Swallowing the Black Pill: Involuntary Celibates' (Incels) Anti-Feminism within Digital Society

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Abstract

Involuntary celibates (incels) are part of the online 'manosphere' and have been widely discussed in contemporary media in recent years due to their involvement in several offline mass murders. This article presents empirical data that specifically map aspects of the incel worldview: the 'black pill'. Analysis of online discussion forums demonstrates how incels believe society is ordered through a hetero-patriarchal racial hierarchy and justify their sexlessness through beliefs rooted in biological determinism and victimisation by women and feminism. It is argued that the black pill is a disciplinary device that aids in building a digital counter-public that engenders a collective incel identity. Further, the article argues that the black pill produces a form of 'stochastic terrorism' in which users interpret its spectrum of beliefs to enact harms from online gender-based hate speech through terrorist violence in the offline world. As a point of departure, the article argues that incel counter-publics transcend the false distinctions between online and offline; both 'worlds' contribute to the (re)production of incel anti-feminism and misogyny.

Keywords

Anti-feminism; extremism; digital misogyny; incel; violence; black pill.

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Introduction

In recent years, involuntary celibates (incels) have received increasing attention after several mass murders have been attributed to extreme fringes of this loosely organised, digital community. Incel groups are predominantly comprised of socially alienated men who describe themselves as being unable to find women who are willing to engage in romantic relationships with them—a state referred to as 'inceldom'. This shared state of inceldom is the central unifying narrative that unites incels and is an important aspect of the collective incel identity. This identity is typified by the first incel to garner mainstream attention, Elliot Rodger, who, on the evening of 23 May 2014, beginning with the release of a YouTube video titled 'Elliot Rodger's Retribution' and an autobiographical manifesto titled *My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger*, conducted a killing spree aiming to punish women for his involuntary celibacy, ending with the death of six people, the injury of 14 and Rodger's own suicide. Coverage of the event and his online activity revealed Rodger as a young man fuelled by loneliness, hatred, insecurity and intense misogyny (Vito, Admire and Hughes 2018).

Influenced by Rodger's rampage, Alek Minassian drove a rented van through a busy street in the Toronto central business district in 2018, killing 10 and wounding 16. It was widely reported that he posted on his personal Facebook account: 'The Incel Rebellion has already begun! … All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!' (Wendling 2018: para 2). Since these two high-profile attacks, several more incels have waged terrorist acts against women, resulting in around 50 deaths since Rodger's initial attacks (Hoffman, Ware and Shapiro 2020). Although it would be disingenuous to conflate the actions of a minority with the majority of incels, previous research has noted that the violent and extreme ideology expressed within the incel subculture is rooted in racist, women-hating and anti-feminist sentiments (Baele, Brace and Coan 2019; Chang 2020; Ging 2017; Hoffman, Ware and Shapiro 2020; Lindsay 2021; Zimmerman, Ryan and Duriesmith 2018). It also appears that incel ideology has 'cross-pollinated' (Ging 2017) and spread to far-right mass shooters, as in the case of the recent attacks committed by Tobias Rathjen in Hanau, Germany, whose manifesto suggested that he was influenced by the incel worldview (Caniglia, Winkler and Métais 2020; Hoffman, Ware and Shapiro 2020).

This article emerges from the need to further understand the incel subculture by mapping aspects of the incel worldview: the 'black pill'. After tracing a brief history of anti-feminist men's movements, the article will discuss the study methods. The remainder of the article will present and discuss the empirical data found during the three-month collection of incel discourse within the theoretical framework of 'digital counter-publics'. In explicating the black pill, I contend that the construction of digital counter-publics aids in building a collective incel identity. The black pill operates as a disciplinary device that accentuates incels' shared sense of social and sexual alienation. I argue that the black pill facilitates stochastic terrorism (Biondi and Curtis 2018), where individuals are encouraged to find their own (violent) 'solutions' to the problems identified and emphasised by the collective experience of inceldom. For some incels, this has led to harms such as gender-based hate speech; however, for a minority of more extremist incels, it has led to terroristic violence offline. This final point, in particular, clarifies the criminological need to understand further the relationship between violent extremism and hostile violence against women (Johnston and True 2019; McCulloch et al. 2019).

Tracing the Contemporary Anti-Feminist Men's Movements

The contemporary men's rights movement has evolved over time in response to the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and early 1970s. Some men's rights activist (MRA) leaders promoted the idea of a 'men's liberation movement' that would work in symmetry with feminism to bring about progressive change (Messner 1998). Coinciding with feminist research on gender, in particular, the oppressive language of 'sex roles', men's liberationists acknowledged that just as the 'female sex role' and patriarchy has clearly oppressed women, the 'male sex role' has negatively affected men's emotional lives and relationships (Marwick and Caplan 2018; Messner 2016). Messner (1998: 256) noted that early men's liberationists sought to 'attract men to feminism by constructing a discourse that stressed how the male role was impoverished, unhealthy and even lethal for men'. Issues such as emotional stoicism, unequal

child support obligations, male-only draft requirements and the social pressures of traditional forms of masculinity as represented through the narrow lens of the male role as a breadwinner or protector were all key concerns of early men's liberationists.

However, despite the promising beginnings of a movement that could work symmetrically with feminism, navigating the tensions between emphasising male structural power and privilege alongside the costs of masculinity proved too difficult. By the late 1970s, the movement split in two, with pro-feminist men's groups to one side and groups that opposed the feminist claim that patriarchy benefitted men more than women to the other (Messner 1998). Some men's liberationists attempted to give equal weight to the limitations and oppressions imposed on women and men while acknowledging the structural disadvantages that women faced (Farrell 1974), while others attempted to explain away men's institutional power and privilege as a myth (Goldberg 1976). While feminist scholarship has highlighted the harmful and fallacious social construction of 'sex roles', 'men's rights' discourse [has] increasingly employed this narrowly conservative language as they metamorphized into an overtly angry anti-feminist movement' (Messner 1998: 2016). Feminism soon came to be viewed as a plot to cover up the 'reality' that it is women who hold power and men who are most oppressed.

Throughout the turbulent economic period from the 1980s to the 2000s, anti-feminist MRA groups gained leverage among men who felt a decline in power and insecurity due to the changing social, cultural and economic norms of the period (Kimmel 2015). During this time, MRA groups organised to contest issues such as feminism's perceived attack on fatherhood through law reform and policy discourse surrounding child custody arrangements and feminist research highlighting the gendered nature of domestic violence and anti-violence policies and called for the disestablishment of domestic violence support services (Dragiewicz 2008, 2011; Kimmel 2015).

From the early 2000s, the internet expanded MRAs' capabilities to disseminate anti-feminist discourse publicly. During this time, groups continued to petition to recognise men as an oppressed class—oppressed chiefly by feminists/ism—but also mirrored the grassroots activism of third-wave feminism (Dragiewicz 2011; Regehr 2020). MRA groups focused on shifting cultural attitudes through cyber-activism rather than attempting to influence law and policy decisions (Gotell and Dutton 2016). Messner (2016: 16) argued that this was the beginning of a true threat to equality and feminist progress that has been posed by a 'kinder, gentler variety of men's rights, taking the form of a neoliberal and professionally institutionalised "moderate" men's rights strategy that skirts analysis of structural inequalities in favour of a common-sense celebration of individual choice for women and men'. However, Ging (2017) argued that Messner overlooked the venomous and pervasive nature of contemporary anti-feminism brewing online.

The digital social networks that encompass the contemporary anti-feminist men's rights milieu are known collectively as the 'manosphere', referring to an array of interconnected MRA groups with an online vocal presence who often promote a heteronormative, sexist, misogynistic and, at times, racist belief system (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016; Ging 2017). Members of these communities adhere to the 'red pill' philosophy, which 'purports to awaken men to feminism's misandry and brainwashing' (Ging 2017: 3). The analogy draws on the 1999 film, *The Matrix*, in which the protagonist, Neo, is given a choice between taking a red or blue pill. The blue pill represents disconnecting from reality into a delusional, agreeable world, while the red pill reveals the hard truths of reality. To be 'red-pilled' means to awaken to the realisation that one lives within a reality constructed by feminists to reduce the rights of men and that steps must be taken to fight against it. Armed with this 'knowledge', manosphere groups and other politically exclusionary groups such as the alt-right believe that the red pill allows men to manipulate the world to their advantage (Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019; Ging 2017).

Rooted within the 'pill' narratives of the manosphere are echoes of biological determinist understandings of gender and race that attempt to challenge contemporary thinking (Ging 2019). These assemblages of online anti-feminist men's groups utilise almost entirely discredited (or, at the very least, 'cherry-picked') interpretations of genetics and neuroscience that explain 'alpha' or 'beta' forms of masculinity, 'pick-up

strategies' and justifications for ethnonationalism (Ging 2017, 2019; Greig 2019; Miller-Idris 2020). Green (2019: 83) highlighted that 'these groups are loose and temporary assemblages, rather than stable and coherent communities' that can shift and become flexible where hierarchies of marginalisation become flexible depending on contingent political needs. Further, Ging (2019: 57) argued that such assemblages 'can be seen as a way of working through post-crisis economic anxieties, whereby the acquisition of property and a career for life are no longer options for many young men'. The individuals who engage and occupy such spaces are mediated by both the global and local political contexts, including the perceived alienation of certain groups of (white) men, yet are united via shared misogynistic beliefs within the digital spaces of the manosphere.

Involuntary Celibates' Digital Counter-Publics

A useful analytical tool for understanding these new assemblages of anti-feminist MRAs is counter-public theory. Broadly conceived, counter-public theory refers to Fraser's (1990) critique of Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere:

> The public sphere can be best described as a network for communicating information and points of view (i.e., opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes); the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specific public opinions. (Habermas 1996: 360)

Counter-publics encompass the sites, methods and collectives that produce new, alternative or non-dominant forms of knowledge and culture, challenging and subverting traditional, historical and hegemonic forms of knowledge that are inherent within the mainstream. Fraser (1990: 67) referred to these formations as '*subaltern counterpublics*' to emphasise that they constitute 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses [sic], which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs'. Counter-publics are derived from the goal of challenging the status quo and dominant forms of power. To this end, Fraser (1990: 68) contended that counter-publics serve two roles: 'on the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment [sic]; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed towards wider publics'.

While the counter-public theory has normatively been associated with traditionally marginalised social groups (women and workers and ethnic, racial or sexual minorities), its framework also offers an opportunity for studying 'unruly' publics such as right-wing populist movements or radical groups that may reject basic democratic principles (Kaiser and Rauchfleisch 2019: 4). Ging (2019) argued that the political space of the manosphere is directly influenced by the neoliberal, post-feminist environment and a turn towards the cultural politics of emotion. Within this discursive space, narratives that centre around individualistic concerns—such as incels' preoccupation with sexual rejection and pseudoscientific explanations of 'sexual marketplaces'—are situated within a broader 'crisis of masculinity'. This crisis narrative constructs the position of (white) men as in decline and situates them as a marginalised group in contemporary society. In this way, individuals communicate narratives of suffering and, through the digitally connected spaces they inhabit, unite others through shared affective experiences. Taking influence from Papacharissi (2016), Ging (2017) highlighted that the manosphere has formed 'affective counter-publics' through the digitally connected personal and political calls and empathy for like causes. Despite holding a degree of privilege within society as (typically white) males, incels perceive themselves as an oppressed and marginalised minority in comparison to the mainstream (Lindsay 2021).

The perception that incels are an oppressed group serves as the bedrock of the black pill philosophy. The online forums and groups that incels congregate within serve two functions not dissimilar to the public sphere: to form an identity and to organise and set political agendas. Fraser (1990: 68) highlighted that one of the core functions of the public sphere is 'the formation and enactment of social identities' because the 'manosphere' groups are more concerned with changing culture than concrete political aims. I argue

that the formation and enactment of a common social identity is the core way that incel groups utilise digital counter-publics to 'radicalise' new users.

The forms of networked hate borne from these affective counter-publics should be understood as the intersection between systemic misogyny and sexism within the wider culture—the racist politics of the alt-right are coupled with the affordances of various platforms and their attendant subcultures. The possibilities for systemic hatred are further enabled and facilitated by the internet, coupled with a reaction to the perceived diminishing social status of men, and have changed the nature and shape of anti-feminist discourse through the amplification of these new expressions of anti-feminism. Thus, it is the goal of this article to provide a critical understanding of how this anti-feminist network forms identity and 'radicalises' new members within these counter-public spaces. In doing so, this will allow us a more nuanced view of the contemporary assemblages of anti-feminism that centre around tropes of male victimhood and gendered hatred.

Methods

This article contributes to the growing literature on incels by drawing on original research and analysis of data collected during the author's master of arts thesis (Lindsay 2020). The content was collected from two online incel forums (www.incels.is and www.reddit.com/r/Braincels) over a three-month period in 2019.[1] I collected the top two threads from each forum and the resulting discussion comments each day over the collection period. This resulted in the collection of 250 forum threads consisting of the 10,773 individual posts that this article draws from.

The collection of such a significant corpus of data allowed me to identify ideological and rhetorical tropes. To analyse the data, I read each piece of data extensively and thematically coded it using constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2014). The thematic analysis process began by reading the body and comments of each thread while noting key themes (e.g., 'violence'), narratives (e.g., 'feminism is the root of all evil') and ideas (e.g., 'solutions' to incel problems). During this process, I sorted the data into systematically developed and refined codes, which constituted the major themes of the study (Braun and Clark 2006). I manually coded the data by selecting rough estimates of the frequency with which a particular code was mentioned within the comment threads. For example, the codes 'feminism/feminist' and 'negative references to woman/women' were routinely observed to be connected in incel forums when describing their narratives of social and sexual alienation. This became a major theme of the study, which I then positioned within an anti-feminist discursive environment that situates and conflates women and feminism as responsible for incels' perceived suffering. This can be observed within other recent studies of incel subculture (Baele, Brace and Coan 2019; Chang 2020; Ging 2017; Witt 2020).

The discussion data was situated within a broader online environment where it can be unclear as to whether discourse should be taken seriously or if it should be read as a joke—or as 'trolling'. As with other manosphere communities, incels create and proliferate original and recycled content such as 'memes' and inside jokes meant to provoke a response from targeted audiences for their entertainment (Green 2019; Nagle 2016). The production of such content steeped in ironic humour and trolling is observed as an intentional strategy by which those deploying it can evade accusations of misogyny or racism while actively reinforcing and normalising such views between insiders. Mediated through digital technology, such veiled forms of bigotry can have harmful effects on their targets. Further, because incels adhere to notions of biological positivism yet conflate gender and biological sex, I will utilise gendered rather than biological sex terms where possible while keeping in mind that in the incel data, 'women' appears to imply biological sex.

All researchers must be aware of the potential exploitation of participants and ensure that ethical standards are upheld (Noaks and Wincup 2004). In making ethical decisions, particularly in politically charged cases such as researching the alt-right and other exclusionary groups, I acknowledge that I have a responsibility to protect the rights of the study population. I saw a core right as being the anonymity of the studied population. As such I have opted to exclude references to names, dates and where possible the

forums associated with the data. Throughout this article, all unattributed quotations represent the data collected, aggregated and analysed from the two incel forums chosen for this study (see: Lindsay 2020). However, there is also a responsibility to speak truth to power and interrogate, deconstruct and expose the influences of potentially harmful groups and this is the overall aim of the research.

Thus, Powell, Stratton and Cameron (2018: 121) emphasised that 'technology is not just *revealing* pre-existing bigotry within society; rather, technology and society are shaping one another, coalescing in emerging cultures and practices that simultaneously *produce and reproduce* hate-based harms'. Lumsden and Harmer (2019: 14) agreed and implored us to 'throw out the well-worn dichotomies of "online versus offline", and the "virtual world" versus the "real world", and instead acknowledge the interconnectedness and fluid nature of our everyday use of information and communication technologies'. In this way, incel discourse should not be thought of as a solely online phenomenon or as harmless fun. Many of such discourses openly endorse harassment, violence and discrimination. These discourses, which will be unpacked throughout the remainder of the article, help fuel and indoctrinate new users into the incel worldview. The findings highlight that these beliefs are facilitated by the affordances of digital technologies that connect incel members globally through the disciplinary device of the black pill philosophy that constitutes the focal point of this article.

Unpacking the Black Pill Worldview

Influenced by the notion of the red pill, which supposedly awakens men to the reality that through feminism, women hold power and privilege over men in contemporary society, incels have introduced a third, black pill:

> [that] if metaphorically swallowed, makes one aware of the unchanging nature of reality: that the world is stacked against low-status men in favour of women and alpha males; that there can be no personal solutions to systemic oppression that the world was, is and always will disadvantage men who are 'genetically inferior'; and, finally, that women are inherently wired to prefer men with particular physical features [over others]. (Lindsay 2021: 32)

Baele, Brace and Coan (2019) argued that this is a crucial difference between the incel worldview and less misogynistic forums within the manosphere and that those who believe in the black pill understand that it is impossible to escape the social hierarchy that excludes them. The black pill is described on the incels.is forum as:

> about understanding the fundamental nature of human social and sexual behavior, especially female mate choice. In opposition to mainstream self-help advice, the blackpill [sic] highlights the role of largely immutable traits in social and sexual exclusion. These traits include physical attractiveness, stature, muscularity, race, personality, ability, health, neurotypicality, social and economic status.

The internet forums of r/Braincels and incels.is operate as ideologically rich information hubs for initiates familiar with pill philosophies. One incels.is forum user described the radicalisation process: 'it starts by browsing PUA [Pick Up Artist] forums, 4chan as a teenager, then stumbling across the ideas of the red pill. Later, you realise that for us genetically inferior men, we are doomed. Swallow the black pill, find out the truth'. The truth, as argued by adherents of the black pill, is that 'society is set up for Chad and women only. The world is, was and always will be stacked against "genetically inferior" men'.[2]

Through the data unearthed in this and other studies, it was found that the black pill simplistically categorises people into a three-tiered system. This hierarchy is primarily based on physical attraction: a minority of alpha males and 'desirable' females are located at the top, a majority of 'average-looking' 'betas' or 'normies' follow, and a minority of physically 'unpleasant' (exclusively male) incels are found at the bottom (Baele, Brace and Coan 2019; Lindsay 2020). The black pill purports that such structural hierarchies are impermeable and that transcending one's genetics is impossible. Belief in impenetrable

structures is a key feature of extremist worldviews (Baele, Brace and Coan 2019), and this nihilistic worldview of the black pill appears to have influenced terroristic behaviour by incels who have attempted violent retributions against those who are perceived to hold a higher social status.

As a collective, incels are primarily united by the (unsuccessful) pursuit of sexual relationships. Adherents of the black pill believe that sexual activity is a primarily female-led marketplace operating under the laws of natural selection (O'Malley, Holt and Holt 2020). This powerful barrier is conceptualised through the careful selection of evolutionary psychology principles to explain the concept of 'sexual market value' (SMV) (Ging 2019; Waśniewska 2020). One user explained this 'hard truth':

> Being attractive is what gets you laid. Without attraction, you can't have sex (and if you do … it's going to suck). It has fuck all to do with personality. Being blackpilled means you have the awareness to avoid the ills of being a beta-provider. [sic][3] You avoid the fakeness, the charade of a relationship with a woman that has no mutual attraction and is only with you for your money, and this is what I'm thankful for.

This finding is consistent with recent work on incels. For O'Malley, Holt and Holt (2020), incels believe that the ultimate human goal is to attain a 'mate' and reproduce and that incels are disadvantaged by women who harbour a natural propensity towards males that are higher on the supposed genetic and social hierarchy. Brzuszkiewicz (2020) noted that this form of fixed, hierarchal thinking results in incels believing that factors such as genetic, social and economic conditions are set and that society is purposely structured to oppress them. In this way, the black pill fosters a collective sense of powerlessness and alienation among incels.

Another example of this expression of perceived oppression is through the interpretation of online dating data to explain incels' collective predicament of inceldom:

> Evolutionary psychology explains why we are predisposed, or programmed, in certain ways. These underlying factors could be seen as major contributors to the existence of Incels. Many of the theories of evolutionary psychology, which relied heavily on self-reported and observational information, are now being supported by data gathered from dating services such as OkCupid and Tinder.

Incels invoke strands of cherry-picked 'evidence' to explain their collective sexual poverty while attributing such evidence to women's decision-making about their animalistic 'natural urges'. Such beliefs work to dehumanise women, presenting them as only capable of simple, 'natural' emotions such as possessing a primary drive towards sexual desire and reproduction. In this way, women are constructed as gatekeepers of sexual selection, with incels stressing their supposed 'animalistic' desires while casting moral judgements on them.

Further emphasising notions of biological positivism to explain their collective experiences of sexlessness and romantic rejection, incels have reconfigured the concept of 'hypergamy' to explain women's sexual expressions. Originally formulated to explain the mating choices of animals, incels conception invokes the idea that women seek to maximise the social, economic and genetic potential of their offspring by choosing 'high-status' men. This notion excludes incels from the sexual or mating marketplace. However, there is a perception that women display hypergamous behaviours throughout their lives while still retaining the security of a beta provider who can provide her with a comfortable life when she decides to settle down:
Today women get to ride the cock carousel and still have a beta provider waiting for them at the end of it all, rather than having to immediately settle for and pair up with said beta provider in earlier years.
This notion reveals a contradiction within the incel worldview: the simultaneous belief in women's supposed base, animalistic instincts alongside their hyper-rational and strategic mating selection process. Further, it is argued that feminism is responsible for men's declining positions in the sexual marketplace:

> Feminism has empowered women and allowed them to freely choose their sexual partners. This has led to beta-males will competing in order to pander to them. But if women are the property of their fathers and husbands and don't have any rights, then men don't have any rational reason to pander to them.

Baele, Brace and Coan (2019: 13) also noted that the black pill is rooted in the idea of a past 'golden age'—a nostalgic time of a 'patriarchal society where monogamy is the rule, traditional gender roles are accepted and followed, women and men marry early, and adultery is prohibited'. During this mythologised golden age, it is imagined that all men had near unencumbered 'access' to women as romantic partners, thereby reducing the competition for sex. In this way, incels rail against *both* women and feminism for their perceived alienation.

The manosphere worldview of the red pill purports that one way to combat women's hypergamy is by raising one's own SMV. This can be achieved through 'looksmaxxing' (improving one's physical characteristics to become more attractive). However, according to black pill theory, maximising one's appearance is futile. For black pill adherents, your genetics determine your dating success, and incels theorise that being white is the easiest option for mate selection: 'race decides the probability of inheriting good features. With whites, the probability of inheriting facial projection (a prerequisite for attractive masculinity) is the greatest'. These kinds of discussions of 'theory' are commonplace within incel forums, providing a shared sense of meaning for members (Lindsay 2020; 2021).

However, these discussions often devolve into racist attacks on the BIPOC incels of the group. When discussing African American incels, one user stated: 'if we analyse their racial features you would notice they have extremely dark skin, which is considered unattractive, huge flat noses which resemble those of chimps, [and] curly hair which looks like pubes'. The user went on to evaluate their 'positive traits' but posed the question, 'why are Blacks considered much higher on the racial hierarchy of SMV than say, Asians, Indians, brown Hispanics, or Middle Easterners? Especially because these races actually have more Caucasoid skull, lighter skin, and refined features than Blacks'.

These narratives mirror ideas of 'race science' that are promoted by the far-right to explain the negative social positions of BIPOC individuals and communities, such as socio-economic disadvantage or crime through genetic differences in intelligence quotients between races (Miller-Idriss 2020). Despite rigorous academic critique discrediting the book, the use of Herrnstein and Murray's (1994) *The Bell Curve*, in particular, shows that the far-right and incels share common intellectual grounds rooted in biological positivism and white supremacy. For incels, genetic determinism is used to reinforce a genetic hierarchy to explain their feelings of alienation. This is a core function of the black pill. It naturalises and reifies categories of difference by utilising pseudoscientific arguments. It is through such arguments and 'evidence' that the black pill provides a 'scientific' justification for the collective experience of inceldom.

Taken together, incels' notions of a sexual market economy rooted in biological positivism serve to demarcate the social boundaries between incels and others in terms of entry into and performance within the sexual marketplace. This forms the primary collective identity of incels as those who believe they are unable to access sexual relationships because of a perception of a rigid social structure that emphasises certain traits and favours attractive men. Frustrated with the prevailing system that is believed to be responsible for men's economic, social and sexual alienation, coupled with the feelings of victimisation, the black pill provides the conceptual ammunition to make calls for a 'beta uprising' appear as a legitimate course of political action.

Creating Radical Dualisms

This article has so far demonstrated that the black pill is rooted in evolutionary psychology and biological positivism; thus, it reinforces and justifies incels' feelings of a lack of power and privilege. It provides a 'scientific' justification for their sexual alienation and emphasises discredited ideas supporting eugenics and 'race science' to reproduce exclusionary social hierarchies (Koch 2011; Parker 2019; Slorach 2020).

These features contribute to community-building online through a collective struggle. Simultaneously, an entrenched black pill discourse is used as a 'scientific' disciplinary tool to help form incels' group identity—creating a collective sense of 'us' versus an outside 'them'.

Incels incessantly depict out-groups (e.g., Chads/alpha males, normies and women) as negative, while the in-group is portrayed as mostly positively. Torok (2013) argued that creating group polarisation is key to radicalising individuals and that the constant comparison of the in-group as 'just' or 'good' against that of out-groups strengthens group homogeneity. This strengthens bonds between group members through the collective venting of frustration and anger. The following passage argues that out-group members (i.e., women and alpha males) are primarily concerned with physical attractiveness:

> Women and Chads are obsessed only with maximising a partner and friends holding high levels of physical attraction, while Incels just want to love and cherish someone who truly accepts and appreciates us.

The user presents incels as romantic and capable of providing unconditional love while they are paradoxically presented as *not* driven by uncontrolled sexual desire based on attractiveness—a trait that the out-group is perceived to possess. Incels present the in-group as rational and morally superior while portraying the out-group as animalistic and self-interested. Incels frequent obsession with having a sexual partner clearly contradicts this belief. However, these comments appear to reinforce the alienation that incel members feel within the digital counter-public. The black pill provides members with a shared struggle, a shared explanation of their struggles and constitutes the construction of a shared sense of identity.

Comments found in incel forums regularly advocating extreme violence against out-group members also reinforce this collective identity: 'if I get the chance to kill, I'm taking it. I don't care if I go down in history as the most evil and hated human being. I'd wipe everything out if I could. Stacys, Chad, normies—everyone'. The construction of a collective black-pilled identity is rooted in emphasising a shared sense of alienation and suffering. This appears to create a form of collective solidarity between incel forum members and encourages violent threats against out-groups.

Incels' inability to find sexual partners leads them to blame women for their sexlessness. Women are frequently depicted as cruel, callous and having simplified emotions (e.g., being guided by biological wiring). This aids in building a sense of superiority over out-groups and policing women on 'proper' feminine behaviours and norms:

> Foids [female humanoid] have the power for mating in today's society. It's sexual selection. It's literally seen in biology. It's seen in many species. In this way, these bitches are identical to animals. Bigger male species tend to be selected for and have a harem of females … We know from the data and science what makes women happy, and its patriarchy, women think they don't want it, but they do. They are very child or animal-like and primitive when it comes to decision-making.

Bauman (2000: 96) observed that 'dehumanised objects cannot possibly possess a "cause", much less a "just" one; they have no "interests" to be considered, indeed no claim to subjectivity'. Further, dehumanisation is a psychological prerequisite for violence and shows that initiates are never burdened with the idea of a 'human', a peer with a name, claim or story (Munn 2019). For incels, referring to women as 'foids', 'roasties' or 'sluts' and claiming they possess animalistic tendencies helps to justify violence against such monstrous archetypes. As Munn (2019) highlighted, through dehumanising rhetoric, rights-bearing subjects are transformed into apolitical objects, clearing the way for rape threats, doxing or, occasionally—as in the case of incels—extreme violence. By framing the out-group as responsible for incels collective sense of victimisation, dehumanisation strategies justify the use of violence and misogynistic attacks, and within the radical milieu, support and encourage those who may commit violence in the future. By targeting the affective dimension through sharing moral outrage over perceived injustices

by the out-group, group polarisation is reinforced, making attacks on the out-group easier and justified (Torok 2013). All the while, these digitally connected communities are discursively linked through the acts of emotional storytelling of suffering—the collective experience of positioning themselves as victims at the hands of women and feminism.

It should be emphasised that most incels are not misogynist spree shooters and that for most members, the forums are spaces used to socialise and vent about their collective predicament of involuntary celibacy (Daly and Laskovtsov 2021; Lindsay 2020). It is also unclear how many incels fully adopt the philosophy of the black pill to the extent that they believe violence is the answer to their social problems. However, it should also be acknowledged that the incel *worldview* casts women as inherently evil. By framing women as a source of trauma, incels consistently disclose feelings of being bullied and humiliated by women. Their constructions portray women as evil through a combination of evolutionary biology and feminist culture. Incels selectively draw from evolutionary psychology and natural selection principles to justify and validate their belief that women are compelled by their desires for reproduction and hedonism to exclude incels cruelly. Biological deterministic arguments and language are used to affirm a gendered (and, at times, racial) hierarchy based on natural differences and propensities between men and women—one based upon a 'natural' order where males should possess power over women.

Normalising Ideologically Structured Hatred Against Women

The online environment is the key context to normalising radical thinking within the incel milieu. Users become attuned to the values and norms of the community through discussions and disciplinary techniques that normalise and structure users' thoughts and actions. Incel users who argued against the black pill tenets were quickly corrected when discussions breached ideologically acceptable boundaries. This policing plays a key role in mediating critical discussion of the black pill and entrenching acceptable discourse within incel forums (Lindsay 2021). This mirrors the alt-right radicalisation journey proposed by Munn (2019). Humorous and ironic inside jokes normalise xenophobic and misogynistic discourse and provide a frame for alt-right values (Green 2019; Nagle 2016). Incels frequently invoke the 'science' of the black pill to suppress independent and critical thought. This works simultaneously to normalise and police opinions for the wider incel community.

Self-isolation is also integral to learning the norms and values of extremist groups (Torok 2013). Self-isolation provides insulation from pervasive outside influences, especially alternative ideas and competing rationalities. Social isolation is prevalent in incel communities, and incel forums are highlighted as key sites for social interaction. As one user lamented:

> No one calls me on my cellphone. I don't even know why I have one. I only use it as an MP3 player at the gym, and when the delivery guy calls me. Other than you guys, I don't really talk to anyone.

By seeking out others with similar ideas and experiences, and through engaging with incel forums and chatrooms, 'experts' in the black pill (those who purport to hold the esoteric 'knowledge' of the way the world truly works) train others by debating current events in reference to their own experiences. Occasionally, when dissenting opinions challenge the beliefs of the black pill, they are corrected using evidence that is often taken from the cache of black pill information located within the 'incel wiki' tab on incels.is. This peer-to-peer interaction, coupled with ubiquitous connectivity to digital echo chambers, allows vulnerable, disillusioned initiates to become 'groomed' by peers and aids to construct and reinforce the collective incel identity.

As Ging (2019) has shown, the configuration of technology, ideology and emotional appeals or calls to action are features of the wider manosphere and its fluid coalescence around collective political action. The nature of hatred and bigotry are techno-social processes that result from ongoing cycles of technological co-production (Powell, Stratton and Cameron 2018). These are mediated through, and afforded by, technological platforms, such as incel forums, which are easily accessible with a smartphone.

Such technology allows for continuous connection and social engagement with incel discourse. Rather than the self-imposed online isolation proposed by Torok (2013), incels can be in continuous contact with black pill discourse and despite reporting being isolated in the offline world, actively engaged incels are far from being isolated within the online sphere. Further, it would be inaccurate to say that incels are being primarily 'radicalised' through online mechanisms because negative interactions with women offline, loneliness and systemic inequalities combine to feed individual incels' feelings of alienation (Daly and Laskovtsov 2021; Ging 2019; Lindsay 2021).The dehumanisation of out-groups also appears to be a way that incels bond. However, through such bonding mechanisms, dehumanising rhetoric is also used to blame those that incels' perceive as responsible for current crises. Incels collectively (re)produce comprehensive blame-attributing narratives, locating actors, such as feminists, women and alpha males, as responsible for their experiences of inceldom. Subsequently, these narratives often centre around advocating for violent punishments for those who have hurt them. Incels regularly show this through admiration and support of violence against their perceived oppressors. This is most clearly expressed through the profile pictures of their pseudonymised accounts paying tribute to misogynistic murderers and by reiterating victim-blaming narratives: 'if only some foid would have fucked [Elliot] Rodger, then perhaps he wouldn't have gone ER on their ass'.

Rodger and other incels who have perpetrated violence share a common history of violence against women and overt misogyny, and incels regularly valorise mass murder/suicide perpetrators known as 'incel saints', for example, Marc Lepine, who, in 1989, murdered 15 female students and injured 14 in Montreal; George Sodini, who killed four and injured nine in the 2009 LA Fitness shooting; Seung-Hui Cho, who murdered 33 people and injured 17 in the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007; and many other notable killers who appear to have shared such misogynistic beliefs. This common history of suicidal misogynistic violence connects to the radical black pill beliefs because it suggests that violent retribution is a valorous solution to inceldom (Hoffman, Ware and Shapiro 2020; Lindsay 2020). In this way, violence against women (including non-corporeal violence) is normalised and connected to the structural dynamics of daily violence against women (Lindsay 2021).

As I have highlighted in a recent article (Lindsay 2021: 40), the 'truth' or 'science' of the black pill is often used as a direct justification for calls for domestic terrorism, accelerationism and incel uprisings, and the lives of the out-group are presented as inconsequential to the broader goals of punishing society for the crisis of beta masculinity:

> Death is a pre-requisite of Life. Brown, White, Black, it doesn't matter. Death tends to happen. The thing about murder is that not only does it kill people … it also can change the course of history. Of course, I would prefer it if Women died. But death happens and I couldn't care less about what their ideology or skin colour is as long as people are dying before their biological death date, that's all I care about. (Lindsay 2021: 40)

Following on from this quote, the same user added that their support for violence was directly related to their black pill ideology: 'Chaos, something that the Elites hate. It is something that I admire. Its final form is the Blackpill [sic] and no one can deny the truth of what we must do.' Several studies suggest that such ubiquitous support for violence, whether it be in the form of the fantastical uprisings mentioned here, lone-wolf terror attacks or the more benign forms of digital violence, may provide a sense of catharsis for incel members' troubled imaginations (Baele, Brace and Coan 2019; Hoffman, Ware and Shapiro 2020; O'Malley, Holt and Holt 2020). I argue that such support fosters a sense of collective solidarity among incel members. This was evident in the wake of the 2019 Christchurch mosque shootings and other high-profile lone-wolf terror events during the data collection period when posts celebrating 'kill counts' and debating the motives of killers were frequently observed. The discussions of such chaotic forms of violence, as well as everyday forms of misogyny, provide a sense of collective identity because they normalise violence against women (Lindsay 2020; 2021).

These last examples clearly demonstrate the connection between online discussions of violence and hateful speech to their offline realities and how such discussions build counter-public spaces that aid in

constructing the collective incel identity. The incel subculture is an example of how ideas cross-pollinate across the manosphere through memes, hyperlinking of articles and the overlapping interests that these online cultures hold in common. These interests are underpinned by hardened misogynistic attitudes that call for the reassertion of patriarchal societies through the use of a style of militant misogyny (Zimmerman, Ryan and Duriesmith 2018) that is deeply embedded within masculine gender constructions directly influenced by far-right groups (Greig 2019). The co-production and sharing of common memes suggest that in a digital society, hatred and bigotry are expressed through such techno-social networks and are not independent of one culture or forum alone (Powell, Stratton and Cameron 2018).

These manifestations of hateful rhetoric (and actions) against gendered or racialised 'others' are explained and (re)produced through hierarchies of difference in an attempt to push back against a 'new' globalised, cosmopolitan world where, in past generations, many of these men would likely have felt more powerful and important than they do today. Incels' extreme conclusions made from a synthesis of carefully selected scientific studies and xenophobic, ethnonationalist and authoritarian narratives work to unite and educate initiates in the black pill philosophy. Practically, they also provide them with an evidence base of 'objective' research that confirms their lived experiences of subjugation by feminist misandry. In this way, the black pill builds community and disciplines the initiates to adhere to the incel worldview, creating a collective incel identity through a shared sense of suffering.

I argue that the black pill's 'scientific' explanations for incels' collective suffering are also used as a justification for terroristic violence. Munn (2019) argued that the rising frequency of the lone-wolf violence of alt-right groups could be explained by the notion of stochastic terrorism, which proposes that while violent attacks can be statistically predictable, they remain individually unpredictable (Biondi and Curtis 2018). Munn (2019) pointed out the individual nature of such attacks: the individual shooter chooses their own targets, location and specific motive. This idea of 'stochastic terrorism' is useful for explaining incel violence. In the context of the black pill, such attacks are dramatic, singular and look like 'an individual killer obeying their own disturbance, their own nature or character or conscious belief' (Clover 2019: para 10). Rather than leaders instructing terroristic violence, the actions of these individuals are structurally produced and reveal themselves at the nexus of intersecting factors, such as harmful constructions of masculinity, broad economic changes leading to insecurities, social alienation and the techno-social construction of digital counter-publics, where such harmful worldviews proliferate. The 'scientific truth' of the black pill philosophy is constructed as a 'truth', which makes it necessary for believers to blame and, therefore, punish women for their perceived positions within society. Provocative rhetoric and the black pill philosophy, alongside encouragement from digital peers, incite users to interpret the personal and political calls to action as they deem appropriate, resulting in a raft of harms from online misogyny to extreme mass violence.

Concluding Thoughts

Exploring the incel subculture via their discourse, memes and other cultural materials that are (re)produced through incel forums and the wider manosphere have revealed a strong, shared mythology of victimisation. It is evident throughout the discourse surveyed in this article that many incels support violence against out-groups (e.g., women and alpha males). I consider such calls to violence and harmful speech highly concerning, especially when considered through the lens of stochastic terrorism. This, of course, creates complications for the prediction and prevention of domestic terror attacks related to incels. It should be noted that this analysis of incel rhetoric was limited to public-facing discourses that are freely available online and may not be reflective of all incel perspectives. Further, it should be recognised that not all incels appear to believe or adhere to the most radical black pill beliefs (including those resulting in offline violence). Bearing this in mind, it becomes even more challenging to study, predict and prevent domestic terror attacks related to incels when they congregate in private and encrypted online spaces.

The key contribution of this article is that within the radical incel milieu, the black pill philosophy helps to form a collective identity rooted in a shared sense of alienation and victimisation at the hands of out-groups. This construction of collective identity formed through digital counter-publics disciplines incels to

conform to shared narratives and, I argue, can push individuals towards acts of radical violence. Incels represent just one part of a spectrum of groups that span an array of political ideologies united through militant misogyny (Ging 2017; Witt 2020). Incels' black pill philosophy is just one facet of the violent masculinity that underpins these worldviews; however, as the article has shown, it appears to be a key force in radicalising new members.

It is important for scholars of digital society to understand that such worldviews do not originate in isolation; they are part of a broader structure of beliefs that already exist (often unchallenged) within society. For incels, they are interconnected through the constellation of men's rights groups that compose the manosphere, a constellation that holds few spaces for critical dissent of dominant ideas. The creation of such hatred and (occasional) violence transcends the false distinction between the virtual and the offline world (Brown 2006). The (re)production of violence, particularly against women, is founded on the conceptual apparatus of patriarchy and racism and the normalisation and acceptance of such violence; however, such ideas are also emboldened and extended within such tight echo chambers that influence violent misogynists (Johnston and True 2019; McCulloch et al. 2019). Future research should seek to understand the specific techniques of predominantly online cultures (e.g., incels, alt-right and other extremist groups) that foster young men to commit violent actions ranging from the 'invisible', everyday forms of violence to the extreme violence of the lone wolves such as Rodger, Minassian and others of their ilk.

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[1] During the study period and up until the publication of this article the website address for one of the forums studied has changed several times. In the early stages of the research the website address 'www.incels.me' was used by the forum, then during the data-collection and analysis period this changed to 'www.incels.co.' In the final editing stages of this publication, the forum has now migrated to www.incels.is, which it will be referred to throughout the body of text. Previous studies have noted these webhosting issues (see: Bael, Brace and Coan, 2019; Ging 2017; Jaki et al. 2019). For the data-collection period /r/Braincels was quaratined by Reddit administrators, which means that visitors will see a warning screen when they try to access a forum and have to opt into viewing its content. In late 2019 the /r/Braincels subreddit was banned for continued complaints of harassment/bullying

[2] Chad represents any man who is sexually successful, charismatic, handsome and clever (although, Chad is often portrayed as unintelligent or jock-like).

[3] A 'beta provider' refers to an individual who financially supports a woman with a comfortable life after or while that woman finds sexual fulfilment with an alpha male elsewhere.

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