Pseudonym	Age	Location	Interview Length	Incel Status
Dan	Early 20s	U.S.A	45 minutes	Incel
Alan	30s	U.S.A	1 hour 32 minutes and 2 hours 21 minutes	Incel
Alex	19	South East Asia	50 Minutes	Incel
Mike	18	Europe	28 Minutes	Incel
Jeff	32	U.S.A	1 Hour	Incel
David	28	U.S.A	2 Hours 38 Minutes	Incel (Though not Involuntarily Celibate)
Rob	30	Europe	1 Hour 35 minutes	Incel (Though not Involuntarily Celibate)
Luke	35	U.K	1 hour 8 Minutes and 23 minutes	Incel
Jake	Early 20s	U.S.A	52 Minutes	Former Incel
Ken	Early 20s	South East Asia	50 Minutes	Former Incel
Will	19	South America	1 Hour 22 Minutes	Incel
Phillip	36	U.K	1 Hour	Incel

Table 1: Participant profiles

Although 12 respondents is a relatively low sample for interview data, certain barriers to engagement - such as the privacy and anonymity of incel forums, and their distrust of academia - means that any research that directly engages with incels is likely to have a low response rate. The research by Speckhard et al. (2021) received 427 respondents, while Speckhard and Ellenberg (2022) and Moskalenko et al. (2022) both draw from the same survey, which received 274 responses from active incels. Both surveys were shared on Incels.is by the website admin, who was involved in the survey construction and recognised as a co-author, and pinned in a prominent space for one week in the case of Speckhard et al. (2021) and just under 4 weeks in the case of Speckhard and Ellenberg (2022) and Moskalenko et al. (2022). The survey research from Moskalenko et al. (2022a) draws from just 56 respondents.

Given the issues around anonymity, as well as the increased contribution of time and effort, in participating in an interview, it is to be expected that research that involves interviews with incels will attract fewer participants. Regehr (2021), whose research involved documentary interviews says that the producer was in contact with 50 incels. Although it is not clear how many of these individuals made it into the final research, five participants are named in the discussion. Daly and Reed (2022), whose research involves interviews with incels conducted via Discord and other social media platforms, relies on data collected from 10 incels. A similar number of respondents can be seen in Scrivens et al. (2019), whose research was based on interviews with 10 former right wing extremists, another group whose unique perspectives were not often heard, but whose experiences were likely to be of great benefit to those aiming to counter violent extremism. Given that incels are a group who are difficult to engage with, as well as the length of these interviews, 12 interviewees was deemed sufficient for this research, provided interviews yielded rich, in-depth data.

4.4.3 Interview Procedure

The interviews were scheduled in order to accommodate the interviewee, meaning they often took place very late at night, or very early in the morning, Irish time. Any questions or concerns the interviewee may have had were addressed via e-mail prior to the interview taking place. It was made clear that I was specifically interested in hearing their individual stories about how they ended up in incel communities. The conversations were cordial and non-confrontational. The interviewing style involved no pushback – if there were things I felt to be untrue or misleading, they were noted in contemporaneous notes. I was eager to avoid these conversations becoming debates, and wanted to create an environment where interviewees felt comfortable speaking openly about sensitive topics. Most interviewees seemed to be interested in my research, and I believe most were satisfied I was not bringing any biases, pre-conceived notions, or agenda to the research. They seemed to appreciate that this was an opportunity to tell their stories to an audience they would otherwise have had difficulty getting through to.

Early on in the interviews, interviewees were asked how they defined simple terms like “incel” and “blackpill”. There was very little consistency. For some an incel was simply anyone who couldn’t have sex, despite trying. In some cases it was key that they’d never had sex. In other cases it was sufficient to have not had sex for over 6 months. Some felt it was necessary to self-identify as an incel, to be a member of incel forums, or to consider yourself “blackpilled”. Others felt the world was full of incels who did not consider themselves incels, and were perhaps unfamiliar with the term. The definitions of blackpill were even more varied. Most agreed that being blackpilled implied having access to certain knowledge. While some described this knowledge as empowering and liberating, others felt this knowledge encouraged “giving up” and aroused feelings of hopelessness. Interviewees were also asked to share their “blackpilling stories”, as this was seen as a useful way to discuss radicalisation, without using the term “radicalisation”, which may be perceived to have negative connotations.

Some interviewees (typically, although not exclusively, those in their late 20s and 30's) were more comfortable speaking at length, and had clearly spent a lot of time reflecting on their situation. Other interviewees (typically those in their late teens and early 20s) often gave answers that were in line with what was being said elsewhere, but spoke in only one or two sentences at a time, meaning their answers were often less rich for analysis.

Most interviewees were comfortable using incel lingo without having to explain, although they appeared to be selective in the slang they used – while terms that related to lookism like “Looksmaxx” and “Gymmaxx” were frequently used, more controversial language like “foids”, “roasties”, “currycels” etc. did not come up. It's possible that this is because the kinds of individuals who are members of incel forums and would respond to a request for an interview, represent a less extreme cohort. It is equally possible that some saw the interview as a chance to get their story out to a larger audience and so wanted to sanitize their image. It is of course also possible they did not want to say anything they felt might receive pushback from me.

On one occasion a participant became noticeably upset during the interview. I stopped the interview to ask if they were okay continuing, and to remind them they could stop the interview at any point, and did not have to discuss any topics they would rather avoid. Another participant, towards the end of what had been one of the longer interviews, was clearly having difficulty staying on topic, and began asking questions about my own sexual history and questioning what sex felt like. Not wanting the interview to continue in this direction, I politely declined answering these questions and quickly wound down the interview. In both cases emails were sent the following day thanking for them for their participation, reminding them that they could withdraw from project at any time, and providing mental health supports in their region, in case anything had come up during the interviews which had upset them.

4.4.4 Data analysis

12 interviews, totaling 16 hours and 45 minutes were recorded and transcribed using the transcription software Otter.ai. All identifying information was anonymized in the transcripts. This research employed an inductive, grounded approach, as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Transcripts were read through and coded using the coding software Atlas.ti, with 429 distinct codes in total. These codes, and the quotes to which they applied, were then grouped into 27 themes - Arrested Development, Autism, Blackpill Science, Community, Early Experiences, Equality, Exiting Inceldom, , Feminism, Forums Changing, Hopelessness, Isolation, Lookism, Mental Health, NEET, Other Incels, Social Media, Parents, Politics, Radicalisation, Rationality, Red Pill, Relationships, Religion, Society, Victimhood, Violence. A separate word document was created for each theme.

At this stage, the quotes were then read through and analyzed, using Fairclough's model of critical discourse analysis. The quotes were considered at the textual level, looking at what was actually being said (the language being used and the ideas being shared or omitted) and the context in which they were being shared (an interview between a member of a community who often feel they are being misrepresented by the media and academia, and a PhD researcher). Attention was paid to how they legitimized certain ideas and behaviors, as well as anything which gave insight into how incels understood themselves, or how they wanted to be viewed by the mainstream. I was also interested in how the discussions around themes that emerged in the interviews reflected or differed from the discussions typically seen on incel forums. Van Leeuwen's (2007) CDA framework was also employed here, paying attention to specific word choices or phrasings which naturalised certain ideas, or revealed ideas the interviewee felt were a-priori true.

Over the course of the analysis these 27 themes were refined and regrouped. Some, such as religion, politics, and parents, although relevant to some interviewees, were ultimately not observed to play a significant role in the radicalisation process of most interviewees, or were closely linked to other,

more pertinent themes (e.g. religion and community). In other cases certain themes were combined because of their thematic overlap (e.g. mental health and autism, community and isolation, etc.). Once the analysis was completed, and the themes were refined, 13 themes remained.

Table 2 demonstrates the relative prevalence of these themes throughout the interviews, including four (social media, feminism, violence and relationships) which were felt to be notable for how infrequently they were discussed. A weighted average has also been included to mitigate the effects of differing interview lengths, and varied areas of interest between interviewees. Notably, the weighted average largely follows the same order as the “total mentions” with just two exceptions. Of course, this table does not account for length of time each topic was discussed, or whether topics were discussed positively or negatively, and so its findings should not be discussed in a vacuum. It is merely intended to aid as a quantitative element to supplement the qualitative findings discussed in the following chapters.

	Dan	Alan	Alex	Mike	Jeff	David	Rob	Luke	Jake	Ken	Will	Phillip	Total	Weighted Average
Total Interview Length (In Minutes)	45	233	50	28	60	158	95	108	52	50	82	60	1021	
Community/ Isolation	9	20	8	5	9	24	13	18	9	16	17	15	165	11.23
Mental Health	9	33	4	6	10	21	14	11	5	2	5	14	133	8.34
Red Pill/ Adjacent Communities	5	4	0	8	3	15	10	6	7	14	7	5	84	6.76
Blackpill Science	4	20	2	3	5	10	21	16	3	4	13	1	102	5.93
Hopelessness	10	16	3	3	2	18	6	11	2	3	2	6	83	5.13
Lookism	7	10	0	2	0	11	16	18	7	1	4	3	79	4.78
Injustice	4	14	5	2	1	7	6	19	0	1	7	8	74	4.43
Free Speech	4	2	5	6	3	17	3	4	3	0	7	2	56	4.23
Arrested Development	3	4	4	0	4	22	4	6	0	4	4	0	55	3.01
Social Media	2	5	4	2	0	9	1	0	4	4	4	5	39	2.96
Feminism	1	15	1	0	6	3	6	9	0	0	2	0	44	2.03
Violence	1	5	1	1	0	3	5	9	0	0	2	2	29	1.61
Relationships	1	4	0	1	2	2	3	3	2	2	0	3	23	1.59

Table 2: Relative prominence of key themes

4.5 Conclusion

In order to capture the range of experiences that are likely to contribute to an individual being drawn to incel communities, and to understand the processes that facilitate their trajectory through the radical milieu of the manosphere in which they exist, loose, unstructured interviews with ethnographic style questions were employed. In total, 12 current or former incels were interviewed totaling almost 17 hours. These interviews demonstrated the heterogeneity of the people who make up these communities, not just demographically but also ideologically. They also captured the range of experiences that can make joining incel communities and identifying as an incel appear appealing. Once interviews were transcribed they were analyzed using a critical discourse analysis, an approach which allowed this research to go beyond simply understanding the answers at a textual level, so that popular discourses, and the factors that gave rise to them, could be observed. This can help us to understand not just what incels believe, but why and how they come to hold these beliefs. Prevalent discourses which can help address the research question – why some young men become incels – were identified.

The analysis has been divided into three chapters, each of which discusses a key stage in the individuals process to identifying as an incel, beginning with an initial stage in which the individual is unable to establish their place in the world, followed by an intermediary stage in which they resort to the internet to find solutions for their situation, and a final stage, where they embrace inceldom and the community it offers.

Chapter 5

Lost Boys

Social Isolation, Neurodivergence and Perceived Persecution

This chapter unpacks discussions around interviewee's experiences with social isolation that came up over the course of the interviews, and introduces the concept of the "Lost Boy" – a term coined by one interviewee, David, to describe the kinds of people who frequent incel forums. In this research, "Lost Boy" brings together two key ideas - Baker's (2019) concept of "Left-Behind Men" and Sharkey's (2022) description of the "extended adolescence" incels commonly experience. This research proposes the concept of "Lost Boys" is useful for understanding a starting position in which many young men can very easily find themselves, that may make them more amenable to a number of extreme positions, of which inceldom is just one.

Following this, attention is paid to discussions of neurodivergence – predominantly depression, anxiety and autism. As well as being an area that is increasingly being recognized as important to research on incels (Daly and Laskovtsov, 2021; Speckhard et al. 2022; Moskalenko 2022; Sharkey 2022), it is also clearly an area incels themselves were eager to discuss, as evidenced by the frequency with which the topic arose, and the thoughtful and reflective answers interviewees provided about their experiences. It is clear that neurodivergence can negatively impact some individuals' ability to "find their place" in the world, and can contribute to becoming off-time, which in turn can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and contribute to social isolation.

The final section of this chapter will analyse another topic that came up when interviewees were discussing their social isolation - a belief that they were shunned or persecuted for their ideas. Incel communities were seen to offer a safe space where controversial ideas could be shared. Interviewees often tried to frame these ideas as important, although their content was frequently racist

and misogynistic. Some interviewees acknowledged this, but suggested it was important to be able to share these ideas anyway, connecting it to the broader issue of freedom of speech.

5.1 Lost Boys

It was notable how infrequently the lack of romantic partners was referenced when interviewees discussed early stages of their blackpilling. Incels inability to form romantic relationships appeared in many cases to be totemic of a larger social deficit. Most interviewees seemed to have difficulties maintaining any sort of offline relationships, or indeed, finding their place in the world. These issues often went beyond simple loneliness. Williams and Braun (2019) explain that loneliness is the subjective experience of being dissatisfied with the quality and quantity of ones' social relationships, and consequently feeling alone. Social isolation however, is an objective lack of networks and social relationships, which can limit the individuals' access to information and resources, and contribute to a diminished sense of community. The experience of being socially isolated is of course not unique to incels, and is something that can happen to anyone regardless of age, gender or race. These interviews however, suggest that neurodiverse individuals may be at particular risk of becoming isolated. A society which does not accommodate neurodiverse people can leave them more prone to becoming "off-time" (not achieving developmental milestones at the same rate as their peers) and becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training). Depending on the nature of their neurodiversity, the internet may offer a preferable alternative.

David is in his late 20's. He was a member of the now defunct Lookism.net forum, as well as a complimentary Discord server and has a number of close friends from the forum. Unlike most Incels I spoke with, David has had little trouble finding romantic relationships since his late teens. Because of this, he described himself as having "a foot in both worlds". He explained that he was

not involuntarily celibate, but considered himself an incel, almost in a cultural sense. This unique perspective made David an outlier in terms of the interviewees I spoke with as he was as critical of the incels themselves, as he was of society. While he was generally supportive of the community, he was also skeptical of many of the claims made by incels as to why they were in the situation they were in. His critiques of other Incels were sympathetic and compassionate, although it was clear he felt there were many members who had decided to “opt-out” of education, adult life and relationships, without having put in sufficient effort towards these pursuits. They rationalized why they were doomed to failure before even trying.

On a number of occasions David referred to incels as “lost boys” or “damaged birds”, who have difficulty “relating to the world”, who “feel different” and who “want to feel seen”. He explained that a common characteristic of “Lost Boys”, is that they have “arrested development”, which he described as both a cause and a symptom of incels’ reluctance to engage with the real world, socialize, find work, etc. This arrested development was described as a “self-fulfilling prophecy” that accelerates and becomes more difficult to overcome the older you get – “it’s almost like it hits a singularity point. If by age 24, they haven’t properly socialized, it’s just like, 30 is just around the corner, you know”. This description in many ways aligns with the concept of being “off-time” as described by Stijelja and Mishara (2022) and Donnelly et al. (2001), who also explain that feeling “off-time” can lead to frustration and loss of confidence, which can further compound feelings of being irrevocably out of sync relative to one’s peers, making it significantly more difficult for the individual to get back on track.

David’s concept of “Lost Boys” here is interesting. In popular culture, the lost boys can refer to a group of children in J.M. Barrie’s Peter Pan who literally do not grow up, or more recently, vampire adolescents in Joel Schumacher’s 1987 film *The Lost Boys*, who also do not age. David described lookism.net as a community where nobody had to grow up – “That’s kind of how it is, a perpetual youth, you know, like, nobody has to grow up on lookism, you know, you can just sit with your own, possibly false notions about the world based on

no evidence, and you can just roll with it, you know, and you're gonna get positive support for". For the sake of this research, the term "Lost Boy" will be used to bring together two ideas which have already been discussed. The first is Bakers' (2019) concept of "Left-behind Men" - men who have identified that they are no longer benefitting from neoliberal globalisation, while believing women and minorities are making significant progress. In the absence of satisfactory explanations, and any supports which target them directly, these men are forced to draw their own conclusions. The second is Sharkey's (2022) description of the "extended adolescence" many incels experience, in a world that no longer provides the conditions that guarantee boys opportunities to become men and access "the good life" (Berlant 2011) - one of stable careers, mortgages, family life, etc. When the possibility of accessing this kind of life vanishes, with limited desirable alternatives, retreat into adolescence, living at home, and playing videogames, may seem preferable to the hardships of moving outside of your "comfort zone" with no guarantee of success. This is of course not unique to incels - anyone, regardless of age, gender, social class, etc. can very easily find themselves in this situation.

David's description of incels evoked an image of a community of outsiders from varied backgrounds who have had difficulty finding their place in the world in some way or another, but who have found each other. This idea that incels are a collection of misfits, as opposed to a movement or an organization, was further reinforced when he explained - "And it's just like, you know, kind of like, not the group that you needed, but the group that you deserve. No one went and hand selected this group". David's account suggests that members of lookism.net become members of the community through no fault of their own, but as a natural consequence of failing to find their place in the world. This framing helps to distance incels from the common mainstream understanding - that incels are angry, and feel entitled to sex. Difficulties with romantic relationships were only briefly acknowledged in his account, when he described incels as "more of a movement based on in my mind comedy, and making fun of each other - Narcissistic personalities, frustration that we can't have sex with women more easily, and just mainly camaraderie". David rarely

addressed incels' failure to form romantic relationships as a factor in their involvement in incel communities. Rather, he emphasized their failure to socialize more broadly – whether that be with real-world friends, or even simply the real-world socializing that most experience as a consequence of attending school or college, or of working any job. He believed this kind of socialization can protect individuals against what he describes as “failure to launch”. Recognizing that a disproportionately large percentage of incels are NEET he also explained that dropping out of school or being NEET for a prolonged period of time derails many incels from the usual developmental trajectory of adolescents. Once derailed, momentum is lost, opportunities disappear, and developmental rites of passage are by-passed. It can be difficult for the individual to get themselves back on track - “Many of them never went to school, you talk to them - A lot of them have dropped out of school, in high school, or like, they don't have conventional tracks of like education, jobs, socialization”. David believes this realization inevitably dawns on the individual – “But at some point (...) they just looked in the mirror and they felt so hopelessly lost”. He suggested that these kinds of “too-late” realizations, lead to hopelessness, and a belief things cannot improve.

In most cases, David explained, incel communities are not places where Lost Boys can get the advice or support necessary to make dramatic changes in their lives. Drawing from his own past experiences making significant changes in his life, David believed that escaping from the circumstances many NEET incels find themselves in requires a level of discipline and impetus most lost boys have no interest in committing to. He joked that personal development requires the individual to move outside of their “comfort zone“, but that many lookism users won't even leave their houses - “I think one of the principal goals of life is to come outside of yourself, you know, and a lot of these people, you talk to them, the joke is like “Tales from the Basement”. They've never left the house like some of these. They're not joking about that. Like some of them literally do not leave”. Lookism.net was described by David as a more attractive proposition than the real world, for people who are in this situation. – “I mean, for many people, the, the, the risk to reward ratio of life is does not

add up, the debts and credits do not add up. I mean, the fact of the matter is, you know, I mean, I think it's just kind of an attractive idea”.

This is an issue which has been highlighted by Bratich and Banet-Weiser (2019), who note that incel solutions such as looksmaxxing or moneymaxxing are unlikely to address the underlying causes of an individual's inceldom. Instead, they explain, the communities offer a kind of “anti-social support” by facilitating individuals withdrawing from and rejecting society. An example of this “antisocial support” could be seen when David explained how the terms “wage-slave” and “wage-cuck” are used to mock people working low paying jobs, including David himself. There is a pervasive belief that unemployment is preferable to this low-paying work. Rather than motivating individuals to engage with whatever issues they're facing, or make incremental steps towards improving their situation, the cynical worldview of Lookism.net promotes further withdrawal from the world, preventing Lost Boys from progressing. Incel communities offer a space where NEETs, who may feel judged by offline peers, are celebrated, and do not feel shame. David acknowledged that he did not feel the same insecurities on Lookism.net that he did hanging out with his offline friends;

“I mean, when I meet with my friends, all my friends are basically wealthy. I mean, my two best friends are, you know, probably making over 250 grand a year. And, you know, (...) I got kicked out High School, but he's an investment banker, has his own company, I mean, and I talk to them, and I can't even pay for meals when we go out. It's just, and it's kind of a disgraceful little bit. And then next thing, you know, I talk to some of these people and, you know, in a sick way, it makes me feel a little better about myself”.

As well as having failed to find their place in the world, and being unwilling to move outside of their comfort zones, another factor which David believed united the Lost Boys of lookism.net is that despite their lack of real world experience, they have very strong opinions about how the world works. He described the forum as a community who spent their time researching, theorizing, overthinking, and overanalyzing real life and dating. David

describes this as “Paralysis by Analysis” and said it “cripples” them. He described them as “armchair philosophers”, explaining – “these people are putting out these high level philosophical discourses on life and they've pretty much never even been outside. You know, they've never worked a job. They never been in university. They never, you know... I'm saying they've never struggled with elements of the real world.” David clearly respected their intelligence, but also recognized that without real world experience to back it up, their analysis is skewed and stunted. An irony of the theories they produce, which David noted, is that many of their insights aren't particularly unique or insightful - “we've spent the last six years talking about how people that are better looking, have more attractive partners (...) every normie knows that”. While other interviewees spoke of how insightful and liberating the truths of the blackpill are, David clearly felt incel communities hadn't discovered anything new.

David was particularly good at articulating his idea of the kind of person who eventually identifies as an incel, although the stories shared by a number of other interviews reinforced many of these ideas.

Jake, a former incel from the US who was active on two popular incel subreddits, described feeling as though he didn't “belong” in the “real world”, and that there are certain topics he couldn't discuss with his peers. However, he explained that he could relate more to the incels who he'd found online, and that he found “solace” in talking to “random people” online who, like him, wanted to be in relationships.

“I think it was just the sense of like, not belonging, but being able to relate to these other people that I had no clue of before. I didn't know what they looked like or any other stories, but they wanted something more, or like a relationship or something. And I did also at the time, and being able to compare it to all my friends at the time was hard. So I could sort of find solace in talking to these random people about it.”

Alan, an incel in his 30s who lives in the United States, also spoke about feeling left out, suggesting that there is a key point that occurs prior identifying as an

incel, where the individual realizes everyone else has achieved this important developmental milestone.

“Yeah. It's just it's just I mean, you're 30 something years old and everyone around you is, not is – has, has gotten into this this secret club that stops the torture and you just haven't”

Rob, an incel from Europe in his early 30s, also suggested the kinds of people who are drawn to these forums are those who feel inferior elsewhere.

“You know, they do it in a community of people that are like them, you know, for once they're not going to feel inferior, as they do with normies, you know, with normies, they feel inferior. But in a forum, everybody is going through the same thing”

Rob continued, suggesting that the kind of person who ends up on incel forums is someone who has no social skills, is alone, and is searching for anything to give them mental stability. He also noted that these feelings of loneliness are exacerbated by social media, which makes lost boys more acutely aware that they are being excluded from “the good life”

“Yes, exactly, is that they have to find something, to give them some mental stability. Because the pain is really, it's really, the despair is huge. When you're like that, you know what I mean? When you have no social skills, and you're alone, especially at a young age, you know, where you see every good looking people around you, your age, having fun, having a great time, having success with women, having success in life. And, and you see it on Instagram, you see it everywhere, social media, you see it on TV everywhere, and you can't have that, you can't have a piece of their world, you know, you cant have a piece of that pie.”

David made a similar observation about the impact of social media in heightening these feelings of exclusion towards the end of our interview

“I mean, look, if you go on fucking Instagram, you see the best looking guys have millions of followers. They're making livings. It's thrown in your face. You know? I mean, these, like, go on Jay Alvarez, his Instagram. He's literally having

a 365 day a year vacation. He's having sex with the hottest and Dan Bilzerian. I mean, they're making hundreds of millions of dollars just on their looks and their lifestyle. I mean, it was shoved down people's throats, you know, so even the most delusional people are now have to come to terms with the fact that the rise of the Kardashians, right, and the Jenners. I mean, it is fucking hard to be in denial. And you know, back in 1950, you couldn't see, if I lived on a little farm in Boise, Idaho, I didn't know that your life you were flying around in private jets and stuff, you know, now it's thrown in your face that Dan Bilzerian hasn't worked in the last 20 years. And I mean, and now you're seeing the disparity in lifestyles, you know?"

5.2 Neurodivergence

Although David provided an interesting account of lookism.net users as somewhat sympathetic figures who have been unable to find their own place in the world, it did not give much indication as to why some young men become lost boys in the first place. However, a number of other interviewees shared their stories about experiences that led to them becoming socially isolated, which played a crucial role in them finding incel communities. It is notable, although not necessarily surprising given the research conducted by Daly and Laskovtsov (2021), Speckhard et al. (2022), Moskalenko (2022) Sharkey (2022) that neurodivergence played a role in a number of the stories shared by incels.

Alan and Jeff, two incels from the United States of America, shared stories about how they eventually found their way to incel communities after being derailed from their expected life-path in their early 20s. Both interviewees described a similar experience of losing faith in their churches due to the hypocrisy of members, and consequently feeling lost. In both cases, the church had been an important institution which provided guidance, and a partial framework for how their lives were expected to proceed. It was also an integral part of their social networks.

Alan, an incel in his 30s who works in tech, explained that after losing faith in the church he had been heavily involved with his entire life, he experienced “a severe mental breakdown”, which he describes as “a catastrophic life event”.

“So I had to have been about 20. I had to have been in my mid 20s when that happened, because... So I had basically grown up since ‘95 being heavily heavily indoctrinated with this stuff at a very impressionable age. Yeah. So I hit basically the... It was, it was pretty bad. I almost became suicidal for a while (...) and that did not go well.”

Alan felt that he has never recovered, mentally or socially, from this concurrent mental breakdown and loss of community. Although he appeared to be doing well in terms of his career, he explained that he has developed neuroses that he believed would prevent him from ever being in a romantic relationship. Of all the interviewees, Alan appeared to be the most confident that his situation could not and would not ever improve.

Jeff, who is also in his 30’s and was unemployed at the time of our interview, also struggled with depression around the time he began distancing himself from his religious upbringing. Jeff had been very religious, although became increasingly put-off by the hypocrisy and bigotry of others in his church.

“I would get scared if I’ve heard someone say things like “gods not real” or “evolutions a fact”. And I used to, and I actually bought into creationism and other things like that. But it wasn’t until I became clinically depressed. And I wasn’t seeing the things, like, God having a plan for me coming into fruition and seeing so much hypocrisy from, from Christians saying, like, “were a religion of love” and, and uh God, and stuff like that. Seeing the hatred for LGBT people and even sometimes even racism and discrimination towards women so that, they really started making me question my beliefs”

Jeff later said that he came to the realization that his depression was both a cause and a symptom of his loneliness. However, he did not feel his religious community was a place where he could safely talk about his issues, as attempts to discuss his depression and loneliness were often met with platitudes which

Jeff did not find helpful. Upon resorting to the internet to discuss his issues, Jeff quickly found love-shy.com, which he described as a place where he could “express my, my depression that I was going through”, noting that many other members would talk openly about their own depression, in a way his offline peers would not.

Jeff, who has been formally diagnosed with autism, believed this also played a significant role in stunting his social development

“My parents were always very overprotective. They knew I was, I was on the autism spectrum, but I didn't know. And they're always saying things like, “Oh, don't do this, don't do that”. My mother was always freaking out that something bad was going to happen to me. So even during the summertime, when kids are usually running around and playing, like, I was usually stuck in my house, and I think that was a huge developmental snag on me”.

Jeff looks back on his parents’ “overprotectiveness” as something which prevented him from engaging in more social experiences and developing his social skills at a formative age. He believed he was still feeling the effects of these missed opportunities, showing that being “off-time” as an adolescent can still have repercussions well into an individuals’ adult life.

During my interview with Mike, an 18 year old Incel from Eastern Europe, he explained his theory about why some involuntarily celibate men join incel communities, while the vast majority do not. He suggested that an individual’s attractiveness is not the most important variable, an idea which runs counter to the prevailing “common-sense” of incel communities. Instead, he explained, it is how depressed the individual is, and the extent to which they have already “given up”.

“Well, from what I’ve seen, there are ugly people and quite good looking people on both forums. So I, uh, think that (...) [people who] have less hope go to the incels forum and the others go to looksmaxxing forums. It’s kind of subjective. Some of them more depressed. And some mental issues. And other life issues, and they go to the incels forum, and aren’t as hopeful about their future.”

Mike suggested that those who are hopeful are more inclined to be drawn to the more red pill, communities interested in finding more proactive solutions like pick-up artistry, looksmaxxing, gymmaxxing, or moneymaxxing. Red pill spaces are (broadly speaking) motivational and aspirational, and incorporate many aspects of “grind” or “hustle culture. They are filled with masculinity influencers, who function as life coaches, and suggest that success is available to anyone, provided they take the correct steps. The dominant form of masculinity present in these spaces is Alpha masculinity, which venerates hard work and individualism. The implicit assumption in red pill spaces is that an individual’s success or failure is dependent on their own actions. This is of course incongruent with many incels’ belief that their situation is hopeless, no matter how much effort they put in. Their situation is a result of factors outside of their control. Mike suggested that individuals who are depressed or despairing may be more cynical (perhaps correctly) of the solutions proffered by the red pill, and may find their worldview aligns more closely with the kinds of discussions they see in incel spaces. This suggests that hopeless people are more inclined to be drawn to incel communities in the first place, rather than it being the case that joining incel communities makes people hopeless.

Rob had a similar theory which accounts for why some individuals who have not found their place in society are drawn to incel spaces, while also explaining why mental health issues are so prevalent among incels. He explains

“Now, the type of people that go to these forums, yes, they have some mental thing going on. Some mental... what's the word? Some mental conditioning that is crippling them, in some way, in real life. And, yes, the difference between NT - neurotypical - and non NT, has a lot to do with it with, you know, maybe if you're an incel, but your brain works the way it's supposed to work - If you're NT you're going to be like my father, you're going to be like, a regular guy who has his own job, you know, is not living in a basement (...) One day he finds a woman that that is going to want to be with him after being rejected by millions of other women. But the difference is that that guy is NT, is neurotypical. But the guys that go out and resort to online forums, they're non NT”.

For Rob, the crucial difference was that the people more likely to end up on incel forums were more likely to be neurodivergent in a way which contributed to their social isolation. Rob defined an incel as any man who is unable to have sex despite wanting to, regardless of whether they identify as an incel, or even know what an incel is. It is a broad understanding in which any involuntarily celibate man is by definition, an incel. He believes that although a lot of men are technically incels, those who are neurodivergent are more likely to end up on incel forums. Neurotypical involuntary celibates, he explains, have a much easier time going out, finding a job, living a life, and are generally more likely to find themselves in social situations where they have the potential to meet someone. In contrast, he believed the kinds of incels who end up on incel forums are likely to have withdrawn from the world due to mental health issues. They may have dropped out of school, they may be NEET, and they may not have a strong social network, factors which may have held them back from enjoying an otherwise normal life. There are clear similarities between the scenario described by Rob, and the experience of Lost Boys, as described by David.

The prevalence of autism among incels was an incredibly popular topic of discussion throughout the interviews, and seemed to connect to a number of important areas. Alan explained that there was a growing awareness in incel communities that many members have autism, and that even members who had not been formally diagnosed were increasingly open to the idea that they may be on the spectrum – “a lot of the, the incels on the forum had begun to suspect, kind of together, essentially, that they were on the spectrum, to varying degrees”. Alan attempted to account for the high prevalence of autism in incel communities, by explaining that autistic people are more likely to have a harder time finding dates because of difficulties with social interactions.

“Being on the spectrum is something we don't have a very good understanding of in the first place. But it tends to make people very literal, and very prone to following very specific rules and being very, just being very, very specific. And what people who are not on the spectrum would often consider an overly, overly literal and overly objective. And that is not a good [for] social tasks, such

as dating for example, that can be a substantial hindrance, because it's all about the intangibles, it's all about these, these non-rule things, these kind of unwritten social conventions, and kind of picking up on these little micro things in a conversation, like humour, that just doesn't have clear rules. And it can make things very, very difficult to follow.

Will, a young incel from South America, believed that people with autism “naturally feel” more alienated, and that they often have higher IQs, another factor which he correlated with a higher likelihood of being alienated.

“I think it is just because like people with autism, like they naturally feel more alienated. And there are a lot of times they, they have higher IQ. So that would lead them to be alienated as well. So I think people with autism, specifically, tend to be more active in those kinds of spaces [...] those are normal symptoms of people with autism, so I can see why they would participate in [incel forums]”

Phillip, who mentioned that he had a formal diagnosis of autism, explained

“I know, certainly I do struggle with, you know, human interactions, and I do struggle to pick up on, on social cues. So I mean, (...) that leads me to prefer interactions over the internet”.

When discussing why autism is so prevalent among incels, Phillip drew attention to the fact that there are far more men diagnosed with autism than women [the ratio is roughly 4:1], and suggests this may partly explain why there appear to be more men who are involuntarily celibate than women.

As previously discussed, Jeff felt that his parents' overprotectiveness due to his autism played a key role in his social isolation. However, Jeff explains that his autism played another role in his pathway to incel communities. Shortly after learning about his diagnosis, Jeff became concerned that it could affect his ability to get a girlfriend. Having no real world social group to discuss these anxieties, Jeff resorted to the internet.

“I just found, I did find out, find out that I had autism, or Asperger's specifically, and that was explaining a lot of the reason why I was having trouble

socializing. And what really terrified me was that I read some interviews with an older man on the autism spectrum, he said that even at their age, they still didn't have a girlfriend. And that made me scared that that was going to be my, my fate, so to say.”

Jeff's initial step towards addressing these concerns was to bring them up on a forum for autistic people. However, when he tried to discuss the unique challenges autistic people face in finding romantic partners, he was dismissed as an incel.

“Even on even on some autism forums, because I would say I was struggling with not having a girlfriend, feeling depressed. Some people will actually say things like, “oh, you're an incel you must hate women and you're a misogynist and blah blah blah. And it's like, no, that's not true at all. I don't hate women at all.”

Jeff explained he had been banned from a number of autism forums for talking about depression and dating. It is impossible to know the content of the forum posts which got Jeff banned, and whether they are as benign as he suggests. However, it is worth mentioning that, throughout the interview, Jeff was very careful never to give the impression he was misogynistic. He considered himself an incel purely because he has never had sex. It is possible the tone of his messages was misinterpreted, something which can very easily happen in primarily text-based communities such as forums. He went on to explain:

“There were also people that were calling, calling me an incel just because I express my depression and frustration over not having a girlfriend. And so that led to a lot of arguments and conflicts, and the hypocritical thing was some of these people were saying a lot of, were saying a lot of abrasive things to me and yet, I was the one getting the talking to while they got away with it”.

It seems that Jeff went to autism forums where he felt he could safely talk about his experiences as someone with autism who has never been in a relationship. However, people accused him of being an incel, he got in arguments with forum members and mods, and was ultimately banned from three separate

communities. He said that at some point he came across the term love-shy and felt that described him. He immediately joined love-shy.net, where he was able to talk about his issues without pushback.

David however, was more skeptical of claims of the prevalence of autism in the community, believing they should not be taken at face value as the term is used very loosely in incel communities.

“I don't really think... I think some of them might be on the spectrum very slightly. [...] I mean, but at the end of the day, that's just like, I think, modern day psychiatry, maybe telling them this, they're all like, “Oh, I'm a sociopath”. I don't know, that's just like a lot of internet stuff. You know, I mean, yeah, you go on the internet, you know, “I'm a sociopath. I sometimes have evil thoughts”, you know, and I think they're not autistic, they're just, most of them I don't think are autistic. I just think that they were kind of like, like I said, they're like the lost boys, you know, they never you know... if you don't water a plant it never grows,”

He suggested a lot of the people on the forum who report having autism have not been formally diagnosed, but have diagnosed themselves. He acknowledged that Lost Boys are generally bad at managing their emotions, have poor social skills, and that many have anxiety or depression, but proposed that in many cases this may be a result of their withdrawal from society, and is not necessarily indicative of autism. David explained “they keep learning these cryptic tomes, you know, and then they go out. And then by virtue of just like their isolation, they do become quasi-autistic, in the way that we think autists are, you know, autism is a lack of being able to be able to meaningfully relate to other people”. David explained that although loneliness and social isolation are things that many autistic people experience, it is equally something that “armchair philosopher”, NEET, forum users who have withdrawn from the world are also likely to experience. He described this as a kind of “quasi-autism” and said that although these men are not autistic, they have withdrawn from society to such an extent that they experience the same social difficulties as people diagnosed with autism.

5.3 Perceived Persecution

When discussing factors that contributed to their isolation, a number of interviewees also brought up the idea that they believed they were persecuted for the views they held. Incel communities offered safe spaces where interviewees could share controversial beliefs without fear of pushback. These ideas were not always specific to inceldom, although they were frequently misogynistic or racist. They were often defended through reference to freedom of speech.

Some interviewees didn't get into the specifics of these beliefs or ideas, although they discussed them in a way that suggested they were likely to offend if shared in the wrong environment. Mike explained that people in incel communities have a different way of thinking about things, specifically noting that they're more open to saying things that might be considered offensive elsewhere. This appealed to him - "I liked that I could have conversations on taboo topics that I couldn't talk to other people about, more offensive stuff, more you know, something you couldn't talk to a normal person about." He mentioned on a number of occasions that this was one of the things that drew him to the community initially - "Yes, of course. I have noticed myself when I first browsed the forums, for the first time ever, seeing all the weird posts that other people may think of as weird or creepy and so on, I didn't really think anything about them like other people do when they start browsing those forums." He acknowledges that while "normal" people may find the ideas shared on incel forums "weird" or "creepy", he did not find them off-putting, suggesting he had at least some values that aligned with incel ideas prior to coming across the community.

Alex also felt incels were saying things he wasn't seeing elsewhere online - "I mean, they're just speaking the truth I guess [...] I mean speaking different languages I guess, from other people". Alex's descriptions of these topics as "the truth" suggested he was seeing things he sincerely believed to be true, but which were considered unacceptable elsewhere, reflected back to him. When asked what kind of "truths" he was seeing on these forums that he wasn't

seeing elsewhere, he avoided getting into specifics, instead answering “Oh, you know, just NSFW stuff. I guess, racist...”. Although Mike and Alex were quite open about that fact that they were drawn to these communities by the “weird”, “creepy” and “offensive”, or “NSFW” and “racist” content on these platforms, they didn’t go into any further detail. From the adjectives chosen to describe this content however, it is likely they were talking about content they would rather not discuss with an outsider such as myself.

Two interviewees, Rob and Will, felt they couldn’t discuss incelism with real world acquaintances because their knowledge of the blackpill was so detailed and esoteric, that their real world acquaintances couldn’t keep up. Rob is very well read in evolutionary sciences and pop psychology, and can talk confidently at length about theories he wholeheartedly believes to be true. However, he explained that his father is the only person he has to talk about these kinds of things with offline, and even then, Rob can’t go too deep because his father has been “conditioned” by religion.

“Unfortunately, you know, in the real world, only my father, kind of, you know, but I can't go too deep with my father, because now he was very conditioned in his childhood, he's religious. And, you know, it's, there's a lot of things that I say, and that these guys say, that contradict religious beliefs, you know, so, but, but other than that, no, I, personally, I can't find people to talk about this, you know, in real life. It's very hard to find people that are aware of these topics in or interested in.”

Will similarly said he found it hard to have discussions with his real world acquaintances as he would inevitably start talking about things in which they were not interested, and lose their attention. On incel forums and WhatsApp groups however, he could talk at length with people who had similar interests and worldviews. While talking about the various WhatsApp groups he was a member of, focused on topics such as incelism, theology, genetics, politics and philosophy, Will explained:

“I think those people I can relate to more than normal people and have, like more profound conversations in a way. Since Yeah, like I have friends in real

life. But my friends in real life, it is harder for me to have long conversations and stuff. Because after 5 to 10 minutes, I start talking about things that people are kinda not interested about. So yeah, like, I feel that on online forums, I can find people that have the same interests as me, in a way it is fun”.

Despite Rob and Will’s framing that they could not discuss their beliefs with others because of a failure to keep up on the part of their interlocutors, it is possible that it was not an inability to understand, but rather disagreement with what they were saying, that stopped conversation from progressing. Incel communities however, offer a space where controversial beliefs and opinions can be shared freely without fear of pushback. Rob explained that incel forums offered users a “judgement free” space where “for once” they were not made to feel inferior to others. For him, this freedom served an important function, as it allowed members to “vent” – something he felt they could not do elsewhere.

“Yeah, they can, they can, within a community of people that they don't feel inferior to, they feel on an equal plane. You know, what I mean? These incels that are desperate, and they go there to shitpost, and to troll. You know, they do it in a community of people that are like them, you know, for once they're not going to feel inferior, as they do with normies, you know, with normies, they feel inferior. But in a forum, everybody is going through the same thing. And they use it a lot to vent.

Rob did not get into the content of the venting, shitposting, and trolling which takes place on incel forums, but his framing, that they are “judged” by “normies” and made to “feel inferior” when they engage in these behaviors in more mainstream spaces, portrayed incels as being somewhat victimized when trying to speak with normies. However, the reason these behaviours are generally not tolerated in most communities is because of their potential to cause harm. Shitposting in incel communities, for example, is often inflammatory, misogynistic, bigoted, etc., while trolling is just a form of harassment. If incels are being “judged” and made to “feel inferior” for their

“shitposting”, “trolling” and “venting”, it is likely the content of these posts is not as harmless as it is made to appear here.

Will was much more candid when discussing behaviours he could get away with in incel communities, which were not tolerated elsewhere. He is a member of a number of blackpilled WhatsApp groups, which he described as “free zones”. He explained that people feel more comfortable talking openly in these groups than they do on the forums, and believed that anonymity is part of the appeal of incel spaces, as it enables you to talk freely about the kinds of things you can’t discuss in “real life”.

“Man, it was more of like, random news about you know, new legislation about marriage. And women having more rights and stuff. And guys talking trash about it? [...] Yeah, and there are lots of those groups, that their whole appeal is the fact that you are online, you are kinda anonymous. And you can just, Yeah, like talk trash about things that you couldn't talk trash in real life”.

For Will, an important part of these blackpilled communities is the anonymity, which allowed him and the other members to “talk trash” to an extent they could not do elsewhere. However, it was clear these groups went beyond just talking thrash about women - these groups also encouraged members to harass them.

“There was a group I participated in, that was National Incelism is its name. But the group was more of a joke in a way like, okay, there were some guys in the group that have girlfriends. And the group was more to talk trash about women. And then sometimes we just add women there. And then we just made fun of them. And then the women just ran out of the group. The group was more of a joke in a way.”

Other vulnerable groups were also targeted in these WhatsApp groups;

“You can just, like do things that you couldn't do in real life. There were some groups I participated in that people really just added like people with mental problems like autists, and schizophrenic people, just to make fun of them. And

like people in real life would think this is horrible but since it is a whatsapp group like people didn't care.”

Will's candor here was surprising. Until this point in the interview, he presented himself as a scholar and his interest in blackpill groups as academic, primarily motivated by an interest in genetics. His abrupt pivot into matter-of-factly explaining that on WhatsApp “You can just, like do things that you couldn't do in real life”, demonstrates a disconnect in his mind about things that happen online and offline. Will repeatedly distinguished these behaviors from “real life” in order to justify why they are acceptable, a framing which helped to obscure the fact that real people had been harassed. Whereas other interviewees who spoke of the value of incel communities as “free” spaces, and suggested they offered some reprieve from a world that treated them harshly, for Will, the value of these spaces was that you could act abusively towards vulnerable people and behave in unacceptable ways, without fear of consequences. The behaviors Will described clearly go beyond his initial framing of these Whatsapp groups being places where people can talk “more openly about some topics”.

David attempted to make a moral argument for the extreme rhetoric shared in incel spaces by connecting it to free speech. He described Lookism.net as “one of the only bastions of freedom of speech”, specifically contrasting it with the more censorious Reddit, where he believed the consequences for saying the wrong thing are considerably higher

“Lookism is one of the only bastions of freedom of speech. Like, I mean, people on Reddit - talk about violent people, those people would expose you if you said one wrong thing. Your face would be on the front page of the New York Times. I mean, those people are out for blood.”

Despite elsewhere portraying himself as a persecuted “moderate”, David went on to share views which could quite reasonably be viewed as extreme and hateful.

“And, you know, I mean, the fact of the matter is, Shane, I am a little racist towards black people, only young black men, probably ages 21 to 29. But in America, I live in [US city]. I mean, I live in [US city], I've been robbed that, you know, I've been intimidated on a daily basis, riding the trains, it's nice to go on there and sometimes share a bit of healthy or unhealthy racism. You can never do that anywhere else on the internet”

David defended this as an acceptable view, highlighting that he had done legal work for black people, and that he frequently travelled to predominantly black neighbourhoods, whereas his liberal colleagues would not. He also described sharing these kinds of posts as a “cathartic outlet”, again sanitizing the hate speech somewhat by suggesting it had a therapeutic function.

While David defended his own views as “realistic” and “just how it is”, his critics were dismissed for living in “Fantasyland” and denying the “truth”, and being part of “the liberal mafia” who want to “silence” people who step out of line. He also suggested that the majority of people secretly agree with him but that they're too scared to say it – “But I think at the end of the day, you know, I mean, if you're not going to meet a single white person in [US city], that is not scared when they go on a train or whatever it is. I mean, because when you have 1200 murders in the city, you know, I mean, that's just how it is.”

Despite claiming to be apolitical, David's politics appeared to lean somewhat to the right, at least on certain issues. He explained that the world had “drastically shifted left”, and that he had to move right and “oppose some of this stuff”. Although he didn't specify what exactly he opposes, from the context, it appeared he was talking about a perceived liberal hegemony that has put him in a position where he could face serious consequences for sharing his beliefs in the wrong spaces. On a number of occasions, David used the cliché “you can't say anything” without people getting offended, and described how he had to hide his views at work and in public. He also explained that he “had to” specifically schedule a male therapist, because if he had a female therapist she would get too offended - “I mean, I have to think about, you know, I have a therapist, appointment today. I'm like, I had to schedule a male therapist, you

know, I had to schedule. Some of these people get too offended, if I had a female. I mean, I don't know...". David clearly felt he had to alter his behaviour in order to avoid upsetting others, and spoke about this as if it is a common experience most people would understand - "At the end of the day, you just have to censor yourself to be able to survive in day to day life". On lookism however, where freedom of speech is prioritized above almost everything else, David did not have to worry about consequences of what he said. He could be as blunt as he wanted, without having to think through an "idea" or "theory" before putting it out there. Because of this, he explained that the "promise of lookism" was that what gets discussed there is the "unfiltered truth".

David was not alone among interviewees who felt that part of the appeal of incel spaces online was that they provided an escape from progressive scolds. Alan was more explicit, claiming that he was driven to incel communities by "radical feminists" he engaged with on Twitter.

"The absolute worst thing that I heard, the thing that really kind of drove me out to the incel forums in the first place was some of the more radical feminists saying that, admitting that having an unfulfilled sex drive is unnatural and torturous, but that incel should be conditioned to ignore it and bear the pain. I'll say that again. There are feminists on Twitter, who will admit the truth that not having sex for long periods of time causes suffering and physical pain, and that they should be subject to cognitive behavioral therapy. To bear it. There is a word for this it's called a conversion therapy. It is sick. It is banned in many in, should be banned in all developed countries. It's banned in most of them. And this is sick, sick stuff (...) to be told that to, to be told that you should enjoy your own suffering was not only sick, was not only irrational. It was like I was hearing the same thing from these feminists that I had heard from the pulpit already. And that is what put me off with them"

This was described as the inciting incident that "drove" Alan "out to the incel forums". Even in his own framing it is clear his response was disproportionate to what these feminists were actually saying. He appeared to have been responding to his own exaggerated interpretation, wherein he equated CBT

with Conversion Therapy. He did this again shortly after, by drawing an equivalence between feminists wanting to ban porn, to feminists wanting young men to commit suicide - "They want to complain about porn. So they're like, no sex, no porn, just suffer. It's almost as if they just want incels to just crawl into a room and shoot themselves." Alan's claim that he was "driven" to incel forums by feminists should not be taken at face value. It appears he had certain beliefs that were incompatible with the worldview of the feminists he was engaging with. Incel communities were more receptive, providing a space where he could speak freely without the same potential for blowback he received when engaging with feminists on twitter.

Like David, Alan viewed himself as moderate and his beliefs as common sense. He even described himself as a feminist, although he distanced himself from "crazy" and "radical" feminists. Despite being critical of the patriarchy on a number of occasions however, it was clear he was significantly more concerned about the potential consequences of feminist overreach. An example of this is seen when Alan discusses his concerns about the #MeToo movement. Although he describes it as being "60% rational", he also feels there's a lot that requires "further social discussion"

The example Alan gives of elements of feminism he agrees with, that women shouldn't be expected to "sleep their way to the top in corporate positions", is something that most people (although not necessarily most incels) likely agree with. However, he then goes on to list a number of concerns he has about feminism which reflect disingenuous talking points often used to critique the #MeToo movement, including the idea that women regularly weaponize rape accusations against men they regret sleeping with, that the definition of sexual assault has become too broad, or that young people no longer understand the rules around consent.

"And a lot of the Me Too stuff has made dating, incomprehensible and kind of difficult, and kind of something that you wouldn't want to engage in first place. I mean, going to have the cops called on you a week later, you know, I just this anyway, there's a lot of a lot of issues surrounding the dating scene in general.

And not that those issues aren't solvable, but that those issues are generating more and more incels, because between the Me Too stuff and the 80/20 even people who are not necessarily having the issues that a lot of the other incels are, they're just having a hard time getting normal sex in the socially approved way anyway. So it's just it's getting to be a larger social issue that is not solely limited only to the forums (...) And I guess the point is, incels is a problem that's only getting worse, it's not getting better. It's not going to go away".

Alan acknowledges that #MeToo is "coming from a legitimate good place", but primarily discusses it in terms of the effect it has on men who he believes are now more vulnerable. He chooses to focus on an imagined scenario, in which men are not having sex because they are scared of being accused of rape, while ignoring the more tangible benefits of the increased awareness around consent and rape. Alan assumes this increased awareness has had a "chilling effect" on consensual sex – a common talking point on incel forums, but one which is not supported by any evidence – which is "generating more and more incels". While his views on #MeToo may be common on incel communities, and indeed beyond, it is easy to see how sharing these views could invite criticism if shared in the wrong context. Nevertheless, Alan views himself as a moderate, his views as common-sense, and the pushback he received, therefore, as unfair. Incel communities on the other hand, were more open to these kinds of discussions.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the value of using interviews to learn about pathways to incelhood. Interviewees were eager to discuss areas of incelhood, and indeed their own personal narratives, that go beyond an inability to form romantic relationships, or their experiences with incel forums. As a result, incelhood could be contextualised beyond incel ideology and forums, and the factors that leave someone vulnerable to identifying as an incel initially could be identified.

A key finding of this chapter, and indeed this research, is that incels' loneliness goes beyond an inability to form romantic relationships. In many cases they appear to be socially isolated at a much more fundamental level. The phenomenon of social isolation is, of course, not unique to incels, and is something that can happen to anyone regardless of age, gender, social class, etc. However, the impact on boys and men appear to be particularly pronounced and deleterious. This can be explained by Kimmel's (2013) concept of "aggrieved entitlement", which emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. While the effects were felt by all, young men were acutely aware of the privileges they were no longer experiencing as a result of their gender. Stable careers, home ownership, and by extension marriage – aspects of the good life to which they had grown up believing they were entitled – were no longer as easily achievable as they had seemed. David explained that many of these young men become lost boys, who are unable to progress in life, and so embrace the NEET lifestyle as a safer alternative to moving outside of their comfort zone, exposing themselves to new people and environments, and potentially facing rejection and failure. However, as time progresses, they become exposed to fewer and fewer opportunities to get their lives back on track. The term lost boys describes the broad swathe of young men who have not been able to find their place in the world, and have become "off-time" as a result – a situation in which many young men, not just incels, could easily find themselves. As noted by Kimmel (2013), Ging (2017) and Sharkey (2019), in the absence of a clear understanding of the material conditions that prevent them from being able to "become men", Lost Boys are amenable to worldviews that are easier to understand, and feel inherently true, as they scapegoat others who appear to be making progress. Inceldom is just one of these.

This approach has also helped us to better understand the role neurodivergence plays in incels communities, something which previous research about mental illness, much of which relied on survey data (Speckhard and Ellenberg 2022; Moskalenko et al. 2022), or analyses of forum posts (Daly and Laskovtsov 2021; Sharkey 2022) could not. Both Mike and Rob described neurodivergence as being the single most important factor that determines

whether someone chooses to identify as an incel, reasoning that neurotypical men who are involuntary celibates have an easier time maintaining careers and social circles – things that prevent them from becoming “lost boys” in the first place. Jeff and Phillip, the two interviewees who discussed the role that being autistic had played in their blackpilling journey, explained that it made it difficult to socialize and that they found it easier to interact with others in more structured environments like internet forums. Jeff’s account in particular, demonstrates how difficult it can be for young men with autism to find their place in the world, particularly after exiting. Without this structure and support of the church, which had provided community and guidance throughout his life, Jeff decided to resort to the internet to address his concerns, and quickly found incel spaces to be the most receptive. It appears the increasing online tendency to dismiss any man who is frustrated with his virginity as an “incel” may have made it more difficult for him to have these kinds of conversations anywhere except incel communities. Phillip also explained that because of social difficulties he experienced due to his autism, he tended to prefer online interactions.

It was also clear a significant amount of interviewees felt they were shunned and ostracized as a result of views they held. These views were often defended through appeals to “freedom of speech”, and for the supposed therapeutic benefits such speech could provide. However, there appears to be a cohort on some of the more extreme incel communities, like Will’s National Incelism WhatsApp group, whose decision to join is primarily motivated by their desire to find a space where freedom of speech is protected, behaviours such as trolling and shitposting are not penalised, and no topic is too taboo or off-the-table. While Will’s example was particularly extreme, others interviewees presented themselves as more moderate victims of censorship and criticism. David for example, described himself as apolitical, although he is frustrated that he can’t share views that are clearly racist, but that he believes everyone knows to be “true”. Similarly, Alan views himself as a feminist, but is upset that he is criticized by “radical” feminists on twitter, who suggest he try CBT. The fact that interviewees like David and Alan can describe themselves as

“apolitical” and “moderate”, while espousing racist and misogynistic talking points is notable. Both appear to believe that they are on the side of common sense, but that there are certain factions of the mainstream who are overly punitive and will punish them for sharing their beliefs. David explains he has “had to” move to the right, because the rest of society has gone to the left. Similarly, Alan insists that radical feminists “drove” him to incel spaces. This particular framing should be treated with skepticism, as it discounts David and Alan of agency and puts the blame on others. As noted by Allan (2015), in the absence of substantive arguments to back-up their claims, many men’s rights activists are instead using heightened emotion to justify their political positions. This performative victimhood can help absolve them of responsibility for holding opinions they know to be controversial. This suggests that in some cases lost boys claims of “isolation” may be a rhetorical strategy. Other interviewees, such as Alex and Mike, explain they were immediately drawn in by the “weird”, “creepy”, “taboo”, “NSFW” and “racist” ideas they saw there, suggesting they already held views largely sympathetic to inceldom prior to coming across incel spaces. This is not necessarily surprising, giving the extensive misogynistic middle ground that connects incel misogyny to the “every day” misogyny seen in mainstream society, the lines of which are becoming increasingly blurred.

The salience of the role social isolation appears to play in decisions to embrace inceldom is reinforced by the accounts of the two former incels who participated in interviews, both of whom credited strong social supports as helping to facilitate their exit. Josh explained that the support of friends and family made it a lot easier to leave incel communities, socialize more offline, and build his confidence. He recognized that he was lucky in this respect, explaining “I got close with my family. My friends were pretty open to going working out and doing stuff too. I got more “out” (...) Yeah, I think I lucked out on that on that aspect.” When wrapping up the interview, and asking Josh if there was anything else he wanted to share that we maybe hadn’t touched on yet, he reiterated this point. He recognized that he has had a very privileged life, but that a lot of the people who end up on a trajectory towards incel

communities likely don't have the same supports and opportunities he had. Ken, a former incel from South East Asia, whose introduction to inceldom came via a WhatsApp group he was added to when he and four of his close friends left for colleges in different parts of the country, explained that his interest in inceldom lessened after he fell out with these friends and got kicked out of the group. He described this as a chance for a "do over" - "so from then I started being more social and I started going to the gym and so just have basically just cut all contact and all like relation with like the incel world". He explained that his incel group had actively discouraged him from pursuing friendships offline. However, the hard environmental reset of starting college had forced him out of his comfort zone and into situations where he was forced to interact with others. He recognized that younger incels are more likely to have more opportunities for "hard resets" than incels who are in their 30's and 40s, who have already experienced, or potentially bypassed, a number of developmental milestones. Things like moving out of a parent's house, going to college, starting a first job etc. all force individuals outside of their comfort zone, and force them to engage with new people, in new environments, expose them to new ideas, and may put them in positions where they feel they no longer need incel communities. Lost Boys who are more withdrawn, isolated, and resistant to moving outside of their comfort zones are far less likely to have these experiences.

These findings offer a fresh perspective to those designing interventions targeted at incels, as well as researchers interested in understanding the incel phenomenon more broadly. Discussions about how incels found their way to incel communities in the first place, rarely made reference to a lack of girlfriend or desire for a romantic partner. When they did, it was often in the context of larger issues that were seen to have played a more fundamental role. Also notable, was that interviewees understanding of their situation rarely relied on the kinds of pseudo-scientific structural critiques commonly shared throughout incel communities. Instead social isolation, neurodivergence, and perceived persecution were consistently highlighted.

Having introduced the concept of lost boys, and discussed how it connects incels to the wider phenomenon of social isolation, the following chapter will look at factors which can help to explain why some only lost boys are drawn to incel communities and choose to identify as incels. Again neurodivergence, and in particular autism, are observed to play an important role.

Chapter 6

The Neoliberal Promise

Red Pill Failure and Blackpill Science

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first looks at interviewees' experiences with red pill communities. Although some interviewees initially attempted to improve their situation with more red pill approaches prior to ending up in incel communities, it was also common for interviewees to bypass this stage altogether, as they felt the red pill could not help them. The second half of this chapter looks at how interviewees felt that incel communities had more to offer them. Interviewees explained they felt lost and unable to make sense of the world for a long time, prior to coming across blackpill science. However, once they understood it, they felt it could explain a lot about their lives, describing it as "realistic", "true", and "liberating".

In the absence of a social circle who can offer guidance and provide supports, many lost boys resort to the internet for advice on improving their situation. However, as noted by Leroux and Boislard (2022), those who resort to the internet for advice on issues such as distress, low self-esteem, loneliness, anxiety, and depression, can very quickly find themselves funnelled to more ideologically motivated communities that offer a red pill form of self-help. The appeal of a community like the manosphere to lost boys is not hard to see. It is a community that recognises that many young men today are not thriving and feel abandoned, and treats this with a level of seriousness not always seen in the mainstream. In addition to this, much of the red pill advice found throughout the manosphere may actually bring about visible improvements in the lives of lost boys, at least temporarily. If you have become withdrawn from the world, spend a lot of time online, and don't have a vision for how your life can improve, simple changes like exercising and healthy eating may well lead to improvements, and help to cultivate confidence and to build resilience. Although the kinds of advice shared throughout the manosphere are unlikely

to address the structural issues that give rise to lost boys in the first place, it seems the advice here, in some cases, is enough to motivate them to make changes in their lives. In some cases, this may prevent certain lost boys from becoming incels. However, not everyone has access to these benefits. The methods shared in the more red pill parts of the manosphere, such as looksmaxxing, moneymaxxing, and pickup-artistry, are largely geared towards able-bodied, and arguably neurotypical young men, who view alpha masculinity as aspirational and achievable. A common theme throughout the interviews was interviewees having at least some history with red pill spaces prior to their blackpilling. While some tried these methods and ultimately found no success, others immediately rejected the idea that these techniques could help them at all.

Bratich and Banet-Weiser (2019), suggest that many incels are in fact failed PUAs who have become disillusioned, not just with pick-up artistry, but with the neoliberal promise that anyone can succeed provided they put in sufficient effort. This research suggests that Bratich and Banet-Weiser's (2019) analysis can be broadened, as the "neoliberal promise" is no longer just a feature of PUA communities, but can be observed throughout the manosphere more broadly, in the form of masculinity influencers, life coaches, fitness gurus, finance bros, etc. whose content is shared throughout. In many cases, these figures don't explicitly discuss the red pill, or identify with any specific community, although their advice draws heavily from evolutionary psychology, and their content positions itself as being 'anti-woke'. This allows the reach of these influencers to extend further into the mainstream, as their reactionary ideology is less explicit, and often defended as being scientific, helping to establish what Ward and Voas (2011) refer to as "an extensive middle ground" which can facilitate radicalisation by providing a common language that connects the mainstream to the extreme fringe.

Bratich and Banet-Weiser's (2019) explain that because a fundamental part of Pick-Up Artistry, and neoliberalism more broadly, is the idea that success is available to anyone provided they do the work, they are unable to account for their failures. Those who try and fail, or indeed, those who recognise that the

advice and techniques can never work for them, are left to find their own explanation. The incel worldview is well positioned to reconcile this uncertainty, by providing a more structural critique, which explains they are the victims of forces outside of their control, that they have no hope of addressing. The transition from the red pill “self-help” communities, to more blackpilled incel spaces is also facilitated by the fact that the two ideologies are heavily grounded in evolutionary psychology. They have a similar understanding of how the world functions, although the blackpill is significantly more deterministic, and thus more inclined towards nihilism. Incels view the blackpill as settled, empirical, and scientific, and do not believe it to be ideological. For many interviewees, the benefits offered by the blackpill were that it could effectively explain reality, and indeed their situation, to a degree not matched elsewhere. This provided incels with truths and insights, which interviewees described as “liberating” as it gave them “more control” over their lives. This scientific grounding also served to make the blackpill appear apolitical. It did not have an agenda, but simply reflected the “truth”. This facilitated more direct and blunt discussions of love and attraction, which interviewees found to be genuinely helpful, as they were free from “cultural conventions” and “platitudes”. However, as will be discussed, the “science” that gives these ideas their truth is incredibly weak, suggesting that their decision to embrace this worldview may be more ideologically motivated than they realize, or are willing to acknowledge.

6.1 The Failure of the Red Pill

Lost boys who feel alienated from society will in many cases not simply be satisfied with their situation, and will eventually seek explanations and answers. However, their dissatisfaction with mainstream society may lead them to seek answers elsewhere. This can be an entry point into the cultic milieu. As noted by Davies (2019) an individual’s initial contact with the cultic milieu often happens as a response to some social disruption that leaves them feeling displaced and isolated. Leroux and Boislard (2022) explain that lost

boys who resort to the internet for answers, are likely to quickly find themselves exposed to ideologically motivated red pill communities. Like Whitsel's (2001) descriptions of the cultic milieu, a key part of these spaces is that they preach scepticism of mainstream explanations, which can help facilitate transitions towards ideologically similar spaces. This rejection of mainstream narratives also means that these shifts tend to be towards more idiosyncratic, society rejecting spaces. The following section will look at interviewees experiences with red pill communities, which exist as part of the same evo-psych, anti-feminist milieu as incels within the manosphere, although are arguably less ideologically extreme. While some lost boys may find some form of success with the solutions put forward by the red pill, not everyone can benefit from the advice shared in these spaces. It is clear that interviewees were not satisfied with the answers and solutions offered in this space, as all eventually found their way to incel spaces.

David suggested this is somewhat common among incels, explaining that many incels are initially red pillled, actively trying to improve their situation, but the cumulative failures and rejection eventually cause them to lose hope. He explained:

"It kind of evolves. I think its natural evolution, it evolves from red pill, thinking, I think, these incels, they have a formative experience, they, they go out and assert themselves into the world, right? They wanted to be dating, a lot of them started out as normal, whatever, rejection after rejection, they go on to a red pill, they improve their bodies, some of that they read these books, you know, like Game by Neil Strauss, but they still fail, and then they turn to the blackpill, or they have something happen and you know, they, and then they end up in the blackpill. That's kind of a normal evolution, I think."

A number of interviewees explained that they came across incel forums while researching ways to improve their dating prospects. Mike didn't remember exactly how he ended up on r/trp (the red pill subreddit) but assumed it happened while Googling advice on how to get girlfriends. He explained that although he liked the information on the subreddit, he must not have

benefitted from it, because he soon began posting on incel forums - "From there I, uh, browsed it for a bit, posted some of my pictures, got some ratings, kind of adopted the lingo and the ideas of the people there, and uh... I was there for a couple of years".

Ken similarly explained that he was red pill prior to becoming blackpilled. Like Mike, he could not quite remember what communities he was active in, or what the exact turning point was for him, but he knew that he was watching PUA videos on YouTube. Although Ken described himself as a former incel, he still very much considers himself red pill, and says he gets a lot of benefit from red pill teachings about "mindset" and "maintaining frame" which help him to keep calm and composed.

"Blackpill not so much, incel also not so much, but red pill I still like, how do I put it, I still think that some of the advice is actually quite good. Such as like, maintaining frame, etc. and just going to the gym, like because I believe red pill is more self-improvement. And actually also a member of like, MGTOW men going their own way. So then also took some advice from there which like, which is self-improvement, getting in shape, etc. and not having girls and sex and all of this be the priority in your life basically to find a new priority. That's the few principles or theories that I took away that I still find, that I think is quite useful and good, even though like even though today I no longer say that I'm an incel."

While Mike and Ken were unclear about what led to them leaving the red pill behind and embracing the blackpill, most other interviewees who had transitioned from the red pill to the blackpill knew exactly what had motivated this change. In many cases, a physical deficiency or disability was identified which led the interviewee to realise the limits of a red pill approach, and recognise that their situation was hopeless.

Luke, a UK based incel in his late 30s, was dismissive of the red pill, explaining "the red pill is "just lift bro". Pickup artistry crap". He later described it as "no bro, improve yourself", extreme looksmxing and all this other surgical procedural requirements". Despite being red pill for a number of years, Luke

eventually came to realize he was excluded from the benefits of the red pill because of a physical condition. Luke explained that he has severe osteoporosis, which means he could not benefit from lifting weights or gymmaxxing. This life-long condition also had a significant impact on his height, something he realized the red pill could not address

“Then, I basically heard about the red pill, the pickup artistry nonsense, Mystery and all this other, Neil Strauss, The Game, and this, that and the other, etc, etc. that was in the middle noughties to late noughties. But when I actually looked at it and actually saw that my height was, how should I say, a critical aspect of it. Then I became blackpilled”

Height was also a played a significant role in Dan’s blackpilling. He explained that he was red pillled long before he was blackpilled, and that he had been a member of red pill communities since he was 13 years old. He discussed getting into weight lifting and fitness at one point, although throughout the interview, it is clear it is his height that he believed was holding him back. Something that the red pill could not offer a solution to. Although he didn’t recall exactly when or how he came across incel forums, Dan’s blackpill trajectory appeared to have started with seeking answers on YouTube, where he eventually got into a proto-incel vlogging community called True Forced Loneliness (TFL). Although there are some exceptions, TFL vloggers, generally do not use terminology like red pill or blackpill, although the content of their videos is often anti-feminist and anti-PUA. This function of YouTube, as a platform for introducing individuals to more accessible, less extreme content, that can nevertheless prime individuals to be receptive to more ideologically extreme material at a later stage, is observed by both Evans (2018) and Miller (2018) as a common feature of extremists radicalisations stories. Dan described TFL as a less extreme version of inceldom, but says that it paved the way for him to lurk on incel forums. Although he found incels off-putting initially, he eventually started posting on them;

“I was like, I thought it was a little weird. I was like, there's no way I'm getting into this. I was like, I identify with it. But I'm not posting in here. I'm not. I'm

not one of them. You know, but then eventually, you know, started posting and I became one of them, I guess (...) curiosity killed the cat.”

It was clear Dan believed he would be an incel forever. He said that he always knew his height would be a significant barrier to him ever getting a girlfriend. It is possible that the more red pill spaces, which offer no solution to addressing this issue, did not appeal to him in the same way blackpill spaces, which at least recognized his issue, did. Dan also discussed his depression and feeling suicidal a number of times, again, something he says he has dealt with his whole life. It’s possible the negative outlook of incel communities appealed more to him.

This appeared to be what happened to Jake, who explained that he found his way to incel communities at a time in his life when he felt particularly hopeless. He initially joined a number of looksmaxxing subreddits for information about improving his appearance. However, Jake explained that he was mentally in a bad place at that time due to the death of a close friend. He soon came across blackpilled communities, which he found more appealing during this period.

“Um, at the time that... it had been a lot for me, and so, I had been going through some stuff. And so the tone there was really, all of them were down and, like, very depressing. And so I thought it was comforting that there are people who were facing the same struggles as me”

Rather than offering self-improvement however, he noticed these communities were “hyper-focused” on immutable facial features – “they talked about like the different like the forward facial growth, hunter versus like prey, I think a whole like a warrior and something else skull like the difference in skull shapes. Like that sort of stuff”.

Jake recognised that at the time, when he was feeling particularly depressed, the hopelessness of the blackpill appealed to him much more than anything being offered by red pill communities.

Rob explained that he was red pill for a long time before becoming blackpilled, in that he understood love, romance, and relationships as

something that could be studied and gamed as it was “just a product of neurochemicals”. He was particularly interested in the aspects of the red pill that drew from evolutionary science. During the interview he spoke at length about a YouTube channel called Far From Average, which uses an “evolutionary approach” to explain male and female “natures”. Although the YouTube channel does not specifically use the term red pill, the content of the videos is very much aligned

“Yes, yes, there was one YouTube channel called Far From Average, that I thought had some interesting ideas. Yes. Ideas mainly based on alpha males. And how women think, well, of course, that those ideas don't... he generalizes it you know, not all women are like that. And not all men are also like the way he described it. But he takes an evolutionary approach. That's what I like. He says, “oh, and the reason why men think this way, you know, it was because back when we were living in the wild, we had to be violent to because there were a lot of dangers”, you know what I'm saying “we had to protect the kids we had to protect against other predators we had to hunt” and so we you know, we needed to have these, these feelings of rage and violence inside of us otherwise we wouldn't survive”

Far From Average focuses on alpha and sigma masculinity, and shares advice on how one can go about making themselves confident, successful, attractive, etc. The channel eschews nuance in favour of brevity and clickbait titles that promise simple solutions to complicated problems – e.g. “3 Reasons You're Single”, “THIS WILL Change How Girls View You FOREVER”, “The Type of Man Girls SECRETLY Want (But Will Never Say)”, etc. Many of these videos have received well over a million views. The channel frequently uploads videos describing the differences between Male and Female “brain-wiring”, often with the assumption that once these are understood they can be “hacked” or manipulated (an idea which Rob believes to be true). A number of videos start from the premise that every woman is operating from lines of code, and that when you perform certain actions, they're innately “programmed” to respond in certain ways. These kinds of ideas are widely accepted throughout red pill and blackpill spaces.

Over time, as Rob began to read more literature on evolutionary science, he came to understand that there were multiple factors that influenced attraction and that appearance played an important role. Unfortunately he also felt that his “long face” was undesirable and so began looking for ways to address this. There were no red pill solutions to this issue. Rob explained that while googling solutions to this problem, he came across Mike Mew, the founder of “mewing” a much discussed figure in incel communities

“I was googling, you know, something that had to do with similarities in cranial facial structures between humans and other primates. And then, and then I stumbled upon Mike Mew. Yeah, yeah. And then from there on, I just entered Lookism at the same time [...] because a lot of it, what makes a person face attractive has a lot to do with our evolutionary history. So and they discussed that there - incels discussed that cranial facial structure, and a lot of facial features that get discussed there. So that's mainly why I'm there”.

However, not all interviewees had experience with the red pill. Some bypassed this stage altogether.

Will, for example, explained that the red pill had never been of interest to him. In Will's case, he identified the cause of his incelism as a hormonal issue which he had had since birth, but which started having much more negative impacts on his life around the time he hit puberty. During this time, he began putting on weight, and developed breasts, which led to him being bullied in school and eventually becoming more withdrawn. Again, this is an issue that the red pill was unlikely to have a solution to.

In Alan's case, it is possible that his complicated relationship with his own masculinity, something with which he explained he had been dealing ever since his breakdown, made the kind of alpha masculinity that pervades the manosphere appear unappealing. He explained that ever since the breakdown, he found himself cringing at “masculine things” like loud cars and aftershave, and that he has felt like less of a man ever since.

“I’ve never been, you know, super masculine, or I’ve never done a lot of the quote unquote, manly things that you would ordinarily do. And after this mental breakdown, I had, I find myself kind of cringing, and a lot of masculine things like loud cars, for example, will just kind of put me on it. I mean, never did before because, it was like - I was a man, essentially. Now, after the mental breakdown, I feel as if I’m like, less of a man or something and like, even just things like that, that like, like loud cars, or like aftershave or stuff like that will kind of just set me off. But that had never happened before. You know, that was never an issue.”

Jeff also explained that he did not engage in certain behaviours he associated with traditional masculinity – such as smoking, swearing and drinking – because he believed these behaviours were anti-intellectual. He felt he had missed out on social opportunities because of this, and that the fact he did not engage in these behaviours was one of the reasons that girls were not attracted to him.

For incels like Alan and Jeff, the more red pill communities, which view alpha masculinity as aspirational, may have been somewhat triggering. Incel forums however, which traffic in a non-alpha form of masculinity, may have appealed to them more. This supports the argument put forward by Ging (2019) that hybrid masculinity may be a useful framework for understanding incels. Hybrid masculinity is a form of masculinity that symbolically distances men from hegemonic masculinity, while reinforcing many of the same existing inequalities and power dynamics. As noted in the previous chapter, Alan considers himself to be a feminist, and here rejects many of the traditional signifiers of masculinity, although he still holds extremely misogynistic views.

It appears from these interviews that Bratich and Banet-Weiser’s (2019) idea that incels are “failed PUA’s” may be a little oversimplified. The experience did not seem to be limited to the PUA community, but to red pill approaches – such as looksmaxxing – more broadly. In many cases, interviewees did not necessarily fail with these techniques, but realised that they were excluded from the benefits offered. This exclusion was justified through reference to a

number of immutable features – height, skull shape, hormones. Nevertheless, these interviewees were still failed by “the neoliberal promise”, a meritocratic myth that anyone can succeed provided they as an individual are willing to put in the time and effort. Interviewees understood there were certain, external factors, outside of their control, which had a significant impact on their chances of success. This is something the blackpill can account for, in a way the red pill cannot.

6.2 Blackpill Science

Having been failed by the neoliberal promise of more red pillled approaches, interviewees were left to find their own explanations and to figure out their next steps. The blackpill was well positioned to reconcile interviewees’ failures at this stage. The blackpill could confirm that their failure was the result of factors outside of their control. By providing a structural critique that combined an intensely deterministic interpretation of evolutionary science, with a neoliberal framework that views dating in terms of supply and demand (wherein certain social elements, such as feminism can limit supply), those who cannot benefit from the red pill are given an explanation of their failure. In addition to this, it is an explanation that has an illusory scientific authority, and which absolves them of all responsibility for their situation. Despite its hopeless prognosis, many interviewees found this to be comforting, and even liberating.

Rob explained that he was drawn to lookism.net “for the same reason as any other incel” – the promise of scientific rules for understanding attraction.

“I find it because at the time, I was really into anthropology and evolutionary biology. And a lot of, in lookism, a lot of incel ideology, you know, crosses over with, with evolutionary biology, and psychology. And I was just googling a certain theme, a certain theory or something like that, that had to do with the evolutionary biology. And I stumbled upon that forum, a similar topic on that forum and stayed to discuss those ideas”

When asked if he found the blackpill helpful, Rob responded:

“Very helpful that, that that is, that brought forth an enormous amount of clarity that I desperately needed in my life. Just to know that sexual desire and love, for instance, is not something magical. No, it is biological and it has a clear explanation and a purpose, and that purpose is so that our species, we evolutionarily can do all the things that are going to make our species avoid extinction, survive and avoid extinction and develop over time”

Even among interviewees who tried to distance themselves from other incels, it was not uncommon for them to defend the blackpill as scientific. Alan was critical of many of the attitudes present on incel forums, and condemned the violent and misogynistic rhetoric, but believed the blackpill to be airtight, as it is based on fundamental ideas which he felt cannot be doubted

“I consider that the typical incels usually have a point when they say they're blackpilled, because the systemic issues they've identified are largely correct. If you ask the question, with a sane and sober mind, does 80/20 exist? Oh, Tinder released their dating information. And it clearly says 80% of the women are dating 20% of the men. That's data. That's data straight from the horse's mouth. So yeah, 80/20 does exist. If you ask the sane and sober mind, is there a 1 to 10 look scale? Duh! Yes, this is pretty standard stuff. It's been around since middle school, not rocket science. If you ask with a sane and sober mind has feminism increased women standards quite a bit... The answer is clearly yes. Not necessarily a bad thing. Maybe not. But it still has happened whether, whether you claim this is good or bad. So the core claims of blackpill are generally not up for debate”

Although he believed these core blackpill concepts to be irrefutably true, the bases Alan gave for each of these beliefs was not scientific. For the 80/20 rule he appealed to a much referenced Tinder Experiment which purports that 80% of women go for 20% of the men. Alan believed this rule to be universally true, and legitimized its truth by noting that this comes “Straight from the horse's mouth”, and emphasizing that “that's data”. However, he ignored that context in which that data exists, and obfuscated the scope of the research,

ignoring that the findings of this research only apply to tinder, and tells us nothing about dating more broadly. It would be unwise to draw any conclusions about dating beyond the app itself, as the algorithmic affordances of tinder incentivize snap decisions based on appearance. Regardless, this statistic is frequently shared in incel communities, and is often used to draw dire conclusions about their situation. The statistic is further catastrophized in incel communities by being tied to the untrue but widely accepted assertion that “all dating is tinder these days”.

The evidence on which Alan legitimized the idea of the 1 – 10 looks scale is even more dubious, simply saying that “its been around since middle school – not rocket science”. Despite Alan’s confidence in this assertion, there is no objective or universally accepted means for quantifying attractiveness. Alan does not recognize this, instead de-facto asserting its truth, not through scientific evidence, but rather through appeal to cultural convention. The extent to which he considered this belief to be beyond scepticism was evidenced by the sentence “If you ask the sane and sober mind, is there a one to 10 look scale? Duh! Yes, this is pretty standard stuff”. It’s so fundamentally ingrained into his way of thinking that to disagree with this statement is evidence of a lack of a “sane and sober mind”, or perhaps evidence that your interlocutor is not arguing in good faith. The third claim that Alan referred to was the belief that women’s standards have increased quite a bit as a result of feminism which he says is “Not necessarily a bad thing. Maybe not. But it still has happened whether, whether you claim this is good or bad”. Again, no specifics are given into what has changed for women, nor are there any temporal parameters (improved since when? As opposed to what?). Nevertheless, this belief pervades these communities, despite only being discussed in the most vague terms, often with an implicit belief that “women’s standards” have increased at the expense of men’s.

Alan went on to further explain how these “structural” factors had forced “higher looks” men to lower their standards

“[Incels] have identified that this is the problem, this is the part of the structure that is causing them... Or they blame the feminists, or they blame Tinder for allowing 80/20. So that the girls who are also kind of like lower looks number or whatever, like maybe the four to five girls or women, who they could ordinarily maybe try and get with are not paying them any attention, because they are going on Tinder, where there are a lot of, excuse me, higher looks number of guys who are willing to lower their standards because they want to have sex right now. They don't want to wait around, they don't want to go shopping, they just want to, to get going [...] the quote unquote “four or five rated girls” are going to go on Tinder and they're going to get a million hits. And the four or five rated guys are going to go on Tinder and get zero hits. They've identified that as a problem”

The assumption that economic principles can be neatly mapped onto concepts as nuanced, complex and irrational as dating requires an incredibly flattened understanding of how attraction and courtship operate in the real world. Despite this very thin basis, it is clear why this kind of logic may be appealing to young men who have remained single throughout their teen years, and into their 20s and 30s. At a glance, the data feels intuitively true. Even more appealing, it describes a scenario where they are not to blame. They are not required to do any significant reflection, or to work on themselves. The wording, that “feminists” and “tinder” “allow 80/20” suggests that not only is this an issue that affects incels negatively, but it's one in which feminists or tinder could intervene if they chose to. That they have not done so could suggest they are responsible for the perceived injustices which incels experience.

Alan, who likened the blackpill to mathematics and programming, as they are all “scientific” and “logical”, suggested that the logic of the blackpill may be appealing for autistic people as it provides rules and structure to courtship, which may otherwise be difficult for autistic individuals to navigate. This is supported by Borrell (2020), who suggests that some men with autism are drawn to extreme communities because of the amateur psychology they proffer, which tends to oversimplify complicated processes, and explain them

in black and white terms. Alan also suggested that “the over analysis of a problem is something that people on the spectrum generally tend to do more than people who are not on the spectrum”, echoing David’s observation that incel forums are filled with “armchair philosophers” who spend all their time theorizing, but have very little real world experience, and suffer from “analysis paralysis”.

For Luke, the validity of the blackpill was more grounded in existing academic research. Although this basis is a little more credible, it was certainly not without bias. A number of times throughout the interview, while discussing “Lookism”, and specifically “Heightism”, he asserted that “the blackpill is getting more and more recognized”. He referred broadly to research from the social sciences which suggested that height can have an impact on young men’s earning potential, their promotion prospects, and their success in the dating market

“Incels are saying well, heightism and lookism, especially for young for men. It's very detrimental. Because the studies are there, short men, our base pay is less on average per year, they're not promoted, etc., etc. [...] Everything that incels had said about heightism, lookism, this, that, and the other is coming to fruition, is coming to the major publicity now, about actually how unfair the dating market is”

While there is plenty of research in the social sciences that finds correlations between attractiveness, or related variables such as height, weight, hair loss, etc., and a variety of outcomes (from income and life expectancy to less tangible factors like trustworthiness), much of this research predates the existence of the modern incel milieu. There was an inevitability to Luke’s framing that gave the impression that all of the emerging evidence supported the blackpill. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that incels are more and more finding research that supports their argument, while research that does not is ignored. Luke also discussed research that supports the blackpill as though it is settled and not up for debate - “it's all been covered, in effect, that I don't really, I don't really need to go into again”. Needless to say, research

that does not support the blackpill does not receive this treatment on incel forums. On Incel forums (and throughout the manosphere more broadly) research from the social sciences is often outright rejected for being “unscientific”. Nevertheless, it appeared that when such research can be used to support the blackpill, it is uncritically accepted as true, and treated with a level of conclusivity and explanatory power that far exceeds the author’s conclusions, again indicating that blackpill beliefs may not be as scientifically grounded as most incels suggest. There is a clear confirmation bias in the evidence which they accept and allow to inform their worldview.

Part of the attraction of incel communities appears to be that they offer information, ideas and insights that interviewees describe as “liberating”, as they offer more “control”.

Rob explained that he wants to understand “everything” about himself, and believed that science was the best way to achieve this. He was particularly interested in how the brain works, listing a number of psychologists, neuroscientists and primatologists whose work he had read. He specifically stated that he wants to understand himself so he could have more “control” over his life and be “more free”, saying that he always lived with the feeling that he was “A puppet of his own brain” , that he was “conditioned” and his actions were “determined”.

“Because I always had the feeling I always live with, with this feeling on the back of my head, like, what is this? I’m a puppet of my own brain. And so I was living with that, that I’m conditioned. I’m determined. I always disliked, I always hated being, you know, biologically determined, conditioned by my brain, these forces inside of me that I don’t control that are controlling me. I’m just a puppet of my biological and neurological functioning [...] and after reaching this, this knowledge, you know, all that pressure, all that negativity, just fades off. Because you know, that you were feeling it, because you were ignorant. And so when, when you’re an ignorant animal, you’re just you’re just completely controlled by your functioning, you know, just, just picture any other animals rather than a human. No, a cow, tiger, a horse, they are

completely slaves to their functioning. They are robots exist completely automatic robots, they have no say, in what goes on inside of them, and the forces that govern them, they can't do anything about it. And why because they're ignorant. And the second you become more aware, and especially more knowledgeable, you gain some leverage, intellectually, and you use in you become less and less a blind slave to your function."

The blackpill helped Rob feel that he is in control of his life, and his decisions, and helped him understand the reasons why others behave the way they do. It is easy to see the appeal of such knowledge. As well as allowing Rob to "gain leverage", it also affords an air of superiority over those who don't have this knowledge, who he dismissed as "blind slaves", and dehumanized, calling them "puppets", "animals", and "automatic robots". It is clear he felt that this way of viewing the world had dramatically improved his life. Evolutionary sciences could explain human behaviour with a level of certainty (whether deserved or not) that no research from the social sciences could come close to. It is understandable that this might appeal to people who feel they lack control of their lives.

Rob had a positivist worldview, and dismissed things that are "unscientific" as "illusions", "fictions" and "delusions". They are "deceptive ideas" that come from "cultural conventions". He gave the example of the idea that "love is divine", saying that people are "hypnotized" and "inebriated" by this idea. He reified blackpill science because he believed it was only concerned with objective truth, and unlike "social conventions" or "ideologies", could not have ulterior motives or hidden agendas.

"Blackpill is just it's just someone who has no what Yuval Noah Harare calls fictions? You know? There's a better word for it. No. illusions. Yeah. There's, there's a better word for it as well. But you know, I can see you know, just those that don't have delusions, you know, it's the person that... For instance, thinking that love is divine. That's delusions, right? Someone that doesn't have deceptive ideas that were, that were fomented by cultural convention, by movies by etc. You know, someone who just knows, oh, human beings, their

psychology growing up, they were influenced by all of this. But science says otherwise. And science says otherwise not because it's funny, not because it's interesting, not because it's, it's going to bring forth an interesting culture. No science doesn't care about culture, any of that. It's just, it cares about the, you know, the objective truth. And I feel that growing up in this world, I always felt that these people were inebriated. You know what I mean? These people were just completely hypnotized by these ideas. And by these fictions, social conventions, ideologies, that are just ridiculous.

Rob clearly did not believe the blackpill to be ideological – Being blackpilled, in his opinion, was being free of ideology. He continued, expanding on what he means when he talks about “cultural conventions”

“But then relationships, they're very different from the romantic ideals you have growing up. And you were influenced by movies and by books and by songs, you know, by cultural conventions. And then you grow up, do you get in a relationship or two, and you realize, Oh, no. Your idealism and your, and your, and your lyricism quickly fades off”.

Rob believed people generally come to recognize the incongruity of the romanticised idea of love, with the reality of being in a relationship from first-hand experience, when the “lyricism quickly fades off”. The idea that love is divine was rejected by Rob for being unscientific, and the image of love as portrayed by movies, books and songs, was described as deceptive. He explained “They have no scientific substance [...] they're just made up”. It was not clear how recognizing this gave Rob an edge over others in his day to day life as he seemed to believe, nor was it clear how the idea that “love is divine” – something which most people likely treat as a platitude, or a poetic attempt to capture an ineffable concept, and not a settled fact – affects anyone negatively.

Rob was not alone in having little time for platitudes. Jeff and Phillip, the two interviewees who discussed their experiences with autism, explained that they found the banal advice about love they receive from friends and family to be

unhelpful and condescending. Phillip said he has tried to talk about his problems with real world acquaintances, but the advice he gets isn't helpful.

"Whereas I think, in the outside world, if you're seeking support from friends or something, they might they might tell you that you're not you're actually, you know, not ugly at all. Whereas in reality that might not actually be, be true. I mean, you, you, you could be, you know, someone who isn't particularly attractive. On the forum, I think if someone's discussing that sort of thing, people would, you know, people wouldn't want to give them a false or, you know, certainly meaningless platitudes or something by telling them that everyone is beautiful. You often hear people say, you know, everyone's beautiful in their, their own unique way, whereas I think, yeah, I think people on there have been through enough to know that some people aren't very good looking. And so they do tend to be more, I suppose, realistic."

Phillip was specifically talking about his experiences trying to get advice on improving his appearance. Whereas real world friends would tell him he's not ugly, Phillip appreciated that the discussions on the forum eschewed platitudes like "everyone's beautiful in their unique way", in favour of blunt critiques, which he found to be more helpful. Because of this, he viewed incel communities as more "realistic". While Phillip appreciated this "honesty", it is worth noting that elsewhere in the interview Phillip discusses his experiences with body dysmorphia and being rejected as a candidate for cosmetic surgery as a result. As many incels acknowledged over the course of the interviews, incel spaces are not supportive, and have been described as "crab-bucket communities" where members are predominantly interested in tearing each other down. Selfies shared by incels on these forums, or on the r/incelfies subreddit, show that many of these men are average or even quite good looking. Nevertheless they are harshly critiqued by their peers, and often told their situation is hopeless due to some immutable feature, and that their options are surgery or suicide. To incels with low self-esteem or body dysmorphia, these critiques may make the community appear to have value as an "honest" or "realistic" space.

Jeff also grew frustrated with platitudes when discussing his incelhood with real world acquaintances

“I usually got told were things like, like, “Oh, you have plenty of time” or some would say, “Oh, God has a plan for you”. And believe it or not, my aunt actually told me like, “oh, Gods still writing your love story”. And I’m thinking if there is a God, and he’s trying to write my love story, either he’s got writer’s block, or he got sick of writing it and then threw it away. I don’t see it happening. I’m 32 By the way, so the whole thing about God writing a love story is just ridiculous. Yeah, especially since there’s no evidence for it.”

Similar to Rob, Jeff rejected this advice which was grounded in belief in god and divinity, as there was no “evidence” to support it. Whereas religion had provided answers for difficult questions throughout his childhood and adolescence it was no longer able to provide sufficient guidance for issues relating to his incelhood. He went on to explain that he found the vague advice he received frustrating and difficult to understand due to his autism. He wanted more specificity.

“And they try to tell me things. Like, “Oh Jeff, it’ll happen just, just don’t – stop beating yourself up, stop being depressed so much” and things like “you need to work on yourself”. And the saying “working on yourself”, that’s always very vague to me, because they don’t tell me what is that exactly? To work on myself? Are they saying like, exercise more or get a different, different job or, or learn a certain skill? Its, its way too vague for me to wrap my mind around and it doesn’t help that I’m on the autism spectrum.”

These examples show that Jeff, like Rob, was very literal. Again, we can understand from his response to this advice why he may have found incel communities, in which courtship is reduced to a science, more appealing.

Luke was also critical of the platitudes incels got when looking for advice elsewhere. He described a version of the blackpill he ascribes to, the Whitepill, as follows

“White pill is basically saying right, life is crap, we know that, you know that. However, move on from your... move on with your life, enjoy your life as much as you can, better yourself, improve yourself, improve the situation and the awareness for incels and take it further from there, like moneymax, looksmax as much as you can, moneymax, statusmax the right way. And basically a stoicism... Just actually self-improvement, self-development, self-improvement”

Unlike the blackpill, which is defeatist and nihilistic, Luke described the white pill as “liberating” – “Now the thing is, I’ve heard that the blackpill is very fatalistic, defeatist, deterministic and I will say that the incels that’s, that’s how I that’s how I originally thought of it at first however for me (...) It’s actually more like cynicism, scepticism, and rationalism basically”. Importantly, it was different from the banal advice that men who have had trouble finding relationships constantly see elsewhere, which Luke dismissed as “propaganda”, perhaps implying deliberate intent to deceive. “So all the propaganda basically of “just be yourself”, and all this other personality crap”.

Despite the framing that the advice put forward by the blackpill/whitepill allowed one to see through the societal programming or propaganda, the advice Luke said that it offered often appeared to be as banal as the unhelpful advice incels often criticize normies for giving (“improve yourself”, “work on yourself” “self-development”, etc). It was not clear there were any unique insights, nor did there appear to be any specific solutions or guidance as to how one might go about achieving these vague goals. When asked how it has benefitted him, Luke repeated that it has shown him there are things he can do to improve himself.

“I’ve been actually going exercising, unfortunately I can’t go to the gym. I’ve also been, I’ve also been opening up my study books because I unfortunately, I let my studies lapse, I mean, lapse, and, you know, it’s one of those things you have to study. You have to get those qualifications. But you also have to get that knowledge to be able to do your work because I work in accountancy and finance. So basically opening up that reading really, I mean, getting up my

speed reading up to date, looking at learning languages, potentially looking at learning cooking. Also looking at learning a musical instrument would be enough because [friend] is a polyglot and also plays the piano and guitar and whatnot.”

Although it is no doubt a positive that Luke feels motivated and has aspirations like these, it’s not clear what the blackpill/whitepill has uniquely contributed that he has benefitted from, beyond telling him there are things he can do to “improve” himself – something which most people, incels and normies alike, would likely understand to be true. Many of the skills he lists - learning languages, instruments, cooking, speed-reading - are things that can be used to quantify self-development. These hobbies, which others may enjoy as an end in themselves, appeared to have been instrumentalized as a means to an end for Luke, in pursuit of the vague goal of self-betterment. He continued

“And yeah, and I basically thought, you know, I could actually, I could work with these ideas effectively or I could use them for self-improvement to actually better myself, better my money making capacity, better my health, better my sense of empowerment, because that’s what the white pill is it to the development of self, self-empowerment and self-betterment, and then taking yourself from there.”

Again, given the lack of any clear instructions of how one may go about achieving this, or what the expected benefits of “improving your speed reading” are, it was not clear what made this advice “liberating”, and what distinguished it from the platitudes he dismissed as “propaganda”. A parallel here can be drawn between the “insights” afforded by the blackpill, and David’s idea of incels as “armchair philosophers” who spend years online engaging in “high level philosophical discourses” only to come to insights that most normies already understood to be true.

6.3 Conclusion

The advantages of using interviews to understand a concept like incel radicalisation are apparent throughout this chapter. As discussed in the introduction, the majority of incel research produced to date has been static and one dimensional. While this has been useful for illuminating many important areas, interviews are better suited to capturing more dynamic processes such as radicalisation. These qualitative accounts of their “blackpilling stories” are well positioned to capture not just the trajectories, but to explain “how” and “why” incels become exposed to these spaces in the first place, and make the decisions they make throughout. Such insights are likely to prove beneficial to those hoping to design interventions targeted at incels. Three key areas were identified in these interviews that demonstrate how the red pill can function as a gateway through which lost boys can find their way to the more extreme and nihilistic blackpill.

First of all, the ease with which interviewees found their way to red pill spaces was notable. Bratich and Banet-Weiser (2019) explain that incels are often individuals who feel that they have been burned by the neoliberal promise of PUA communities. This research expands on this, suggesting it is not just PUA communities that function in this way, but that the neoliberal promise has increasingly spread into areas beyond simply PUA, or even manosphere communities. It has become an integral part of much of the self-help advice targeting young men today. Although these spaces may not explicitly describe themselves as red pill, or use the terminology, they still draw heavily from evolutionary psychology, and generally position themselves as an alternative to the mainstream, or “anti-woke”. Drawing from Whitsel’s (2001) concept of the cultic milieu, these blurred boundaries can be understood to facilitate an individual’s entry into red pill, and eventually blackpilled spaces, as they all eschew traditional explanations offered by the mainstream, in favour of an ideology that draws from evolutionary science. A common theme among interviewees was that they did not seek out manosphere communities directly, and did not appear to be driven by any misogynistic beliefs, at least initially.

They were primarily motivated by a desire to find solutions to their problems. However, as observed by Leroux and Boislard (2022), upon resorting to Google they were quickly exposed to YouTube and Reddit accounts that, although not necessarily explicitly red pillled, were grounded in the same evolutionary sciences. Interviewees described the kind of optimistic solutions they observed in these spaces, which ranged from relatively mainstream advice like “looksmaxxing “ and “gymmaxxing”, to more ideologically motivated approaches, such as pick-up artistry. This exemplifies Ward and Voas’ (2011) idea of the extensive middle ground that can function as a gateway, funnelling people from relatively mainstream spaces to more extreme communities. It also appears that the inability of algorithms to moderate content, as discussed by Daniels (2019), may have played a role in some cases, as interviewees described key points early on in their blackpilling where they consumed content from YouTube accounts, such as Far From Average, or the True Forced Loneliness network, which avoid explicitly identifying as red pillled or blackpillled and using the terminology, although still traffic in many of the same ideas. As noted by Whittaker et al. (2021), Haroon et al. (2022), and Roose (2019), YouTube’s recommendation algorithm is likely to expose people consuming this kind of content to more extreme versions over time.

The second key finding of this chapter is that the kinds of solutions shared within red pillled communities cannot benefit everyone. Some people are excluded by the kind of neoliberal masculinity proffered in these spaces. Interviewees identified a number of factors which they felt meant they could not benefit from these approaches, including physical deficiencies, disabilities, and depression. Other interviewees spoke of their complicated relationships with masculinity, and how they were put off by more alpha-forms of masculinity, which are dominant throughout the manosphere. Whether interviewees had tried and failed with these approaches, or recognized in advance the inability of the red pill to address their issues, it appears that most interviewees had lost hope prior to joining incel communities. This supports Mike’s idea that the most important factor in determining whether an

involuntarily celibate person becomes an incel or not, is the extent to which they have already given up. It also supports Bratich and Banet-Weiser's (2019) argument that the appeal of the blackpill is its ability to account for the failure of the neoliberal promise, in a way red pill communities cannot.

The final key finding of this chapter is that interviewees were drawn to the blackpill because it could explain the insurmountable structural factors that had brought about their situation, with an apparent scientific authority – something which neither the mainstream explanations nor the red pill spaces could offer. Interviewees generally spoke positively of the blackpill, and the clarity and control it gave them. However, although they might imagine themselves as being creatures of pure reason who are drawn to incel communities for their science, interviewee's beliefs appeared to be more ideologically motivated than they recognised. Despite claims of the blackpill being a liberating force in incels' lives, very little evidence of this emerged throughout the interviews. One notable exception was the cases in which it helped to make nebulous concepts like love, attraction, and romance more tangible and easy to understand, particularly for interviewees who had been diagnosed with autism. However, it can be argued that attempting to map these abstract concepts onto a simple scientific and economic framework leaves incels with ideas that are so stripped down they cannot be applied to any real-life context. Interviewees also described the blackpill as beneficial, not because it could change their situation, but because it could explain why their situation was inescapable. Not only was their loneliness not their fault, but that they were no longer obligated to try to remedy the situation. This could provide closure, allowing the individual to stop worrying about their romantic lives, and to focus their time and energy elsewhere. From this perspective, the appeal of the blackpill is easy to understand – it provides a scientifically grounded, exculpatory narrative and absolves the individual of any responsibility to make changes in their life going forward. This may explain why some individuals choose to embrace the blackpill ideology as an inarguable science, despite its incredibly weak scientific grounding

In Bratich and Banet-Weiser's account of the PUA to incel pipeline, it was observed that those who are failed by the neoliberal promise and embrace the blackpill become "mutated entrepreneurs" interested not in creative destruction, but rather pure negation. They describe Incel communities as offering a form of "anti-social support" which can facilitate this. This is largely coherent with interviewee's accounts. Despite speaking positively of the blackpill as being a "liberating" and "empowering" force that exposed the causes of their situation and gave them more control, it did not appear incels were taking any actions to improve their situation. In many cases, interviewees suggest that spending time engaging with other incels on the forums was having a negative effect on their mental health and instilled feelings of hopelessness. Nevertheless, they had no interest in leaving these communities. The following chapter will examine this phenomenon in greater detail.

Chapter 7

Incels as an Affective Counterpublic

Contrived Inequality and Instilling Hopelessness

As well as being able to explain the structural causes of incels inability to form romantic relationships with an illusory scientific authority, another benefit of identifying as an incel discussed by interviewees was the community it offered. It is understandable that this may be appealing to individuals who are socially isolated, and who have not been able to benefit from the individualised solutions offered by the red pill. Interviewees discussed the therapeutic benefits of seeing there were other people who were going through the same things they were, and that they were not alone. David noted the importance of being able to speak with people who have a shared experience of “the miseries and raptures of life”, while Ken also acknowledged there was consolation in realizing there were a lot of other young men having an equally difficult time finding partners.

“Oh, there is so many more people who think like me (...) I never knew there's actually a community behind all of this. And that was heartwarming. Maybe like, Yeah, not exactly heartwarming, but like, consoling. I'll just put it that way. Yeah. Like, I'm not the only one out there who can't get laid, in a sense?”

Although many interviewees spoke positively of this moment of realization, the benefits derived from it appeared to be fleeting for most. Their circumstances remained mostly unchanged. However, they now had some form of community and collective identity. This opened up new avenues for affecting change in their lives, which differed significantly from the individualized solutions discussed in more red pill spaces. By embracing their victimhood, they could lobby for equality, an approach well suited to those who embody hybrid masculinity.

This chapter begins by looking at the nature of the power afforded by this more collective, political approach, and the ways in which it purportedly allowed individuals to have more control over their lives. Incel communities help lost boys to reframe their loss of privilege as oppression, helping to establish an idea of incelhood as a marginalized identity. This allows members to frame themselves as righteous underdogs, and employ the same tactics and rhetoric as other oppressed and marginalised groups. However, it is found that the collective approaches offered here are no more effective for improving their situation than the individualised solutions offered by the red pill. The supposed power offered by the blackpill fails to materialize because incels have not correctly identified the actual structures that are negatively impacting their lives. Instead, they focus on feminism, and other marginalized identity movements, which are seen to be more privileged. The extent of incels' efforts to affect change, is to suggest that they are as deserving of the sympathy and supports others receive. This is achieved by emphasising the broad similarities between incels and other marginalised groups, while ignoring important differences. Because their claim to being victims of inequality is so contrived, this approach is unlikely to find purchase among those who do not already accept the blackpill as being true. However, this approach is effective at evoking and heightening negative emotions such as outrage and hopelessness, which may help to consolidate in-group identity (Ahmed 2004) and reaffirm the blackpill. It is thus argued that incels can be understood as an example of an affective counterpublic (Papacharissi 2014), rather than a group formed around a cohesive political ideology.

This chapter will end with an examination of interviewees' discourses about their experiences with incel communities, and the impact they believed joining them has had their lives. Despite discussions about the blackpill being generally positive, interviewees overwhelmingly felt that spending time on incel forums negatively affected their mood, worsened their depression, and contributed to feelings of hopelessness. These communities also helped to heighten feelings of outrage and injustice. Although incel communities allow members to feel these emotions intensely, which may provide some transitory

form of catharsis and help to establish solidarity, they are unable to offer the structure, supports, or indeed the political vision, members require to improve their situation at an individual or collective level. In some cases, interviewees believed that spending time on these forums actually made it less likely that their situation would improve. Nevertheless, they were reluctant to elave.

7.1 Contrived Inequality

For some interviewees, the power and control afforded by the blackpill came from the collective incel identity it helped to establish. Luke viewed inceldom as a movement with political objectives based around equality and raising awareness, while David semi-jokingly described incel communities as effectively functioning as “white males matters” groups. Alan’s take was somewhat less political, suggesting that they can be understood as “self-help groups” based around the idea of an incel identity. However, it quickly became clear the political horizons of incel groups were limited to highlighting the progress of others and employing a skewed, a-historical idea of “equality”, to suggest that incels’ plight was being ignored by those in power. This was an area that interviewees were eager to discuss, although the examples shared were unlikely to convince anyone who has not accepted the blackpill as being true. The following section will look at the many ways in which these interviewees attempted to manufacture examples of injustice and unfair treatment of incels to legitimate their calls for equality.

Throughout our interview, Alan frequently made allusions to equality and egalitarianism, often expressing a belief that feminism had been “achieved”, and that patriarchy had been “got rid of”:

“And so we got rid of the patriarchy, that was good. But we're running into this other issue, where now we have this kind of, I wouldn't call it like, reverse-patriarchy is not the right word. But we have the kind of a reverse problem, where instead of women needing consent, which is not good, now, we're having a lot of men who can't get consent at all. And that's not good either.”

Supporting the argument put forward by Gill (2007) and Ging (2019), it appeared postfeminism had laid the groundwork for misogynistic beliefs to be legitimized under the guise of equality. Feminism was viewed as an over-correction which has given rise to what he calls a “reverse-problem”. Alan suggested that as an unintended consequence of patriarchy being addressed, men were now not able to “get consent at all”. He framed incelism as an issue of “consent”, although obviously this is not what “consent” is usually understood to mean. He went on, equating the current situation in which incels find themselves, with the experiences of women under patriarchy - “It's just, it's not normal, and it's not healthy. It's not any more normal or healthy for society to expect its members to be incels, any more than it really was healthy, to have patriarchy and say that women shouldn't have consent. Neither of these extremes are a good thing.” Ignoring all historical context, Alan drew a false equivalency between issues relating to women and consent, and young men who are unable to find a sexual partner, rhetorically suggesting that these two, distinct phenomena exist on a single spectrum.

David similarly understood recent progress by women in certain areas as evidence of men being neglected.

“And I don't know, I mean, I've heard that, in the last 10 years, men have been kind of neglected, or women have been the focus, I guess, you know, I mean, maybe you know, women are making more money now, or they're more in graduate school in the workforce. And maybe men kind of got left out in the last 10 years for society. Maybe that could be a one theory of it, you know, in the last 10 or 15 years, man, we're not the focus on the forum being discussed. I was listening to a therapist talk about it. He was talking about his clients, you know, and he was like, my clients, the men are all struggling, the women are doing much better now, in the last 10 or 15 years. He's like, it used to be the opposite. Women are making more money, women are more in graduate school, women are succeeding more. And men have kind of been overlooked in some ways, you know, which kind of gives rise to the Incel movement. It was kind of his take on it. But I do think that's an interesting way to think about it. I mean, I do see some truth in that, you know, men are just like, Alright, take

care of your own shit, shut the fuck up, work hard. And there's been, I guess, the #MeToo movement or all this stuff for women. You know? There's even been like BLM black lives matter for black men. I mean, this is mostly we're talking about white, Asian or Indian and on these incel sites, yeah. Right. So, I mean, maybe they just didn't have anything looking after them. And I mean, it's true. And I include myself in that group too. I mean, maybe we just kind of there wasn't a lot of focus on us, we kind of make our own waves a little bit, you know, and find out our own little groups, you know, and so there's definitely not a young White Males Matter group that would be we'd all be arrested. And we started one”

At no point did David highlight anything that was being done to men, beyond the fact that men have not been “the focus” for the last 10 to 15 years. The specific examples he gave to illustrate his point were that there were more women entering the work force and in grad school, and that women were earning more now. These are the same two examples highlighted by Kimmel (2013), who explains that women’s apparent progress in these areas is reflective of their relatively low representation to begin with. Nevertheless, David’s assumption that this is a negative for men suggests that gender relations are indeed viewed as a zero-sum game. Similarly, #MeToo and BLM were understood as privileges women and black people enjoy, rather than (mostly inadequate) movements to address the inequalities these groups have historically experienced. David viewed them as evidence that white and Asian men have been ignored, and put forward the idea that incel sites exist for men who don’t have anyone else looking out for them, half-jokingly explaining that you couldn’t start a “white males matter” group, before adding “we started one”.

Luke was perhaps the post politically active interviewee. He explained that in the past he had been an EDL (English Defence League) activist, but now was concerned with the issue of men being discriminated against. He was concerned with the issue of “lookism”, and in particular “heightism” and said he had brought up the issue with his local MP and other legal groups. He attempted to highlight the preferential treatment women were shown by

drawing an equivalence between misandry and misogyny, and noting that only the latter was discussed by policymakers (a UK law to designate misogyny as a hate crime was proposed in 2021 but did not become law).

“Well, if they're going to make misogyny a crime, then they're going to actually have to make misandry a crime, you can't have a hate crime law, which protects one and then allows that allows that other one group to actually be hateful towards another group (...) I'm not having any laws like that anymore. And we're not gonna have our freedom of speech censored anymore (...) now they're trying to pedestalise women as pawns in their little power-mad censorious games”.

The fact that there was no discussion of introducing laws to label misandry hate speech was seen by Luke to be evidence of policymakers desire to “pedestalise” women while censoring men’s “freedom of speech”. Again, no historical context was included to explain why there might be a greater need for designating misogyny a hate-crime than misandry. However, on a number of occasions throughout the interview, Luke called for “equality of treatment” for men and women. Adding “of treatment” as a qualifier to the concept of equality may suggest an awareness of the historical and structural differences between men and women’s experiences that he didn’t want to acknowledge, as it would not benefit the narrative he is trying to promote.

Another approach to highlighting the mistreatment of incels was to draw an equivalence with a group who did receive support and sympathy, and to suggest incels deserved the same treatment. One of the most extreme examples of this occurred during my second interview with Alan, where he argued that although suffering was unquantifiable, a case could be made that incels experience more suffering than victims of sexual assault.

“Yeah. Being raped is bad. Being raped is a point in time traumatic event that is bad. All day long. That's bad. We don't want this. (...) But the amount of suffering that you wind up with being an incel, it's not a point in time at that, it's just stretched out over a long, long, long, long time. It drives you completely insane. And it does not make for a stable person. Because you're constantly

being tortured by your body. "Why aren't you having sex? You're supposed to have sex. Why are you not doing this?" Your body is telling you to do this. And society is telling you "No, you can't do this". Whether it's these religious wackos these religious lunatics who tell impressionable young children, they'll burn forever in a lake of fire if they have sex like their body wants them to. Or whether it's these lunatic feminists who say, "I don't care if you suffer, I don't care if you never get laid, fuck you". It's the same thing (...) and that's what drove me to the incels like, well, they are nuts. And do I agree with the incels? I don't know, let me find out. And because I obviously don't agree that that rape is good, because it's not. But it's the... it's the difference between like, would you rather be stabbed once and then just be stabbed to be done with it? Like rape? Or would you rather have to wear some like pins and needles vest or something that's constantly torturing, you're not hurting? You're not, you know, you're not... It doesn't pierce the skin. But it's always needling you all the time. And you try to lean back in a chair and it jabs you, you know, would you rather do that for your whole life? I mean, which one would you want? Which one would you choose? If you had to pick one? Which one would it be? It's probably be being stabbed, to be honest with you, you know? Now I'm not saying well, being an Incel is worse than rape. I don't think so. It's just if you could quantify the amount of suffering, like - you can't quantify suffering - but if you could, and you put being violently raped, and the associated psychological trauma, let's not take that part, on one end of the scale, and put being an incel for a lifetime, on a scale, which one's going to be more? Which one's going to be heavy? Probably the rape, but the Incel is going to be pretty heavy, too, it's probably gonna be about the same. Because you are taking a lifetime of slow burn over being, over a point in time flash. And it's the... Ultimately you're talking about a similar level, if not the exact same."

Despite making a fleeting reference to the "associated psychological trauma", Alan's argument suggested that the suffering and trauma experienced by victims of sexual assault exists only during the assault itself, which he described as "a point in time flash". He grounded his argument in an idea that not having sex was unnatural, and that suppressing a bodies "natural" urges

“drives you completely insane”. Ignoring the flawed premise of the thought experiment, which was based on the idea that this kind of suffering is quantifiable (which Alan acknowledged is not the case), or the baseless assumption that the suffering would be equal (an unknowable and untestable hypothesis), Alan also ignored all the extant reasons which may explain why one group might receive more sympathy from society than the other, and why society may be more invested in trying to address the issue of sexual assault, over the issue of incelism. The only important variable as far as Alan was concerned, was suffering, which he baselessly suggested is “probably gonna be about the same”.

The body positivity movement was also invoked to highlight inequality. In advance of our interview, Luke emailed me an article about Primark using plus sized models to sell clothes over Instagram, explaining that he wanted me to have read this article in advance and be ready to discuss, signaling how important he felt this issue to be. His email suggested the contents of the article would be self-evidently outrageous. It was not clear what Luke wanted me to take away from the article, but when the topic came up in our discussion he explained

“You see, there's a lot of body positivity movement for women, but not for men. And this is where incels are actually picking that up and saying, “Hang on a minute, mate. Hang on a minute people. We're dealing with a world where we're facing off against the very same things that women are facing off against, however they're getting, they're getting a pat on the back and actually a shoulder to cry on. And we're getting a boot up the ass. You know, that's not equality. That's not fair treatment”. So, you know, it's um, yeah, that's, that's another one of those things, what can you say?”

Luke later explained that he felt the exclusion of discussions about men's height in the movement is evidence of “hypocrisy”, although he was uninterested in the idea of trying to establish a movement for men or to integrate them into the existing body positivity movement. He primarily seemed to be interested in using this as a means to chastise women as

hypocrites. It is worth noting that there has certainly been at least some progress in terms of establishing a body positivity movement for men. Although some articles discussing Men's Body Positivity are dismissive in tone, it's also true that women involved in body positivity movements regularly receive significant pushback and derision. A cursory glance of the comment section of the Instagram posts highlighted in the article linked by Luke revealed that although the model certainly received a lot of positive encouragement, she was also submitted to a lot of very personal abuse, centered entirely on her appearance. Luke did not mention these comments, nor did he acknowledge that historically, men have not faced the same pressures to maintain their appearance that women have. Although men can certainly be mistreated due to their appearance, they are generally not held to the same impossibly high standards as women, nor have predatory industries emerged to prey on their anxieties to the same extent. Nevertheless, Luke suggested these "power imbalances" needed to be addressed in order to prevent "further massacres", and again called for "equality of treatment".

"Because these are the issues that need to be addressed, to stop to stop further massacres and, and other crap like that happening. And to actually re-address the power, I'm gonna say the power imbalance. We address the state of play that people are finding themselves in now. I'm not actually advocating for, how should I say, any incel Sharia crap, Caliphate nonsense like that. Which is saying, we just expect, I mean, equality of treatment, we don't want to be negatively commented on because were short, we don't want to be negatively discriminated against, passed over for promotions, or, or, etc., etc. passed over for dating because were short".

Attempts were also made to equate incels with groups that comprise the LGBTQ+ movement. Alan spoke about his experiences as a lurker on transgender forums, and on a number occasions, claimed that transgender forums and incel forums "are the exact same".

"I started lurking in this this trans support forum. I will tell you what, they're the exact same forum. They are no different. You have people talking about

suicide, every two seconds. You have people talking about long term depression, every two seconds. You have people saying what is the matter with me every two seconds and the rest of the community saying there's nothing wrong with you look at all the rest of us. We're the same. There's nothing but attempting to, to console them and say, hey, you're not the problem. Society's the problem.”

Obviously, to say that transgender forums and incel forums are “the exact same” is not accurate. Alan ignored important differences between the two spaces (e.g. the fact that inceldom is a chosen identity), again choosing to focus on the similarities he observed (both groups discuss mental health), while mischaracterizing incel communities by exaggerating the support and compassion members receive, while ignoring the negativity and vitriol. He went on;

“And trans people still get kicked out of their house, when they come out as trans, they still get discriminated against. They still, you know, have this, that and the other happens. But the difference is, now they have a support network. And that support network has been socially legitimized, which is a good thing. So that when they do come out, they have a safe landing zone. Which is great. Two thumbs up. But incels, who are victims of the exact same, not the exact same social construct, but the exact same type of problem, it's a social problem. It's not a... Incels aren't broken, society is, trans people aren't broken, society is.”

Alan addressed and immediately disregarded the material fact that many transgender people get kicked out of their houses – something which does not regularly happen to people who choose to identify as incels – but suggested that because they have a “socially legitimized support network” their situation was preferable. The fact that incels do not have this same “safe landing zone” was used as evidence that society treats transgender people better than incels. Alan seemed to imply that because being an incel and being transgender are both “social problems”, the experience should be the same. It is however important to note that this characterization of the transgender experience as

a relatively frictionless existence because it has been “socially legitimized” does not accurately reflect the experiences of transgender people today who are increasingly being problematized by reactionary and conservative groups, while most incels are able to live their lives without any family, colleagues and acquaintances ever knowing of their inceldom. Despite claiming to understand the issues the transgender community face, Alan ignored this, perhaps because it was not in the interest of his argument for this to be acknowledged.

Luke also brought up the cause of incels in juxtaposition with the LGBTQ+ community, who it was clear he believed were less deserving of sympathy and support.

“And then we've got the whole notion of “no one is entitled to sex”, and “no one has died from a lack of sex” well, and it's espoused by the radical feminists again, who are funnily enough espousing political lesbianism and promoting this Nordic model of sex work. Well, I'm not being funny or anything, but if nobody's entitled to sex, why did we go ahead and decriminalize homosexual acts between two people when we believed before that it was a perversion, and that it was predatory.”

Luke was outraged and indignant at this point in the interview, although it appeared his outrage was rooted in his own misunderstandings. He conflated the decriminalization of homosexuality, with homosexuals being “entitled to sex”. Given that incels are frequently told that “no one is entitled to sex”, Luke was quick to highlight the hypocrisy of the situation. Again this appeared to Luke as a situation in which the LGBTQ+ community were being shown preferential treatment to incels, when in reality, it was an example of the community being given the same rights heterosexual incels have always had in the UK, where he is based. This, to Luke, felt like an injustice. He went further, appearing to suggest that because homosexuality used to be viewed as “a perversion” and “predatory” it ought still to be. It was unclear whether he himself holds these views about homosexuality, although he clearly has no qualms about revisiting outdated, bigoted discourses to make incels appear to be more deserving of support. This was seen again when he claimed that

because domestic abuse is proportionately more common in lesbian relationships than in heterosexual relationships, the fact that they were legally permitted is evidence of “toxicity”, “elitism”, “supremacism” and “narcissism” among the LGBTQI+ community.

“Why did we decriminalize lesbianism? I mean, lesbian sexual acts, because currently it’s actually being shown that lesbians actually experience far more domestic abuse proportionately than heterosexual couples do. You know? So, you know, there's a, there's a hell of a lot of toxicity going on, and a hell of a lot of elitism and supremacism. And I would say narcissism amongst these other groups, which, how should I say, cloud clouds a lot of their judgments, or actually, it doesn't cloud a lot of their judgment, they are aware of what they're doing, but yet, they still think they can get away with it effectively”

Luke clearly believed that same sex couples receive preferential treatment, but that incels are more deserving of sympathy. He invoked the language of oppressed groups in his critique (“toxicity”, “elitism”, “supremacism”), perhaps as a means to making incels appear more sympathetic, by portraying them as underdogs or “victims” of these “elites”. Given that Luke and his fellow incels have the same legal right to sex as same-sex couples in the UK where, it’s possible that this felt injustice comes from his experience of seeing the LGBTQ+ movement being championed while no similar support exists in the mainstream for incels. This can contribute towards feelings of injustice and unfair treatment, albeit in a superficial way that does not hold up to any real scrutiny. Nevertheless, Luke and other incels appeared eager to indulge this belief.

As noted by Marwick and Caplan (2018) there are advantages to being able to position yourself as a victim of oppression. Framing oneself as an underdog can make arguments appear more sympathetic, while making critics appear cruel and uncaring. However, in the absence of any real, tangible examples of being treated unjustly, interviewees were forced to manufacture examples on incredibly thin pretenses. In the place of persuasive examples, interviewee’s arguments often relied on flattened versions of “equality”, wherein

equivalences were drawn with other groups by intensely focusing on similarities, while ignoring important differences. Further “evidence” of injustice was afforded by invoking heightened emotions such as outrage and incredulity, which Allan (2015) notes are often employed performatively.

Despite their lofty rhetoric about “equality” and incel “identity”, it was not clear identifying as an incel had afforded them any more control or power over their situation. However, this collectivized approach, formed around an idea of incels being a marginalised identity, was useful for affirming grievances and reinforcing feelings of injustice. Ahmed (2004) finds that some negative emotions – specifically pain and suffering – can serve a political function insofar as they can help to consolidate in-group identities and justify interventions. She refers to this as “the cultural politics of emotion” and suggests that rather than simply being psychological states, these emotions can be understood as a form of cultural practice that can help connect individuals with political ideologies, and form communities. Papacharissi’s (2014) work on affective publics similarly finds that emotion can play an important role in helping groups consolidate around specific ideologies. Ging (2017) explains that this can be seen in the manosphere, where the pervasive idea that men are suffering as a consequence of feminism, evidence for which is generally anecdotal and emotionally loaded, has allowed a number of disparate groups, whose goals may seem otherwise unaligned (MRA’s, PUA’s, MGTOW, etc.) to coalesce around the red pill. In this case, interviewees could invoke emotional arguments formed around “inequality” and “injustice” in order to reinforce their belief that incels were being ignored and excluded, while other marginalized identities were being privileged at their expense. However, the arguments used to justify this belief are unlikely to convince anyone not already predisposed to be sympathetic toward the blackpill, meaning the primary audience for such messaging is likely incels themselves – a group who acknowledge that they are powerless to change their situation. Incels can thus be understood as an affective counterpublic, as the group sustained by bonds formed around sentiment, rather than any cohesive political ideology or vision. Despite the political aesthetics of these discourses

around equality, they were unlikely to effect change in ways that would benefit incels or improve their circumstances. This was reflected in discussions about interviewees overall experiences with incel communities, which demonstrated a clear belief that these communities did not offer any solutions or supports, and ultimately left them feeling devoid of options.

7.2 Instilling Hopelessness

Although incels tended to describe the blackpill in positive terms – as “empowering” and “liberating”, or that it was “a great comfort” - another common theme that emerged over the course of the interviews was that not only did incel communities and forums not help, but that spending time on them negatively affected interviewee’s mental health, and contributed to feeling of hopelessness.

David explained that whenever he spent time on lookism.net, he could feel the influence of the blackpill ideology on his day-to-day thinking. Even though he recognized this, he couldn’t help but internalize a lot of the beliefs on the forum. He believed Lookism had “corrupted his mind” and “misshapen” his brain - “I mean, a lot of them know it's not healthy for you, it kind of corrupts your mind. You could do a fucking MRI of my brain and it would be like, misshapen. I mean, I get it. It's bad for you in the sense that it it's just constant”. He believed that incel communities have made it more difficult for him to maintain healthy relationships with women, and that the forum had negatively affected his confidence, and worsened his ability to deal with rejection.

“Before I got introduced to lookism Shane, when I would get turned down by a woman, I would go on a spree of self-improvement, you know, it was like, kind of, you know, why do I expect such a high value partner, if I'm not working on myself to that degree” .

He also explained that he has noticed an inverse relationship between his mental health and being on lookism

“What your exposed to becomes your personality (...) But I think at the end of the day, it should be used very sparingly for me, yeah, as with all things, but I just I just noticed, my mental health just rapidly declines, the more I go on, it's like an inverse relationship.”

David believed the forum isn't entirely harmful, and that there is some advice which may benefit users. However, he suggested that the site should be “used sparingly” (one day out of the month) for “very small doses of motivation”, otherwise it will “destroy your life”. It should be treated as a resource (for harsh truths and pragmatic advice) rather than a community. However, David gave no indication as to how users might be expected to distinguish beneficial content from content which may cause harm

Although Alex appeared to believe that Incel communities had the potential to provide positive benefits, he also suggested that whether or not the forum was helpful depends on how ready the individual is to deal with the “truth” of the blackpill, acknowledging that the ideas shared in these communities have the potential to make members angry and even suicidal.

“I mean, it's kinda like, the blackpill, if you can't handle it, you end up being a suicidal person I guess.... you kind of turn yourself into a monster filled with rage, kind of punching yourself normally, and then you become so much more nihilistic, you just want to get revenge on the world by destroying it mostly, you want to see the world burn. You don't care about women anymore by then.”

While the harms Alex listed were clear and serious, the benefits he described were less concrete. When asked how the blackpill has benefitted him, he explained that it has helped him to understand that the world runs on “simping”.

“Yeah, through simping we have cars and stuff, we look flash to impress, so we can get women. Have a girlfriend in our life, but now, everyone's uncomfortable, women aren't interested in guys any more, but still [...] simping still continues, but human progression just stops, you know [...]. You

know, like, evolutionary theory and stuff, you know. Evolution is still true, but why people doesn't live to 300 years old [...] you know, algae and shit. Evolutions kind of stopped.”

Alex's description of how the blackpill has “helped” him was incoherent, and read more like a list of vague grievances he has come to hold. He believed human progression has stopped and that things are getting worse, although it was unclear how this relates to “simping”. He believed he sees things clearly, and has a privileged insight which allows him to understand how bad things have gotten – but the evidence he drew from includes the fact that humans don't live to be 300. There was no real insight here, but nevertheless, it angered him. Elsewhere in the interview he explained he does not have hope that the future will be better because more children in America want to be influencers than astronauts. He also explained that he gets angry when he sees TikToks of people dancing. It was not clear how these ideas relate to the blackpill, or why they should make him angry in the first place. From our interview, it did not appear the blackpill was having any positive benefits, or motivating him to make any changes. The information he was finding on these forums only served to make him more pessimistic about the future. Incel communities appeared to provide him with a constant flow of content he could draw on to further his feelings of outrage. Despite this, he viewed himself as someone who could “handle” the blackpill.

Mike explained that he feels more hopeful when he spends time on red pill spaces, but loses this hope when he goes on Incel spaces - “Well uh, I wasn't really feeling hopeless browsing the red pill, it gave me hope, but browsing looksmax, blackpill, incel forums, lessened that hope a bit.”.

Jake noticed that members of incel forums weren't encouraging each other, or trying to help anyone else improve, saying “And there was no, like, really encouragement to get better between the users. It was just a bunch of self-loathing, and nobody really wanted to improve over there.” He explained that he was unfamiliar with Incel ideas and concepts before joining r/braincels, but that the subreddit made “something click” in him which “Worsened his

insecurities”, by providing novel things for him to feel insecure about, which he otherwise would never have considered.

“Um, I'd never heard of them before, or any of those terms beforehand. But it sort of made something click in me, in a way, I think it worsened my insecurities, I learned about wristcels and all the type over there and I was thinking, “Oh, maybe like, after reading it here. It's my wrists that are too small. That's why I haven't had any girlfriends” or “it's because I'm not white”. Or it's because I don't have hunter eyes or do crazy insane things like that. And it made me, yeah, it worsened my insecurities.”

It was suggested that the reason incel communities are unable to help members, and in fact seem to worsen their situation, is that their singular focus on sex obscures other things that are keeping them unhappy. David, who describes himself as an incel in a “cultural sense” but generally has no issues having sex, said incels are “worshipping at a false prophet”, and explained that whatever incels are lacking, whatever issue needs to be addressed, it's not going to be solved by something external.

“And we don't need to find these things and external, you know, it's just like, everyone is looking for a god or to feel connected, they think they're gonna find it inside of a vagina, basically, which is really just a lack of them having experience with it (...) if they had all had sex with about 10 or 15 girls, that the site would die in three days [Lookism Mod] would have to shut it down. Because they kind of wouldn't care anymore. You know, already, or it would be Money.net. Or Money-ism or Dick-ism, you know? (...) just basing your whole life around sex is such a robbery, it's like living in the smallest room in the house, you know? So, and I think you need to have sex to realize that”

Incels have created a situation where they believe sex is the only thing they need to be happy. They have formed an identity around their inability to acquire something that many believe to be literally unobtainable. However, David believed that if the Incel's on lookism did have sex, they would quickly realize it's not the answer to whatever issues they are having. Elsewhere in the interview, he made reference to incel's who have had sex, and then

immediately returned to the forums, complaining that they now want sex with more attractive partners, kinkier sex, or sex with a partner with whom they can start a family. He also explained that even if all their sexual needs were met, they would find something else to complain about, joking that the website would be called “Moneyism or Dickism” (as opposed to Lookism.net). There would always be something else they want or need, unless they can address underlying issues. David believed that whatever these underlying issues are, the causes are more likely to be internal than external, an idea that is antithetical to the incel worldview.

Elsewhere in the interview David discussed changes he has made in his life that have improved his situation (exercise, meditation, eating healthy etc.) but recognized that this kind of advice is generally not well received on incel forums. Real, effective personal development, he explained, takes discipline and effort, but forum members don't seem to be interested in incremental progress. David recognized that everyone, incel and otherwise, experiences some degree of suffering or discomfort in their lives. For most people this can be worked on, and maybe even an opportunity for the individual to learn. Lookism.net however, does not give users the tools to learn or grow from their suffering. In fact, David believed it was more likely to perpetuate it.

“I mean, it doesn't matter who you are, you know, everybody has things going on in their lives that make their lives difficult, or, you know, I mean, they don't understand that through their own suffering. Suffering leads to grace, you know, it should not lead to more suffering, it should lead to an eventual... Man's Search for Meaning Viktor Frankl, you gotta be worthy of your suffering, but it should lead to some type of enlightenment, but it's looking like lookism is an experiment that essentially might have failed. It might be leading to more suffering. Might be perpetuating itself, you know?”

A clear example of how misidentifying the problem makes it impossible to identify solutions can be seen with Rob, who believed anything that is not going well in an incels life is caused by a lack of sex. As a result. Sex is treated as a “panacea” that can cure mental illness and mood disorders, and improve

confidence. He explained that as a “sexual creature” if you don’t have sex, “Depression comes in”.

“But even being average, there were times you know, a year, year and a half, without any, any woman, without any girl without any female companion or intercourse. And it gets very dark. And I understand why they get so depressed and so hopeless. Because it's really, when, when you develop as a sexual creature, you know, if you don't have sex, if you don't have girlfriends, if that's not a part of your life, then depression comes in. It's just consequently biological, that's just consequence. It's just what your brain and your body produce, if you don't get laid.”

While it is possible that a lack of sex does contribute to feelings of depression experienced by many incels, Robs framing – that “depression comes in” if “you don’t have girlfriends” is a massive oversimplification of what is happening. The causes are likely to be multifaceted. Robs linear understanding however, is not uncommon on incel spaces, where almost every issue an incel is experiencing is understood to be related to not having sex. As a result, sex is understood to have the potential to cure mental illness and mood disorders, improve confidence, and even make you more desirable (it is not uncommon to see incels who believe women can instinctively tell, at a primal level, if a man is a virgin, and that they find this off-putting). This belief is obviously incredibly reductive, and leads to solutions that are unlikely to improve the lives of Incels. In Robs case, he believed the way to address their mental health situation is to make society more sexually liberated. He explained that legalizing prostitution and educating children about safe sex from a young age would help to address this problem, but the main issue which he felt needs to be addressed, is no longer shaming women for having multiple sexual partners.

The ideas shared on incel communities can also lead members to believe that it is not just their romantic lives that will never get better – it is every aspect of their lives. David described the blackpill as a fatalistic worldview which forecloses on the idea that anything can improve.

“The blackpill is basically the belief that it's a fatalistic life view that everything is pre-determined in the world. And you're never going to be able to achieve past your station in life because of overwhelming disparities and looks, money, ability to be productive in society, intelligence, IQ, work ethic, family life stations in life, how rich your parents were, it's an overwhelming apathy towards any type of upward mobility. Just because you believe that it's completely impossible, in the face of all this overwhelming competition in the world. It's basically it's a very simple worldview, only based on the upwards mobility of money and women basically.”

David described a situation where everything is pre-determined, and there are no actions the individual can take to improve their station in life. Although he did not ascribe to this worldview, he could still see this hopelessness in many other members of Incel forums. He explained that this fatalistic worldview is “learned” through prolonged exposure to incel forums.

“It's unhealthy. Because, you know, if you hang out with cripples, you learn how to limp, you know, people that have a nihilistic fatalistic view of the world. And it's not life affirming, you know? It's sad, you know, I mean, everybody, I mean, some of these. I mean, like, everybody kind of knows, you know, looks money status, obviously, these things, you know, they can be tools to have a better life. For a lot of those people. A lot of those people don't have a rich inner life, or their life is marred by all this anger (...) I mean, in this world, it's a hard world to survive in, you know, and you kind of have to be, or I think Jordan Peterson says, you have to be monstrous to survive in the world. And some of these people just have no tools. So their only recourse in life is to basically hang out with each other and be depressed together on a Friday night. Which, you know, like, I love the people on lookism but, you know, I obviously, wish I could get off the site for good bye Um, you know, lookism is addicting,”

David described the spread of these beliefs almost like a social contagion, and said it can be particularly difficult for people who don't have “a rich inner life” or whose lives are “marred with anger”. Because they cannot imagine their lives improving in any respect, they resort to spending time on incel forums,

where they can at least be around other people who are equally depressed and hopeless about their station in life. David recognized this is not healthy, and described the forum as “addicting”.

Rob felt that the hopelessness experienced by Incel’s does not come directly from the forums, but from social media and TV, which show young, good looking, happy people. It’s now easier than ever to see the apparent inequality between good looking people on Instagram and your own life. To incels, this kind of content serves as a reminder that they “can’t have a piece of their world, you know, you can’t have a piece of that pie”.

“The pain is really, it's really, the despair is huge. When you're like that, you know what I mean? When you have no social skills, and you're alone, especially at a young age, you know, where you see every good looking people around you your age, having fun, having a great time, having success with women having success in life. And, and you see it on Instagram, you see it everywhere, social media, you see it on TV everywhere, and you can't have that, you can't have a piece of their world, you know, you can't have a piece of that pie. And you look at the, at the mirror every day, and you just hate what you see, you know, and I hate, you hate what you see, and you can't do nothing to change it, you know, unless you're rich, and you can afford multiple surgeries. And that's and that's the hopeless part. You know, that's, that's really very depressing. And it's, it's, it's devastating, you know?”

Despite Rob’s framing that it is images of “the good life” from social media and TV that cause incels to feel hopeless, the reason these images are upsetting to members in the first place – that they show a life the incel can never access - is because of beliefs they’ve internalized from the forums. As has been suggested elsewhere, incel communities have the ability to instil new concerns and anxieties in members (e.g. Jake becoming concerned his wrists were too thin). In Rob’s example it the individuals facial structure that is the issue. For Rob, the hopelessness comes from an understanding that what is holding back incels from experiencing the kind of life they see their peers enjoying, is their

appearance. Rob described this as both “depressing” and “devastating” and suggested giving up and losing hope was a way to “cope” with these feelings.

“It’s coping. When they say that, oh, it’s over, give up. It’s their coping mechanism, because it’s either that, or you know, or, or suicide, because they’re like, “Okay, I’m blackpilled. So now I know that my looks are not going to get me the success I want with females. So now I have two things to do. Either I live in just a ridiculous amount of suffering every day. Or I kill myself or I accept I create this coping mechanism where I accept nothing is ever going on and I just take it as it is”. It’s the “it is what it is” mentality”.

Whereas coping often has negative connotations, in incel spaces it is positioned as a preferable alternative to living in “a ridiculous amount of suffering everyday” or “suicide”. Giving up is framed as a kind of acceptance. “Cope” is understood to provide some degree of mental stability. For some members of incel forums, the horizons of their expectations are so severely diminished by an assumed external locus of control, that being able to just “cope” is seen as desirable.

Ken similarly described the blackpill as “giving up hope” and retreating into a comfort zone.

“It’s sort of like, giving up giving up hope. Just retreat, retreating into ones, not comfort zone, but just into retreating into their own mind. And just, basically, I’ll say, it’s more, it’s more or less just giving up hope on improving on just life in general. That’s how I view it now. With, with where I’m standing now, that’s how I define it.”

He believed the blackpill makes you lose hope. And once you lose hope, it can be difficult to escape from this “mindset”.

“From what I gather yeah, I think, like, incels it’s like a once you’re in you’re not exactly never out, but cuz I feel like incels is basically make you lose hope. It damages hope, in a sense, where like, you’re no longer hopeful that you can improve yourself, you can get out of the incel mindset. So I believe they think that they will be incels basically, until the day they die”.

It is clear that many incels recognize that spending time on incel forums has a negative impact on their mental health, as well as their ability to “ascend” from incelhood. This has been noted by Sharkey (2022) who draws from Berlant’s (2011) concept of “cruel optimism” to explain that incels’ attachment to failure and loserdom is damaging to these individuals. It has also been noted that incels are reluctant to seek traditional mental health supports for issues they may be facing, such as depression and anxiety (Daly and Reed 2021; Speckhard and Ellenberg 2022). However, this chapter argues that the negative emotional experiences incels have in these spaces plays an important function. Paasonen’s (2019) work on “networked affect” suggests that evoking emotional resonance – whether positive or negative – creates an “affective stickiness” that helps certain online spaces to hold individuals’ attention, and encourage them to return to these spaces at a later date. In this case, negative emotions, particularly feelings of outrage and despair, resonate with members in a way that helps them to feel more attached to the community, even if they are aware they are not benefitting from it. As David explains, it’s “addicting”. The prominence of content specifically designed to evoke these negative emotions is evident in some of the most popular tags attached to posts on incel forums, including “ragefuel”, “suicidefuel”, “ropefuel”, which suggest that the content of these posts will promote feelings of outrage, or even make the reader want to kill themselves. Again, this supports the idea that incels can be understood as an affective counterpublic. Papacharissi (2014) explains that it’s not just the degree of emotion that such spaces evoke that helps to form resonance, but also the constant, cumulative, flow of highly emotional content, that she suggests allow individuals to “feel” more intensely, without necessarily helping them to better understand causes of their suffering.

7.3 Conclusion

While the solutions offered by the red pill are individualist, the blackpill ostensibly takes a more communal, collectivist approach. It is understandable that this kind of community may appeal to lost boys who could not find success

with the red pill. However, the political horizons of blackpill movements are incredibly humble, primarily focused on highlighting their own injustice and victimhood, through appeal to the apparent preferential and privileged treatment received by others. This is an area that interviewees were eager to bring up and discuss, demonstrating how sincerely they felt this issue to be important. While discourses around equality and identity may afford incels the appearance of a political identity movement, there were no visible steps or political vision that suggested the group could effect change. However, highlighting inequalities did appear to help affirm incels' grievances about men's unfair treatment, facilitating the formation of an affective counterpublic (Papacharissi 2014). In this case, the affective counterpublic is formed around negative emotions - primarily feelings of injustice, outrage, and hopelessness. It is likely that the intense emotions evoked here played an important function in encouraging individuals to return to incels' spaces (Paasonen, 2019) and helping to consolidate in-group identity (Ahmed 2004). As noted by Ahmed (2004) and Allan (2015), intense emotions can also be used to justify holding certain beliefs or attitudes that may not be congruent with mainstream values, or to justify advocating for extreme interventions.

Interviewees overwhelmingly felt that spending time on these spaces was negatively impacting their mood, and perhaps even their ability to "ascend" from incelhood. Although these sentiments are occasionally shared on incel forums, it was notable how open interviewees were about this throughout the interviews. Even interviewees who embraced the blackpill, and who enjoyed the community, trolling, and shitposting, acknowledged that these communities were not helpful, and may even have negative impacts. Nevertheless, interviewees generally returned to these spaces, perhaps reflecting not only the "affective stickiness" (Paasonen 2019) or "addicting" qualities of these spaces, but also the dearth of options for young men who are failed by the red pill, and have similarly realized the blackpill has not improved their lives. Now bereft of options, incel forums at least offers some form of community, and a constant flow of content that allows members to intensely feel negative emotions. They also reinforce the idea that nothing can change,

that their lives cannot improve, and that existing interventions, such as therapy, cannot help them (a common refrain on incel forums is that “there’s no therapy for your face”). As an affective counterpublic drawn together not just by outrage, but also hopelessness, members are afforded few opportunities to effect change at an individual or collective level, and no vision of what an improved society might look like. Whatever these individuals need in order to improve their lives, they are unlikely to find it on these forums. As Bratich and Banet-Weiser (2019) explain, incel communities offer an “anti-social support” – an overwhelmingly negative community that encourages further withdrawal from society, while foreclosing on the idea that anything can change for the better. This is reflected in the experiences of many interviewees. While the fact that incel communities do not offer members the tools or supports they need to progress has been well covered in the research (Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019; Brzuzskiewicz 2020; Sharkey 2022), the fact that so many incels are willing to acknowledge not just this, but also the negative effects incel communities have on their mental health, is a finding that will likely be of interest to those designing interventions targeting incel communities.

Chapter 8

Conclusion: The Age of Loneliness

This research recognizes incels not as a terrorist group or organisation, but rather as a network of extreme communities with the potential to radicalise members. In some cases, individuals are radicalised to the point where they are motivated to commit acts of violence, although the vast majority remain non-violent. The ideological flexibility these networks allow for, means that those who condemn violence often inhabit the same milieus as those who support it. The existence of these post-organizational, non-hierarchical, extreme communities is by no means a new phenomenon, nor is it one that is unique to incels. It is a useful way of conceptualising a wide range of extreme networks, relating to various ideologies, in which the concept of “membership” is difficult to define, and which have the potential to stoke anxieties, enflame anger, and encourage withdrawal from mainstream society. As such, the findings of this research, and indeed the methodological approach utilised, will likely be of interest to those attempting to understand extremism, and the processes through which radicalisation occurs within these kinds of networks, regardless of the specific ideology.

As these extreme networks become more diffuse, processes of radicalisation become more varied, individualized, and difficult to track. This research demonstrates the viability of direct engagement via interviews as a method for overcoming these challenges. This research has also demonstrated the novel kinds of data researchers can access using such a direct approach. This chapter will conclude this research, by showing how these findings can help us to identify new potential points of intervention for those wishing to tackle not just the issue of inceldom, but the broader phenomenon of angry, disenfranchised young men, who feel they have been left behind by society, and have not received the necessary supports required to help them to transition into adulthood.

This research set out to answer the question “Why do some men choose to identify as incels”. Through interviews with 10 current and two former incels who were invited to share their “blackpill stories” a broad trajectory was identified, which provides a general framework of the experiences many members of incel communities go through prior to identifying as incels. A key finding of this research is that although incels are generally characterized by their inability to form romantic relationships, many have difficulties maintaining any form of social relationship.

Building on David’s description of the kind of person who ends up on incel forums, and drawing from Bakers (2019) concept of “left-behind men”, and Sharkeys (2022) discussion of boys who cannot grow up, the term Lost Boy is introduced as an archetype of a socially isolated person, who feels off-time relative to their peers, and recognizes that they are not thriving. In the absence of any supports or even a satisfactory explanation as to why they have not reached the levels of success they had expected, lost boys have to find their own answers. At this stage, without any framework for understanding their situation, they are vulnerable to the kinds of black and white explanations offered by more extreme communities online – including incels. The concept of lost boys helps us to conceptualise individuals who hold extreme beliefs, at a point where they were “vulnerable” to radicalisation, but not necessarily radicalised in any identifiable way to a specific ideology. They are seeking answers and open to any number of explanations. As this situation is not unique to incels, the concept of lost boys will likely be of value to researchers attempting to understand the radicalisation of young men into any ideology, particularly those wishing to avoid focusing on the phenomenon in its most extreme incarnations.

Pathways into these extreme communities are complex, and multiple factors can play a role in an individual’s process of coming to identify as a member. By inviting interviewees to share and discuss their own stories, in their own words, the variety of experiences was made clear. More importantly, similarities were identified, that not only helped to construct a general framework of incel radicalisation, but also helped to situate incels as part of a

larger phenomenon. The difficulties and anxieties most frequently highlighted by interviewees – such as mental health issues, autism, and social isolation – are commonly experienced by broader swathes of the population. At the same time, issues that are often associated with incels specifically, such as an inability to find a romantic partner, or being unattractive, rarely arose during the interviews.

While previous research has observed neurodivergence to be particularly prevalent in incel communities (Speckhard et al. 2021; Speckhard and Ellenberg 2022; Sharkey 2022; Daly and Laskovtsov 2021; Moskalenko et al. 2022), this research has been able to further our understanding of the role neurodivergence plays in some individuals' decisions to identify as incels. By engaging directly with incels, it was found that the loneliness, isolation and feelings of being “off-time” frequently reported by incels, may be a consequence of societies inability to provide suitable or sufficient supports for neurodivergent individuals, who can easily find themselves socially isolated.

Interviewees spoke at length of their own experiences with depression, anxiety, autism, and body dysmorphia and how this impacted their lives. A remarkably common theme was having negative experiences at transitional or difficult times in their lives (leaving education, exiting their church, the death of a friend). Mental health issues were understood to exacerbate these stresses and uncertainties, or in some cases, emerge as a result of them. The absence of any guiding structures during these liminal periods in their lives, and an unwillingness to engage with existing supports, as identified by Speckhard and Ellenberg (2022), leaves withdrawal as one of the few available options for avoiding rejection and failure and minimizing discomfort. This puts them at risk of becoming “off-time”, further compounding their depression and anxiety, while making withdrawal appear even more appealing.

Rob suggested that the most important factor that determines whether an involuntarily celibate man becomes an incel, is whether or not they are neurodivergent. He explained that neurotypical involuntary celibates have an easier time in workplaces and social situations, and so generally have an easier

time staying “on-track”. As a result, they are more likely to regularly find themselves in situations where they are exposed to new people and opportunities. However, the world is significantly less accommodating to neurodivergent people who may wish to avoid these experiences. Consequently, they can easily find themselves becoming withdrawn and “off-time”. As Al-Attar (2020) explains, those who find these situations anxiety inducing are more likely to avoid them, and more inclined to rely on more structured environment, such as online forums, to fulfil their social needs. He explains that this increased time engaging with others online in a text-based environment, and a “social naiveté” which some autistic individuals experience, may expose them to extreme ideas that they do not identify as such. Another factor that can account for the over-representation of autistic individuals in incel communities is the clear, unambiguous “science” of the blackpill. As Borrell (2020) explains, autistic people are often drawn to the kinds of black-and-white explanations found in amateur psychology. This was reflected in the interviews. Interviewees who discussed their experiences with autism explained that the advice generally given to people looking to form romantic relationships can be platitudinal, vague, and generally unsatisfactory. In contrast, the scientific discussions around attraction and romance in incel spaces were easier to comprehend, and seen to be more insightful, and even emancipatory.

Another key finding which emerged over the course of this research, was that many interviewees had found their way to incel communities via more red pill parts of the manosphere. Although Bratich and Banet-Weiser (2019) have previously noted that many incels are “failed PUA’s” who have been let down by the neoliberal promise, this research expands on this, finding that many interviewees were failed by neoliberal, individualised solutions of the red pill more broadly. This reflects the changing nature of the manosphere, wherein many communities are now offering a neoliberalised form of self-help specifically targeted towards young men. The term Neoliberal Masculinity is introduced to describe the form of masculinity that pervades these spaces, which are filled with influencers and figureheads who ignore the idea that the

lost boys' situation may be a result of larger, structural factors, and instead offer them advice which they can implement in their own lives to improve their situation at an individual level. Some lost boys see their lives improve as a result of this advice, which can involve diet, exercise, and confidence building. However it is clear that not everyone can benefit from the solutions offered in these spaces – interviewees gave a number of reasons as to why they felt these solutions were not viable for them. As well as being too depressed or despairing, interviewees also spoke about how certain immutable features, such as their height or their facial structure, precluded them from being able to find success. The red pill has no approach for addressing these kinds of issues. For those who are drawn in by the ideas and promises of these spaces, but unable to find success, taking the blackpill can appear to be the next logical step. Blackpill communities, which draw from the same undergirding logic, can reconcile failure in a way the red pillled manosphere cannot.

The normalization of neoliberal masculinity and the red pill ideology into the mainstream offers an excellent example of the “extensive middle ground” discussed by Ward and Voas (2011), which can connect extreme ideologies to the mainstream, while disguising their ideological underpinnings and hiding their most extreme incarnations. Although the majority of interviewees were not able to benefit from the masculinity presented in these groups, the ease with which they could be found via Google and YouTube, often while searching for answers to relatively innocuous questions about loneliness, facilitated radicalisation by introducing them to content which, although not always explicitly red pillled, drew heavily from the evolutionary sciences and contained red pillled “ideas” and terminology. This normalization and obfuscation of red pill ideas provides an obstacle for those attempting to address anti-feminist movements via content moderation. The initial content may not explicitly break any rules, and may simply contain ideas that, although often used for misogynistic means (such as evolutionary psychology), are not in and of-themselves obviously harmful. To many, they may even appear to be scientific and legitimate. The breadth and scope of this kind of content, the speed with which it evolves, and its availability across all major platforms,

presents another issue to those wanting to tackle this content through moderation.

Although this research's explicit scope was on incel communities, the phenomenon of sanitized versions of extreme ideas reaching mainstream audiences can be observed in a number of extreme networks. It is an important issue that extremism and radicalisation researchers will need to reckon with going forward. Another clear example of this can be seen in the variety of anti-LGBTQ+ bigotry which has recently become particularly visible in the US and the UK, where individuals have been able to introduce less extreme version of their ideology into mainstream discourses, by tapping into concerns about the safety of children, who are vulnerable to "paedophile gangs" and "groomers". Paedophilia and grooming are of course legitimate concerns which should never be ignored. As such, attempts to censor these kinds of discussions could potentially jeopardize children's safety. However, a significant volume of the content around these ideas that has been produced in recent months treats any and all visibility and attempts at awareness raising by LGBTQ+ communities as inherently immoral and dangerous. Again, that so much of this extreme anti-LGBTQ+ ideology traffics under the guise of concerns about "child safety" from ostensibly "concerned parents" presents a difficulty for those attempting to intervene via content moderation.

Much as radicalisation into inceldom is facilitated by the ambient (and frequently explicit) misogyny that exists in contemporary society, which can help make certain misogynistic beliefs appear to be common sense or scientific, today we can see how the latent homophobia and transphobia that exist in society have created a space where the LGBTQ+ community are problematized, and hateful ideas have been allowed to move from the extreme fringes into the mainstream, under the guise of spurious claims about childrens safety. Much like incels, biological essentialism and ideas of what is "natural" are invoked as scientific and inarguable, and extreme ideas are covertly spread as though appeals to an ostensible "common sense" (e.g. asking someone to define "woman" or how many genders there are). Although certainly an approach that has it's challenges (access, trust, researcher safety,

etc.), it is possible that by attempting to engage directly with members of these extreme networks, and using an approach which integrates sociological and psychological research, common experiences, pathways, and anxieties will emerge, that may help to contextualise this form of extremism as part of larger phenomenon, and reveal new potential points of intervention for tackling this kind of radicalisation.

Another feature of incel communities that appealed to interviewees was the community and mutual recognition these spaces offered. Interviewees spoke of the benefits of recognizing other people were going through the same thing. Some interviewees went further, discussing incelism as marginalised identity, and invoked “equality” as a goal around which incels could mobilise. While this collective, and ostensibly politically oriented approach may be appealing to young men who feel alone and have been failed by the neoliberal promise and the individualised solutions of the red pill, the extent of incel’s political vision appeared to be highlighting other marginalised groups who received sympathy and support, and drawing contrived equivalences with these groups to suggest they were receiving preferential treatment. Given the weak bases for these comparisons, it is unlikely anyone outside of incel communities would be convinced by these arguments.

Although these narratives were fragmented, and did not contribute to any cohesive political ideology around which an effective incel movement could coalesce, they appeared to serve another, more subtle function. Highlighting the apparent injustice and inequality incels experienced provided an opportunity for incels to feel and perform outrage. This helped to consolidate an affective counterpublic formed around negative emotions and sentiments, which functioned more as a self-help group, insofar as it brought men together and encouraged them to share their feelings and experiences, providing recognition and catharsis. For some interviewees, the social aspect of these communities appeared to be more important than the actual ideology being shared. While those researching radicalisation have often focused on ideology and strategy, there has been significantly less discussion of cultural practice as a facilitator. Drawing from research about the role of affect can play in online

networks, this research finds that the intense emotions members are encouraged to share in these spaces in response to certain content (frequently anecdotal evidence that supports the blackpill), and the frequency with which such content is shared, are important factors in why incels remain in these communities. The heightened emotions and the hyperbole and catastrophization that pervade these spaces not only create an “affective stickiness” (Passonen 2019) which can keep individuals returning, it promotes the idea that their situation is hopeless, and that there are no alternatives.

It has been well recognized that one of the defining features that distinguishes the Manosphere from the men’s rights movements that preceded it, is the increased role emotion has come to play (Ging 2017). It could reasonably be argued that incels represent the most emotional group within the manosphere. While all other groups at least gesture towards the importance of stoicism and emotional restraint, incels are far more likely to engage in fatalism and hysteria as a default response to any perceived injustice (and indeed, a range of issues which do not appear to impact the individuals who comprise these communities in any way). These learned emotional responses, more so than any coherent political ideology, appear to be a fundamental crux around which incel communities are formed. However, in the absence of any actionable steps they could take to effect change in their situation, and the given negative nature of the emotions around which these affective counterpublics form (outrage, injustice, and hopelessness), participation in these spaces still has a predominantly negative effect on individual, with interviewees consistently reporting that spending time on incel forums worsened anxieties and depression and instilled feelings of hopelessness. Despite recognizing this however, members continued returning to these forums for the transitory benefits of the “anti-social support” they offered.

8.1 Interventions

This research recognizes that incelism is a symptom of larger social phenomenon – loneliness and social isolation – which anyone can experience regardless of age, gender, class, etc. An article written by George Monbiot for

the Guardian in 2014 argues that the defining characteristic of this era is a significant increase in isolation, and argues that we are living in “The Age of Loneliness”. It is noted that loneliness is increasingly being described as an “epidemic” that is overwhelmingly affecting the youth, and young men in particular. Monbiot (2014) warns that this absence of networks contributes to social isolation, a situation in which individuals lack connections that can provide support when needed, and connect them to new people and opportunities. Indeed, this increase in loneliness appears to have continued in the years since that piece was published. Research conducted by the PEW Research Centre (Fry and Parker 2021) found that the share of unpartnered adults between the ages of 25 and 54 in the US had risen from 29% in 1990 to 38% in 2019. Another study conducted by the American Perspective Study (Cox 2021) found that one in seven Americans reported not having any friends, while results from a survey conducted by GSS Data (Ingraham 2019) found that the number of American adults who had not had sex in the last year was at a record high of 23%. Rates of sexlessness were at their highest among the 18 – 29 cohort where almost one in three adults had not had sex in the previous 12 months. Men were found to be less likely to have had sex in the past years than women across all age groups. A number of health risks have been associated with loneliness, most notably depression and anxiety (Beutel et al. 2017; Kraav et al. 2020; Stickley et al. 2016). Research by Beam and Kim (2020) finds that young people were more likely to experience negative psychological effects of the loneliness and social isolation brought about by Covid Lockdowns, while Nguyen et al. (2020) find that those in their 20’s are most likely to report being lonely. Research has also found gender to be an important variable in how loneliness is experienced, with males found to be more at risk (Wiseman et al. 1995; Neyedley 1998; Fry and Parker 2021) and to experience the negative effects more severely (Schultz and Moore 1986). Research by McKenzie et al. (2018) suggests that the gendered differences in experiences with loneliness are informed by the kinds of social contexts men are more likely to find themselves in and the kinds of social relationships they have. The authors explain that reluctance to seek any supports, or to disclose

feelings to peers was connected to an unwillingness of young men to engage in behaviours they perceived to be “less masculine”.

Interventions that attempt to target loneliness and isolation would likely benefit significant swathes of the population, beyond just incels. There is understandably a knee-jerk reaction to recognizing incels as vulnerable, or treating their loneliness as anything other than a moral failure on their part, as this can be understood to almost excuse the misogyny, hate, and violence. Recognising inceldom as being a symptom of larger issues opens up avenues to addressing the structural causes that give rise to their existence, and which fuel their grievances, in a way that can also account for the much larger cohort of lonely young people, men and women, who are socially isolated and alone, but do not identify as incels. The most effective solutions will be those that aim to address broader societal issues, such as loneliness, alienation, and social isolation, and provide supports for mental health issues, mood disorders, autism, etc, via a public health approach or educational interventions. Such interventions will prevent individuals from becoming “off-time” lost boys in the first place.

Approaches which have discussed political interventions to addressing incel problem, on both incel forums and in the mainstream media, have generally understood incels issues in a discrete sense, and failed to identify them as symptomatic of a larger issue. Some, such as Tomkinson et al. (2020), have called for the securitization of incels, arguing that such an approach would highlight the seriousness and urgency of the threat posed by incels, which may help those attempting to tackle the issue of inceldom secure funding and resources. Such a narrow approach however, which tackles the issue at its most extreme point, is unlikely to do anything to address the structural causes that drive people to incel communities, and would likely distract from the much more significant amount of misogynistic violence perpetrated by non-incels.

Others have discussed addressing inceldom by introducing marketized solutions that speak directly to incels concerns, involving deregulation and

legalization. One such example was discussed during the 2022 democratic primary for Pennsylvania's 3rd congressional district, where a candidate drew national attention due to their keystone policy of introducing a legally protected right to sex. Although not focused on incels specifically, this approach was discussed enthusiastically on incel forums. However, the issues facing incels identified in this research – social isolation, mental health issues, and feelings of hopelessness – are more complex than a lack of sex, and are unlikely to be addressed by introducing a right to sex. In a similar vein, some interviewees discussed decriminalising sex work, an idea generally supported on incel forums, with an understanding that it will have an effect on the supply/demand ratio of sex, and will bring down women's "market value", in a way that is favourable to incels. Again, this approach does not offer a solution to the isolation and alienation many young people experience today. Similarly, trying to destigmatize sex, and encourage positive, shame-free attitudes towards sex as Rob suggested, is not necessarily bad in and of itself, but his belief that an increased supply of sex will "cure" young men's mental illnesses, demonstrates the limits of approaches singularly focused on sex. These kinds of proposals draw attention away from structural critiques of the conditions that have brought about contemporary incelism, as identified in this research. When there is no vision for how the structural problems can be addressed, addressing the symptoms at their most dire point may seem appealing. However such a superficial approach does not address the destabilizing misery, loneliness, and alienation so many young people feel today, that forces them to "drop out", nor is a marketized solution that makes intimacy more transactional likely address young men's inability to form meaningful relationships.

Speckhard and Ellenberg (2022) end their article by suggesting that incel spaces could function as spaces through which incels can be engaged and mental health supports distributed. The appeal of this is clear, as it bypasses incels general reluctance to seek out mental health supports, making them available and accessible to them in their own community, with the implicit endorsement of the forum's admin. There are obviously certain barriers to

implementing such an intervention – e.g., any intervention proposed would have to recognize that in many cases, even those who have negative experiences with these forums often believe the blackpill to be inarguable truth, and thus, that therapy cannot help them. Genuine self-care and self-help may be philosophically incompatible with the blackpill, which tends to be nihilistic. Because of this, mental health supports would ideally be introduced at an earlier stage in the individual’s radicalisation. Nevertheless, the number of incels who recognize that incel communities have a negative impact on wellbeing, as well as the willingness of incels to engage with those outside the community as demonstrated throughout this research, suggests designing interventions in collaboration with incels could open up new possibilities in this area, and help overcome these obstacles.

Before concluding, it is also worth noting that despite the obvious ideological baggage, there are many lost boys who appear to genuinely benefit from the kinds of guidance and support seen in the more red pill parts of the manosphere. Many interviewees mentioned that their pathway to incelism began when they resorted to the internet to find solutions to their loneliness. Generally this involved googling something relatively innocuous and being redirected to ideologically loaded subreddits and YouTube channels. These red pill spaces were viewed as one of the few spaces taking young men’s concerns seriously, explaining their situation, and offering at least some advice from which they often experience immediate benefits. It is possible that the harm caused by incel communities, and indeed, the manosphere more broadly, can be somewhat mitigated by addressing the clear demand for these kinds of spaces, in a way that is less toxic and misogynistic.

Whatever their faults (and there are certainly many) these spaces tell young men that if they are unhappy with their lives, there are steps they as an individual can take to address their situation. Many of the strategies and tactics do lead to improved outcomes, by forcing young men to move outside of their comfort zone, and offering techniques that help them to build resilience and become comfortable with rejection. The success of Jordan Peterson in these spaces can be somewhat understood as a result of him addressing young men

directly, and demonstrating that there are at least some actions they can take to improve their own lives, and providing them with small actionable tasks - such as making their bed - which they benefit from, at least temporarily. Similarly, masculinity influencers, life coaches, and fitness gurus who teach young men how to lift weights and eat well also have positive impacts on many young men's lives. Of course, this information, and indeed the advice offered by Peterson, comes packaged with ideologically motivated pseudoscience, and exists in close proximity to more reactionary discussions about cultural and political issues, which ignore the structural causes of young men's loneliness. Still, it is not unthinkable that young men could be motivated to take similar action in a way that is separated from the misogynistic and reactionary ideology. Similar solutions motivated by a more inclusive ideology, may have potential to offer an alternative for socially isolated young people who resort to google for guidance and solutions to their problems. It may also be able to do so in a way that embodies a healthier form of masculinity that incorporates equality, compassion and inclusivity, and can accommodate more than just cis-het males. Loneliness and isolation are of course not completely gendered issues, and the demand for these kinds of supports goes beyond just lost boys. An example of this can be seen in the emergence of "Female Dating Strategy" (FDS) community, a response to PUAs who draw heavily from postfeminist language of empowerment, to teach women how to "raise their body count". Although unlikely to be as harmful or dangerous as male PUAs are to women, the community encourages certain behaviours - such as the categorization of men into "high value" and "low value" men (with low value men being colloquially referred to as "scrotes") - that are unlikely to be conducive to healthier gender relations.

The figureheads and influencers who peddle this kind of self-help towards young men clearly have an advantage in terms of how they market themselves - they "guarantee" success is achievable for everyone, in a way that is grounded in a "science". However, interviewees explaining that the "harsh truths" of incel communities appealed to them suggests that a more inclusive approach can succeed while acknowledging that dating is hard, that some

people have an easier time than others, and that being alone and feeling romantically unfulfilled can be very upsetting. It would also help to acknowledge that physical appearance can play a role in this, and that factors outside of the individual's control – such as their height, their facial structure, their hairline – can indeed be a hindrance. However, these issues can be discussed in a healthier way, which does not suggest that anyone's situation is hopeless. Providing a space where difficulties and barriers are acknowledged and discussed in a more grounded way, without resorting to evolutionary science, and without suggesting it is a moral failing, may appeal to the kind of individual who is drawn to incels communities because they are tired of the vague platitudes and judgement they have received when looking for guidance elsewhere. Offering a more visible alternative for those who resort to Google for guidance would be an unequivocally positive step in helping to mitigate the damages of the manosphere.

8.2 Recommendations for Future Research

While the small sample size and the self-selection bias of this research limit the generalizability of these results, this research has provided new insights into young men's path to identifying as incels, and provided a framework for understanding them in way that dissuades researchers from viewing them in isolation, or as a discrete phenomenon. Future research will benefit from focusing on the broader structure from which incels have emerged, and the conditions that have given rise to the social isolation, loneliness, and mental illness, the create lost boys in the first place. This is the site where effective changes that address the issue of inceldom will need to be made.

This research, along with research conducted by Speckhard et al. (2021), Moskalenko et al. (2022) Daly and Reed (2021) Regehr (2021), also demonstrates that there are significant number of incels who are willing to engage directly with researchers, and will even take the time to be interviewed, provided their anonymity can be guaranteed. Although the scope

of this research is specifically focused on incels, direct engagement with interviewees is an approach which those researching terrorism, extremism and radicalisation of any variety will likely benefit from, given the unique data such an approach affords access to. Although members of such communities may be oppositional and even hostile towards academics, this research has outlined steps researchers can take to minimize the risks to which they are exposed.

Future research, incel and otherwise, should also pay closer attention to the role mental health, and indeed, the lack of sufficient supports and services, might play in radicalisation. This is an area that has been flagged in much of the research that has engaged with incels directly, and an area which receives significant discussion on incel forums. In this research too, the topic came up in almost every interview, with interviewees discussing how their own experiences with depression, anxiety or autism had contributed to their journey to incelhood. This is clearly an area incels feel to be important and are eager to discuss. Future research will likely benefit from taking an interdisciplinary approach, which incorporates research from the discipline of psychology, a discipline which has rarely focused on the phenomenon of incels to date.

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Appendix 1: Recruitment Advertisement for Incel Interviews

Hello! I'm a PhD student from Ireland with a background in Communications Studies, who has been researching the social phenomenon of incelism since 2018. I'm currently in the process of conducting informal interviews with members of incel communities, and will be continuing to do so over the coming weeks. I'm writing this post to introduce myself, briefly explain the project, and provide contact information for anyone over the age of 18 who may be interested in taking part.

I'm interested in hearing about member's individual experiences with these communities, and how these experiences have changed over time. I'm also interested in hearing from members about the ideas, viewpoints, or aspects of these communities members believe have been misunderstood, misrepresented or under-reported.

To date, much of the research on incel communities has been conducted without any direct engagement with members of these communities. I believe that there is a lot to be gained from hearing about the experiences of members first hand, and representing them in their own words. I'm not looking to debate, I'm just looking to have a very casual, informal, interview via Zoom, which should last roughly 30 - 60 minutes.

Privacy and confidentiality will be taken very seriously. Cameras will be off for the zoom call, participants are free to use screen names or pseudonyms (which will be anonymized in the final text) and any identifying details that may come up during the interview will be omitted from the finished project. If people are worried about security, it's absolutely not a problem to use burner accounts, VPNs, etc. Interviewees will obviously be free to skip any questions they would rather not discuss.

As I mentioned, I'm based in Ireland, but I'm happy to find a time that suits you.

If you have any further questions, feel free to email me at comms.research@dcu.ie and I can send more information about this research project.

Cheers!