Chapter 2

The Emergence and Development of the Manosphere

This chapter situates the historical context of incel by outlining the key developments that led to the emergence of the manosphere online to show how incel did not occur in isolation, rather the ideology underpinning what it is to be an incel is rooted in the belief systems of pre-established men's groups. Although incels claim not to be politically motivated, with individuals being aligned with either the left or right, or apolitical, their philosophies about women's rights and society are inevitably political, and so party allegiances are a moot issue. The background to the development of Men's Rights Activists (MRAs), tracing it back to the pre-digital technology era with the Men's Rights Movement (MRM) in the 1970s and its links with the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM), is considered to show how initially these groups advocated each other, recognising the pejorative impact of the patriarchy on both men and women. However, the MRM later experienced much discord, predominantly fuelled by apprehensions from cisgender white men about their perceived diminishing social status, which resulted in a volte-face whereby feminism became the adversary. Whilst feminism throughout its various waves, though fundamentally concerned with women's rights and issues, is not anti-men's rights nor misandrist, despite claims to the contrary, still maintains how damage is inflicted on everyone, irrespective of sex or gender, through the enforcement of strict sex and gender roles. Notwithstanding splinter groups acting under the guise of feminism such as Society for Cutting Up Men (SCUM; Solano) that did have the elimination of men as their agenda. This chapter outlines the evolution and development of Men's Rights groups online, including MRAs, Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), Pick Up Artists (PUAs) and Fathers for Justice. These groups and incels are all connected by the same underpinning anti-feminist ideology, namely the redpill and the blackpill that have subtle distinctions and engage in trolling and harassment tactics that embody internet culture but are driven by the same motivations as the earlier men's rights groups. Drawing on masculinity theory, this chapter will consider what makes

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predominantly young cisgender white males vulnerable to the propaganda and incel ideology, leading to them being ensconced within such communities.

The Origins of the MRM

Rooted in the early 1970s and established alongside the WLM, the origins of the MRM, the Men's Liberation Movement (MLM) was initially an ally of feminism, with shared acknowledgement of the damage incurred by both men and women from rigidly enforced sex roles (Messner, 1998). It was recognised that not only was sexism harmful to women, but men also suffered as a result of strictly enforced expectations of masculinity resulting from the patriarchy, as psychologist Jack Sawyer (1970, p. 1) stated 'male liberation calls for men to free themselves from the sex role stereotypes that limit their ability to be human'. Stereotypes included how men related to women, questions of power and dominance in public and private life and the ability to fully express emotions.

It was generally educated men in colleges and universities who engaged with feminist ideas and politics and attempted to understand their role and how they too experienced negative impacts from the issues harming women. However, from the outset, there were tensions within the MLM, in particular the paradox of recognising that, on the one hand, men benefit from systemic privileges, whilst, on the other hand, certain masculine pressures are harmful to them. Pleck (1974, 1995) attempted to navigate this complexity by asserting that though they hold institutional power in patriarchal societies, most men do not actually feel powerful, creating a further conundrum for men to reconcile with – why do they not feel powerful when they are supposed to? Pleck (1974, 1995, p. 7) argued that the male sex role, which necessitated men having to compete and publicly win, was emotionally fraught, which in turn led to men feeling that women had what he termed 'expressive power' and 'masculinity-validating' power over them. Men are dependent on women's power to express their emotions and to validate men's masculinity; however, this is not necessarily a role that women wanted to attain, rather these are powers bestowed upon them by men, who see their ultimate validation in terms of heterosexual success.

In essence, the MLM was premised on a liberal acknowledgement of sex roles, with uncomfortable regard as to men's position as oppressors of women and disregarded by some men's liberationists, who argued that women and men were equally oppressed by sexism. In this context, the concept of oppression was depoliticised to apply to a general impact experienced by everyone within a sexist society. This notion of sex role symmetry, where both men and women are harmed by sex roles, impacted upon both the MLM's ability to support and denounce feminism. Moreover, the women's movement was also affected by this alliance, with a discord between liberal and radical feminists in particular, with the former viewing the movement as more inclusive and concerned with the sex role debate to psychologically liberate both sexes, whilst the latter concentrated their efforts on tackling misogyny and removing men's institutionalised privileges which gave them power over women. Carol Hanisch (1975) claimed that the real issue for men's liberation was capitalism, as their grievance was with their jobs and the pressures to be financially successful. Yet, this was unrecognised by the MLM, which consisted mainly of white, educated 'white collar' men focussing on their

challenges of being the breadwinners and stifling their emotions, and was also limited by class and race blindness.

The language of sex role theory has been described as a departure from biological essentialism. Philosopher Judith Butler (1990) famously called upon society to enact 'gender trouble' and disrupt the binary view of sex, gender and sexuality. Butler argued that gender, rather than being an essential quality derived from biological sex, or an inherent identity, is an act, which grows out of, reinforces and is reinforced by societal norms and creates the illusion of binary sex. The problem lies with the inclusion of the term role, which implies immutability, as such sociologists tend to discuss issues of race, gender and class as identities or relations, which consider the impact of historical and politicised constructions. The currency of incels is grounded in biological essentialism, yet they demonstrate sex role stereotypical socialisation processes. They dissolve into individualistic, voluntaristic levels of analysis rather than institutional analyses of relations of power between groups (aside from claiming the power that women have in the sexual marketplace (SMP)), they normalise a universal male sex role – middle-class, white heterosexual, such that any difference from this appears as deviance, and incels resort to categorical dichotomisation of men and women, based on uninformed biologically essentialist assumptions about binary male and female sex categories.

Emotions and the emotional expression of men was a central focus of the MLM, relying on the personal rather than political, a substitution that continues with men's movements today. Professor and feminist social activist, bell hooks (2004, p. 60, 66), claims that second-wave feminists rejected this in subconscious support of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy, adhering to a narrow masculine construct in which emotions, aside from anger, are suppressed. During the MLM, many men were embracing and reflecting on their emotions, often for the first time, and wanting to transform themselves. This emotional exploration, hooks (2004) states, was often not welcome within feminist spaces, with these men labelled 'narcissistic or needy ... attention seekers, patriarchal manipulators trying to steal the stage with their drama' (p. 7). Feminists rejected such men for fear of them attempting to take over the feminist movement, hooks argues. In addition, some women were still committed to the narrow constructs of hegemonic masculinity, in which emotional expression is weak and unwelcome, a commitment that continued to support a patriarchal society. There is validity to both the critiques made by second-wave feminists at that time and the more contemporary critiques of hooks. Patriarchy, as hooks affirms, is not just upheld and maintained by men; women can and do work to maintain patriarchy as well. Connell (1995) suggested that men who tried to resist patriarchal masculinity in the 1970s were 'likely to be met with derision from many other men, and from some women', highlighting an 'almost journalistic cliché that women despise Sensitive New Age Guys' and that these men did 'not necessarily get warm support from feminist women' (quoted in hooks, 2004, p. 32, 74). The notion that every man within the MLM was entirely committed to resisting the patriarchy is challenged by Kimmel (2017), who claims that when feminism moved from critiquing sex roles to critiquing the personal – specifically men's violent behaviours – in establishing rape, sexual harassment and domestic abuse as part of the gender dynamics under their inquiry, men's liberation departed from feminism. The substituting of the personal for the political

without the recognition that, for women and many other marginalised groups, the personal will always be political was problematic to second-wave feminists and continues to be problematic today. Whilst current scholars, such as Jackson Katz (2006), draw attention to hegemonic masculinity and emotional expression, they use a feminist lens. No such lens was used by the men's liberationists as they continued their depoliticised emotional exploration.

The notion of an MLM coinciding with feminism to enact progressive personal and social change was advocated by men's rights scholars, who positioned men's liberation as the obvious counterpart of women's liberation. Notable texts included Warren Farrell's *The Liberated Man*, Marc Feigan Fasteau's *The Male Machine* and Jack Nichols' *Men's Liberation*. Warren Farrell was on the board of the National Organization for Women's (NOW) New York City chapter, and it was through this role that he commenced the organisation of a nationwide network of men's consciousness groups. In these sessions, and in his 1974 book *The Liberated Man*, Farrell argued that women were not the only ones suffering due to sexism, men were hurting too because they were compelled to be the breadwinners and bear the brunt of the financial responsibility for supporting their families. In addition, men were forced to stifle and hide their emotions. Farrell delivered role reversal workshops, focussing on the effects of sexism on women and men, whereby women were reduced to their appearance and men to their monetary value. Workshops included male beauty pageants where men were forced to strip, pose and receive catcalls from women and activities which saw women organised into rows based on their earning prowess, with those at the lower end of the scale branded 'losers'. Indicating that they were able to disassociate comfortably from women's experiences, the men appeared to enjoy their role play and didn't necessarily succumb to feeling humiliated or degraded. Women, however, would leave their role play activities early, such was the discomfort they felt. Farrell's impact and recognition as a feminist at that time led to *The Chicago Tribune* hailing him 'the Gloria Steinem of Men's Liberation'. Nevertheless, there are early indications of his future change in allegiances, and to his evolution as the 'father of modern-day MRAs', with comments he made in the 1970s about women, that ignore men's power over them 'if a woman has her own life and destiny to control, she will not be as likely to feel the need to control her husband' (Farrell, 1976).

Marc Feigan Fasteau's *The Male Machine* discussed the emotional impacts of restrictive masculinity, borrowing from Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Feigan Fasteau (1974, p. xiv) wrote that men's 'denial of dependency ... and emotions leads to silence and the creation of a male mystique'. Feigan Fasteau is also famous for his egalitarian marriage with Brenda Feigan Fasteau, a feminist lawyer who co-founded the Women's Action Alliance with Gloria Steinem, and with whom he set up a law partnership, representing gender cases such as fathers who sought custody in divorce cases.¹

¹A notable case includes *Ackerman v. Board of Education* in 1974, in which the Feigan Fasteaus defended Gary Ackerman who sought paternity leave in New York City.

Although there was this early male support to the WLM, it is important to remember that such advocacy was in the minority. The lack of engagement could have been due to animosity towards the movement's perceived threat upon male privileges, a result of apathy, or being unable to identify with women's issues. Nonetheless, there are echoes of festering resentment in regard to women's rights, clearly infused through the manosphere and wider society remaining today.

When Feminism Became the Enemy

By the late 1970s, the MLM had dissolved, with the conservative and moderate wings of men's liberation transforming into an anti-feminist MRM, which Messner (1998) describes as being facilitated by the discourse of sex roles. The progressive wing of men's liberation, however, continued as a pro-feminist movement but focussed on gender relations and power, rejecting sex role language.

The 1980s saw a pop cultural turn in regard to a blurring of gendered representations with the heyday of glam rock, yuppies, and UK musicians David Bowie, Boy George and Freddie Mercury pushing boundaries of what it meant to be male, whilst family dynamics and divorce were increasingly becoming more politicised. During the dissension of the MLM, some men questioned the previous stance on sexism and sought a return to traditional masculine values in a bid to tackle how modern society had emasculated and feminised men (Kimmel, 2017). Anti-feminist MRAs saw an opportunity to manipulate concerns about shifting gender norms and the changes influenced by the sexual and cultural revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, to garner support from men who felt oppressed by society and who blamed women and their increased rights, for their dissatisfaction (Kimmel, 2017; Schmitz & Kazyack, 2016; Whitehead, 2002).

One of the main concerns for MRAs pre-web in the 1980s or as part of Web 1.0 from the 1990s to 2000s (although such discourses continue today) regarded state-centred issues, such as feminism's perceived attack on fatherhood via the implementation of family law legislation, which MRA's believed, was in favour of women's interests (Gotell & Dutton, 2016; Kimmel, 2017; Maddison, 1999). MRAs sought to dispute, what they saw as bias law reform and policy relating to child custody, access and support (Boyd, 2004; Kimmel, 2017). Furthermore, an abiding rhetoric of MRA groups, which was prolific during this period, is their challenging of feminist studies that evidenced the gendered nature of domestic violence and anti-violence policies aimed at protecting women, with retaliations about discrimination against male victims (Dragiewicz, 2008, 2011). Rather than advocating for survivors of domestic abuse (whether male or female), MRA communities campaigned for the disestablishment of domestic violence services that protect women, which they perceived to be providing women with an unfair social advantage (Dragiewicz, 2008, 2011; Kimmel, 2017; Schmitz & Kazyack, 2016). MRAs were also typically preoccupied with organising and fighting against what they felt were attacks on the family and unfair practices in divorce proceedings, such that those who had earlier alliances with feminism underwent an about turn.

The previous ‘feminist hero’, Warren Farrell, had taken umbrage against NOW’s stance in divorce cases, in declaring their support of providing child custody to the main caregiver, who was usually the mother, and having been through a divorce himself, came to the conclusion that feminists were more interested in power than in equality, a view that was being echoed by many more men. The disillusionment with feminism continued to escalate with the growth of women entering the workforce. Rather than viewing this as a positive, a means of reducing the pressures on men to be the sole earner, it was viewed as a threat to men’s position. The dormant economy was overlooked, and instead, blame for less jobs for men and divorced fathers losing access to their children was apportioned to feminism and its gains, impacting upon the continued splintering of the MLM. Farrell’s 1988 book *Why Men Are the Way They Are* depicts a world where women, especially female executives, wield immense power. Ideas from this publication, perpetuating the sexual power of women over men, continue to be regurgitated on incel and wider manosphere forums today, informing their perspective on the so-called SMP: Even those women who are less successful have ‘enormous sexual leverage over men’ and ‘can use the power to get external rewards’, Farrell wrote, men, on the other hand, have been reduced to ‘success objects’, judged solely by their status and earning potential (cited in Blake, 2015).

In his later book, commonly regarded as the MRA ‘bible’, the *Myth of Male Power: Why Men Are the Disposable Sex*, Farrell (1996) makes some bizarrely nebulous claims about male issues. For example, he contemplates whether American males are the new ‘n*gger’ by comparing men giving up their seats for women to slavery. Furthermore, he stated that women only have themselves to blame for unequal pay, domestic violence occurs both ways and government programmes to assist women only exacerbate inequality. Although there is some acknowledgement that men have some societal advantages, Farrell maintains that women’s sexual power negates any such leverage. Bolstering the false rape allegation rhetoric favoured within today’s MRA and incel communities, Farrell argued that feminism has enabled women to pursue sexual harassment or date rape charges, when they merely feel ill-treated. There are even the seeds of the incel resentment towards women for having the autonomy to refuse them sex, in which Farrell intimates that men experience sexual trauma from women changing their minds about having sex and are at risk of being accused of sexual assault merely from attempting to initiate sex – which is what is expected of them.

Additionally, during the 1980s, a subgroup of MRA had formed driven by the belief that white men in America were in crisis as a result of feminist, and more broadly liberalism, influence destroying traditional American culture. This was a critical turning point not only for the MRM but also in popular backlash sentiment towards feminism, strengthened by media myths propagating the ‘dangers’ of women’s careers and conversely stay-at-home mothers (Faludi, 1991). The contemporary MRM is therefore a reaction to a perceived diminishing social status of cisgender white men and the emergence of feminist and multicultural activism as a mainstream political strength. Its goal is to eradicate feminism as much as it is to improve men’s rights (Allan, 2016).

Masculinity and Misandry

A central theme permeating the manosphere is that of misandry, where men perceive themselves to be the real victims of a world that is unfairly in favour of women. Much of this diatribe consists of challenge to issues that overwhelmingly negatively affect women such as domestic abuse and sexual violence and either place men as those most harmed or deny the occurrence of those issues. However, demonstrating (women's) serious hatred of men, to the extent that misandry can be claimed, is often without substance. Even though MRAs would describe feminism as a misandrist movement, there are no swathes of feminist communities dedicated to espousing hatred against men, or indeed encouraging female against male violence, which is what women have to contend with (particularly online today). Nor are men physically dying at the hands of women each week. According to UN data,² six women are killed every hour by men globally, most by men in their own family or by their partners. In the United Kingdom, the Femicide Census³ shows that a man kills a women every three days, a statistic unchanged across the 10 years' worth of data studied. This is not to say that men are without problems, and certainly, the alarming suicide rate of men is testament to this, for example, the suicide rate for men in England and Wales during 2019 was the highest for two decades according to data from the Office of National Statistics (ONS). Men accounted for around three-quarters of suicide deaths registered in 2019 – 4,303 compared with 1,388 women.⁴ Nevertheless, there is little evidence to show that misandry is an issue affecting men's lives and which they live in fear of (which many women do). Men who are killed are most likely to have been killed by a man, whilst women who are killed are most likely to have been killed by a man.

Online, the only references to misandry usually only relate to the claims from men themselves rather than from women actively and publicly hating men. However, there is some hostile sounding rhetoric from the WLM that could have been interpreted to be anti-male, for example, 'Watch out. You may meet a real castrating female' (Adams & Briscoe, 1971, p. 55). Furthermore, in an extreme example, the SCUM manifesto, written by Valerie Solanas, took anger towards men and transformed it into a justification for the eradication of men. Solanas and SCUM are regularly referred to within the manosphere and by incels as validation that masculinity is under threat.

Solanas, infamous for shooting the pop artist Andy Warhol in 1968, had wrote and self-published the SCUM manifesto the previous year. Though the attempted murder has sealed Solanas' infamy, with her motives associated with the actualisation of the SCUM manifesto, this has been criticised by Breanne Fahs (2008), who describes this as a reductive formulation that overlooks the inherent contradictions in both the manifesto and Solanas' life. In brief, the SCUM manifesto

²<http://femicide-watch.org/products/2019-study-global-homicide-gender-related-killings-women-and-girls-unodc>

³<https://www.femicidecensus.org/reports/>

⁴<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/suicidesintheunitedkingdom/2019registrations>

states that men are responsible for all of society's problems, are inferior and therefore should not exist. The male is described as an 'incomplete female' a 'walking abortion, aborted at the gene stage' (Solanas, 1968). Within feminist discourse, there is an understandable reluctance to embrace Solanas' work, and certainly her ideas are not easily palatable to a movement that is not a monolith and which has varying divisions of radicalness. Yet, to the manosphere, Solanas represents all of the misandrist fears, and furthermore, SCUM adds credence to the supposed need for men to fight back in order to preserve their very survival. Interestingly, incel ideology and Solanas' manifesto share nihilism in common.

Further support for the anti-feminist MRM came from a woman who had previously been at the heart of second-wave feminism's key gains. In 1971, Erin Pizzey founded the first women's refuge in the United Kingdom. Based in Chiswick, West London, here women could find solace from their abusive partners and start to rebuild their lives. The refuge movement is recognised as one of the pivotal achievements of feminism, in not only providing desperately needed practical support to women but also effecting the language used to describe violence that occurs within the home, changing societal attitudes towards domestic abuse (Lewis, 2020). However, by 1975, Pizzey had actively distanced herself from feminism due to fundamental political differences. She viewed the movement as treating men as the enemy, understanding women's own capacity for violent behaviour, and how both men and women in dysfunctional relationships drive a vicious cycle, leading to what she termed 'addiction to violence'. Pizzey (2009) claimed that this explained why women regularly return to abusive partners, which is in stark contrast to the wealth of research that demonstrates how instead victims are controlled and coerced by abusers, isolated from family and friends and have their self-esteem and confidence diminished (Stark, 2007). Nevertheless, it is clear to see how Pizzey's interpretation of domestic abuse and responsabilisation of women in those situations would be appealing to the MRM, who seek to challenge women's status as victims in heterosexual domestic abuse incidents, particularly where government funding is involved. If couples are both dysfunctional, rather than one party being violent to the other, then the feminist focus on male violence and male perpetrators would be unjustified. However, statistics consistently evidence that this attention is warranted. Self-reported data from the UK 2018 Crime Survey for England and Wales⁵ show that nearly twice as many women as men reported being victims of domestic violence that year (7.9% of women, compared with 4.2% of men), although the gender of perpetrators and their relationship to the victim were not recorded. The police found that 75% of victims of domestic violence were female, whilst for specifically sexual offences, 96% were female. Therefore, the extent of male violence and the harms impacted upon women as a result is indeed a perennial problem, though not one acknowledged within the confines of the manosphere. Today, Erin Pizzey is affiliated with MRAs and MGTOW and helps Paul Elam to run a Voice for Men.

⁵<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/domesticabuseinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2018>

The Manosphere

Attempts to omit gender from discussions about the abuses that women face are part of a broader backlash against feminism (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007). The term ‘backlash’ was coined by Susan Faludi (1991), to describe the ‘cultural counterreaction’ that occurs in response to undermine and reverse gains from each feminist efforts to advance women’s rights (p. 48). MRAs have increasingly began coalescing online spurred on by their offline counterparts who are fixated on dismantling feminist practical and policy gains including efforts to force women’s shelters to accommodate men too, on the grounds that it would be otherwise discriminatory (The National Coalition for Men).⁶ The efforts by fathers’ rights groups to undermine women’s shelters and services in the context of the backlash against feminism were explored by Molly Dragiewicz (2011). Rather than campaigning for male victims of domestic violence to have their own desperately needed shelters, MRAs prefer to try and encroach on women’s spaces and protections. Other MRA concerns involve seeking the compulsory inclusion of women in the draft and challenges to violence against women legislation. For MRAs online, their activism is entrenched in personal experiences and narratives influenced by sexual rejection and pseudo-scientific interpretations of biological essentialism, rather than an organised political movement, but which still has far-reaching political implications.

MRAs online congregate within the manosphere. The manosphere refers to an online movement of anti-feminist websites focussed primarily on ‘men’s issues’ (Ribeiro et al., 2020; Van Valkenburgh, 2018). The term was popularised by author and pornography marketer Ian Ironwood, who published a book collating blogs and forums about perceived male struggles titled *The Manosphere: A New Hope For Masculinity* (Ging, 2017). The manosphere has no principal authority, comprised of a decentralised network of websites, gaming platforms and chat rooms imbued with misogyny and satire, and a compelling overlap with other violent ideologies, most notably right-wing extremism and white supremacy. The manosphere encompasses a wide range of groups from MRAs and Fathers’ Rights Activists (FRAs), to PUAs and to the more extremist MGTOW and incels but is united by the central belief that feminine values, propelled by feminism, dominate society and promote a ‘misandrist’ ideology that needs to be overthrown. MRAs are driven by anger and want to effect change, namely a return to the traditional values where women are subordinate to men. Women need to be put back in their place and to do so abuse of women, particularly feminists, is encouraged. Despite what its name may imply, MGTOW members weaponise homophobia in order to solidify their heterosexuality in a space that rejects women, and they use online harassment to police the borders of hegemonic and toxic masculinity. The MGTOW movement differs slightly from much of the manosphere as it generally rejects any form of relationship with women,

⁶<http://ncfm.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/01/Woods-v-Shewry-published-decision.pdf>

although it is noted that some members do have sex with women and are married to women, but the same issues of violence and harassment are present (Jones, Trott, & Wright, 2020). MGTOW in rejecting the demands of what they perceive to be Western geocentricism are influenced by the mythopoetic movement led by poet and author Robert Bly (1990), who suggested that men should return to their ingrained nature by embracing homosocial solidarity.

PUAs view women as mere objects, bodies to be tricked into sex. There is no consideration of women as autonomous human beings worthy of honesty or respect; moreover, women are viewed as simply shallow and motivated by looks and money and thus fair game to be deceived and used for sexual purposes. Pick up artistry is informed by a hegemonic ideal of what it is to be masculine (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), benefitting off the self-help movement, and evident in the lad culture and banter so pervasive in contemporary society, and which had significant impact upon the development of 'ladette' culture in the 1990s/2000s (Levy, 2010). Due to representing the perspectives and experiences of its creators, certain representation and diversity have been overlooked with unforeseen discriminations embedded within technology such that sexism, racism, homophobia and ableism are inherent, making web spaces less accessible to people from marginalised groups. Let us not forget the original purpose of Facebook, which Mark Zuckerberg, after being rejected, decided to develop a tool in order to rate the female students at Harvard University. It was less about the building of an online community (or billion-dollar conglomeration at that point) and more about the old adage of exercising male privilege and reducing women's importance to their aesthetics. This notion of striking back at the female population and viewing women's only value as their appearance is certainly at the core of not just PUA activity but also incel ideology.

Reference is also made to groups such as Tradcons and NoFappers in the manosphere. Tradcon is short for traditional conservative. Persons within this group advocate on behalf of traditional values such as family morality and gendered roles; however, the incel wiki describes this term as a slur used for identity politics and so claims that there are few that would identify as a Tradcon as a result. NoFappers are men seeking to abstain from pornography and masturbation because they believe that this will enable them to preserve testosterone and achieve greater sexual power and enlightenment. There is a crossover with other misogynistic and antisemitic groups, such as the Proud Boys, who before apparently disbanding in May 2021 had a policy of #NoWanks.

Unlike the aforementioned groups residing in the manosphere, the primary focus for FRAs, with Fathers for Justice being the most well known, is actual men's problems rather than espousing vitriol against women, progressiveness and feminism. Fathers for Justice are concerned with paternal rights and ensuring that fathers have access to their children when relationships break down, when Criminal Justice Systems entrenched in what they deem, sexist, conservative ideals ordinarily operate in favour of the mother. In this respect, the continuation of traditional gender roles, the desire and ideal of other groups in the manosphere, marginalises men and devalues their status as parents.

Although misogyny is rooted within it, the manosphere started as a relatively innocuous expression of men's issues, developing into spaces to air grievances about genuine problems such as male victims of domestic or sexual abuse. However, it has since become increasingly more extreme, spawning a network of activists and sites that take Farrell's ideology on an unsettling course. Users argue the prevalence of false allegations of rape and domestic violence, that shelters for abused women are financial hoaxes, and encourage the hatred of women for being independent or sexually liberated. Studies by Horta Ribeiro et al. (2020) and Farrell, Fernandez, Novotny, and Alani (2019) have shown that the new communities that establish themselves are more toxic and misogynist than their predecessors, and that the language used is becoming progressively more sexually explicit, violent, racist and homophobic. In addition, there has been the growth of far right conspiracy theories permeating the perceptions of manosphere communities and intermingling with the anti-feminist diatribes. An early manosphere site, Fathers Manifesto, saw fragments of Farrell's work being used to supplement calls to exile black people from America along with assertions that Catholic priests were sexually abusing children as part of a cabal to spread AIDS⁷ (Blake, 2015). This idea of a powerful secret cabal engaging in child sexual abuse endures today in the form of QAnon, an online conspiracy theory originating on 4chan but which spreads to mainstream social media sites that claims Donald Trump is waging a secret war against elite Satan-worshipping paedophiles in the government, business and media establishment. Social media and opinion polls indicate that there are millions of people who believe in QAnon's ludicrous allegations.⁸

Academic literature has highlighted the increased capabilities of the internet for MRAs and incels to publicly disseminate antifeminist discourse (Ging, 2017; Gotell & Dutton, 2016; Lilly, 2016; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Schmitz & Kazyack, 2016). Incels have been presented as a misogynistic 'fringe' due to their explicit sexism and hatred for women (Tait, 2018); however, the misogyny espoused by incels, normalising violence against women, is not new and is enduring with digital technologies creating novel opportunities for misogyny to advance and be disseminated. In particular, online communities and virtual platforms have provided the means for the collective animosity of incels and other manosphere groups to advance on an unprecedented scale enabling what Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016, p. 171) refer to as 'networked misogyny' to prosper. Furthermore, search capabilities and algorithmic politics embedded within technology reflect the interests of their designer's, who are primarily straight, white and male (Ging, 2017; Massanari, 2017). Moreover, anonymity and the availability of polarising topics have simplified the process of finding others with related interests and/or belief systems (Perry, 2001). Archaic perspectives about biology and race not only provided contemporary validation online via forums, social media and memes but also propagated offline in mainstream media, politics and academia.

⁷<https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/01/warren-farrell-mens-rights-movement-feminism-misogyny-trolls/>

⁸<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/53498434>

Comprised of blogs, videos, podcasts and forums espousing anti-feminist rhetoric, the tendrils of the manosphere reach all over the Web from highly popular and publicly accessible sites such as YouTube to the murkiest recesses of the dark web, which is only accessible via encrypted means. However, early traces of the manosphere can be noted online long before this term was adopted. From Usenet news groups and early blog culture in the 1990s and early 2000s, which were primarily constituted of the core demographic populating the internet at that time – white, educated tech-savvy men, to the prevalence of social media with wider reaching demographic representation arising from 2010 onwards. Progressive men's activists have congregated together to tackle real and significant problems such as the neglect of male health, suicide and unequal parenting rights but also propagate hate, resentment and misogyny.

Like its earlier iteration, the online MRM has emerged alongside feminist configurations and mimics their developments. Third- and fourth-wave feminism, enabled by the technological affordances emanating from the Web 2.0 era, centres on grassroots action and digital activism (Blevins, 2018; Schulte, 2011; Zimmerman, 2017), whilst contemporary MRA groups rely on similar tactics to propagate their causes rather than challenging law and public policy (Gotell & Dutton, 2016). Within the manosphere, there is an emphasis on men being the victims of false rape allegations, the denial of the patriarchy and rape culture as a myth espoused by feminists to instil moral panic (Gotell & Dutton, 2016). However, rape culture as a concept to understand the assemblage of vastly 'gendered norms, behaviours, attitudes, beliefs, values, customs, artifacts, symbols, codes, language, and institutions that tolerate, condone or celebrate sexual aggression' (Powell & Sugiura, 2018) is helpful in framing how cisgender heterosexual men experience sexual victimisation, often perpetrated by other men. Furthermore, it informs the meaning of masculinity and what constitutes a 'real man' (see Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), which have implications as to understanding the experiences of male victims and responses to them.

Ging (2017) investigated how theories of masculinity operate within the manosphere, and she found that traditional ideas of hegemonic masculinity and power are intersected by the utilisation of 'victimhood'. She argued that social media provides the perfect platform for amplifying the expression of this 'new hybrid' of masculinity; which she calls 'aggrieved manhood'. Indeed, MRAs often utilise language from feminism in order to portray symbolic and systemic harms against men instead (Nicholas & Agius, 2018). Van Valkenburgh's (2018) content analysis of 'Redpill'-related documents showed that the ideology is not just an expression of hegemonic masculinity, but that it also includes scientific discourse and elements of neoliberalism. This is shown in the way that it economises sexuality and treats women like commodities with a quantifiable exchange value, known as 'Sexual Market Value' (SMV). This framework removes intimacy from human relationships, meaning that women no longer threaten the emotional boundaries established by hegemonic masculinity. Bratich and Banet-Weiser (2019) point to the failures of neoliberalism as being the underlying cause for the increase in violence seen within the manosphere. Neoliberalism has failed to give men the self-confidence it promises, instead relying on misogynistic ideas, which has resulted

in reactive violence against women who do not comply with patriarchal gender roles for sexual reproduction. This violence often starts with online harassment and increases in severity. This abuse has been unsurprisingly denounced by MRAs who dismiss the experiences of women and feminists as victims of online violence in forum discussions (Lumsden, 2019). Any online abuse of women and feminists is justified as retaliation for men's victimisation.

In the manosphere, the redpill and bluepill analogy is used to 'awaken men to feminism's misandry and brainwashing' (Ging, 2017, p. 3). Incels have created a third pill, that of the blackpill, which once metaphorically consumed shows the uncontested nature of reality: that the world is ordered against 'low status' men in favour of women and alpha males, it is impossible to evade this systemic oppression, 'genetically inferior' men have, are and will always be socially disadvantaged, whilst women are biologically equipped to desire conventionally attractive and rich male partners.

Male incels are sad, disillusioned individuals, who have been linked with suicide and mental health issues, more so than members of the other communities. Frustration with the lack of sexual success as promised by the PUA community has, in some cases, led men to pursue the fatalistic incel path. Although it is difficult to ascertain exact numbers of men who self-identify as incel and participate in the online community, estimations suggest over 100,000 globally. They have assumed victim status based on what has essentially led to them identifying as what they term being subhuman. They have been dealt the lowest hand in life by not having the looks to adhere to societal standards of desirable aesthetics (at least in their view and associated with being unsuccessful with the women they want to attract) nor the material wealth which could mitigate the unattractiveness (with the notable exception of Elliot Rodger who did come from a wealthy background). Yet, is this victimhood based on real rather than perceived adversity, discrimination or mistreatment and is more to do with expectations and entitlement about how their lives should be in accordance with the promises afforded to being male. Recall, that some incels are not actually celibate but aggrieved that they are unable to engage in relations with the women they perceive to have a high SMV.

Men-Only Spaces (Online)

The manosphere aside, cyberspace has questionably long been situated as a male-possessed and -managed space inhospitable to women, such that initial users of 4chan professed there 'were no girls on the Internet' (Penny, 2013). Whilst this statement is undoubtedly incorrect, as women were involved in both the development and early uptake of the internet (see Wajcman, 2010) though they and their contributions were not necessarily always acknowledged, it is indicative of the perspective that women do not belong and are unwelcome in many online spaces. Indeed, women's mere presence online is often responded to with abuse and aggression, including gender-based hate speech and trolling, as well as many examples of sexual violence and harassment (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Henry & Powell, 2015; Jane, 2016; Mantilla, 2013; Megarry, 2014).

Trolling is a tactic favoured by incels; in fact much of the content on incel forums is designed to provoke, shock and invoke an emotive reaction, a core motivation of trolls. Some behaviours of those who initially co-opted the incel name from its original inclusive origins are remarkably similar to those demonstrated by the early trolls in the Usenet days of the internet. The priority in these situations was about building the community and keeping outsiders out, as well as engaging in combative vexatious actions with peers. Some of the earliest instances of trolling involved Usenet members posting disinformation, content that was deliberately untrue and ludicrous so that anyone who responded and appeared to believe it would be automatically outed as noobs (short for newbies) and ridiculed by the wider community. Other early trolls were referred to as ‘net. weenies’, essentially these people said whatever they liked and insulted whoever they wanted to – they were unashamedly an asshole for the sake of being an asshole. As Whitney Phillips (2015) author of ‘This is why we can’t have nice things: mapping the relationship between online trolling and mainstream culture’ noted in a Daily Dot article⁹ ‘trolling was something that one actively chose to do. More importantly, a troll was something one chose to be’. Trolls demonstrate cognitive but not affective empathy (March, 2019); this means that they can predict and recognise the emotional suffering of their victims yet do not actually care or feel guilty about the pain they cause; hence, they are master manipulators of both cyber settings and their victim’s emotions.

Initially, the incel community on Reddit was about performing for your peers – who had the worst tales about rejection and was heavily influenced by internet culture, particularly that of trolling, where insults were freely traded. Arguably, this was not for outside consumption, though this does not give free reign to discriminatory language of course. Much like the mindset of spaces not being for women, threads were viewed as a place for men to vent to other like-minded men, without having to worry about offending women. The victim-blaming narrative of warning women and others to stay away to avoid being outraged was prevalent. Much of this culture and mindset still remains, and members continue to post materials designed to garner attention; however, the content has also become more extreme, and the contempt, not just for women but each other, has expanded. The popularity and growth of anonymous sites such as 4chan and 8chan alongside this advancement of more extreme and offensive incel posts is not a coincidence. Although incels frequent different platforms, some specifically dedicated to incel issues alongside generic social media sites, the chan rhetoric, though being more prolific on its own dedicated platforms, has influence elsewhere, especially on the groups whose interests converge with it. Chan is renowned for a culture of abuse, condoned depending on the intention of the abuser – if they don’t believe in what they are saying that it’s ok. Essentially any topic is fair game as long as it is intended to be humorous – for the lulz. The problem is that trolling as a term has been conflated and excused when it encompasses a broad range of harmful behaviours. As Zoe Quinn, who was the original

⁹<https://www.dailydot.com/unclick/phillips-brief-history-of-trolls/>

target during Gamergate,¹⁰ astutely states on the site Crash Override (which was created to support victims of online harassment):

Trolling is an activity as old as the internet itself, though the definition has been warped to apply to everything from someone just being a jackass for laughs – starting an argument with an insincere, asinine, or ridiculous statement to see who will take the bait – to outright hate speech and serious threats.

The deeply misogynistic content posted by incels, regardless of whether it can or should be accessed by others, is a form of online gendered hate. Although there are few instances of posts directed at specific individuals, and even where women (often those in the public eye – which does not provide an automatic licence to disparage them though) are explicitly named, comments are generally made about them rather than to them. Nevertheless, this does not diminish the harms being perpetuated, not just to the individual concerned, but these and other misogynistic posts also impact all women. They are normalising men's violence against women as well as sending a message to women, about how they are hated, how they are right to fear men and how they should not speak or act in ways which challenge the dominant power structures and hierarchies (even if incels themselves do not acknowledge themselves as belonging to those dominant structures). This reflects the idea from hate crime theory that hate crimes are not just about suppressing individuals but about controlling the wider community (Chakraborti & Garland, 2015; Perry, 2001).

Why Young White Western Cisgender Men?

There is a common presumption that the incel community is largely white or white presenting. This has been informed, in part, by the several self-described incels who have committed violent acts. This theory was not upended by the broader ethnographic exploration of incel online spaces I undertook, as the majority of YouTube channels, and self-descriptions on forums supported the contention that the majority of incels are white or white presenting and based

¹⁰Massanari (2015) highlights that the scandal began with independent game developer Zoe Quinn who created a game called 'Depression Quest', which reflected what it was like to have clinical depression and the sole purpose of the game was that you can never truly win, and there is no real way out. Zoe's boyfriend at the time Eron Gjoni accused her of having an affair with a game journalist in order to receive a favourable review. The alleged affairs exposure on 4chan gave rise to the notion that there was a politically incorrect feminist conspiracy surrounding game culture. This in turn led to Zoe being subjected to a process of doxing, in which her social media accounts were hacked and her personal information leaked online, resulting in her having to move home. The same occurred to other women who showed their support for Zoe and challenged the abuse and harassment.

in (North) America and Europe. A 2020 poll on the incel.co site, however, adds nuance to the issue of incels and race, as the results indicate that roughly 45% of its users are from non-white ethnicities. Although the majority (55%) of respondents identify as white or Caucasian, the remaining 45% are equally divided among a range of ethnic and racial groups, including Black, Latino, Asian, Indian, Middle Eastern or ticked the 'other/not sure' option.

Furthermore, according to the incels.co poll, incels are not exclusive to any one country or continent, though Europe and North America do have the greatest numbers of respondents stating they are based from those areas (43% and 38%, respectively). Respondents also hailed from Central and South America, Asia, Oceania and Africa, with representation from every continent aside from Antarctica. Therefore, inceldom has comprehensive international participation.

It is debatable, however, as to whether this site is fully representative of incels and incel culture. Certainly, there are many accounts that are referred to as 'bluepillers', for example, indicating that these are not authentic incels, but it does have a significant number of users that continues to grow and, in terms of an incel community, has the greatest collective online presence. Furthermore, based off the fact that many incels reuse the same username/pseudonym across different platforms, it can be seen that many of the incel.co users are active elsewhere and so this site is not separate or distinct to other incel activity. In addition, a note of caution should be applied when exploring the more prominent incel sites and accounts, which do tend to involve the stereotypical younger white men. This is not necessarily just about incels but also about societal reactions and acknowledgement elevating those who ordinarily have greater visibility to the forefront. Therefore, though there appear to be more vocal young white male incels, we should not overlook the presence of incels of different ethnicities who may not be as publicly active. Jaki et al.'s (2019) analysis of incels.co revealed a racially diverse membership, for example.

This inclusion of more racially diverse people does not mean that incel spaces are exempt from white supremacy and racism though. There is a racial hierarchy positioning whiteness as the ideal, whilst concurrently claiming that white masculinity is under threat. Certainly, there are many discussions centred on the just be white (JBW) theory, whereby non-whiteness is viewed as yet another affliction affecting one's ability to be considered attractive. This was highlighted to me by Tom in the interviews:

Incels in general do see white men to an extent as genetically superior, because they have a better success in dating and social life compared to non-white men. Rich attractive white men are seen as socially more desirable, and in a jealous/envious way that incels don't have what attractive rich men do.

There is also a thing called Just be White¹¹ where non-white incels believe the idea that being a white man is considered more attractive

¹¹See the subreddit r/JustBeWhite

(especially among non-white women) because of their race. This also highlights sexual racism where non-white men face a lot of disadvantages in dating and society because of their race and racial prejudice/stereotypes. (Tom)

As such there is no guarantee that accounts of incels claiming to be white actually are white and are simply masking their true ethnic background to fit in or be more accepted. However, as these forums are sites for people to be as harsh on themselves as possible, assuming more positive characteristics defeats the purpose of engagement somewhat. Alternatively, this could suggest something about incel.co being more appealing to people of different ethnicities.

Perhaps, individuals struggling with issues of ethnic identity have found their way to these conversations. It is also recognised that incels who are white but from different countries do not appreciate being homogenised under a white umbrella, and that there are nuances relating to language and culture impacting on their incelhood. For example, Alex emphasised that incels are an international phenomenon and stated that whilst the redpill and the blackpill are usually two separate ideologies, particularly in the United States; within the Italian incel community, the terms are almost interchangeable. However, he also maintained that in accordance with the majority of incels, Italian incels are blackpilled rather than redpilled, which is ironic as they refer to themselves as ‘redpillati’ and their primary Facebook page was called ‘Il Redpillatore’. Alex explained that the incel community in Italy did not start with this group nor on Facebook even but on a forum created in 2008 called ‘Il Forum Dei Brutti’ (‘the forum of the ugly ones’) and, referring to a poll in 2019 on the incels.co site, highlighted how many members are from Europe¹² (approximately 40%).

The majority of the interview participants further upheld the presumption that all incels are white men; however, this was challenged by Ian, although in terms of age he supported the notion that incels are predominantly younger men:

Not all incels are same. There are incels of all races. Most of them are socially inept, isolated, lonely and lost young men with issues in a world which doesn't care about them and they want some direction in life. (Ian)

It is significant that Ian describes incels as having been rejected by society, as such they are susceptible to an ideology such as the blackpill, which provides them with appealing explanations for this supposed exclusion and lack of sympathy.

¹²The survey thread is no longer available online.

Whilst there is some crossover between incels and other manosphere groups, interview participants were keen to distance themselves from different men's rights communities and to highlight the distinctions within their ideologies.

Incels are not the same as MGTOW and TRP, so when you see mainstream media lumping all of the manosphere together, they're misinforming. (Ian)

The manosphere also has support from groups comprised of women. Trad-wives, short for traditional wives, are women who support and practice traditional domestic values, with a mutual nostalgic yearning to return to simpler times, when men and women knew their places – men as the breadwinners and women as the homemakers, and a rejection of feminism. There is overlap with Tradcons, as well as the far right, as they and trad-wives share an anti-immigration, anti-islam and anti-multiculturalism political stance, which they believe have contributed to contemporary societal problems. Trad-wives first emerged online, predominantly from the Redpill Woman subreddit, this being an offshoot from the manosphere. On this thread, women are taught that their single most important purpose is to please men, which sounds like the ultimate achievement for incels. Moreover, submission and obedience to husbands are emphasised. Trad-wives are increasingly gaining a greater online presence, with videos titled, for example, 'The War on Men', in which the mainstream media, education system, the entertainment industry and naturally feminism are credited with creating the 'hostile narrative' surrounding [straight white] men. Such videos rely on the same scaremongering as other MRA groups, namely fathers losing access to their children, the denial of women as experiencing the majority of domestic abuse at the hands of male perpetrators, workplace quotas and attacks on masculinity. Intertwined amongst the hyperbole are real men's issues, but the agenda to promote progression as the enemy is all consuming, and thus, there is little presented to resolve those problems other than turning one's back on equality. Joining the MRM is often presented as a solution, though sometimes the trad-wife declares a disclaimer of sorts by stating that she is not that familiar with the operation of the movement, coming from someone who also supposedly encourages critical thinking and engagement with verified sources, then this is a contradictory turn. Interestingly, trad-wives also go to great lengths to highlight that though men are the ones who suffering, they are not victims, such that their role as protector is untarnished.

The influence and support of trad-wives upon the growth of the manosphere and ultimately the increased threat against women and society should not be overlooked as women have long played a significant role in extremist movements, if not as key risks as potential allies (Bloom, 2011; Brown, 2013; Parashar, 2011; Pearson, 2020). Incels, whilst aggrieved at sexual liberation enabling women to choose who they have sex with, differ from trad-wives who view chastity and marriage as a solution to sexism. Nonetheless, where incels and trad-wives complement each other is their resentment and rejection of contemporary sexuality and gender relations. Both agree that men are oppressed

by their gender, and this oppression is the outcome of pressures and constraints placed on men by society (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) leading to a crisis of masculinity.

Crisis of Masculinity

There are claims that the West has lost faith in masculinity and the divinity of masculinity to which men could aspire to, has been denigrated, impacted by high levels of unemployment, low educational achievement, a deterioration of traditional working-class professions and the growth in women's equality, which have launched masculinity into a state of crisis (Bourgois, 1996; Collier, 1998). I was alerted to a study, about the decline of happiness in Americans¹³ by Ben, who claimed that men are actually the unhappiest they've ever been and argued that navigating masculinities has little to do with it:

A large number of young men feel they are left alone and isolated. They feel that their importance in society is being undermined and they're not given enough importance and young men's issues are considered not important or invalid, especially with the rise of feminism. (Ben)

R. W. Connell's (1987) *Theory of Hegemonic Masculinity* has been applied to explain behaviours of incels and other misogynistic groups within the manosphere (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Ging, 2017; Menzie, 2020; Vito, Admire, & Hughes, 2018; Witt, 2020). Hegemonic masculinity refers to men's power being systematically institutionalised, manifesting in destructive social and behavioural expectations of men that fulfil the purpose of maintaining dominance over women (Connell, 1987). Connell (1987, p. 185) notes that the public face of hegemonic masculinity is not automatically what powerful men are, but what preserves and enables their power and what many men are encouraged to aspire to. In writing about hegemonic masculinity, Connell aimed to expand upon patriarchy theory and highlight the systemic nature of men's domination not only over women but over other men too, what she termed subordinate masculinities. As such hegemonic masculinities provide a way to understand hierarchies between men and not just genders. This is particularly useful when applied to the thinking underpinning the incel hierarchy – from the alpha Chads down to the zeta incels themselves. Connell refined the concept of hegemonic masculinity with Messerschmidt in 2005 (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), suggesting that masculinity is not fixed nor embodied in the physical body or personality traits; thus, it should not be considered as an essence of gender, rather it is a set of practices and accomplishments. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 848) also stated that 'gender is always relational'; thus, femininity is instrumental in shaping masculinities. Favourable masculine

¹³<https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.fatherly.com/health-science/why-am-i-unhappy-because-american-men-are-sad/amp/>

traits include competitiveness, achievement, self-confidence, emotional control, strength, aggressiveness and sometimes violence. Homosexuality and perceived 'feminine' traits are considered less valuable or desired attributes in Western society (Kachel, Steffens, & Niedlich, 2016).

Spaces within the 'manosphere' promote unhealthy conceptions of masculinity centring around a collective sense that modern masculinity is in 'crisis'. No clearer is this assertion found than in the analysis of incel discourse involving negotiations and conceptions of masculinity, for example, the incel conception of the Chad hegemonic masculine standard and their 'beta' positioning in relation to 'Chad'. The term 'toxic masculinity' has increasingly been popularised within public discourse, highlighting the problems of a hegemonic gender structure that enables male violence and misogyny (McCann, 2020). First appearing in the 1990s, toxic masculinity referred to destructive behaviours embraced by men when attempting to achieve aspects of successful manhood (Karner, 1996). Kupers (2005, p. 714) defines toxic masculinity as '... the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence'. It is often applied in a manner echoing the motivation of hegemonic masculinity, to understand how some men are also harmed by rigid gender norms. However, Waling (2019) claims that toxic masculinity is a misinterpretation of Connell's work as it reduces the hierarchical element of the theory. Connell's original hierarchy enables us to appreciate different facets of masculinity that sit unevenly with each other – McCann (2020) presents the example of risk-taking behaviours of non-heterosexual men. Whilst toxic masculinity only offers an explanation as to the risk-taking behaviour without considering the role that the disfavoured sexual orientation plays, hegemonic masculinity provides a more nuanced interpretation that considers how the impact of a subordinate masculinity might have shaped the risk-taking behaviour. Applying an intersectional lens as per Crenshaw (1990) allows us to appreciate how sexuality, race and/or class may have influenced and informed such toxic behaviours. As Launius and Hassel (2018) assert, an intersectional approach is vital to understanding how masculinities are created in relation to different aspects and expectations of identity.

Some academics have criticised the term toxic masculinity for presenting the notion that there is a contrasting healthy masculinity which men should strive to. Waling (2019) claims that labelling certain masculinities as toxic and others as healthy is unhelpful and reinforces a binary-gendered framework. Theorisations of masculinity as toxic often position men as victims rather than being active in retaining gendered relations, provide vague explanations of healthy masculinity, overlook the duality of traits in being positive in certain contexts and damaging in others and suggest new forms of masculinity that appropriate femininity, whilst discounting femininity at the same time (Waling, 2019). Fundamentally, Waling argues that responses to toxic masculinity that propagate a healthier masculinity situate masculinity as separate from femininity and fail to include feminine qualities into an understanding of masculinity.

The challenges to toxic masculinity, particularly from incels, and more broadly MRAs, include the retort that toxic femininity also exists, suggesting that women

have pernicious behaviour too. The motivation behind this rebuttal is to neutralise any gendered explanations of power and present anti-feminist sentiment. An example of this is from Jeff Minick who wrote about toxic femininity as ‘toxic femininity’ on the conservative website *Intellectual Takeout*¹⁴ – ‘Based on their sex, women fired from a job or refused promotion can claim “victimhood” status, while a man who did the same would be laughed from the room’.

The incel and MRA forums and websites are replete with the topic of how women act in toxic ways, are bitchy, vengeful and manipulative. What incels and MRAs misinterpret, when they deploy the term toxic femininity, is that within feminist spheres, this refers to the gender expectations that keep women subservient, quiet and submissive to men’s domination and aggression. Snider (2018) discusses how women internalise patriarchal ideals of femininity and are constrained to think and behave in ways conforming to those notions. The very status that incels and MRAs want women to maintain, rather than what they are suggesting through their application of the term, as to the supposed harms that women are inflicting upon men. Obviously, it would be erroneous to claim that no woman has ever hurt a man, emotionally or physically, but alleging that there is an equal counterpart to damaging male behaviours applicable to women overlooks differing systemic gender roles and the impacts from them. Rather than using this term, McCann (2020) recommends considering what might be noxious about certain aspects of femininity and presents the concept of ‘rigid femininities’ to explain the structures that reinforce the control of a toxic gender power system.

Despite criticisms for being used to castigate men and immediately putting them on the defensive, instead of acknowledging that the problem is structural; toxic masculinity does not mean that all men are lethal, rather there are certain forms of masculinity which are harmful, especially to women, non-binary and transgender people, the men who do not adhere to the patriarchal ideals (white, heterosexual, successful with women, financially wealthy) and even the men who do fit those standards and comply with the behavioural expectations. It is conceivable, however, that men who are feeling disempowered and that their masculinity is under threat could turn to acts of violence to try and reclaim power and enhance self-esteem (Messerschmidt, 1994; Nayak, 2006).

Conclusions

Initially, the mutual damage impacting women and men, from patriarchal-gendered expectations – women’s importance is in their looks, whilst men’s in their financial success – was recognised by both the women’s and men’s liberation groups, and there was an alliance in dismantling these structures. The disintegration of the MRM has led to feminism becoming the enemy for current MRAs within the manosphere and beyond and the weaponisation of women’s appearances. According to contemporary men’s rights groups, women do not

¹⁴<https://www.intellectualtakeout.org/article/why-feminists-hate-toxic-femininity/>

experience sexism, because their looks provide them with power which they can use to manipulate men. Women are unable to experience discrimination from men, about something which places them in a dominant position over men. Men, however, are still expected to earn the money but are also acknowledged to be more successful if they are lucky enough to be born attractive. These ideas, however, did not originate with the MRAs of today; these beliefs were already inherent within the early movement and espoused by influential figures, for example, Warren Farrell (1974, p. 48) stated 'A woman becomes a sex object as a man becomes a success object'. Moreover, key elements of incel philosophy – the de-politicising of gender, the notion that manhood needs to be earned or achieved and the belief that feminism created the myth of male privilege – align with those of the men's liberationists and the MRM.

Some of the issues discussed within the manosphere are facts, for example, the limiting nature of masculine gender roles and constraining expectations for the performance of Western masculinity; however, much is based on more emotive responses. This is not to dismiss men's feelings, feelings are real, and I am not questioning or challenging what men are feeling, but despite the strength of feelings, they may not be *true* and are based on individual perceptions rather than facts (Kimmel, 2017). For example, the feeling that men are marginalised from society, and are victims of the 'natural social order', initiated by second-wave feminism and the sexual revolution of the 1960s, which is the essence of incel.