

Chapter 4

Weirdos or Extremists?

Just killed a woman, feeling good. (TommyInnit)

TommyInnit is a popular YouTuber who plays Minecraft. In May 2021, TommyInnit, who is 17, had 8.7 million subscribers, a number which continues to grow exponentially. Minecraft's average user demographic is 15- to 21-year-olds,¹ although the game is suitable from age three years. The natural progression from playing Minecraft as a young child is to engage with YouTubers and learn about modifications for the game and to be part of the gaming community where derogatory language about women and minority groups is used in abundance. TommyInnit's catchphrase, however, is just one example of normalised male violence towards women in popular discourse, which is not confined to the online realm and is far more widespread than incels.

Utilising analyses of research data underpinned by the sociology of deviance, subcultural, gender and feminist theory, this chapter explores the lure of the manosphere and the appeal of rejecting progressive social values. Incels have been increasingly described as extremists, which has far-reaching connotations in how they are responded to, and so it is important to critically analyse the accuracy of this application. The chapter considers how rudimentary incel beliefs are enactments of male supremacy, which some but not all individuals in incel communities can and indeed do internalise and become fanatical about. Pathologising groups such as incels as 'deviant others', distinct from 'ordinary men', is problematic as it suggests that explicit sexism is confined to these small groups rather than being symbolic of wider societal perspectives and behaviours. Although the hatred of women espoused by incels is acute, their attitudes are actually symptomatic of structural misogyny, further emboldened by the precarious and increasingly right-wing Western political climate, a manifestation of what bell hooks (2013) refers to as 'the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy'.

¹<https://minecraft-seeds.net/blog/minecraft-player-demographics/>

The Incel Rebellion: The Rise of the Manosphere and the Virtual War Against Women, 69–95
Copyright © Lisa Sugiura 2021 Published by Emerald Publishing Limited.



This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this work (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licences/by/4.0/legalcode>

All rights of reproduction in any form reserved

doi:[10.1108/978-1-83982-254-420211007](https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83982-254-420211007)

The parallels with the alt- and far right are considered, in particular how both groups camouflage their extremist behaviours as satire to ensure that those who are offended are not privy to the ‘in-jokes’. Even if the intention is not to cause harm (although this can be called into question), how the messages are being perceived, and the outcomes and impact in enabling misogyny and encouraging violent behaviours, cannot be denied. Algorithms, memes and echo chambers further promote and reinforce the ideologies, with limited intervention from social media companies. Employing some of the high-profile cases of incel violence, this chapter then considers how, irrespective of recent media attention, incels and groups in the wider manosphere were able to fly under the radar for so long, avoiding exposure in the mainstream discourse. Here the affordances of digital technologies, combined with reluctance to tackle misogyny and recognise its severity, are significant. I consider the links with domestic violence and terrorism as well as the issue of copycat attacks, and whether mass incel killings are comparable with school shootings. This chapter will address why certain forms of extremism and extremist behaviours invoke ‘lone wolf’ descriptions or explanations associated with mental health instead before turning to the responses that have been employed to tackle the expanding incel threat, some of which may be actually exacerbating the problem.

Subterranean Values and the Appeal of the Manosphere

Incels have been described as a subculture (O’Malley et al., 2020). Subcultures perform in ways that oppose the dominant culture or reject wider societal values (Wolfgang, Ferracuti, & Mannheim, 1967; Young, 2011). Sarah Thornton’s work on *Club Cultures* (1995) is useful to link subcultural theory with incels as it is not concerned with dominant ideologies and subversive subcultures, rather the focus is on the subcultural ideologies. Incels are not a subversive subculture fighting back at a dominant ideology, regardless of how much they may attempt to assume that identity. At the core their ideology is not separate or unique from perspectives continuing to permeate wider society, but it is an overtly extreme manifestation of misogynistic, homophobic, racist, classist and ableist ideas and beliefs, which is also prevalent in the mainstream. Within subcultural communities, members become imbued within deviant norms, attitudes and values that liberate them from traditional constraints on their behaviour. Hence, incels engage in explicitly heinous discussions and utilise outrageous language denigrating women, ethnic minorities, the LGBTQI+ community and even themselves. This special language establishes their attachment to the incel ideology and determines the parameters of the community and who is welcome within it (Hamm, 2002; Holt, 2010).

Incels, and indeed other groups within the manosphere, define themselves against an imagined mainstream, one that they perceive to be anti-men, but which in reality, covertly provides support and validation for them. Therefore, the discourses of incels are ideologies that fulfil their particular cultural agendas (Thornton, 1995). These subcultural ideologies enable incels to envisage their own and other social groups, maintain their unique characteristics and insider status within the community. As such, this research is not just predicated on what incels believe

but also explores what Thompson (1990, p. 7) refers to as 'meaning in the service of power', recognising that incels do assert authority and assume the inferiority of others in some instances, particularly in the application of the blackpill. This knowledge provides strength, a feeling of superiority over those who are either too ignorant or doltish to appreciate what incels believe and, to them, establish the facts of how the (Western) world operates. This enables them to cope with all the hardship they endure from not being born attractive, as well as from how wider society now does perceive them in light of their increased negative public attention.

Incels are subject to labelling, within the media they have been referred to and portrayed as figures of ridicule – losers and pathetic virgins, deviants, weirdos, misogynists, extremists and terrorists. Some of these labels such as being losers and sexually inexperienced are already internalised, whilst others, especially the terrorist label, are actively rejected. For individuals who had already thought they were hated, being the current 'folk devil' (Cohen, 1972) of choice, means that what might have been paranoia is now substantiated. Subcultures have developed to mitigate and obtain solidarity against stigmatisation (Braithwaite, 1989). Individuals already in a situation where they feel society has rejected them are then ostracised further. Although the original perception of rejection is a subjective interpretation given credence by the blackpill ideology, incels as a community are now homogenised and demonised, such that the term incel is almost the default for misogynist, overlooking how misogyny is pervasive in society and not confined to these individuals. Proclamations of perpetrators being incels are also utilised in the immediate aftermath of lone terror attacks, when there is no evidence to support it at that juncture. Those who are committing these disgusting atrocities fundamentally do need to be called what they are – terrorists, murderers, sociopaths, etc.; however, the risk of labelling others who, although aligned with undeniably problematic perspectives, have not displayed any such behaviours nor are working towards committing any atrocities is that a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1948) could be inadvertently encouraged. The problem is that it is not obvious, which individuals are travelling down that path, particularly amongst the cacophony of bile and hatred present within the community. Irrespective of whether it is performed for each other, the influence of being absorbed by the blackpill mindset upon different individuals and how they might react to it, and the goading of their incel peers, is subject to interpretation, which in some cases could be to lash out violently.

As noted, younger men appear to be more susceptible to the lure of the incel ideology, although the incel community is not exclusively constituted of young men. Criminological theory provides insight into younger men's engagement with and identification of incel. Matza's (1964) functionalist perspective on subcultures, 'state of drift', assumes everyone shares the same delinquent values, which lead some people to engage in criminal or deviant behaviour; however, most people are able to suppress these principles most of the time. These values are understood as subterranean 'underground' values. This ability to restrain oneself, though, is a learned skill; therefore, we are more likely to participate in criminality or deviance when young and less so as we age and assume more responsibilities. Therefore, people are neither conformist nor deviant and, according to

Matza (1964), are able to drift between both throughout their lives. A glimmer of hope in the otherwise fatalistic world of incel is the potential for ascension, to leave the life of loneliness behind. Applying Matza's state of drift concept, just like delinquency, inceldom is a phase, something that young men identify with as part of their engagement with digital culture but can grow out of. Although there is currently limited data on how many men do leave the incel community behind, the indication is that being an incel is not a permanent state, which is another contradiction of the blackpill, in claiming immutability. Further, it is unclear if the impact of being immersed in incel culture can be completely eliminated or whether certain aspects end up being so deeply ingrained that even though ex-incels might learn to outwardly treat women with respect, internally they still maintain derision for them. This sadly seemed to be the case with some of those ex-incels, I spoke with who still retained sexist assumptions of female privilege, in what they termed a 'pussy pass'. The treating of women with respect might also be the outcome of realising that this is how they will be able to get what they want, that is, sexual/romantic relationships with women, and so ultimately these men end up conforming to the very 'cucked' behaviours that they previously claimed they despised.

Without dismissing the issues arising from the involvement with the community and indeed the influence of the blackpill upon how women and progressiveness are perceived, being an incel might be a passing chapter, a foray into a subculture, which young persons have historically been associated with and that in turn have prompted societal concerns (Pearson, 1983). Goldsmith and Brewer (2015) proposed the concept of digital drift to account for youth offending, which extended elements of Matza's original theories to the virtual sphere. They suggest that access to and use of digital technologies for interaction subjects individuals to environments where prosocial influences are disregarded. Young people are able to engage with new identities due to the relative absence of capable guardians to present different perspectives. Goldsmith and Brewer (2015) also highlight how online anonymity liberates individuals from a sense of responsibility and could encourage people to act in ways they would not otherwise, offline (Suler, 2005). Settings such as online gaming, chats, forums, etc. provides escapism and minimises the need to conform to social norms and values. The power of traditional authorities is diminished in digital environments, allowing the emergence of transgressive influences that enable deviance (Bishop, 2013; Hinduja, 2008). Therefore, Goldsmith and Brewer's iteration of Matza's original concept can be applied to consider how young men can be drawn into and escalate hatred against women as a result of participation in virtual incel communities. Subterranean values are demonstrated in how people draw on neutralisation techniques (Sykes & Matza, 1957) to offset their wrong doings. If people held different values, when engaging in crime or deviance, they would not feel any guilt and would instead believe their behaviour to be correct. Instead, people do turn to justifications to legitimise their actions or remove their responsibility in relation to mainstream values. Incels are no different, in using different techniques of neutralisation; the implication is that they understand and share some societal values, despite often presenting themselves as having shunned them.

Extremist and Deviant Others

A notoriously contested concept, ‘extremism’, typically refers to beliefs or behaviours sharing three characteristics: ambitions for radical social, political or other transformations; scepticism towards the efficacy of ‘normal’ channels for the satisfaction of those ambitions; and the positing of fundamental difference between an ‘us’ and ‘them’. The meaning of ‘extremism’ derives from other concepts, identities and practices. Designating individuals, groups or behaviours as ‘extremist’ explicitly or implicitly relies upon (and, in turn, reproduces) the identification of non-extremist individuals, groups and behaviours. Extremism also cumulates some of its meaning from adjacent concepts like terrorism, radicalisation and violence, which address similar or overlapping phenomena. Likewise, the combination of the term with adjectives such as ‘violent’ or ‘hateful’ shifts its meaning and emphasis.

In Berger’s (2018) framing, extremism can be characterised as a belief that in-groups can never be healthy or secure unless they engage in hostile actions against outgroups. I recognise the ontological instability of the term ‘extremism’. As with related terms in the political violence lexicon like ‘terrorism’, the meaning of extremism is variable such that its designation in one geographical or temporal context differs markedly from another. The meaning of extremism is also fluid, making it contestable in specific online or offline contexts. In fact, behaviours considered acceptable at specific moments may later qualify as acts of extremism.

Following incel-related mass murders, incel is now inextricably linked with extremist behaviours. The Institute for Research on Male Supremacism (IRMS), however, has published recommendations for media reporting on incels,² in response to media coverage that has engaged in, what Jock Young (1971) famously described as, ‘deviance amplification’, which in heightening the social reaction increases the deviance itself. Media outlets such as the BBC, CNN and the *New York Times* have been criticised for portraying incels as something distinct and ominous from wider society. Much of these pieces address the misogynistic angle of incel, but the IRMS states that this is undertaken without making the connection with male supremacist ideology, which means that those who are misogynist, in having their reasons for hating women magnified, that is, women won’t have sex with them, are able to elicit sympathy and support for their adoption of the victim status. Tomkinson et al. (2020) describe how the media reporting on incels, which publicly affirms feelings of victimhood or persecution amongst men, undermines any political action on gender-based violence, as well as encouraging those who feel persecuted to engage in violence. Media reporting, which includes incel’s own narratives, emphasises and legitimises the channels available for other disillusioned young men to join them. The realisation that allowing the voices of individual incels to be heard, further enabling a platform for their potentially extremist and warped perspectives, is a tension that I have grappled with in this research. After all, these are not especially marginalised (though they would disagree) individuals who are ordinarily silenced; however, I felt it was important to

²<https://www.malesupremacism.org/tips-for-media/>

not just undertake external observations of the communities and to have direct engagement with people who would enable me to have a richer understanding of the incel dynamics, without becoming unduly sympathetic to them.

The IRMS acknowledges that there is incel identity distinct from the misogynistic incel ideology and violence. Here women, men and non-binary people are noted as being able to identify as incels who do not have world views rooted in deep misogyny. There is a different interpretation of the many studies incorporating the blackpill, one which does not apportion blame onto women, feminism or progression. Those incel men who are misogynist and who do dehumanise women and glorify violence should be distinguished in media reporting. The IRMS suggests clarification is needed when reporting on particular forums and spaces and making the distinction between general incel communities and misogynistic incel forums, particularly if the latter excludes women. In previous research analysing the misogynistic discourse on the now defunct r/incels (Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021), women were often excluded from conversation. This could create a false impression that because women were not experiencing direct abuse in these and other environments, the misogyny has little impact. Instead, discussions such as these, which were or are publicly available, highlight how misogyny is sustained and demonstrates the commonalities between the narratives and reasons espoused by incels with other forms of online and offline men's violence against women. Online abuse, like offline violence, happens on a continuum (Kelly, 1987). This gamut does not merely range from unpleasant, sporadic, non-threatening (direct or indirect) messages to frequent, highly threatening, hateful content (Lewis et al., 2017, p. 1469), but it also involves misogynistic discourse and practices considered non-criminal or non-threatening because they are seen as 'fiction', as satire/cultural in-jokes (Zillmann, 1983) or because they do not entail a direct interaction between users. Detaching 'exceptional behaviour' from the continuum shields more mundane forms of misogyny from scrutiny. Incels with their deliberately ridiculous and exaggerated misogyny can be used as a distraction from the more subtle forms of misogyny that is pervasive in society.

Separating 'extreme' versions of an ideology from more 'mundane' ones creates an artificial dichotomy between the deviant fringe and mainstream ideologies that, in actuality, are based on the same assumptions. The extreme/non-extreme distinction is deceptive, since it obscures systems of oppression and 'everyday' misogyny – particularly online, where such boundaries can be harder to differentiate – that have become socially sanctioned and normalised. Moreover, this arbitrary division absolves the 'non-misogynistic' majority as it is allowed to express reprimand for and rejection of 'extreme' misogyny, whilst presenting itself as morally irreprehensible (Ferber, 1996). Hence, incels can be othered from 'normal' men, such that incel has been conflated with all forms of misogyny to the extent that it is almost representative of all misogyny and male supremacy. Domestic terror attacks are labelled incel regardless of the perpetrator being connected to these communities or ideology. Viewing misogyny as exclusive to incels obscures the broader violent nature of heteropatriarchy and misogyny that are the very real lived experiences of many women. Incel is but one component of the larger male supremacist movement.

Incel misogyny is often seen as an issue of a secluded online group of deviant individuals, whose problematic attitudes towards women are exclusively attributed to their 'weird' personalities, as individual deviance or mental illness, and without affiliation with structural misogyny or patriarchal socialisation systems (Manne, 2018). In this sense, incel is conceptualised in a manner similar to rapists: deviant men who engage in 'extreme' acts of misogyny because of their individual pathology (Malamuth, 1981). This approach to understanding incels neglects to consider the prevalence of misogyny pervasive in wider society, and the role it plays in influencing and reinforcing incel's attitudes towards women.

The Right and Incels

Commentators and academics (Beauchamp, 2019; Nagle, 2017; Ribeiro et al., 2020; Stokel-Walker, 2021; Young, 2019) have drawn comparisons with incels and the alt-right and certainly there is overlap in terms of their shared heteropatriarchal attitudes towards women and women's rights. The alt-right is notoriously aligned with racism rather than hating women; however, misogyny intermingles comfortably with racial prejudice. The alt-right rose to prominence in the wake of Trump's campaign and election, placing far right ideologies firmly in the mainstream. Like incels, alt-right groups mobilise the internet through the use of social media, trolling and use culturally specific language and memes – included shared words such as 'cuck' and images like Pepe the Frog. The use of such language and memes creates a universality across groups and the internet, where words and images are representative of shared meanings and beliefs.

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC, n.d.) defines the alt-right as

a set of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that 'white identity' is under attack by multicultural forces using 'political correctness and social justice' to undermine white people and 'their' civilization.

Aaron Winter (2019) calls attention to the contested nature of the term alt-right, and how in using this more palatable yet novel and edgy terms, it attempts to camouflage the racism, white nationalism, white supremacism and fascism associated with the traditional far right and appeals to the usually politically apathetic youth. Distinct from previous far right movements, the alt-right exists principally on social media, on the same platforms as incels – Twitter, Reddit, 4chan, etc. – and also comprises of relatively anonymous youths (Hawley, 2018).

There is also a nexus between incel ideology and other alt-right ideologies, such as being anti-liberal, anti-leftist, anti-feminism, and that Western civilisation is in decline, hence the desire to preserve/return to traditional values aka abolishing much of the equality rights benefitting women and marginalised groups. This is linked with redpilling and Men's Rights Activists (MRAs) within the manosphere, where one is awakened to delusions of contemporary society. Also, much of the incel online discussions involves a not so insignificant amount of racism. However, for the most part, incels claim not to be politically motivated insofar as

there are incels who are both right and left leaning or even apolitical, and having specific political beliefs is not necessarily a main driver for becoming an incel in the first place:

It's a common misconception that all incels are alt-right. Incels can be anywhere on the political spectrum. I don't know why there is a supposed connection to it. That part doesn't make sense. (Ben)

However, a different perspective is provided by a former incel, who describes incel forums as a type of gateway to the alt-right:

These communities surely overlap. I think that incel forums are a gate to the alt-right. Not every incel of course becomes an alt-right supporter, but many do. They overlap in the sense that many incels become alt-right supporters so both groups have many members in common. (John)

Despite, incels not necessarily being a political movement, given the positioning of blackpill philosophies that are undeniably right wing, convergence between incels and conservatism is justifiable, particularly when incels criticise policies which they view as adopting the 'feminine imperative' – that is, treating women as autonomous human beings worthy of having equal rights to men. For example, the term 'cuckservative' appears in various threads, which according to the incel wiki means a man who advocates progressive social policies or a conservative who adopts leftist or pro-racial-diversity policy. There are also certainly politically motivated or aligned opinions and discussions prevalent within the community, such as women's and men's rights, and the treatment of women and men in the criminal justice system and family courts. For feminists, the direct vitriol they receive about their gains for women could not be perceived as anything less than political, after all as Carol Hanisch (1969) astutely observed 'the personal is political'.

Although some incels have actively rejected or resent any affiliation with the alt-right, the political connotations arising from the incel ideology are inescapable as are the undeniable parallels with the desire to return to traditional values as outlined in Chapter 2 in regard to the fetishising of trad-wives. However, incel ideology is rooted more in male supremacy rather than the white supremacy of the alt-right. Incels certainly internalise racism and recognise white privilege, though often they frame it in terms of attractiveness rather than recognising the systemic social benefits emanating from being born with white skin:

Many non-white incels have also faced racism in dating (partly due to which they became incels). For e.g. many (South and East) Asian incels have struggled with dating partly because of their image in western society, and also that even many of their own women are self-hating who worship white guys. (Mike)

Many non-white incels feel they themselves are subhuman partly because of their race too, and wish they were white, kinda like internalised racism. (Sam)

However, one non-white interviewee, indicated that incels who are white, may have white supremacist connections due to the ideological overlap with the alt-right.

Incel ideology, i.e. the black pill is a part of alt-right itself, although many incels themselves may, or may not be actively alt right (depending on their race). Although many incels are white supremacists, there are many non-white incels too, who combined with the other issues, also may have faced racism while growing up if they grew up in a western country. So blackpill in itself isn't directly related to white supremacy, but a growing number of white incels are white supremacists. (Alex)

The misconception is that all incels are white supremacists, yet many incels are not white. This is not to say that non-white persons can't be affiliated with alt-right ideology but would be precluded from white supremacist groups due to the core identity inherently within them. In addition, because of the overlap in incel and alt-right ideologies, being a member of the incel community could be viewed as a passage to the alt-right and white supremacy. However, the IRMS states that male supremacism should be recognised as a threat in its own right, not only as a conduit to other harmful ideologies. Although there is undeniable cross-pollination of ideas between male supremacism and white supremacism, misogyny is not simply a gateway to white supremacism and other aspects of the alt-right, which media outlets such as *Vox* and *The Atlantic* have claimed. Meanwhile, Jaki et al. (2019) found that incels are not mostly 'white right-wing conservatives' as assumed by the media but are actually a much more heterogeneous group. Jaki et al. (2019) stated that the forums full of incitement and violent fantasies could be no more than verbal tactics for self-enhancement within an online echo chamber.

Hiding in Plain Sight – the Power of Memes and 'Satire'

An 'echo chamber' is an environment where individuals will only encounter opinions or information that reflect and reinforce their established beliefs. Echo chambers can create misinformation and warp a person's viewpoint so that they struggle to consider alternate perspectives. This is exacerbated by confirmation bias (Wason, 1968), where a person will prefer information that reinforces their existing beliefs. Echo chambers can occur in any space where information is exchanged, but the nature of the internet lends itself to creating digital spaces with only like-minded individuals. Companies such as Facebook and Google enable *Filter Bubbles*, spaces of intellectual isolation based on algorithms of former search histories, click behaviours and location information. This results in limited topics and perspectives being presented, leaving narrow bubbles of formulated interests and personalised search subjects (DiFranzo & Gloria-Garcia, 2017;

Pariser, 2011). Research from Bright (2018) and Pariser (2011) demonstrates that filter bubble algorithms are shutting off new ideas, subjects and significant information, resulting in many people not accessing knowledge outside of their own political, religious or societal views. Incel forums and websites create these digital echo chambers which reinforce and amplify their world view, including potentially extremist perspectives – enabling the radicalisation of this community of lonely dateless men (Bael et al., 2019; Jaki et al., 2019; Zimmerman et al., 2018):

I don't think that violence is the solution, because it won't solve anything, but I can understand the psychology behind their violence. Incel sites are echo chambers of negative thoughts, so just by reading the threads and posts you get more negative day by day. You don't even realise that because the changes are slow and constant so that it seems normal to you to be like this, to be this negative. (Carl)

These kind of echo chambers are especially very harmful to those who already have psychiatric problems like ER and AM because people with psychiatric problems, especially with aspergers, tend to obsess on some things or thoughts. But not all incel terrorists were mentally ill before they discovered the blackpill. Some became mentally ill after taking the blackpill and staying in those echo chambers every day. (Tom)

Within these spaces, there is an insular trolling sensibility, whereby such platforms are not suitable for those easily offended yet are easily accessible and available for public consumption. Through the use of humour, the cultural taboo of racism, homophobia, sexism and ableism is subverted (Reitman, 2018). Memes often appear as comical images; however they facilitate the spread of ideology in masking discriminatory messages as harmless satire or parody. Nagle (2017) describes this as a countercultural irony tactic, generally employed by far right movements to use edgy humour to mask the loaded racism in their messaging, to open the 'Overton window' – expanding the public conception of what is acceptable discourse (Wendling, 2018, p. 91). According to Crawford (2020), the gradual and increased exposure of users to ironic parody obscuring hostile content may mobilise the impact of extreme ideology. This exposure may function from the bottom-up as users seek out progressively extreme content for themselves, be an outcome from the algorithmic nature of platforms that recommend or provide new content based on what has been engaged with previously, such as YouTube's *up next* and *suggested for you* features, or it may be part of a top-down approach where 'meme campaigns' are disseminated to attract new users (Crawford, 2020).

According to Milner (2013), out-groups are continually othered via the distribution of stereotypes. Certainly, stereotypes play a significant role in the success of memes as they facilitate a shared cultural assumption about different groups. Pre-existing cultural narratives allow for the inclusion of pithy new catchphrases to enable successful memetic reproduction, because the facets of intertextuality

are aimed at the ingroup who are already familiar with the tropes. Hence, memes are effective in communicating the logic of populist messaging and providing more rhetoric to besmirch the outgroup.

It is not just alt-right groups that utilise memes with underlying abusive and misogynistic connotations. The dirtbag left, also pejoratively referred to as the *Bernie Bros*, are known as privileged white male Bernie Sanders supporters, consolidated around a disparate group of left-wing media outlets – most notably the *Chapo Trap House* podcast, which employs harsh and cruel humour as an intentional political tactic to villainise the outgroup – those who do not support Sanders (Beauchamp, 2020). The deployment of memes endorses the dirtbag left's reputation as an anti-establishment social movement, increasing the group's appeal to younger people familiar with internet culture and humour.

Kingdon (2020) emphasises how the common defence of 'it was just a joke' is commonly employed to justify the sharing of, or commenting on, a meme that could otherwise be deemed discriminatory, thereby using humour to excuse taking responsibility or feeling remorse. Such excuses means that further audiences could be persuaded the imagery is an innocuous joke and not recognise the underlying bigoted content. The humour concealing the discrimination within memes can produce a sense of moral impunity, where users are able to engage with the underlying ideology, whilst simultaneously mocking outsiders who take the content seriously; hence, this is a mechanism favoured by incels. Thus, these memes and other forms of 'satirical' posts benefit from the innate ambiguity of online interactions, as outlined in Poe's Law,³ creating what Milner (2013) has termed a 'Logic of Lulz' where it is never possible to discern the intended tone of an online post with any certainty. As such, all participants of an online space are perpetually vulnerable to trolling. This way, extreme views are allowed to thrive enriched by a surrounding culture of troll sensibility, vagueness and in-group cohesion, sustained by the perception of anonymity.

The online disinhibition effect refers to how anonymity, whether real or imagined, may allow people to explore their identities, and to act without fear of being held to account for their behaviour, in a realm where responsibilities, norms and social restrictions may not apply (Suler, 2005, pp. 321–326). Suler (2005) studied behaviours in online chat rooms, noting that people tended to display greater anger and aggression in cyberspace than they did offline, which he argued was because the protective factor of hiding behind a screen brings with it a perceived anonymity allowing them to act without fear of reprisals 'when protected by a screen, people across a broader spectrum of violence and abuse that are

³Poe's Law is derived from internet culture which states that without a clear indicator of the author's intention, it is impossible to create a parody of extreme views such that it cannot be mistaken by some people as a sincere expression of the views being parodied. The original statement by Nathan Poe in 2005 read: 'without a winking smiley or other blatant display of humor, it is utterly impossible to parody a Creationist in such a way that *someone* won't mistake for the genuine article. ㄟ(ツ)ㄟ'.

perpetrated through cultural feel that real-world social restrictions, responsibilities and norms don't apply' (pp. 321–326).

Jane (2014, p. 4) describes trolling on the internet as 'e-bile', pointing to the often graphic and sexualised violent context of it, the purpose of which is to 'out-shout everyone else'. Women are more likely to be the recipients and less likely to be the authors of 'e-bile' and report the impacts of e-bile as distressing and anxiety provoking (Jane, 2014). In extreme cases of e-bile, female targets have not only removed themselves from online engagement but from the offline public sphere as well (Jane, 2014), which demonstrates the new forms of excluding women's voices.

The lens of geek masculinity has been used to theorise the silencing of women as an outcome of online misogyny (Massanari, 2017). Geek masculinity is visible in the actions of men who brandish their digital culture and unique vernacular knowledge, by creating and sustaining online groups that thrive on male-centric sources inaccessible to wider audiences. With geek masculinity, there is both a sense of subordination and persecution and dominant masculinity, because, on the one hand, geeks are usually outsiders and nerds, whilst on the other hand, there is a belligerent adoption of masculine stereotypes and over sexism (Salter & Blodgett, 2012). In the example of Gamergate, the violent, sexualised abuse of women was deemed reasonable and justified by the Gamergaters who had adopted a position of ethical superiority.

Not for Normies

Incels post content that is intentionally extreme, using shocking language and imagery, claiming it is ironic, internet humour, such that they can respond to the accusations of them promoting hatred with dismissals that outsider others have failed to get the joke or appreciate the irony. Amongst the postings of the studies and 'scientific evidence' of which the blackpill is comprised, manipulated to support misogynist commentary, for example, are outlandish falsehoods exaggerated by incels that are interspersed amongst the doctrines incels do believe. An example of this is the dogpill, the ridiculous proposition that rather than have sex with them, women are having sex with their pet dogs. The dogpill is not part of the blackpill, and it is ambiguous as to whether it is a genuine incel philosophy or a tool designed to deliberately provoke and amass outraged reaction. There is belief amongst the incel community that women prefer animals to them, and there is commentary about women's online profile pictures that feature them with their dogs rather than male partners; therefore, the preposterous extension of this is to claim that these women are then engaging in bestiality, to potentially invoke the greatest reactions both internally within the community and externally from the 'normies'.

Similar to other online trolls who deny any harms arising from their abusive comments by alleging it wasn't their intention to cause harm, incels attempt to distance themselves from the repercussions of their words and content by refuting the seriousness of them. As per Sykes and Matza's (1957) techniques of neutralization, Irony is a way to deny responsibility for what is being said, thus removing them from any harms caused. However, whilst Sykes and Matza's original concept explained how offenders absolved themselves of any guilt relating to harms arising from their actions, in the case of incels, they are not necessarily experiencing

guilt which they are looking to offset through dressing their abusive comments up as humour. Moreover, they either do not recognise the harm in what they are doing, are too consumed with their own pain and may be lashing out or are using what Scott and Lyman (1968) would call excuses to justify their discrimination instead. To further complicate matters, discrimination is sometimes unrecognised, especially in regard to gender, and so denying the oppression of women is another reason to engage in misogynistic behaviour.

Incels are able to reconcile their support of mass murderers and comments of going ER with not being violent, with claims that they do not mean it, they do not actually want to commit violent acts nor encourage others to do so or these posts were not made seriously. Yet, this undermines the normalisation of violence against women and symbolises that it is acceptable to discuss it in positive terms. Incels may well think that they are being humorous, whilst completely disregarding the societal impacts. Additionally, they aren't immune to the harms that engaging in this unhealthy way causes, further perpetuating the mental health issues, loneliness and isolation.

Incel Attacks and Their Legacies

Academics at University of Western Australia (UWA) found that incels have been linked to the killings of at least 50 people and injured at least 58 more since 2014 – statistics comparable to the number of victims of Islamic extremism in the same period (Tomkinson et al., 2020). In order to further consider the incel threat, this chapter now turns to the high-profile mass killings conducted by individuals who identified as incel or who were associated with the incel community or ideology. However, before addressing those incidents, another case will be discussed that pre-dates the contemporary incel community yet foreshadows the same misogynistic fuelled violence. In naming all of these killers, I am conscious that I am further enabling the notoriety they craved in conducting their heinous attacks; this is difficult to reconcile but necessary to explore the association between incels and physical acts of violence. Although I appreciate that I have already centred some of the infamous murderers in earlier discussions within this book, here, in each case, all the names of the victims that died will be presented first, I want to ensure that they are not forgotten, and it is their memories that I want to respect not those of violent misogynists.

Geneviève Bergeron, Hélène Colgan, Nathalie Croteau, Barbara Daigneault, Anne-Marie Edward, Maud Haviernick, Barbara Klucznik-Widajewicz, Maryse Laganière, Maryse Leclair, Anne-Marie Lemay, Sonia Pelletier, Michèle Richard, Annie St-Arneault, Annie Turcotte

On 6 December 1989, Marc Lepine walked into a classroom in Montreal's Ecole Polytechnique engineering school armed with a semi-automatic rifle and sent the 50 men and 9 women within there to opposite sides of the room. Lepine had previously been denied admission to the Polytechnique and was upset about women working in positions traditionally occupied by men. He ordered the men to leave and told the remaining women that they were there because he hated feminists

and opened fire, killing six female students instantly and leaving three injured. Lepine then specifically targeted more women to shoot, whilst moving through the college corridors, cafeteria and another classroom. Eventually, he turned the gun on himself, but not before a total of 14 women were dead, another 10 women injured, and four men had been hurt unintentionally in the crossfire.

After the attack, police found Lepine's suicide note, which included his clear motivations: (translated from French) 'Feminists have always enraged me', he wrote. 'I have decided to send the feminists, who have always ruined my life, to their Maker'. The note also included a list of 19 accomplished women who he claimed would have been killed if not for a lack of time. Responses after the killings included psychologists pathologising Lepine as a madman, or as 'innocent as his victims, and himself a victim of an increasingly merciless society' (La Presse). Note that this moment in time coincided with the significant growth of men's rights groups discussed in Chapter 2; however, the misogynistic motive behind Lepine's actions was originally deemed too political for public knowledge. The police were also concerned about going public with the suicide note in case it inspired copycat killings. At the time of the massacre, feminism was achieving great gains in Canada and especially Quebec, in relation to the pro-choice movement⁴; however, Lepine's mindset was not an anomaly; there was an underlying and increasing resentment from men towards feminists as a result. The attack had the effect of silencing many feminists for fear of further reprisals and instilling guilt in women for the deaths of their female sisters, furthering the goals of Lepine and anti-feminism. Despite the fact that misogyny continues to prevail in Canada, with a woman or girl killed every 2.5 days,⁵ there is an unwillingness to address the issue of men's violence against women and recognise it as an act of hatred, as highlighted by its glaring omission during the 2019 federal election. Canada is also home to many self-identified incels as well as the site of major incel-related attacks, which will be discussed in more detail below.

The same forms of antifeminism endure today, and these perspectives are not an end in themselves but could, and indeed do, lead to the most extreme and violent forms of hatred coming to fruition, as the all-too-real cases evidence. The difference is the advances in digital technologies that fuel and shape these ideologies and assist the planning and implementation and legacy of attacks.

***Christopher Michaels-Martinez, Veronika Weiss, Katie Cooper,
Cheng-Yuan Hong, George Chen, Weihan Wang***

On 23 May 2014, Elliot Rodger (ER) conducted what is probably the most high-profile incel-related attack in Isla Vista, California; indeed, it is the case that first drew

⁴*Tremblay v Daigle* [1989] 2 S.C.R. 530 A Quebec woman named Chantale Daigle had been victorious in overturning an injunction, obtained by her violent ex-partner at the Canadian Supreme Court, preventing her from ending a pregnancy. More than 10,000 women demonstrated in Montreal in support of Daigle.

⁵<https://femicideincanada.ca/callitfemicide.pdf>

prominence to the incel community. Twenty-two-year-old Rodger embarked on a shooting and stabbing spree which culminated in the deaths of six people, before he took his own life. The attack was fuelled by misogyny and sexual frustration as detailed in his lengthy written and video manifestos providing insight into his twisted ideologies. A member of PUAHate, Rodger had posted many tirades about feminism and race on this forum prior to conducting the massacre; in one post, he encouraged incels to retaliate against women and society: ‘one day incels will realize their true strength and numbers, and will overthrow this oppressive feminist system. Start envisioning a world where WOMEN FEAR YOU’. Women, however, already live in a culture of fear, they police their behaviours and movements to avoid male violence, to the extent that it is habitual (Stanko, 1985, 1990; Vera-Gray, 2018). Rodger, as a privileged and entitled man, would be unaware of women’s lived realities and had not engaged with women in a healthy manner to appreciate this.

Although Rodger’s self-identification as an incel is inconclusive, he has since become a martyr within incel communities and revered in online chats in the manosphere. His admirers have bestowed on him the honorific ‘The Supreme Gentleman’, a term Rodger used to refer to himself. In some respects, Rodger is the incel equivalent of Anders Breivik⁶ for white supremacists: a hero and an inspiration who is labelled as a ‘Saint’ by his sympathisers and canonised by his followers, with his image often transposed onto religious iconography. The SPLC claims that Rodger’s actions were directly linked with the alt-right, as a marginalised youth who found a sense of community in the fringe alt-right – typically blaming personal deficiencies on non-white ethnicities and women.

The thing about Elliot Rodger was he felt entitled to the very attractive supermodel women. What was sad was if he was told just to be nice and polite and he would get a girlfriend, which wasn’t the case. (Tom)

***Lawrence Levine, Lucero Alcaraz, Quinn Cooper, Lucas Eibel,
Jason Johnson, Treven Anspach, Rebecka Carnes, Kim Saltmarsh Dietz,
Sarena Moore***

On 1 October 2015, 26-year-old Chris Harper-Mercer, who had described himself as mixed-race, and had been clinically diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome, armed with six guns, a flak jacket and spare ammunition magazines, killed nine people in the writing class where he was enrolled, at Umpqua Community College Oregon. Mercer took his own life after the police shot and wounded him. Although initially the attack was thought to be religiously motivated – according

⁶Anders Breivik is a Norwegian terrorist and right-wing extremist who committed the 2011 Norway attacks. On 22 July 2011, he killed 8 people by detonating a van bomb amid Regjeringskvartalet in Oslo and then killed 69 participants of a Workers’ Youth League (AUF) summer camp in a mass shooting on the island of Utøya.

to survivors, Harper-Mercer interrogated his classmates about their faith before shooting them, a typewritten manifesto left behind at the scene of the massacre and online postings that he had previously made indicate that he was angry at not having a girlfriend and resentful against a world that he believed was functioning against him. The manifesto showed that Harper-Mercer had studied mass killings, including that committed by ER, and similar to Rodger, expressed his sexual frustration as a virgin. Accordingly, Harper-Mercer, using the handle `lithium_love`, had commented on a thread titled ‘How many girlfriends have you had?’ with the response ‘0. Never had anyone’. This was further elaborated upon with ‘well, it means I’ve never been with anyone, no woman nor man (nor dog or animal or any other)’, later stating in response to a comment that he ‘must be saving himself for someone special’ that this was ‘involuntarily so’. This is the closest documented evidence of Harper-Mercer being an incel, although he may not have necessarily self-identified as so, particularly in regard to the adoption of the blackpill, which was less established then. Nevertheless, the incel wiki describes him as an ‘involuntary celibate shooter’ accompanied by the statement that it does not support him or his actions.

Harper-Mercer had also made online comments about the notoriety achieved from committing murder. There were rumours that he had been a member of 4chan and had posted a warning of the attack on the `/r9k/` board ‘Some of you guys are alright. Don’t go to school tomorrow if you are in the northwest’. However, there is no way of verifying that this did come from Harper-Mercer due to the anonymous nature of the platform. The phrase ‘some of you guys are alright’ later became a meme on `/r9k/` and elsewhere through the spaces of the alt-right and the manosphere.

Donald Doucette

On 31 July 2016, 38-year-old Sheldon Bentley, whilst working as a security guard in Edmonton, Alberta, killed a 51-year-old homeless man – Donald Doucette – by stomping on his torso and robbed him of \$20. Bentley claimed that being involuntary celibate for the preceding four years had contributed to him committing the killing.

Francisco Fernandez, Casey Jordan Marquez

On 7 December 2017, 21-year-old William Atchison killed two students and then himself at his former school – Aztec High School, New Mexico. Atchison had been harnessing his violent fantasies and obsession with school shootings for years beforehand online, practised his attack in an online video game designed to emulate a mass shooting event and had been immersed in communities discussing and celebrating white supremacy, racial and social prejudices. He had even been investigated by law enforcement in 2016, after concerns were raised about his threats to enact violence, and it was discovered that he had been in contact with other shooters⁷; however, he convinced agents that he was merely engaging in online trolling. The SPLC states

⁷Ali David Sonboly, the 18-year-old who shot and killed nine people in a Munich, Germany, mall on 22 July 2016.

that Atchison bore all the hallmarks of the alt-right, and although it is unclear as to whether Atchison identified as an incel, he is believed to have used the pseudonym ‘Elliot Rodger’ on several online forums and praised the ‘supreme gentleman’.

Alyssa Alhadeff, Martin Duque, Alaina Petty, Alex Schachter, Jaime Guttenberg, Cara Loughran, Gina Montalto, Luke Hoyer, Peter Wang, Carmen Schentrup, Nicholas Dworet, Joaquin Oliver, Helena Ramsey, Meadow Pollack, Scott Beigel, Chris Hixon, Aaron Feis

On 14 February 2018, 19-year-old Nikolas Cruz killed 17 people and injured 17 others in a shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Cruz had previously been expelled from the school for disciplinary reasons, which according to another student were related to a fight Cruz had been in with his ex-girlfriend’s new boyfriend. There were also claims that Cruz had been abusive to the ex-girlfriend. Cruz’s social media included racial slurs at black and Muslim people, support of the Anti-Defamation League and white supremacists and his aspiration to become a ‘professional school shooter’. Cruz had also commented on a YouTube post that ER ‘will not be forgotten’. Following the attack, posts were made on incel forums, praising Cruz – referring to him as a ‘hero’ and the ‘man of the year’. There are claims that a post on 4chan was reportedly made by Cruz before committing the massacre:

I WILL SHOWER THE NORMIES WITH LELAD [sic]
TONIGHT. GIVE ME SOMETHING TO PUMP AND BLAST
UP TO ... FUCK YOUR SCHOOL I’LL FUCK YOU UP
FUCK OFF FUCKING FUCK FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK
FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUU
UUUUUUUUUUUCK FUCKING NORMIE N**GERS GET
THE FUCK OUT

Although this cannot be validated, responses were made to this post congratulating Cruz for delivering on his promise. Taking a stance against this abhorrent attack and far too many others like it, a group of students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School publicly called out the National Rifle Association’s (NRA) influence on national politics and the leaders who enable negligent gun laws. They started a youth political movement #NeverAgain to pass comprehensive gun reform, resulting in international gun debates, and the organising individuals ended up on the cover of *TIME* magazine. Although new legislation has yet to be enacted, the resilience and resistance of this young generation is a beacon of hope for the future.

Anne Marie D’Amico, Dorothy Sewell, Renuka Amarasingha, Munir Najjar, Chul Min (Eddie) Kang, Mary Elizabeth (Betty) Forsyth, So He Chung, Andrea Bradden, Geraldine Brady, Ji Hun Kim

On 23 April 2018, 25-year-old Alek Minassian drove a rented van deliberately into pedestrians on a busy pavement in Toronto, Canada, killing 10 and injuring 16.

Minassian, who had no former convictions and was previously unknown to the authorities, made the infamous post on Facebook, prior to launching the attack, which has since become synonymous with incels:

Private (Recruit) Minassian Infantry 00010, wishing to speak to Sgt 4chan please. C23249161. The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys! All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!

When details of this post were first released, its authenticity was strongly questioned by academics and online users. Media manipulation experts such as Whitney Phillips, knowledgeable about online hoaxes in the wake of mass murders and the troll culture connected with 4chan, mentioned in the post, warned that it needed to be approached with ‘extreme caution’⁸. Phillips described the ‘standard and steady effort’ to associate 4chan with media news stories, and the delight that 4chan members take in misleading journalists into mentioning the site in their reports. A connection with 4chan in the wake of a high-profile attack has even got to the point where it is a recurring trope or meme, further amplified by media erroneously reporting the supposed 4chan link. Phillips was sceptical of Minassian’s Facebook post because the majority of previous 4chan connections were eventually debunked; however, it is now generally accepted that this post is authentic and supported by Minassian’s self-adoption of the term incel. Phillips refers to this a ‘meme coming to life’ and notes how Minassian has connected himself to the ‘long list (of) traditional hoaxes that have come and gone’. The extent of Minassian’s engagement and affiliation with the incel community and ideologies are uncertain though, with little evidence that he had actively participated incel in forums or discussions, only that he had searched for information on past ‘incel killers’. Furthermore, though he claimed to have been in contact with both ER and Chris Harper-Mercer prior to their attacks, this can be not be supported nor disproved. Minassian has now been found guilty of the murder of 10 people and the attempted murder of 16 others, though notably was not prosecuted for terrorism. His association with the incel community has also been somewhat downplayed by the presiding Judge in his case – Judge Molloy – who viewed this as a means to obtain notoriety and deflect responsibility, exemplified in his attention-seeking Facebook post. Nevertheless, Minassian along with Rodger remain the incel ‘poster boys’ in the external public consciousness and in some incel sites, despite both arguably not being actual incels. Their legacies thrive to inspire future individuals looking to obtain similar infamy under the guise of the underdog retaliating at an ‘unjust’ world. As John stated:

Elliot and Alek are however glorified by incels. Keep in mind this is a radical toxic cult, they will glorify someone like that. Many

⁸<https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2018/04/24/facebook-deletes-post-linked-to-alek-minassian-amid-questions-about-its-authenticity.html>

incels see their acts as revolutionary because it's like they carried out a revenge against what they believe had done wrong to them (women, society, etc.). Both of them are essential to incels, they're seen as a kind of Che Guevara or some revolutionary. (John)

Maura Binkley, Nancy Van Vessel

On 2 November 2018, Scott Beierle, a master's educated, 40-year-old army veteran, walked into a Tallahassee Hot Yoga studio, located near to Florida State University, shot and killed two women and injured four other women and one man, before turning the gun on himself. Beierle who had previously been investigated for harassing a woman, also castigated women, black people and immigrants in online videos and songs on YouTube. In his videos, Beierle referred to women as 'sluts' and 'whores' and bemoaned women who 'betrayed their blood' by engaging in interracial relationships. In one of his videos, titled 'Plight of the Adolescent Male', Beierle referred to ER:

I'd like to send a message now to the adolescent males ... that are in the position, the situation, the disposition of Elliot Rodger, of not getting any, no love, no nothing. This endless wasteland that breeds this longing and this frustration. That was me, certainly, as an adolescent.

Another video 'The Rebirth of my Misogynism' featured him listing the names of women – from school through to his time in the Army – who had committed 'collective treachery' against him, whilst songs uploaded to SoundCloud included 'Nobody's Type', which expressed his bitterness over women not finding him attractive. Although, as with many of the associated incel killers, other than the nod to ER, there is little evidence of Beierle actively participating on incel forums and engaging with the blackpill, though there are obvious connections with his misogynistic rants, dissatisfaction with his appearance and his being perplexed over women not wanting to be with him.

Ashley Noelle Arzaga

On 24 February 2020, Ashley Noelle Arzaga was fatally stabbed, and another woman and man injured at a massage parlour in Toronto by a 17-year-old boy who has not been named due to being a minor. The teenager became the first Canadian, and indeed the first individual, to be charged with carrying out an incel-inspired terrorist attack, after evidence found by investigators indicated that his actions were motivated by violent misogynistic ideology and participating in the incel community. Thirty-one years after the Montreal massacre, misogyny was finally recognised as a driver for terrorism by the Canadian authorities.

There is also speculation about the connection with Brenton Tarrant's attack on 15 March 2019 on mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, and incels. Tarrant posted a 74-page manifesto on 8chan before live streaming his massacre on Facebook,

which left 51 people dead and over 50 wounded, including a three-year-old boy. However, I have chosen not to include it with the above cases, because aside from his white supremacist ideals and him frequenting similar forums on 4chan and 8chan, there is no evidence relating Tarrant to the incel community, and any such claims have been rejected by those sites, which is distinct from the aforementioned incidents. Nevertheless, Tarrant's and the other perpetrator's actions demonstrate that declarations of violent discriminations should not be cordoned off from the physical violence that tragically claims people's lives.

Whilst the rise of incel-inspired extremist violence is most prevalent in North America, the threat is seen as spreading to Europe, and experts suggest it is only a matter of time before the United Kingdom witnesses a violent attack by someone identifying as involuntary celibate (Hoffman et al., 2020). Certainly, there have already been potential UK incel attacks thwarted; in March 2020, a 22-year-old man from Middlesbrough reported in the media as the 'UK's first incel bomb maker'⁹ was prosecuted for possessing explosives and terrorist materials, which he wanted to use to launch an attack as retribution for his lack of success with women. Further, in January 2021, Gabrielle Friel, aged 22, was jailed for 10 years after being found guilty of offences under the Terrorism Act, after arming himself with a high-powered crossbow and a foot-long machete.¹⁰ Friel was also originally charged with conducting online research on mass murders, especially those associated with incels, such as ER; however, any motivation by incel ideology was not proven. Additionally, Australia is also viewed as an appealing place for the growth of incels, given the problematic volume of domestic violence cases as well as the increase in far right extremism which was flagged by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO)¹¹ earlier this year.

Klein (2012) in her book *The Bully Society* examined how a society of 'gender police' that enforce traditional and hegemonic ideas of masculinity has contributed to mass shootings at schools by young white men. She argues that these men who are marginalised, and possess traits that are feminine, feel powerless when these attributes are picked on by other people. They, therefore, settle on ideologies and figures that give them a sense of power, and resort to violence as a way to prove their masculinity and to enact revenge. Many of the young men who have committed school shootings and mass shootings in America share similarities to incels, in the way that they are often seen as failing in traditional ideas of masculinity and have little success with women. Klein uses the case of Michael Carneal¹² to illustrate her arguments and points out that his first victim was Nicole Hadley, a girl who he allegedly was 'in love with' but who did not share his feelings. This case shares similarities with the mass killings – by ER, Nikolas Cruz

⁹<https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/11268587/violent-fantastist-jailed-incel-bombmaker/>

¹⁰<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-edinburgh-east-fife-55631950>

¹¹<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/dec/10/a-threat-to-australia-experts-welcome-inquiries-focus-on-rise-of-rightwing-extremism>

¹²<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/a-young-murderer-is-indicted>

and Alek Minassian, who used their perceived rejection by women as justification for their attacks (Bael et al., 2019; Collins, 2018; Scaptura & Boyle, 2020).

There is an indication that some of these incel attacks have been conducted by persons separate from actual incels, as there is little evidence of their direct engagement with the community. Additionally, the homage paid to earlier ‘incel’ perpetrators means that the notion of copycat crimes comes into play. The term ‘copycat crime’ has been used in popular discourse and academic literature to refer to crime imitating and influenced by the media. Helfgott (2008) describes copycat crime as crime inspired by another crime, which has been publicised in the news media or fictionally or artistically represented, where the offender incorporates aspects of the original offence into a new crime. In the aforementioned cases, there are elements of the same *modus operandi*, such as the use of guns and knives (although Minassian is the anomaly in using a vehicle), but, in itself, utilising the same type of weapon seems a broad stretch to warrant copycat crimes being committed and could also be comparable with other mass shootings, in particular school shootings (Borum, Cornell, Modzeleski, & Jimerson, 2010; Muschert, 2007; Verlinden, Hersen, & Thomas, 2000). The perpetrator’s school was the site of attack for some of the perpetrators, who associated this with those they wanted to get revenge upon and who were representative of the demographics they wanted to target. The shared motivations in the narratives of their online accounts – misogyny, racism, white supremacy, rejection – may well have been influenced by each other, yet are symptomatic of wider manosphere and alt-right ideologies, not just incels.

Multiple academics have argued that attacks by incels fit within the definition for terrorism, and the SPLC has officially added the community to their list of dangerous hate groups (Bael et al., 2019; Beauchamp, 2019; Collins, 2018; Richter & Richter, 2019). Terrorism is a much-contested term, with definitions differing nationally and internationally, such that some writers claim a universal definition is unlikely (Shafritz, Gibbons, & Scott, 1991; Weinberg et al., 2004). Viewed through a global lens, though, there is a general acceptance that the point of terrorism is to terrorise, with the act of doing so historically assumed by an organised force (Chailand & Blin, 2007). In addition to terror and intimidation, there are other factors such as violence, harm, threats, political motivation, the targeting of civilians, non-combatants and innocents and deliberate attempts to publicise the acts of terror. Violence for political purposes is evidenced across acts of terrorism, warfare and insurgency, and terrorists seldom refer to themselves as such (Silke, 2018). Some incels dispute that the incel attacks qualify as terrorism because there is no realistic policy change that is being advocated, since their frustrations are merely a result of failed interpersonal relationships. However, the perpetrators in their manifestos and defences justify their use of violence to assuage their grievances; hence, their violence is ideological in nature, and they have attacked civilians in order to have a psychological impact on society, all classic hallmarks of terrorism. Attempting to distinguish between the individuals who have conducted acts of mass murder and the wider incel community is challenging, particularly when threats about physical violence and the use of force are commonplace on incel forums and discussions, and these are often accompanied

with desired outcomes, that is, making a stand against women/feminism/society. It would also be easy to brush off this community as a small online subgroup, but the reality is that incel is the product of a society that has long been rooted in misogyny. These online spaces are a reflection of the real world, shaped by anger, entitlement and hatred towards women (Beauchamp, 2019) and the broader problem of male violence against women.

Moghaddam's (2005) staircase analogy represents how individuals increasingly become indoctrinated into extremist groups. The initial stair begins with individuals' perceptions of injustice and a desire to improve their situation (Moghaddam, 2005). For incels, this could be the first step with young men, who are frustrated and disillusioned, undertaking online searches in order to find answers or support from others as to how to obtain a girlfriend or how to cope with rejection, discovering the incel community and the blackpill. The vast majority of those who are engaging with the community and self-identifying as incel will never leave that bottom stair and not consider stepping up the staircase further to extremism or terrorism. However, a tiny majority have and do move up the staircase, from displacement to disengagement from mainstream morality, where their choices become fewer and fewer, because the options they perceive available to them are narrower (Moghaddam, 2005).

There has been some consideration of the relationship between domestic violence and terrorism (Ferber & Kimmel, 2008; Taub, 2016; Zimmermann, 2018). In this context, men who have committed mass murder deemed to be acts of terror have also had a history of perpetrating domestic violence, abuse and sexual offences against women. For example, the Everytown for Gun Safety (EGS), a gun control advocacy group in the United States, analysed Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) data on American mass shootings from 2009 to 2015 and found that 57% of cases included a spouse, former spouse or other family member amongst the victims – and that 16% of attackers had previously been charged with domestic violence (Taub, 2016). The latter statistic should be approached cautiously though, as these 16% of cases are only the perpetrators who had been charged with domestic violence, it is widely accepted (Felson & Paré, 2005; Straus, 1999) that this type of offence is under reported and notoriously difficult to prosecute, and so this figure might not capture the full extent of the picture.

Rachel Pain (2014) states that domestic violence includes physical but also 'psychological and emotional tactics, including threats, isolation and undermining self-confidence', what she describes as 'everyday terrorism' (p. 532). This everyday terrorism results in fear, terror and ultimately control (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Stark, 2007). There are, however, similarities between the concepts of domestic violence and terrorism. Pain (2014) defines terrorism as an extension of everyday terrorism, 'an attempt to impose or disrupt an order through violence and fear which aims to have these effects within macro-political geographic settings' (p. 536). Additionally, Ganor (2005) described how the primary aim of terrorists is to create fear in the target population, with the intention that the fear is translated into pressure on governments to acquiesce to the terrorists demands in order to prevent future attacks. Taub writing in the *New York Times* (2016) has even defined domestic violence as 'intimate terrorism', whilst Ferber and Kimmel

(2008, p. 885) interpret domestic violence as a restorative means comparable with terrorism – a ‘reclamation of lost but rightful authority’. They argue:

And like terrorism’s goal of frightening an entire population into submission to this restoration of unchallenged masculine authority, so too is the goal of domestic violence the frightening of an entire class of people, namely women, into subjection to men’s rightful authority over them. Only with such a restoration do terrorists, either political or interpersonal, regain their masculinity. (Ferber & Kimmel, 2008, p. 885)

Although all terrorist activities are based in extremist ideology, very few people who actually hold these ideologies go on to become terrorists (Ferber & Kimmel, 2008). Accordingly, though there are many terrorist activities perpetrated by individuals with histories of domestic violence, not all of those who have committed domestic violence will go on to become terrorists. Nevertheless, ideologies of far right and Islamist extremist groups share a common vision of women and their inferior role in society, and adhere to hegemonic expectations of masculinity, both in their world views and in their action and political mobilisation (Ferber & Kimmel, 2008). Journalist Soraya Chemaly states that domestic violence and the toxic masculinity that fuels domestic violence are the ‘canaries in the coal mine for understanding public terror, and yet this connection continues largely to be ignored, to everyone’s endangerment’.¹³ Chemaly notes that other factors such as racism, access to guns or mental illness are all factors, but many of these issues originate in the home. Nowadays, the influences in the home extend to the virtual domain, where individuals seek like-minded others in organisations and communities, which provide comfort and attention.

There is a lack of consensus amongst experts as to what extent the internet serves as a vector of radicalisation, with some citing offline links to be just as, if not more, significant (Maher, 2014; Neumann, 2016). Yet, it is abundantly clear that today online communities from fringe platforms in the Chansphere to mainstream sites play a key role in broadcasting extremist ideologies, leading to increased recruitment and mobilisation for the causes (Perry, 2001). Lonely individuals, those with a desire for belonging, or recognition, can also absorb the ideologies and act upon them.

Lone Wolves

So far, the incel threat appears to be from lone actors and not any small cells or groups. ‘Lone wolf’ is often attributed to acts committed by individual white men, though not exclusively as there are cases of lone shooters of other ethnicities, described in the same manner. The term lone wolf was popularised in the late 1990s by white supremacists Tom Metzger and Alex Curtis to encourage other

¹³<https://womenaware.net/news/connecting-domestic-violence-and-mass-shootings-orlando-gunmans-history-of-dv/>

racists to act alone for tactical security reasons when committing violent crimes. Lone wolf terrorism, as defined by Bakker and de Graaf (2011), refers to

individuals that are inspired by a certain group but who are not under the orders of any other person, group or network. They might be members of a network, but this network is not a hierarchical organisation in the classical sense of the word. (p. 3)

Throughout the course of this research, there did not appear to be an organisational element to incels, with leaders at the top of a hierarchy instructing those lower down the scale to recruit for the operation, for example. Although there are more renowned incels such as Eggman, Sergeant Incel and Master Incel (of incels.co and now incels.is), for example, who are very active online and produce lots of videos that may play a part in grooming others to the incel mentality, they are not viewed as having any sort of control over the community, though they are mentioned in regard to how people first became aware of incels. Therefore, even though there may not be a clear formulated approach to radicalise others to join the incel community or to adopt the philosophies of the blackpill, the materials readily available online are drawing susceptible young men in. Whether or not they become active members of the incel community, some young men are then inspired by the overt misogyny and anti-establishment discourses to the extent they develop extremist tendencies and engage in acts of terror. These are sinister performances designed to make a statement to society, procure recompense for their 'suffering' at the hands of women and portray the perpetrators as the 'real' victims.

Often the lone wolf narrative is accompanied by claims the individual is mentally ill. For those willing to dismiss incels or 'extreme' misogynists as mentally disturbed, these labels are not mutually exclusive. Individuals suffering from mental illness can also be heavily influenced by a specific ideology and commit acts of violence that qualify as terrorism. This was supported in the interviews by Ben who made reference to another infamous mass murder: 'Cho Seung Hu, the Virginia Tech shooter, killed 32 people and was mentally ill and he hated women'.

Counterterrorism Responses

To reduce the presence of terrorist groups and individuals espousing violent ideologies online, social media and technology companies have grown far more vigilant in recent years, moving to eject terrorists and their supporters from popular platforms like Twitter and Facebook (Conway, 2020; Conway et al., 2017; Conway, Khawaja, Lakhani, & Reffin, 2020). This is also a response to legislative encouragement, such as the Online Safety Bill¹⁴ in the United Kingdom, and the

¹⁴<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/online-harms-white-paper/online-harms-white-paper>

threat of significant fines. Language from extreme misogynist groups, however, is sometimes not as classically alarming as language from other extremist groups; therefore, it is still the case that it can more easily fly under the radar.

Disruptions of groups on mainstream sites have caused a shift towards other more clandestine platforms, like Gab, the encrypted app Telegram, and the gaming site Discord, where there is much less moderation, regulation, or oversight. The manosphere is currently flourishing in these locations, although it is likely that attempts to stamp out extremism will cause another migration to a different group of platforms and the continuous game of cat-and-mouse will continue unabated.

Whilst sites that members of the manosphere frequent, like 4chan, 8chan, 8kun and Reddit, were not originally created to be congregating points for these specific groups, the mechanisms of these sites make them very hospitable. It is easy for groups within the manosphere to establish online communities for themselves where they are free to share memes, rants, personal stories and the like all whilst evading heavy moderation for extended periods of time, sometimes years.

However, on sites like Reddit that are heavily populated with those who do not belong to the manosphere, extreme misogynist communities are often noticed by outsiders and can sometimes be ‘brigaded’ by other communities or even banned by site moderators. The subreddit */r/Incels* was banned in November 2017 and was subsequently replaced by */r/Braincels*, which was then banned in October 2019. */r/MGTOW* was quarantined in January 2020, meaning that the community does not appear in any search results and users are met with a warning before entering the site. ‘Shitposters’ make law enforcement’s job more difficult, because they add a constant torrent of noise to the possible signal from lone actors openly musing online about committing acts violence in real life. More recently, *r/incelswithouthate* was banned at the end of March 2021 by Reddit, ironically for espousing hateful content.

There is a funnelling effect happening online in which the most extreme members of the fringe are pushed off sites like Reddit. However, banning means migration elsewhere, often to darker, harder to access and observe sites. Hence this is not necessarily the ideal solution. Being banned or censored has ended up galvanising manosphere communities, whilst making incels become more exclusionary, insular and desperate. For example, the site *PUAHate*, which was removed after being associated with ER, ended up being even more extreme and misogynistic upon its resurrection as *PUA Slut Hate*. In addition, the mediatised connection made between the PUA community and Rodger was reductive because it failed to consider how Rodger had actively expressed his condemnation of the website and did not affiliate with the ideas of the group, having been unsuccessful in playing ‘the game’ and not procuring a girlfriend. In blaming an online community (no matter how problematic the ideas they espouse are) is problematic due to the symbolism this presents. This symbolically creates a legendary aspect to something that is usually an external or contributory factory rather than the main motivator, and can be appealing, encouraging others to seek it out.

For Tom, though, rather than these sites are harmful to others, his issue is that they occupy too much energy of its members:

I think that incel forums should be closed by law, not only because those sites could breed potential terrorists, but because staying in those forums is a waste of time, that could be used for self-improvement. At the same time though I don't want them to be closed because it teaches men not to waste time putting efforts to have a relationship with a woman and that saves you a lot of time. (Tom)

Yet, Tom, also continues to see the value in incel forums because they discourage connections with women, maintaining that this is futile.

Other interviewees continued to justify violence and the ineffectiveness of shutting down incel spaces in preventing incel-inspired acts of terror, because of the growing dissatisfaction and discontentment of men:

Even with a ban on incel sites there will still be incel terrorists in the future, like there were in the past. I think that incel terrorists will be more than in the past even with banning incel sites, because men are getting more sexless, poorer and less happy, and these are breeding conditions for violence. (Mike)

Mike's comment epitomises male supremacist ideology and how male violence is excused and vindicated through reasons that are beyond their control.

Conclusions

Incels are neither simply weirdos nor extremists. They are a heterogeneous and complex community replete with contradictions and an overwhelming inclination for validation and companionship. Subterranean values play a part in attracting young men to the manosphere and incel, under the guise of outrageousness and being anti-progressive. Despite some media representations and even how they can present themselves as offbeat, incels are not 'deviant' others, they are not separate from other men. Incel is not a unique manifestation of misogyny, confined to online spaces, instead the attitudes they espouse (though blatant and shocking) are at the core, characteristic of and reinforced by wider societal stereotypes of gender. Ironically, incel is not a rejection of the mainstream, regardless of the contempt often displayed to it by the community, as influential persons – those with prevailing offline platforms are advocating the same ideals. Although there are obvious similarities with the alt-right, incel is not a far right movement. Nevertheless, corresponding tactics are employed by incels and far right groups – particularly the alt-right – especially the use of humour and internet culture, to deflect the harms caused from their behaviours, and both benefit from algorithms, memes and echo chambers, to bolster their ideologies.

This chapter considered the high-profile cases of incel violence, and how the incel threat came to become part of the mainstream discourse as a result of these attacks, when previously the community and others in the manosphere were able to disseminate their hatred with little concern or impunity, due to the fact that misogyny has for so long been the last taboo, where the denigration of women is accepted and tolerated.

Digital technologies enabled the growth of groups such as incel and provide spaces for disillusioned men to gain the attention and notoriety they feel they are lacking elsewhere in their lives, which can and has spilled over into offline violence. Parallels between incel attacks and domestic violence and school shootings have been considered, particularly in relation to age, connection with some victims, and cases where attacks have occurred at perpetrator's former schools or colleges. Certain forms of extremism and extremist behaviours, however, such as that conducted by incels and MRAs, invoke 'lone wolf' descriptions or explanations associated with mental health instead. This is unhelpful as they overlook the influence and dynamics of the community. Finally, responses to incel, such as banning of forums and sites, may actually be aggravating the issue, in driving members to more clandestine online spaces, where there is more of a potential for outsider extremist tendencies to flourish, due to even less opportunities for individuals to engage with opposing conducive narratives.