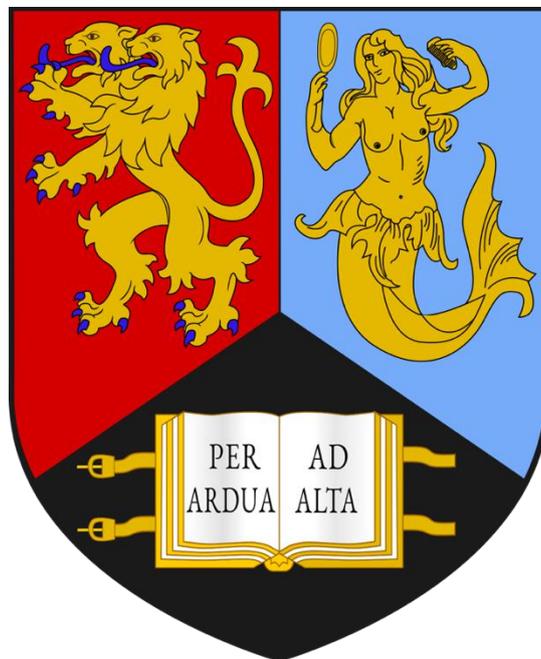


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Antifeminism in Neoliberalism

The Case of Incel



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This thesis is dedicated to my late grandmother Sylvia

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Content Warning

This thesis comes with a content warning for descriptions of violent sexual fantasy and suicidal ideation from the first page.

Chapter One: Introduction – The Unmapped Relationship between Antifeminism and Neoliberalism

Humanity... All of my suffering on this world has been at the hands of humanity, particularly women. It has made me realize just how brutal and twisted humanity is as a species. All I ever wanted was to fit in and live a happy life amongst humanity, but I was cast out and rejected, forced to endure an existence of loneliness and insignificance, all because the females of the human species were incapable of seeing the value in me.

(Rodger, 'Introduction' to *My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger*, 2014)

On the evening of May 23rd, 2014, twenty-two-year-old Elliot Rodger murdered six and injured fourteen others near the University of California, Santa Barbara. After stabbing three students¹ to death in his apartment, Rodger uploaded a video to YouTube titled '*Elliot Rodger's Retribution*' and emailed to various acquaintances a lengthy document titled '*My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger*', an extensive description of the origins of his hatred for women and the men who date them, beginning with his birth in London, 1991. In the short video, Rodger vows to 'enter the hottest sorority house at UCSB and I will slaughter every single spoiled, stuck-up, blond slut I see inside there'. After attempting and failing to enter the nearby Alpha Phi sorority house, Rodger shot dead three more students and injured fourteen others around Isla Vista. Following a police chase Rodger was found deceased with a self-inflicted gun wound to the head.

Rodger's legacy, illustrated in 'ironic'² memes and references to phrases he used (e.g. 'The Supreme Gentleman'), is partially a product of the considerable online imprint he left behind. Numerous YouTube videos – since deleted – featured Rodger lamenting the injustice

¹ Two of these men were roommates of Rodger. The other was a friend of the roommates.

² Irony is a constitutive feature of communication in many online spaces and in online communities. The veneration of murderers like 'St. Elliot' Rodger, as well as other misogynist figures like Marc Lepine, is an immediate – and shocking – feature of many forums examined in this thesis. The question as to whether ironic detachment or an attitude of flippancy and shock-value undermine the terrorist violence this appears to promote, is considered in more detail in Chapters Six and Nine.

of his involuntary celibacy. He was also a regular poster on *PUAHate*, a forum in which disgruntled users discuss the fraudulence and/or ineffectiveness of ‘Pick-Up Artists’ (PUAs), an industry which promises to assist men struggling to date women by teaching them techniques of body language, mental disposition, verbal communication and style (O’Neill, 2015). In *‘My Twisted World’* Rodger blames ‘humanity, particularly women’ for denying him happiness, affirmation, and sexual contact. The isolation and torment resulting from this denial, he claims, has led him to murderous retaliation.

The Isla Vista killings are among the most notorious of a series of such events that took place over the 2010s, in which the perpetrator was found to have at least partially blamed difficulties attracting a partner for their rage. Rodger is personally cited as an inspiration by mass-murderers Alek Minassian (Toronto, 2018) and Chris Harper-Mercer (Oregon, 2015), both of whom expressed frustration with developing intimate relationships as a motivating factor for their acts of violence. These events were and are often reported as evidence of ‘Incel’ (Involuntary Celibate) extremism, a phenomenon in which groups of mostly anonymous men interact over the internet by sharing insights into the injustice and pain of living as seemingly permanently single males. Many users express suicidal ideation. Some, like Rodger, respond with violence: ‘If we can’t solve our problems we must DESTROY our problems... One day incels will realise their true strength and numbers and will overthrow this oppressive feminist system. Start envisioning a world where WOMEN FEAR YOU’ (Rodger, cited in Glasstetter, 2014).

Taken in sum, Rodger’s is a small – and not especially sophisticated or eloquent – drop in an online ecosystem in which ideas of gender, competition, power, sex, intimacy, value, and justice collide. One artefact of this is the loosely affiliated network of online communities commonly referred to as the ‘Manosphere’. These communities share a perception that feminism is a highly successful sexual strategy pursued by women to the detriment of men,

and that only by realising this can men develop their own strategy (sometimes referred to as ‘Red Pill Philosophy’ or ‘The Red Pill’) (Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019: 595-596).

Many Manosphere participants claim that one of the most damaging consequences of feminism’s success has been a skewing of the sexual market in favour of women, who are encouraged to hold increasingly high expectations for potential partners and practice their evolutionary biological and psychological impulse towards hypergamy³. This has, it is argued, led to an underclass of men who are ‘locked out’ of forming sexual relationships, often through immutable, unfavourable characteristics no fault of their own. ‘The most symbolically important distinction between masculinities is in terms of sexuality’ (Connell, 2000: 102), and nowhere is this more accurate than Incel forums. Exacerbating their pain is the ubiquity of pro-woman, pro-feminist messaging and scripts with regards to gendered behaviour: dateless men are told to improve their confidence; that women prioritise sensitivity, chivalry and loyalty over physical appearance; that being a ‘good guy’ is worth it. Women are told they can and should ‘have it all’ (M3, 2018).

Visibility and Backlash: Why Now?

The 2010s was a significant decade both for a visible, popular feminism, and what has been termed an antifeminist backlash, a popular misogyny, and a rise in ‘gender hate online’ (Anderson, 2015; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Manne, 2018; Nicholas & Aguis, 2018: 1-2; Ging & Siapera, 2019). My own observations of this visibility and backlash, particularly between 2012 and 2015, informed the initial decision to pursue a PhD in the de/repoliticisation of specific feminist campaigns, and subsequent adjustment to focus on how neoliberalism informs not only popular feminism but antifeminism too.

³ A contested concept describing women’s in-built impulse to securing the highest quality mate, irrespective of whether they have previously committed to another.

The language and iconography of feminism has long been a feature of neoliberal society (Fraser, 2016: 281-282). Pro-feminist messaging has increasingly been employed by celebrities, corporations and politicians to sell products and endorse empowerment, a dynamic which receives numerous critiques, notably from feminist writers cautioning against the ambiguous effects of feminist ‘entanglement’ with neoliberal priorities of capital accumulation and individualism (summarised in Budgeon, 2015: 152-154). At the same time several online feminist campaigns suggest a more radical and less consumption-based model of tackling enduring gendered inequalities, even as these movements and communities engaged in fierce internecine debate and conflict over long-standing divides in feminist thinking: race, sex work and trans acceptance (see Dzodan, 2011; Grant, 2014; Phipps, 2016). Whether citing Twitter campaigns such as ‘#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen’ (2013), the use of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s ‘We Should All Be Feminists’ speech in Beyoncé’s hugely successful eponymous album (2013), the spate of celebrities⁴ wearing ‘This Is What A Feminist Looks Like’ shirts or UN-backed campaigns for gender equality like ‘HeForShe’, there was a perception at least of unprecedented feminist visibility (Rottenberg, 2017: 329).

Simultaneously, antifeminist ideas also became more visible. This visibility comprised not only the communities which make up the Manosphere but also concerted campaigns to fight back against feminist encroachment into popular culture (Nagle, 2017: 86-87; Zuckerberg, 2018: 4). Many of these campaigns, most notoriously the Gamergate controversy of 2014, were characterised by extreme misogynist abuse, including threats and the spread of personal information, being directed at individual women (Salter, 2018: 247-248). More broadly, an ‘anti political-correctness’ sentiment emerged as a culture war framing through

⁴ Including: actresses Emma Watson and Lena Dunham, comedian Eddie Izzard, rapper A\$AP Rocky and a variety of politicians including pre- Prime Minister Theresa May.

which feminist (as well as anti-racist) gains could be dismissed as self-obsessed virtue-signalling, a dynamic which continues in 2020 (see Mulesky, 2019).

While anonymous users on various online platforms functioned as the foot-soldiers of concerted campaigns and antifeminist abuse, an ‘intellectual wing’ applied a range of theoretical concepts⁵ to empirical and anecdotal data, justifying its antifeminism and presenting the backlash as either a brave truth-telling in the face of a misandrist culture and unquestioned allegiance to feminism, or a natural kick-back from disempowered young men (Zuckerberg, 2018: 32-33; Lyons, 2019: 244-245). Increasing numbers of single men, decreasing birth rates (often among the ‘indigenous’ populations) and the rise in male loneliness are construed as the fault of feminism in Western⁶ society, going as far back as the 1960s ‘sexual revolution’ (see Devlin, 2006). Unsurprisingly, this intellectual effort to portray feminism as a bringer of male unhappiness and civilisational decay, while by no means a new phenomenon, is considered a factor in the rise of misogynist abuse online (Jane, 2014: 561-563; Massanari & Chess, 2018).

I found it almost impossible not to notice, in this period, an odd convergence between some feminist critiques of its own entanglement with neoliberalism, and Manosphere laments regarding the commodification of select feminist ideas. Twenty-one years old in the summer of 2010, my own immersion in many of the online platforms, *chan* culture and ‘edgy’ internet humour of the time, combined with my long-standing but previously somewhat dormant commitment to feminist principles⁷, granted me an unusual but beneficial vantage from which to observe this dynamic in real time.

⁵ This includes elements of evolutionary psychology, traditional conservative views on gender roles, libertarian and neoreactionary (NRx) ideas.

⁶ Some of these arguments were and continue to be absorbed into broader far-right projects which rally variously against multiculturalism, immigration, Islam, Judaism, liberalism and so on (for a summary see Sedgwick, 2019: xiii-xxvi; for specific examples see Devlin, 2006) and cite right-wing figures of the twentieth century as inspiration (e.g. Julius Evola and Alain de Benoist).

⁷ Arguably this describes the postfeminist subject: accepting feminist objectives but concluding that the majority of them had been legally secured.

At this point I was unaware that some of my own questions regarding the ambiguous ways in which feminist ideas had been made visible, had already been posed by feminist theorists. Why, for instance, was a select performance of femininity (able-bodied, sexually active, white, middle class) associated with feminist ideas in a such a seemingly ahistorical and male-gaze oriented manner (see McRobbie, 2004)? How could women – or men for that matter – match these kinds of [gendered] expectations to be constantly self-improving and succeeding as sexual agents, with one eye on their financial income and another on their muscles (see Bay-Cheng, 2015)? More selfishly, why did I feel increasingly paralysed by a sense that I must look, act, and even *think* differently to ever succeed – not just romantically, but more broadly in my social environment? The dating scene, especially with the emergence of online platforms like *Tinder* and *Plenty of Fish*, did feel like an extension of *LinkedIn* and similar sites of self-management and networking: a transactional, efficient site of competition with a powerful culture of expected performance and desirable traits.

I chose to examine Incel and offer an analysis which disrupted its common portrayal as exclusively the remit of basement-dwelling, badly smelling women-haters. To be clear, I do not doubt that this description is at times – perhaps most of the time – accurate. Likewise, I have never encountered the level of vitriol which Incel spaces reserve for women and especially feminists. However, I also observe in these spaces a repudiation and reproduction of neoliberal ideas which hurt men and women alike: an obsession with self-improvement, quantitative evaluation, the immutable and the malleable features of the body and the mind, and sex as a transactional act. Many contributors articulate a sense that competition, between the sexes and within them, is an unchanging fact of reality, even as this perception drives them to inflict violence on their ‘failed’ selves and on the women who supposedly benefit from unfair advantages.

These early impressions of Incel sites anchor my primary research objective as well as what guides my interaction with the data:

Table 1: Research Objective and Sub-Questions

Research Objective	In what ways is the antifeminism of the Incel community entangled with neoliberalism?
Sub-questions to guide the empirical analysis	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What themes emerge from the data? 2. In what ways does the Incel worldview reproduce, reject or engage with its neoliberal environment? 3. How does this entanglement shape Incel antifeminism?

In this thesis I am chiefly seeking to discover, via an examination of the Incel worldview, the justificatory logics of contemporary antifeminism. I am not attempting to *explain* that worldview, but rather to understand what animates it. Incel is facilitated by a combination of neoliberal ideas and institutional changes occurring under neoliberal regimes, which are then filtered through an antifeminist framing and culture which explicitly links male and masculinised sexual anxiety to an imagined feminist threat.

My account therefore refuses the common portrayal of Incel as an outlying or aberrant phenomenon, and the major findings of this thesis reflect my argument that what animates the Incel worldview is precisely its reproduction of, and opposition to, specific dimensions of neoliberalism. The fostering of violence towards women, ‘feminised’ society and ultimately the [Incel] self; the painful embrace of competition as a characteristic of *all* social behaviour; the Incel community’s self-identification as transgressive and emancipatory; and the claim that feminist thinking constitutes the dominant ideological power in contemporary society, are all a product in different ways of this entanglement.

This project, therefore, does not attempt to sympathise with Incel, but to demystify it. In this sense my project is indebted to sociological studies on the worldviews expressed in subcultural communities which are then linked to historical and contemporary grids of

intelligibility (e.g. Theweleit, 1987; O'Neill, 2018). By locating Incel within contemporary grids of intelligibility – which I describe as quintessentially *neoliberal* – I believe that we can develop existing approaches to Incel and avoid some of the common misconceptions which I have observed while writing this thesis. Incel is often portrayed, for instance, as somehow beyond intelligibility: ‘It is vile. It is just incredibly unhinged and separate from reality and completely raw’ (Wendling, cited in Williams, 2018). One of my objectives is to develop claims that bring clarity to the ways in which Incel is not, in fact, as unhinged and ‘separate from reality’ as we might like to think.

Furthermore, there has been a troubling propensity for analyses to focus on the sexlessness of individual men as a means of defining the Incel phenomenon. By grouping ‘someone who has not had sex for a sustained period of longer than six months’ as Incel, then one can reasonably conclude that ‘the majority of incels are peaceful and non-violent’ (Costello, 2020). In doing so, however, we risk erasing entirely the antifeminist agenda which is at the heart of the community’s worldview. Irrespective of how many individual posters might be ‘peaceful and non-violent,’ that sexually active men *are* permitted to access the most popular Incel website (*incels.co*) so long as they subscribe to and do not contradict its worldview, while females are ‘banned on sight’, is indicative that there is far more to the phenomenon than melancholic, involuntary celibates. Despite this, several recent analyses locate Incel in the register of counter-culture or as another victim of a censorious ‘political correctness’, in which the spirit of transgression, taboo-busting and criticism of bourgeois sensibilities is linked to masculine sexual identity (Nagle, 2015: 63-65).

As above, what these analyses do not properly address is the significance of the Incel *worldview*, an all-encompassing heuristic in which perceived sexual deficiencies of the masculine self are explained with reference to an overarching feminist power and inherent

female evolutionary biology and psychology. In Incel spaces⁸ this is referred to as ‘The Black Pill’. More than a simple list of uncomfortable truths, The Black Pill functions as a socio-historical explanation for the Incel phenomenon; a scientific defence of the claim that unattractive men are at the bottom of an imagined social hierarchy; and an affective account of living as an Incel. It is through examining this worldview that, I claim, we can develop a more productive understanding of the ways in which Incel and its antifeminism is both an extension of specific neoliberal ideas and simultaneously a reaction against the same.

Neoliberalism and (Anti)Feminism: Situating a Project

There is a large and diverse literature on the relationship between neoliberalism and feminism which I cite in **Part One** (see Coole, 2000; McRobbie, 2004; Brown, 2005; 2015; Prügl, 2012; Fraser, 2013; 2016; Rottenberg, 2014; Budgeon, 2015; Gill, 2016; Eschle & Maiguashca, 2018). O’Neill (2019: 1) claims that ‘[w]here feminist scholars have produced a rich and varied literature on the subject-producing capacities of neoliberalism as they pertain to women and femininity, there is little parallel scholarship on men and masculinities.’ This project begins to fill that gap, addressing Incel as a phenomenon shaped by its ideological environment (neoliberalism), in which its antifeminism is informed and shaped by neoliberal principles including those which are considered entwined with feminist thinking. While this is an analysis of antifeminism, Incel is an example of neoliberalism producing a subject which pertains to men and masculinities.

I utilize a nuanced understanding of neoliberalism, heeding O’Neill’s warning that most studies of contemporary masculinities are limited by a definition of neoliberalism as ‘an

⁸ I have noticed several examples of people online, likely unaware of the term’s connotations and origins, describing themselves as ‘blackpilled’. In these cases, the term has come to mean a much vaguer attitude or disposition, in which the blackpilled individual recognises an unjust and depressing reality and has accepted the certainty of its fixedness, and the lack of hope that justice (however construed) will ever prevail.

economic programme rather than a cultural rationality' (2015: 18). I distinguish four 'ideal type' accounts of neoliberalism, two of which emphasise its economic and institutional programme (e.g. Harvey, 2010; Jessop, 2013), while the others foreground its interventions in culture and epistemology (e.g. Dardot & Laval, 2013; Lemke, 2001; Mirowski, 2011). The analytical status of neoliberalism in my project is significant: I use the term as a description of a discourse and set of material conditions which shapes the worldview and practices of Incel, as well as a description of the reality of contemporary society. This usage therefore incorporates a variety of processes and rationalities which extend across political, economic, social and cultural sites.

Each of these four 'ideal types' has an important function in setting up the analysis section of this thesis. What I call the Historical and Foucauldian accounts of neoliberalism lend themselves more obviously to an analysis of Incel, as so much of the data examined in this thesis addresses the relationship of individuals to their self, often manifest as a frustrated desire to radically transform the interior or exterior self. Moreover, much of the anxiety expressed in Incel spaces is attached to the attempted quantification of value in an imagined sexual marketplace. Concepts like human capital (Becker et al, 2012) and governmentality (Lemke, 2001), which are reoccurring concerns in these 'Affective' accounts of neoliberalism, highlight how neoliberal power operates precisely through this reconceptualisation of the individual's relationship to the self, as opposed to a unilateral agent that wields power over others. Unsurprisingly therefore, several studies on nascent extremist phenomena, not just antifeminist but also white supremacist and fascistic, have been approached foregrounding just such an understanding of neoliberalism (e.g. Phelan, 2019; Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019).

What I have called the Classic and Institutional accounts of neoliberalism offer this thesis different routes into analysis. There are two major examples of this. First, the Incel

worldview understands feminism as the dominant ideological pillar⁹ of contemporary power relations, with significant material effects on the lives of all men. Broad institutional changes which have occurred in the neoliberal era – wage stagnation, contracting out of public services, reduced union power, reduced social programmes and transfer payments etc. – have certainly had gendered consequences (Lindisfarne & Neale, 2016: 29-30), and it is important that this study highlights the complexity in how these consequences manifest in the meaning-making that occurs in Incel spaces. Second, much of the Incel data examined is concerned with inequality and elitism. It is commonly argued in Incel spaces that women constitute a sexual class, with power akin to the property-owning class of classic Marxist theory. The adoption and adaptation of language from social struggles (e.g. OCCUPY's slogan 'We are the 99%'), in which Incels frame their suffering as that of a starved majority held back by the self-interest of elite [sexual] market competitors (Srinivasan, 2018), reflects that the Incel community has a highly complex relationship with ideas of natural inequalities and elite rule.

The breadth of this kind of understanding of neoliberalism, in addition to its use implying an oppositional political sensibility, is subject to critique from political scientists and social anthropologists (e.g. Laidlaw, in Eriksen et al, 2015). 'Neoliberalism' certainly confers different meanings to different academics, which necessitates a careful and precise approach to defining the term when pursuing my research objectives. This is especially true when it is used – as it is in this project – to refer to forces exerted upon and within 'contemporary society' across different governments in different parts of the world. To do so, I have developed a detailed and critical overview of a large literature defining neoliberalism, which also addresses both the terms in which its efficacy as an object of research is denied, and the implications of this denial in everyday, non-academic spaces.

⁹ Feminist hegemony is often explained by Incels alongside vaguely defined theories of knowledge like 'postmodernism' and 'critical race theory' which are presented as vessels through which a resurgent feminism has secured favourable conditions for all women (for an interesting overview of this, see McManus, 2020: 36-50 and 114-118).

I conclude Part One with an examination of the ways in which neoliberalism has become ‘entangled’ with feminist ideas and language. This serves two purposes. First, it is this ‘entangled’ incarnation of feminism – in a neoliberal environment – which is the basis for Incel understandings of the prevailing ideology in which it exists and, supposedly, resists. In comparing the ways in which academics have theorised this dynamic, which broadly fall into a literature which focuses on institutional changes and political economy (e.g. Roberts, 2015) and another which examines a ‘postfeminist sensibility’ (e.g. Budgeon, 2011: 31-32), with that offered in Incel spaces, my subsequent analyses will be better equipped to link the Incel worldview within its social environment. Second, I am interested in drawing parallels between this version of feminism and the gender politics of Incel. It is clear that aspects of ‘neoliberal feminism’ and ‘postfeminist sensibility’ imply a certain kind of antifeminism (Gill et al, 2017). In what ways is this implied antifeminism distinct from, or aligned with, that expressed in the Incel community?

There is a small but growing literature examining the Manosphere from a number of perspectives, including: as part of the history of men’s rights groups and their relationship with feminist politics (Messner, 2016: 16-17); as a node in the production of misogynist hate-speech online (Jane, 2014); as part of a global backlash to ‘gender ideology’ (Corredor, 2019); as new form of terrorism (Horgan, 2019); as a fluid ideology with metapolitical, right-wing objectives (Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019; Zuckerberg, 2018); and as a techno-social phenomenon in which changes in technology and society produce new subjectivities (Ging & Siapera, 2018: 518). These are all cited in **Part Two**, which provides a conceptual model for differentiating between misogyny, backlash and antifeminism as well as setting the [online] context in which Incel exists. I expect that several of the complaints made in Incel spaces, and across the Manosphere, will mimic those outlined in Faludi’s (1991) work on antifeminist backlash in the 1980s. While this thesis is not a comparative study of backlashes then and now, the conceptual model offered

by Faludi (1991) and Cudd (2002) introduces productive ways of understanding how antifeminist backlash can manifest, how it can in some cases be distinguished from misogyny, and the types of visibility that can provoke it.

One of the most striking differences between the material examined by Faludi (1991) and other feminists writing in that time with today, is the primacy of online spaces in its production and circulation. The interplay between types of antifeminism and misogyny, and the internet as its medium, raises several important considerations for this thesis. This includes the rise of a ‘translocal misogyny’ facilitated by a medium, the internet, which is widely considered to have been a male-dominated space from its inception, and popular in and associated with masculinised spaces (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2015: 173). Furthermore, the communicative etiquettes of especially anonymous online behaviour have been theorised as prone to performative displays of disinhibition (Suler, 2016). Incels, along with many other online communities associated with hate speech, are prone to justifying or excusing the most heinous examples of hate speech as ‘trolling’ or ‘shitposting’, a deliberate but ultimately unserious or jokey provocation. My thesis rejects such explanations while acknowledging the specific logics of provocation and masculinised identity which carry a cache in online spaces.

While most studies of online antifeminism refer to the Manosphere as a collective (e.g. Van Valkenburgh, 2018), there are a few exceptions in which specific subgroups are examined and which serve as useful guides to conducting this study. Like O’Neill (2015), I historicise the Incel phenomenon from its surprising online roots as the project of a young, queer woman in Toronto to a community regularly banned from different servers for its threats of violence and hate speech. This history and, in particular, the fraught relationship between the Incel and ‘Pick-Up Artist’ (hence PUA) communities, is extremely important to understanding the ways in which Incel emerged not just from a postfeminist or neoliberal feminist society, but from an online environment which was already disposed towards antifeminist explanations for male

suffering. This history is – I argue – a substantial factor behind both the *a priori* antifeminism and misogyny observable in Incel spaces and media, and the extreme cases of hate speech with which the community is associated.

In ‘*Seduction: Men, Masculinity and Mediated Intimacy*’ (2018) Rachel O’Neill immerses herself in the training and development sessions that PUAs advertise as routes to happiness. O’Neill’s central claim is that rationalities of neoliberalism and postfeminism are reorganising contemporary intimate life, and that the intimate subjectivities of heterosexual men are being shaped by neoliberal values of management and entrepreneurship (ibid. pp18-20). I consider this claim through a case study analysis of Incel in **Part Three**, using the most popular online source of Incel interaction – the forum *incels.co* – to gather data and examine the thematic constitution of the most popular threads. Adapting O’Neill’s approach, I have spent a period of nearly four years immersing myself in the [online] world of Incels. This has involved reading daily the many online hubs of Incel communication, across a variety of subreddits, Twitter accounts, YouTube channels, podcasts, and forums. During this period, I maintained an observation diary from which I cite in my analysis chapters.

I am interested in the possibility that, just like PUAs, Incel represents not a diversion from or challenge to prevailing gender relations under neoliberalism, but instead an *extension* and *reaction* to them. By ascertaining the influence of neoliberalism for Incel antifeminism, we can better understand it as a phenomenon with real links to its ideological environment. This possibility would provide invaluable insight into the profound sense of fatalism, misogyny and violence which permeate its discourse. This project seeks to go beyond the pathologisation of those who identify as Incel and towards a more sophisticated understanding of it as a reaction to neoliberal ideas of gender and market relations.

Part One: ‘We Live In A Society’ Academic responses to and understandings of Neoliberalism

‘We live in a society’ is a phrase which became a popular meme in the final years of the 2010s, and one I noticed referenced on several occasions during my immersion within the Incel community. Associated with the character of The Joker, particularly his depiction in the comic *Batman: The Killing Joke* (Moore, 1988) and Heath Ledger’s portrayal in *The Dark Knight* (Nolan & Goyer, 2008)¹⁰, the phrase was originally an expression of mockery and/or disgust with different aspects of a social environment. ‘We live in a society’ would typically be followed by a critique of a specific aspect, for example. ‘... where free thinking, open-minded people are considered “crazy” and the ignorant, close-minded people are “normal”’ (@EsotericExposal, cited in Earp, 2019). The structure of the meme locates the author outside of mainstream society, ‘looking in’ and able to see the absurdity because of this affective distance.

Over time however the meme has acquired a new meaning: satirising the ‘elitist, faux profound tone of the Joker’ (Earp, 2019) and, by extension, individuals who claim to share his ‘outsider’ status. ‘We live in a society’ is recast as shorthand for a propensity in online discourse to rally against the ‘unthinking masses’ or ‘sheep,’¹¹ often in a way that grants the author greater critical authority on the basis of their outsider status. The comedy lies in the author’s failure to capture profound observations and instead make sweeping generalisations stripped of any ambiguity or detail. In this new configuration, ‘We live in a society’ no longer requires an answer, the four words are sufficient to convey the message on their own.

¹⁰ The latest cinematic adaption of this story, *Joker* (2019), has been discussed in several newspaper articles as potentially sympathetic to the Incel worldview (e.g. Hoffman, *J* 2019).

¹¹ This kind of conspirational framing of the world is not dissimilar to the narrative of a[nother] key Manosphere text: *The Matrix* (1999).

The resonance of this new, satirical meaning is for my project twofold. In my experience, it accurately describes a significant portion of the data I have collected in Incel spaces. Many social phenomena, from changes in national birth-rates to the spread of online dating apps, are critiqued from this ‘outsider’ perspective, with a similar proclivity for attempted profundity and binary or simplistic explanations. Second, and more subtly, the ‘We live in a society’ meme raises questions of how exactly we do describe, interpret, and envision our shared social environments. What words do we use for our contemporary ideology, political economy, and culturally or legally enforced norms of the permissible? ‘Neoliberalism’, the wide-reaching concept that my thesis uses to describe the conditions in which Incel has emerged entangled within, is one possible word. It is, however, prone to criticisms on account of its vagueness, tendency towards reductive causal explanations, and appealing via political distance to critical authority (Eriksen et al, 2015).

Part One assesses existing accounts of neoliberalism and, in response to several claims made regarding the perceived incoherence of the term (e.g. Venugopal, 2015; Jessop, 2013), offers a defence of neoliberalism as an object for present and future research. I believe then, that ‘We live in a [neoliberal] society’. I argue against ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’ by abandoning the term, if such a thing is even possible, and in favour of developing the common ground between four reoccurring approaches to studying and defining neoliberal phenomena. In so doing, I contribute a schema through which we can evaluate the ways in which Incel subculture reproduces and rejects select neoliberal ideas and technologies, as well as rebuffing a ‘neoliberal denialism’ which questions its academic credibility.

Neoliberalism, I argue, functions as a significant and distinct context in which contemporary social developments and decisions are made and interpreted. Select themes and/or values, inscribed into symbolic and material exchanges, function as techniques of [neoliberal] governance. The diversity of these exchanges, which operate in ostensibly

disparate fields (e.g. welfare provision and dating routines) and across temporal-spatial environments, share a maxim of expanding market logic to areas previously considered public/common, as well as a shift in institutionally guided processes of subjectification, from the individual as ‘economic partner’ to ‘economic business’ (Foucault, 1979/2008: 226). The breadth of examples of neoliberalism-in-action should not occlude recognition of these key, reoccurring themes.

Different approaches to the study of neoliberalism (see Table 2) pertain in different ways to an analysis of Incel, as different aspects of neoliberalism are both reproduced and repudiated in my case study as well as more broadly in Incel culture. To unpick this entanglement, my project begins by addressing a vast and diverse literature on defining and studying neoliberalism. Part One is made up of three chapters, the first of which will focus on accounts of neoliberalism which emphasise material changes in public policy and the circulation of capital. The second chapter examines accounts which centre the intellectual history of the early neoliberals and their influence on ‘actually existing’ neoliberalism today, and on the ways in which neoliberalism incorporates interior life into its mode of governance. These approaches I have respectively labelled: Classical and Institutional; Historical and Foucauldian. For each approach I summarise the definition of neoliberalism with reference to key, representative texts and note the type of research pursued in their academic work. I also consider the ways in which the thematic codes which emerged from my case study (e.g. Violence, Sex/Dating, Competition) are evoked, if at all, in these accounts.

The question I am posing therefore is not only ‘Is the Incel subculture characterised by the same qualities that this literature has ascribed to neoliberalism?’ (although it might be) but ‘Does the Incel subculture reject, reproduce or otherwise react to neoliberalism as it is understood in the academic literature?’. This will prove particularly challenging initially, as the political science and political economy literature is unlikely to stress the constitutive role

of sexual behaviour in its work on neoliberalism. Addressing a diverse set of literature is however an important part of my research design. Any rigorous investigation into the effects of neoliberalism must confront its significance as a context for social phenomena that encompasses significant changes in politics, policy, and economy. Many of these changes have shaped a grid of intelligibility, manifest in the Incel worldview, which functions as a route for involuntarily celibate men to identify as Incels and subscribe to its key claims.

To develop my answer to this Chapter Four addresses the existing literature on the entanglement of neoliberalism and feminism. Feminism occupies a ‘boogeyman’ role in the Incel worldview and in my data, with the term (as well as ‘feminist’) repeatedly subject to scorn and threats and blamed for all manner of societal ills including the Incel phenomenon itself. This implies the question: which/what feminism is being blamed by Incels and why? While observing Incel forums I observed many criticisms made of supposedly feminist actors/phenomena which fell into one of two camps: that institutional arrangements (e.g. law courts, education, welfare provision etc.) increasingly address, favour and reflect the interests of women; and that pop-culture messaging addresses an ideal type of woman who can and more importantly *should* ‘have it all’. I am interested in the crossover between these Incel complaints and two branches of critical feminist research: neoliberal feminism and postfeminist sensibility. In my effort to complicate and develop the common [mis]understanding that the Incel phenomenon is *simply* an antifeminist venture I will highlight the ways in which Incel subculture shares with critical feminist studies a dissatisfaction with the way that gender is shaped by neoliberal ideas, and examine the extent to which the feminist boogeyman is in some ways surprisingly similar to that derided by contemporary feminist writers.

Part One is in effect a critical literature review which contributes a relatively straightforward but important overview of existing accounts of neoliberalism. These accounts have not previously been grouped together in this way. Existing research on the constitution of

neoliberalism have with few exceptions (e.g. Cahill & Konings, 2017) avoided, or lacked, locating their own understandings qua other approaches to its study. While several studies begin with a critique of how neoliberalism has been studied elsewhere before offering an original alternative (e.g. Peck, 2010), rarely do they identify that there exist traditions (or ideal types). I argue that this is at least partially influenced by the endurance and popularity of denialist claims. This denialism, and the mushrooming of academic interest in neoliberalism (see Fig. 1), makes the need for a clear schema of neoliberalism more pressing.

Table 2: Approaches to the Study of Neoliberalism

Approach	Academic Discipline and Key Authors	Objects of Investigation	Definition of Neoliberalism
Classic	Political Science; Human Geography (Harvey, 2003, 2005; Chang, 2002; Duménil & Lévy, 2011)	Government policy; measures of capital concentration; measures of inequality.	An update of neoclassical economics involving the withdrawal of the state and the deregulation of markets. A political effort to protect class interests.
Institutional	Political Economy (e.g. Jessop, 2011, 2013; Peck & Tickell, 2002; Peck & Theodore, 2012)	Financial crises; history of institutional architecture; relationship between the state and private sector.	An uneven implementation of neoliberal ideas through public policy, subject to nationally specific institutional architecture.
Historical	Economic History; Economic Sociology (e.g. Mirowski, 2009a, 2013; Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009; Gane, 2009)	‘Blueprint’ documents of early neoliberal organisations; the ‘neoliberal thought collective’ (NTC).	A re-conceptualisation of the market as an epistemic position, spread through a network of pro-neoliberal organisations. Directional rather than destinational policy agenda.
Foucauldian	Cultural studies; Sociology (e.g. Foucault, 1979/2008; Rottenberg, 2017)	Discourses in the neoliberal era; ‘technologies of the self’; politics of emotion.	A rationality that takes the human subject (‘human capital’) as the key site of neoliberal reproduction.

Chapter Two: Denialist and Materialist Neoliberalism

Each account of neoliberalism is an ‘ideal type’ category. This is, in the Weberian sense, an acknowledgement that the study of neoliberalism relies on focusing in on certain features of action for analytical purposes. The ideal type construction and presentation of these modes of understanding are not meant to reflect empirical reality so much as to abstract from them. Ultimately this allows us to read specific cases in terms of how far they deviate from the ideal type (Coser, 1984: 1444). I am arguing here that the study of neoliberalism relies in different instances on four idea-constructs, which mark differences in broad definition, methodology, and the extent to which the approach in question engages elements of the other approaches.

These approaches are not exclusive from one another, nor do they constitute an unmoving set of rules. Academic work which largely fits the classical approach, for instance, will often evoke definitional or methodological fixtures of the institutional approach (e.g. Jessop, 2016 and Harvey, 2005). It is worth noting here that many of the authors that I ascribe to certain ideal-type positions might not self-identify within these traditions. As discussed below, neoliberalism is a diverse object of academic study, and this diversity and breadth is one quality which is used deny its legitimacy.

Undertaking a review of the whole literature would be a mammoth task. Moreover, this would run the risk of oversimplifying a proportion of the literature’s finer arguments, and to potentially ignore others (Dunn, 2017: 436-437). Instead, I have substituted formal selection criteria for a typological method, with the caveat that claiming distinct approaches to and understandings of neoliberalism is not a controversial one (Cahill & Konings, 2017) and that these approaches exist in various overlapping forms across some thirty years of study on neoliberalism.

Neoliberal Denialism

Denying the credibility of neoliberalism as a concept is not uncommon in popular as well as academic accounts of contemporary ideology (e.g. Barnett, 2005; Weller & O'Neill, 2014). Often, neoliberal denialism is not denying that neoliberalism, or some overarching capitalist epoch exists, but that it ought, in a variety of ways, be denied academic legitimacy. There is a significant body of work explicitly or implicitly critiquing the use, understanding of and academic investment in, neoliberalism. These claims are recursive and indeed neoliberalism is referred to in this manner so regularly that I will employ quotation marks when assessing claims which put forward an understanding of neoliberalism as lacking the qualities necessary for academic legitimacy: 'neoliberalism'. The quotation marks reflect the suggestion of a narrative which, if not fictional, is to some degree a construction of imagination rather than empirical research.

Neoliberal denialism has a productive life of its own, as do all iterative descriptions (Ahmed, 2010: 43). In this case, the scale of criticism directed at 'neoliberalism' as an object of study results in the term further losing clarity. 'Neoliberalism' is considered an invention or fabrication, absent finite, measurable characteristics, or a construction of social scientists who do not understand economic modelling (Brennetot, 2014; Venugopal, 2015: 182). More precisely, I have noted several strands of neoliberal denialism which stem from two core objections:

1. 'Neoliberalism' refers to too much:
 - a. 'Neoliberalism' exaggerates the novelty of contemporary political, economic and social conditions.
 - b. 'Neoliberalism' does not sufficiently emphasise material transformation and class power, instead it is too readily applied to vast examples of cultural production.

2. ‘Neoliberalism’ is limited by its common use as a [leftist] pejorative:
 - a. ‘Neoliberalism’ is a term used primarily by leftist *elites* rather than in ‘authentic’ social movements.

The reoccurrence of these claims makes neoliberal denialism ‘something of a genre in its own right’ (Springer, 2014: 155). We should understand these strands as denialist claims about the content of ‘neoliberalism’ as a signifier (1, 1a, 1b) and how it is deployed (2, 2a). I accept the claim that:

There is no contemporary body of knowledge that calls itself neoliberalism, no self-described neoliberal theorists that elaborate it, nor policy-makers or practitioners that implement it. There are no primers or advanced textbooks on the subject matter, no pedagogues, courses or students of neoliberalism, no policies or election manifestoes that promise to implement it
(Venugopal, 2015: 179)

However, I reject some of the subsequent recommendations, including abandoning or substituting the use of the term (Gibson-Graham, 1996), and/or demanding a singular definition to the exclusion of others (Barnett, 2005: 7-8).

Neoliberalism is rarely mentioned in Incel spaces, but there are countless claims made about contemporary ideology suffusing government policy and popular culture. ‘Feminism’ is the most common signifier of this ideological form and is always referred to in a desultory way. My analysis of neoliberal denialism then, speaks to the *possibility* that the object of hate in Incel spaces *could* be construed as a hatred of specific neoliberal processes and ideas, especially those which address gender and gender relations. I am also interested in the focus within these criticisms on feminism’s theoretical embrace of ‘postmodernism,’ ‘critical race theory’ and in the broadest sense ‘social construction’. Within Incel spaces, this association is considered

particularly egregious, as it undermines the authority of scientific, objective verification and explanations for social events and processes.

Neoliberalism Refers to Too Much

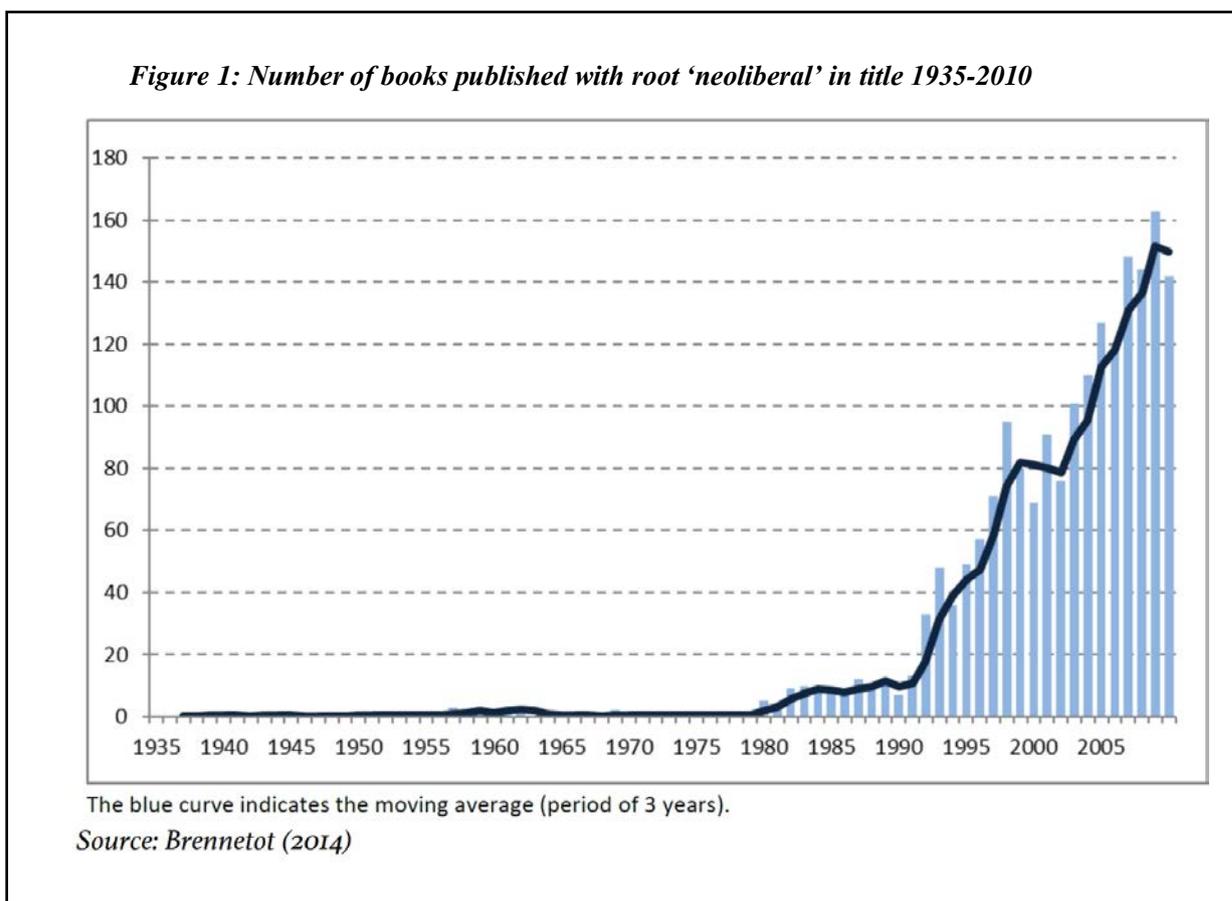
The ubiquity of ‘neoliberalism’ is often problematised by (1) this very ubiquity (repetition dilutes meaning), and (2) the paradoxical absence of self-identifying neoliberal actors¹². The lack of self-identifying neoliberal actors is not a wholly new phenomenon. Few organisations historically identified as ‘Keynesian’, ‘Classically Liberal’ and so on, although there was a greater consensus in defining these models.

The broad contention that ‘neoliberalism’ refers to too much is the umbrella claim that couches two adjacent manoeuvres: that ‘neoliberalism’ exaggerates the novelty of contemporary political, economic and social relations, and that the way in which ‘neoliberalism’ is understood and used as an academic term does not pay sufficient attention to the dynamics of class power. That neoliberalism has come to signify so much across so many academic fields is then critiqued as misplaced. Claims of ‘neoliberal’ novelty, and overuse, are therefore often concurrent (e.g. Weller & O’Neill, 2014: 165-166)

The popularity of neoliberalism as an object of analysis is partially illustrated by the sheer number of books published about it (see Fig. 1) and the diversity of sites and/or practices in which neoliberalism is supposed to have a key influence or intervene. This includes but is not limited to: reality television (Couldry, 2008); pole-dancing (Donaghue et al, 2011); football (Dubal, 2010); music (Reynolds & Press, 1995); higher education (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000); international labour flows (Elias & Louth, 2016); feminisation of the banking sector (Brassett

¹² There are exceptions to this in online spaces (e.g. Adam Smith Institute’s (ASI) Twitter profile).

& Rethel, 2015) and the way in which anti-capitalist activism operates and understands social realities (Roberts, 2014).



The diversity and breadth of how neoliberalism is used is regularly cited as de facto evidence of its intellectual weakness:

Social science cannot be precise and many concepts are contested, but here the diversity of usage is particularly great with as yet little indication even of any movement towards establishing means of adjudicating between rival interpretations.
(Dunn, 2017: 436)

The denial can and does go further, to speculate on the efficacy of present and future research into neoliberalism. According to this kind of account, the likelihood of neoliberalism becoming a useful academic term – if it ever was – is stymied by this massive dexterity. It is already ‘too late’ for ‘neoliberalism’ (Laidlaw, 2015: 912).

1a. Exaggerated Novelty

Denialist claims occur in positive accounts of neoliberalism, especially in the institutional tradition. A useful illustration of this is the discussion between Hall (1984; 1985) and Jessop et al (1984; 1985) over the ideological underpinnings of the Thatcher governments, and the broader role that specific discourses have in constructing the conditions for neoliberal governance.

Jessop et al (1984) critique Hall's (1984) article on the basis that Hall does not sufficiently recognise that neoliberalism is not the project of any specific government agenda or political collective, and that it does not mark a clear break from a socio-economic consensus on the Keynesian compromise. Though the two arguments are different in their emphasis, they are often articulated together:

The post-war consensus around the KWS [Keynesian Welfare State] was limited by the post-war consensus on Atlanticist foreign policy and City financial policy and was conducted not under the hegemony of the Labour Party and/or the working class, nor even of the industrial bourgeoisie, but under the dominance of financial capital. This must qualify any argument that there has been a radical break between a social democratic era and the present Thatcherite ascendancy.

(Jessop et al, 1984)

Outside of a much longer series of transformations in the financial sector, the only novelty in the 'neoliberal period' that Jessop et al allow for is internal schism within the Conservative Party, and a tentative 'Two Nations' political strategy.

Jessop et al's framing of Hall's (1984) piece as overstressing in its account of the ideological content of neoliberalism is emblematic of much of the work done on neoliberalism¹³. According to Jessop et al (1984) and similar subsequent accounts (e.g. Dunn, 2017; Eriksen et al, 2015; Venugopal, 2015), the understanding of neoliberalism used by Hall

¹³ Often interpreting the multiple 'points of entry' for neoliberal rationality as evidence that writers continue to use the term loosely, or as a synonym for 'capitalism' (Eriksen et al, 2015).

(1984; 1985) and other accounts which emphasise the integral role of discourse (e.g. Brown, 2003; Dean, 2008; Springer, 2014; Scharff, 2016), forget or do not sufficiently stress that all capitalist epochs utilize discursive strategies to subdue labour and acquire democratic legitimacy.

Where Hall and similar accounts are particularly useful to my project however is precisely in their recognition that neoliberal discourses are often pointedly contradictory, both with one another and with the kind of policy pursued by neoliberal governments. These contradictions are keenly felt and elaborated upon in Incel spaces. For example, the popularity of ‘self-improvement’ and ‘wellness’ discourses across popular culture is perceived to contradict the structural impediments to wellness experienced by Incels.

Whether this dynamic of discursive contradiction is exclusive to the neoliberal era is beside the point when judging both the credibility of neoliberalism, and for exploring a community which is obsessed with tracing the hypocrisy (and contradiction) of contemporary gender relations. Hall’s example of the Thatcher government as ‘Simultaneously, dismantling the welfare state, ‘anti-statist’ in its ideological self-representation and highly state-centralist and dirigiste in many of its strategic operations’ (Hall, 1985) does not minimise the decisive role that the ‘economic nucleus’ (ibid.) and organisation of capital and its owners play in neoliberal ascendancy: ‘the practice of neoliberal statecraft is inescapably, and profoundly, marked by compromise, calculation, and contradiction. There is no blueprint. There is not even a map’ (Peck, 2010: 106).

1b. The Obfuscation of Class

The second motif of neoliberal denialism is that the exaggerated novelty of ‘neoliberalism’ distracts from the class struggle it [should] represent. This claim is again implied in several positive accounts of neoliberalism, particularly in the Classic and Institutional tradition (e.g.

Harvey, 2005; 2014; Streeck, 2014). The Classic approach centers class in its definition of ‘a political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites’ (Harvey, 2005: 19). Though this and similar neo-Marxist accounts (see also Dunn, 2017; Duménil and Lévy, 2011) do not deny the significance of discourse in consent-building, it is most commonly through the lens of the traditional Marxist belief that ‘the class which is the ruling material force in society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force’ (Marx, 1846). Ideology is understood as epiphenomenal, or in Marxist parlance, of the superstructure:

Powerful ideological influences circulated through the corporations, the media, and the numerous institutions that constitute civil society – such as the universities, schools, churches, and professional associations. The ‘long march’ through these institutions... the capture of certain segments of the media, and the conversion of many intellectuals to neoliberal ways of thinking, created a climate of opinion in support of neoliberalism as the exclusive guarantor of freedom. These movements were later consolidated through the capture of political parties and, ultimately, state power.
(Harvey 2005: 40)

This is strikingly reminiscent of the Incel vision of a world dominated by women, who have ‘gamed’ contemporary ideology to their benefit, but who in the final instance rely on a material reality of scarcity to embed their power.

This is most pronounced in criticism of Foucauldian approaches to neoliberalism. As Leggett (2017: 136-137) notes, the Foucauldian tradition is not typically interested in neoliberalism as a phenomenon existing in a context of capitalism. Instead, its interventions are nearly always into the permanent power-knowledge nexus, offering genealogical accounts that highlight governance structures which circumscribe seen and unseen knowledge, and the police function of the state and/or self over human populations. Neo-Marxist theories (e.g. Harvey, 2005: 9-11) are reliant on an understanding of power at odds with Foucault’s¹⁴, which

¹⁴ E.g. Mitchell Dean’s (2010) work on assemblage and practices of liberty.

see power as always already there, and not wielded in linear fashion by one over another. Foucauldian approaches are also interested in the *productive* dimension of power, and how certain subjectivities can emerge from this nexus. As we will see this makes it a potentially rewarding analytic approach for my study of Incel.

Neoliberalism has the capacity therefore to absorb its own contradictions by virtue of its own lack of systemic pattern and can be usefully examined outside of the context of capitalism. This is only at odds with the most rigid Marxist reading of global economy, and most Institutional and Classic accounts acknowledge that ‘There is no ‘pure’ anything, but admitting to this is not the same as saying something does not exist’ (Springer, 2014: 157). More commonly these Foucauldian analyses are denied or delegitimised via an association with a poststructuralist turn in academia (Haider, 2018). This denial extends the claim that ‘neoliberalism’ refers to too much to its deployment as a performative announcement of political orientation:

Initially that sounds intriguing, until you notice that the idea of a self-negating force is not only logically confused but also empirically quite un-falsifiable: a handy tool for attributing a virtually unlimited range of bad states of affairs in the world to the same undefined cause. Cognitively empty, it has the merely rhetorical function of signalling the author's political affiliation and moral disapproval of any unhappy situation whatsoever, and of implying that the latter vindicates the former.
(Laidlaw, 2015: 913)

‘Neoliberalism’ as a Pejorative Used by Elites

Neoliberalism is also denied on the basis that it is nearly always deployed critically, and that it denotes the speaker’s political orientation rather than describing a credible socio-political model. While there is no homogeneous political affiliation among Incels, there is a regular distaste expressed towards left-wing politics because of its association with feminist thinking.

Ubiquitous in the social sciences, ‘neoliberalism’ had become ‘By the early 1990s... elevated to an epochal phenomenon and [is] often used as loose shorthand for a prevailing dystopian zeitgeist’ (Venugopal, 2015: 167-168). Denialist accounts claim that ‘it is a term of the political left; but also particularly of left elites, used much more widely in academic discourse than within social movements themselves’ (Dunn, 2017: 442). There is some irony in the number of high standing academics making this kind of claim (see Harman, 2007; Venugopal, 2015; Dunn, 2017), but accusations of elitism and performativity (‘virtue signalling’ in online parlance) are inarguably part of a long debate over the strategic approach of leftist politics (Springer, 2010; Mason, 2017)¹⁵.

The denialist interpretation of ‘neoliberalism’ as the remit of leftist elites minimises the work, academic and popular, built upon Jameson’s claim that ‘it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism’ (Jameson, 1991; see also Butler, 2009). It also affirms the claim made not only in Incel spaces but across the alt-right and alt-right adjacent online ecosystem that ‘post-structural neo-Marxist feminism’ (Peterson, 2018) occupies a dominant position in academia, popular culture and juridical/political institutions. In the most popular descriptions of this dominance there is often a gross misunderstanding of Foucault as a post-structuralist (Haider, 2018), and concurrently a misunderstanding of social science methodologies as ‘reality denying’ (Kiersey, 2016). While likely unintentional, some Classical and Institutional accounts which repeat a dismissal of ‘neoliberalism’ as too interested in discursive power (as opposed to historical materialism), enforce this alt-right talking point.

¹⁵ To what extent opposition to neoliberalism is synonymous with, or a reformist retreat away from, anti-capitalism, came to the fore in the aftermath of the 1999 ‘Battle for Seattle’ (the large protest at the World Trade Organisation summit), although the debate over reformism has characterised much inter-Marxist work in the preceding century (Mitchell, 2013). In contemporary terms, ‘we might legitimately ask whether the evils being criticised are specifically neoliberal or more generally capitalist ones’ (Dunn, 2017: 449), as well as whether neoliberalism refers to a distinct capitalist period and the foreclosure of anti-capitalist politics more generally (Brown, 2015).

The characterisation of ‘neoliberalism’ as primarily a performative staking of political identity paradoxically understands the term as an example of elitist academic jargon, *and* as meaningless due to its ubiquity. If ‘neoliberalism’ is a marker of *academic* self-promotion or political orientation, then how does this differ from writing critically about capitalism? Or, if it is in fact a *popular* marker of left-leaning politics (or ‘wokeness’) how does this dilute its coherence? These questions are rarely posed let alone answered in denialist accounts.

Materialist Neoliberalism No.1: The Classic Account

In academic and popular texts alike, the classic account is regularly evoked (e.g. Iber, 2018; Rodrik, 2017; McDonnell, 2016). This is presumably influenced by its relative formality, which uses a Marxist reading of ideological superstructure and class-relations to present neoliberalism as a technologically updated return to laissez-faire capitalism (Lapavitsas, 2013: 26-28). Ambiguity regarding the precise relationship between neoliberalism and capitalism, outlined above, is resolved by a Marxist or neo-Marxist emphasis on changes in macroeconomic policy within a broader narrative of capitalist accumulation (Bruff, 2014: 113). The most indicative texts in the classic tradition are those of Harvey (2003; 2005; 2005a), Chang (2002), Duménil and Lévy (2011), and Quiggin (2010¹⁶). The classic account’s emphasis on class, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a minority group and quantitative measures of inequality are in various ways replicated in the Incel worldview, most obviously through the construction of a social hierarchy based on inherited, immutable and transferable capitals (see Chapter Six).

¹⁶ Quiggin (2010) refers to ‘market liberalism’ rather than neoliberalism.

The Classic Definition of Neoliberalism

The classic approach defines neoliberalism as a series of phenomena, on a global scale, which while not explicitly coordinated are organised in support of elite economic interests and prompted by a crisis in the rate of profit. This includes: a shift away from the post-war ‘Keynesian compromise’ in the direction of laissez-faire capitalism¹⁷, the mushrooming of financial services (referred to as financialisation) and an agenda of depoliticisation in which economic questions are removed from the political arena. These policies prioritise: liberalising of trade; privatising public services; deregulation of finance and business; shrinking of big government; reducing corporate tax rates; encouraging foreign investment; marginalising union power; expanding exports; reducing inflation and enforcing property rights (Sparke, 2018: 455).

A Return to Laissez-Faire

The classic approach acknowledges that the state (as opposed to specific political parties) is heavily involved in creating the legal-judicial conditions for neoliberalism (Iber, 2018), although the extent to which neoliberalism relies on the state or a governing party is less likely to be stressed. Instead, neoliberalism itself is considered a kind of agent or force with its own direction, independent of any political party or government, while still powerful enough to shape policy:

The primary role of the state is to provide an institutional framework for markets, establishing rights of property and contract, for example, and creating markets in domains where they may not have existed previously. Neoliberalism thus accords to the state an active role in securing markets, in producing the subjects of and conditions for markets, although it does not think the state should—at least ideally – intervene in the activities of markets.

(Dean, 2008: 49)

¹⁷ This compromise is understood as a balance between free-trade and open markets, with the state taking a significant role in the redistribution of resources via a national welfare system, progressive taxation and the promotion of full employment as a core political objective (Gáspár et al, 2003: 590).

This is interpreted in at least two ways. First the classic approach acknowledges the reality of uneven development through neoliberalization (neoliberalism as a series of processes), in a similar way to the institutional approach. This unevenness can manifest inter- and intra- nationally (Chang, 2003: 10-12). Similarly, my case study demonstrates an awareness that ‘hegemonic feminism’ manifests differently in different parts of the world¹⁸. However, this variation is less likely to be explained by an historical, institutional architecture, and more likely to be due to an understanding of neoliberalism as a vessel for the re-assertion of elite economic interests played out on a national or international scale (Crouch, 2004). Second, the state is considered restored, via economic crisis, to a guarantor of the ruling classes’ interests. The ‘Keynesian compromise’, according to this logic, was always unsustainable to the extent that it could not hold during cyclical capitalist crisis (McGimpsey, 2017: 66-67).

A series of economic crises in the 1970s, and the rise of popular political ideas of the political right (e.g. Thatcherism), degraded the political elite to a[nother] tool for elite economic interests (Jessop et al, 1984). This is a key explanatory device used in the classic approach, but emphasis is typically placed on the latter (economic interests) over the ideological messages of neoliberalism: ‘Although it is true that neoliberalism conveys an ideology and a propaganda of its own, it is fundamentally a *new social order* in which the power and income of the upper fractions of the ruling classes – the wealthiest persons – was re-established in the wake of a setback’ (Duménil & Lévy, 2005: 9).

Neoliberal Financialisation

Financialisation is considered the quintessential neoliberal industry (see Harvey, 2005: 24; Lapavistas, 2013: 2-4), epitomising how neoliberalism operates both within and without the

¹⁸ This hegemonic status is considered almost universally true. The only exceptions are ‘un-cucked’ (see Glossary in Appendix 1) areas of extreme patriarchy and/or theocracy.

state. The state and banking sector coordinate in embedding the process: ‘the emblematic year [for neoliberalism] is certainly 1979, when the Federal Reserve decided to suddenly increase interest rates. This is what we call the *1979 coup*’ (Duménil & Lévy, 2005: 10). While financial services and its effects are seldom discussed in Incel spaces, there is an obsessive desire to place numerical value on everything, from specific parts of the body to models of thinking and references to IQ.

Financialisation qualifies the ‘neo’ in neoliberalism, turning away from a ‘tamed’ capitalism to an increasingly de-territorialised and highly mobile one: “There was undoubtedly a power shift away from production to the world of finance... In a conflict between Main Street and Wall Street, the latter was to be favoured.” (Harvey, 2005: 33). There is some overlap here with the Incel lament that the tragedy of ‘today’¹⁹ lies in the deterritorialisation of intimacy via technological advance in communications, the rise of social media and ‘swipe left’ type dating apps. Whether the processes of financialisation were initiated before the crises of the late 1970s is a matter of dispute within classic accounts (see Davies, 2015: 52-53) but there is broad consensus on its impact: an enlarged capacity for banking practices of credit provision while average wages stagnated, and the effective, informal privatisation of central banks (Duménil & Lévy, 2005: 13).

Elitism and Class Power

In contrast to the institutional approach, the classic approach posits an overarching elitism, *by design*, as a universal characteristic of neoliberalism. This is often referred to as the ‘capture’ of the state by the ruling class (Harvey, 2005: 40). While writers in this tradition are not conspiracy theorists, the basic framing of a somewhat shadowy cabal of empowered actors

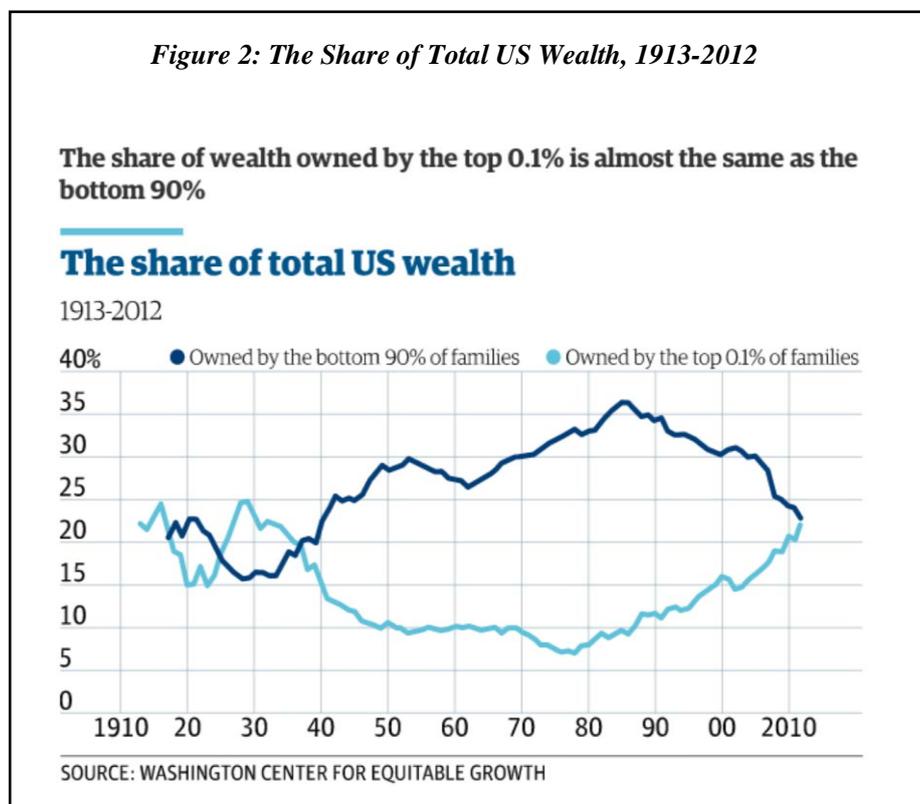
¹⁹ While demographic data on the Incel community is scarce and lacking in rigour, my observations suggest that the typical user is of an age which puts their year of birth between the late 1980s and the early 2000s, roughly corresponding with the electoral success of neoliberal governments.

directing business, policy and culture (e.g. Crouch, 2017: 23-26) is extremely common in Incel spaces. The state's role in adjusting monetary policy and deregulating financial centres, as well as international governance structures is interpreted as evidence of neoliberalism's use of the state apparatus to restore wealth to economic elites (see Fig. 2). This crosses temporal (Venugopal, 2015: 167-168) and spatial dimensions of neoliberalism. Though there remains a 'power of ideas to act as a force for historical-geographical change... the evidence suggests, moreover that when neoliberal principles clash with the need to restore or sustain elite power, then the principles are either abandoned or become so twisted as to be unrecognizable' (Harvey, 2005: 19).

The restoration of elite wealth marks the 'return' to pre-Keynesian levels of [in]equality in core neoliberal countries (see Fig. 2). The assault on wages, mediated by increased credit provision and housing market bubbles, is then abetted by attacks on 'trade unions and other forms of collective solidarity' (Foster, *J* 2016: 100; see also Flew, 2014: 57; Harvey, 2005: 85-86), as well as stricter management – though funding cuts in real terms have been uneven (Glynn, 2006) – of welfare through programmes like work fare, benefit freezes and forms of means-testing (McGimpsey, 2017: 67).

The role of elitism, and indeed of natural inequalities, is a fraught topic within Incel spaces. While crude applications of the Pareto Principle are used to demonstrate how inequality in access to sexual partners has increased exponentially, the belief in market outcomes as an objective measure of value appears to be more deeply held. Therefore, it is not so much the existence of elites which Incels criticise, but rather the constitution of those elites (i.e. feminists and other progressives). The classic approach understands these processes as reflective of neoliberalism's drive towards competition and as an effort towards concentrating wealth in elite groups, but not so much as a product of any agential exercise. As in the institutional account, the *systemic necessity* for capitalist reproduction supersedes any ideological mantra

(ibid. p64), which contrasts markedly with the Incel preoccupation with culture and policy alike as being driven by choices made by elite feminists.



Neoliberal Globalisation

Whether globalisation is understood as simply the internationalisation of neoliberalism, or as holding its own independent logic, varies. While ‘Neoliberalism arrived with globalization or else globalization arrived with neoliberalism’ (Streeck, 2017), it is also made clear that the impact of neoliberalism and globalisation is uneven, and that the more extreme fostering of competition and spreading of markets was imposed fiercely in comparatively economically weak nation states: ‘For the US ruling class, neoliberalism—in the sense of letting the market rip apart established capitals—is something to be imposed on weaker national capitalisms to the benefit of US capital, not something to be allowed to happen without restriction in the US itself’ (Harman, 2007). The processes most closely tied to neoliberalism are tied to globalised

trade and financial services, which has led some commentators to use the terms as synonymous (Sparke, 2018: 455).

The trend towards privatisation and the expansion of markets is global (United Nations Commission on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) 2007). Neoliberalism is interpreted as a neo-imperialist venture, in which the HQ of the world's largest MNCs and financial service providers remain in the West (Harvey, 2005: 9) while financial capital is extracted from developing countries (Chang, 2002: 102). There is an extremely interesting correlation here with a fierce debate within the Incel community regarding the long-term impact of historic and contemporary imperialism, specifically over the accuracy of 'Just Be White' (JBW) theory, which argues that one such impact is the establishment of beauty standards which champion whiteness. Additionally, I observed on several occasions references to the spread of corruptive 'Western degeneracy' (considered synonymous with feminism) across the world, including countries in the Global South.

Neoliberalism occurs in a moderated way in core countries, and in a more aggressive or punitive manner on the periphery (Duménil & Lévy, 2005: 10). This aligns with a Marxist view of the relationship between capitalism and imperialism (ibid. p9-10), as well as [Marxist] analyses of democracy under neoliberal conditions (Burnham, 2001). In both cases, the core nations serve as an exporter of governance norms which allow for the continued reproduction of a specific capitalist regime. In a similar way, Incel proponents of JBW argue that Western culture forcibly export beauty standards which favour those women (and few men) who live in the Global North. The circulation of capital via globalisation processes therefore becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as international rules and/or guidelines ensure governments act in the interests of capital, since if a business disagrees with a country's policies (e.g. a hike in corporation tax) they can disrupt that country in multiple ways by abruptly relocating (Iber, 2018). This aspect is not immediately observable in Incel spaces.

Depoliticising Effects

Finally, the classic approach claims that the political strategies of neoliberal policy have a series of depoliticising effects. While not mentioning depoliticisation by name, Incel concerns with how their suffering is not permitted for discussion outside of their online spaces, offers a parallel of sorts.

Depoliticisation occurs in the context of neoliberalism spreading outside of its core states and so operating supra-nationally: ‘the global hegemony of the combination of neoliberalism and liberal democracy is largely due to the convergence found in their liberal component: depoliticization and de-democratization, not popular participation, have been its leitmotif’ (Vázquez-Arroyo, 2008: 128). That leitmotif is pursued by political choice; the classical approach sees neoliberalism as selective political calculation to consistently make sure that, when posed with a choice between making capitalism seem the only possible economic system, or making capitalism a more viable economic system, the decision is always the former (Hay, 2014: 306-307)²⁰. Similarly, the Incel worldview stresses that it is in the interests of the powerful to take questions of [sexual] inequality off the table. In the classic account, neoliberalism produces depoliticised regimes insofar as it is a pragmatic solution to the threat that democracy poses for the restoration of elite power.

Summary of Classic Approach

Neoliberalism is understood as a shift or return from a consensus of Keynesian management and welfarism, towards a ‘classically liberal’ economy with a reduction in government intervention, and a rolling back of state involvement more generally. To the extent that the state and political party is important in pushing this agenda forward, the classic approach maintains

²⁰ This includes decisions which predict a reduction of future state capacity to steer economic policy, a dynamic stressed more in institutional accounts (Burnham, 2001: 127).

that neoliberalism – a technologically updated mode of capitalism – has a power beyond any particular government or state apparatus, and instead is accurately understood as a [re]imposition of historical class interests. In this sense, the classic approach reproduces a denialist claim that there is little novel to neoliberalism other than the particulars of its time and space with which to distinguish it from previous capitalist iterations. This is underlined in the temporal dimensions given to the neoliberal project, which do not go far before the ascent of neoliberal governments in the late 1970s. The primacy of class interests in defining neoliberalism extends to its spatial understanding of global[isation] [and] neoliberalism, which shares a Marxist reading of international relations and imperialism.

As the most common account of neoliberalism in the literature, it is especially important to consider the overlap between this definition of neoliberalism and how it pertains to the Incel worldview. Incel sites do not often discuss the finer points of what constitutes neoliberalism as opposed to liberalism, capitalism, social democracy etc. What Incel sites do indicate is a strong sense that some of the key definitional points of the classic account (especially the restoration and protection of elite power) are mirrored in their construction of a hegemonic feminism. Substitute neoliberalism for hegemonic feminism, alter some of the processes (e.g. financialisation for the rise of dating apps; depoliticisation of redistributive economic policy for political correctness in popular conversations about gender relations) and you can observe a resemblance between academic writing on neoliberalism, and anonymous Incel writing on hegemonic feminism.

Moving forward with this project I expect that similar incidents of convergence will occur with each account of neoliberalism. These convergences are noteworthy on their own merit, although they lead to several other questions: is the Incel worldview an attack on neoliberal processes and ideas? Or, do Incel spaces in fact reproduce neoliberal ideas, even as they lament their own position in the neoliberal era as the ‘losers’, the mass of people outside

of the elite bracket? As I continue to examine the entanglement of Incel and neoliberalism I expect there will be examples of both. There is however a limit to the usefulness of drawing these parallels in this way, and of course my request to substitute processes undermines my inference that the Incel worldview can be evaluated as a neoliberal phenomenon. At the end of Part One I will focus specifically on what neoliberalism has to say about gender, in order to press in more detail the ways in which Incels reject, endorse and otherwise engage with neoliberal ideas.

Materialist Neoliberalism No. 2: The Institutional Account

Academics writing in the institutional²¹ tradition typically reject framings of neoliberalism that ascribe essential qualities outside of the specific time and place in which its ideas are being implemented. They consider capital-labour dynamics as the primary driver of neoliberalism (Jessop, 2013: 68), sharing with classic accounts a Marxist understanding of economic crises as historic vessels for a restructuring of capitalist relations to restore the rate of profit for private interests (Harvey, 2011: 9; Jessop, 2011; Jessop, 2014: 352-353). Institutional accounts often repeat denialist claims of over-reach by arguing that definitions of neoliberalism need to be limited (to a specific site or time) to avoid becoming an unhelpful academic term (ibid. p65-67). The question of whether ‘neoliberalism’ is an appropriate signifier for these changes occupies many institutional engagements with the term: ‘neoliberalism’ is rarely a ‘given’ but a term which requires at least some qualification (Jessop, 2013; Peck, 2010).

²¹ The institutional approach to the study of neoliberalism differs from institutionalism as it is commonly used in political science, which has a long and diverse literature, although there are several shared concerns. Particularly in the case of ‘new institutionalism’, there is a shared focus on processes of re/de/politicisation that can occur alongside changes in sector-specific institutional arrangements (March & Olsen, 2009). ‘New institutionalism’ includes both [neo] Marxist analyses which focus on systemic power relations between capital and labour, as well as non-Marxist variants on the organisational practices which scaffold institutional culture. In both cases, institutionalism in political science is seldom blind to the influence that political life has on constitution and organisation of institutional life (Lowndes & Roberts, 2013: 1-3).

The institutional approach focuses on the specific contexts in which neoliberalism has become a dominant – though seldom hegemonic – practice of government, and emphasises the *relationships* between the state and market forces, as well as path dependencies which pre-assign systemic practices of the state-private sector relationship (Crouch, 2010; Peck & Theodore, 2012). ‘Neoliberalisation’ describes this process of reconstitution that, though marked by clear temporal phases, is never complete or entirely secure, often manifesting in ‘unstable, mongrel formations’ (Peck, 2013: 145). The political sphere acts as a mediator between economic and social relations, transformed during neoliberalisation. The key texts are often found in political science and anthropological journals, and I will be paying attention to the work of Jessop (2011; 2013), Peck & Tickell (2002) and Peck²² & Theodore (2012).

Institutional Definition of Neoliberalism

The institutional account provides us with a diverse literature analysing in detail the effects that the partial adoption of neoliberal ideas has on different sectors. In this sense institutional analyses are often forensic rather than birds-eye, and while institutional culture is considered an important cog in the processes of neoliberalisation, the focus on specific institutional arrangements is not obviously applicable to Incel concerns regarding broader cultural discourses. Furthermore, the neoliberalism described in institutional accounts – incomplete, fragmented, hybridised – is a far cry from the vision of a dominant, even hegemonic contemporary power referred to in Incel spaces.

Despite these differences the institutional account suggests ways in which I can complicate the depiction of Incel subculture as a purely misogynist and antifeminist

²² The reader will note that the work of Peck is also referenced in my description of the classic account: the ideal types are not meant to be considered as exclusive or as all adhering to the same precise rules of definition.

phenomenon (even if it is often both these things). Institutional analyses offer a logic which stresses the way in which neoliberalism has come to be partially incorporated into all manner of realms, and how the political sphere serves as a mediator between substantial changes in economic relations and the social sphere (Jessop, 2013). Denunciations of specific institutional arrangements (e.g. alimony courts; rape and hate-speech laws; human resource management) are common across the Manosphere, and the institutional account is well-placed to offer a way of assessing how certain themes in my dataset (especially Competition and Other Beliefs, which includes the subject code ‘Politics’) can be interpreted as responses to neoliberalisation.

Neoliberal Crisis

Neoliberalism was spread and continues by ‘failing forward’ (Peck, 2010: 7). In several examples of institutional analyses, economic crises and market failures – and their immediate political ramifications – provide key objects of study and reveal the ways in which neoliberalism is absorbed differently according to the specific institutional architecture of a given environment (Davidson, 2017: 615-616). The changes that result from these crises (policy agendas, regimes of normative governance in specific sectors and institutional cultures) are often shaped by neoliberal principles (Jackson, 2014: 266-267). While the role of the state is significant in embedding these changes, institutional accounts stress that tensions between capital and labour predate the early neoliberal governments, and that principles of neoliberalism began to encroach on institutional architecture as early as the Labour government of 1974-1979, which committed (or capitulated) itself to the remit of finance capitalism (ibid)²³:

²³ This is evidenced by the policymaking agenda of Prime Minister Callaghan (1976), who claimed: ‘We used to think you could spend your way out of a recession and increase employment by cutting taxes and boosting government spending. I can tell you in all candour that that option no longer exists’

...crucial ruptures associated with Thatcherism were actually initiated during the period of so-called social democratic consensus: abandonment of full employment, public expenditure cuts, and privileging the fight against inflation. This suggests that Thatcherism has simply provided an ideological gloss to these tendencies and thereby reinforced them.

(Jessop et al, 1984)

This historical narrative matches with that found in many Incel spaces as an inverted, funhouse-mirror type replication of the slow ascendancy of feminist neo-Marxism. Here, an ‘enemy within’ succeeded by slowly marching through the institutions²⁴ from the 1960s onwards to impute its ideas on institutional and popular culture, femininisation of the workforce and political mediation of its consequences. There is no clean break from the Keynesian compromise in institutional accounts: the policies, practices and institutions of the Keynesian era ceased to avoid a falling rate of profit, and to secure a disciplined labour market, leading to capitalist restructuring, occurring differently in different parts of the global economy (ibid). This crisis, which took on specific guises depending on the sector, produced neoliberalism²⁵.

Early neoliberal governments were unable to keep mediating the inevitable market failures and so cohesion of market society (Jessop, 2013: 72). And yet, new [neoliberal] institutional arrangements were maintained by state subsidies, underwriting and executive involvement in the form of public-private partnerships (PPPs), and the funnelling of private finance investments (PFIs) into public utilities and building projects. The failure of electoral coalitions formed by the Thatcher and Reagan administrations were also formed anew – in the interests of capital, according to the typical institutional account (ibid. p73) – by the return of social democratic parties under new, ‘modernising’ leadership (i.e. Blair and Clinton).

²⁴ The Gramscian reference is made explicitly in my data, and I observed several examples of posts referencing other writers from a variety of disciplines (e.g. Kimberle Crenshaw, Julius Evola, Jordan Peterson and Nick Land).

²⁵ Rather than, say, theoretical blueprints set out by the Mont Pelerin Society, as is the case in the historical tradition.

Incomplete Neoliberalisation

The resolution of labour/capital crises introduces new codes of institutional conduct which are then constantly in a state of re-negotiation. For institutional writers this is a condition of capitalist political economy rather than exclusive to the neoliberal era, and as true during the KWS²⁶ – maintained until its tensions could no longer be adequately resolved – as after it. Neoliberalism does not proceed in a linear fashion and is characterised by a moving, diverse series of such negotiations:

...complex, unevenly developing spatialities that are deeply constitutive rather than merely contingent aspects of the project of state-authorized market transformation. They reject both one-sided emphasis on the essential structural coherence of actually existing neoliberalism and one-sided insistence on the essential heterogeneity of its multiple instantiations.

(Jessop, 2013: 68)

Neoliberalism is used as an umbrella term for a diversity of institutional practices which became more common during and after the failure of the KWS. What neoliberalism ‘is’, is a constant hybridisation of contexts, historical norms of governance and contested²⁷ changes thereof. In this sense institutional analyses are less likely to refer to neoliberalism as anything like ‘laissez-faire’ economics, and observes an antagonistic relationship between and within new formations of [contested] market rule existing alongside and sometimes antagonistically with one another (Peck, Theodore & Brenner, 2012: 266).

Institutional accounts stress the ‘complex and variegated ways that economic activity is actually governed ... [which] is both a source and a consequence of considerable political debate about the appropriate governance of various economic activities and sectors’ (Nelson

²⁶ Institutional accounts reject claims that the KWS was the product of an empowered socialist or social democratic electoral support, arguing that this erroneously accepts New Right narratives. Instead, the KWS was the product of negotiations between labour and capital.

²⁷ This is in sharp contrast to classic accounts account such as Hall & Jacques’ (1989), which depicts neoliberalism as hegemonic in cultural, political and economic arenas.

2011: 1). It can be difficult to assess how neoliberalism is distinct from any other capitalist iteration. What binds these diverse governing strategies however are patterns of logic operating in favour of capital security and workforce discipline²⁸. Focus on the path-dependency prompted by broader policymaking agendas, such as austerity and financial crisis management, are another means of assessing the extent to which neoliberal ideas have shaped institutional architecture (Jessop, 2016: 418-419; Olssen & Peters, 2005). This is not entirely removed from Incel depictions of private and particularly state institutions as guided by a specific logic (e.g. the promotion of women's rights and autonomy) with no recourse to its externalities (e.g. themselves). In the most extreme cases, many Incels resort back to agential explanations for these institutional changes, i.e. the elites who manage these institutions are at best weak, 'Blue Pilled' men, or at worst man-hating feminists.

While the institutional account focuses on the contested nature of neoliberalisation, most writers in this tradition conclude that substantial changes have been made. 'Workfare' policies have been examined in a context of policy mobility and path dependency, as the neoliberal valorisation of flexible workforces extends into the welfare system and secures, through the link between readiness to work and payment, a new institutional framework for labour policies (MacLeavy, 2011). Neoliberalism is a partial incorporation into institutional culture, and institutional accounts emphasise the co-constitutive effects of knowledge production in the field in question, particularly in science and innovation (Tyfield, 2016: 340-241). Though Incels describe feminism as 'dominant' in contemporary capitalism, they also describe partial incorporation and manipulation of existing frameworks by a feminist 'agenda'. Much in the same way, institutional analyses observe developments in sectors/fields/disciplines are considered *co*-produced with neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is *not*

²⁸ This can be in sector-based institutional practices, for example changes in higher education funding and the relationship between business schools and the private sector which set in motion a domino effect of pressures on universities (Birch, 2017).

a given and structured context for knowledge production, but always relational and co-produced alongside institutional developments.

Political Sphere as Mediator

While changes in global capital flows are the key catalyst for neoliberal processes, the state has an integral role in the installation²⁹ of neoliberal patterns and in resolving any disruption that this results in: ‘neoliberalism does not assume that conduct automatically takes on an entrepreneurial form; instead, neoliberal regimes develop institutional practices for enacting this vision’ (Scharff, 2016: 109). Writers in this tradition warn against accepting uncritically any political rhetoric – either in adherence or opposition to the state’s role – as not only does this not always reflect the authentic interests of the political classes, but also because the message emitted is often distinct from the message received (Jessop et al, 1984).

Neoliberal governments resolve ensuing social conflict by forming temporary electoral constituencies into broad – if temporary – coalitions capable of sustaining a normative framework for governance (Hackworth, 2019: 55). Though the institutional account does not focus on political *leadership* as such, the wider political sphere is read as a forum for mediating between economic and social relations which secures the interests of capital. This includes how political actors react to moments of crisis, in which ‘path-dependent effects are political and ideological as well as economic’ (Jessop, 2013: 72).

With some notable recent exceptions, Incel communities demonstrate an intensely distrustful and negative attitude to mainstream politics and political process, which are considered useless and in behest to its most powerful constituent: women and their orbiters.

²⁹ The ‘entrepreneurial state’ (Mazzucato, 2018), in which governments guarantee investment in research and development for subsequent use in the private sector, is in this account an example of how political agendas work towards securing the conditions for capital circulation and a disciplined labour source. The ideological messaging of such governments plays a role in securing electoral support rather than necessarily embedding any particular mode of governance.

The political sphere in this vision is also a mediating actor which legislates in favour of women who would otherwise face the cruel realities of a market society. Unattractive men form an entire underclass which has been ignored and exploited by contemporary capitalism and its governments.

The extent to which neoliberal governments can embed neoliberal patterns into institutional pathways varies across the globe. These changes are in final instance secured not by democratic means but by the executive power of technocratic bodies outside of outward-facing pro-neoliberal governments, either in the form of advisory bodies and thinktanks, or international agencies. This is illustrated in the more authoritarian character of Chile's neoliberal takeover (Silva, 1991: 393), where 'For its converts in the global south, neoliberalism assumes the status of the Latinate church in medieval Europe, externally imposing unbending rule regimes enforced by global institutions and policed by local functionaries' (Peck & Tickell, 2002: 381). This is not technocracy in the pre-1968 sense of rigid statism, but a state-led attempt to incentivise and re-structure institutions of the market and of the public sector to promote flexibility (e.g. 'fast policy transfer' – see Harvey, 2005), and in so doing securing the conditions for its own [continued] existence. In the Incel worldview, there is a parallel between the role of advisory bodies and thinktanks in the institutional account of neoliberalism, and the dating advice columns and popular media depictions which valorise 'working on yourself' and the importance of 'being yourself,' which work to embed similar entrepreneurial patterns of thinking in the minds of its viewers.

Summary of the Institutional Approach

To some extent the distinction between definition and method is collapsed in the institutional account. 'What is neoliberalism?', 'How is neoliberalism sustained?', and 'How do we learn about neoliberalism?' are blurred: neoliberalism is a diverse series of processes and cannot be

understood productively as an agenda with a linear trajectory. Neoliberalism can be understood as a contested reassertion of capital over labour, but this reassertion takes different forms in time and space. This is what neoliberalism ‘is’, but it is also what it ‘does’ as well as how we come to know it. The incorporation of neoliberal ideas into different institutional sectors has a *productive* effect in creating new knowledge, which is an especially useful tool to take forward into the analysis of the Incel worldview.

Neoliberal principles (flexibility, accountability, marketized society etc.) can provide an ideological ‘sheen’ to changes demanded by capital’s interests. Third Way governments’ rhetorical commitment to a way out of the ideological binaries of the past (Fairclough, 2000; see also Hall, 2003 on the ‘double shuffle’) is recognised as an example of how the extra-economic serves as a supplementary device to ensure continued capital accumulation (Kiersey, 2016: 166-167). These attempts at collapsing the barriers between public and private, though fleshed out in more detail in affective accounts, are an important context in which Incel can be understood as a reaction to its socio-economic environment. Likewise, the contradictory ‘direction, not destination’ (Peck, 2013) of neoliberalism introduces to my study the notion that neoliberal policy *as well as ideology* can be paradoxical.

Chapter Three: Affective Neoliberalism

There are two other ideal type approaches to the study of neoliberalism, historical and Foucauldian, both of which focus – albeit in different ways – on the ‘epistemic authority’ of neoliberalism (Mirowski, 2009: 417-418; see also Bair, 2009: 360; Davies, 2011). This includes an interest in the ways in which neoliberal ideas are inscribed into interior lives of individuals, how broader discourses come to reflect neoliberal ideas, and the theoretical works of early neoliberal organisations and writers. Though both acknowledge the significance of economic crisis and capital-labour relations, neoliberalism is understood in a context somewhat divorced from capitalism and instead is located as one juncture in the history of a knowledge-power nexus.

Affective accounts of neoliberalism have already been used to interpret subcultural communities including some who are part of the Manosphere network which includes Incel (e.g. O’Neill, 2018; Kelly, 2020). Anthropological applications of definitions of neoliberalism suggest several ways in which I can answer my research questions, drawing attention to how neoliberalism influences the specific sites in which these subcultures operate, how the desires and demands of community members can be read as neoliberal, or as reflecting the desires promoted by neoliberalism.

Affective Neoliberalism No. 1: The Historical Account

The historical account shares with the institutional a definition which stresses the contradictory patterns of neoliberalism which is spatially achieved and reproduced in different ways (Plehwe, 2009: 4). Methodologically however the historical account proposes that the ‘blueprints’ of neoliberalism (the earliest pro-neoliberal organisations and communities, such as the Colloque Walter Lippmann (CWL) held in 1938 Paris), as the basis of understanding how neoliberalism

works and how it is an intellectual effort rather than a set of policy prescriptions. Neoliberalism is understood then as a much older phenomenon than in other accounts (see Overbeek & Van Apeldoorn, 2012: 1-7).

From analysis of the early neoliberal documents, the historical account outlines three key components of neoliberalism: the role of the ‘neoliberal thought collective’ (NTC), the elevation of the market to an epistemic orientation and the deliberate use of misinformation (‘double truth doctrine’). The most indicative texts focus on the activities of the NTC: Mirowski, (2009a; 2013); Mirowski & Plehwe (2009), and Plehwe & Walpen (2005). While none examine subcultural movements, the work on the reframing of the ‘market’ as an ‘ultimate information processor’ is extremely valuable when observing the way in which the language of markets and competition is used in the Incel community.

Historical Definition of Neoliberalism

The historical definition links the diversity of neoliberal voices by (1) their involvement in a nexus of pro-neoliberal think tanks, organisations, academics, and journalists (what Mirowski (2009) calls a ‘Russian doll’) and (2) a founding *raison d’être* running from an early twentieth century fear of state planning and, originally, bolshevism. The methodological emphasis on the written record of early and contemporary NTC organisations – many of which do not use the term ‘neoliberal’ in any way – and policy and/or legislative agendas in the neoliberal era, is further complicated by Mirowski’s admission that the ‘Russian doll’ was ‘never intended to be transparent’ (ibid. p28). This has led several academics to characterise these works as borderline conspiratorial (Cahill & Konings, 2017), noting that the logical end point of ‘double-truth doctrine’ is a clunky reworking of double-consciousness, particularly in the context of the mobilisation of the working classes to repeatedly vote for neoliberal governments.

There is however a surprising amount we can learn from historical work on early neoliberal organisations and even in the double-truth practices of the NTC as it looks today. The conclusion of many historical accounts is that neoliberalism has seeped itself into normative structures of governance to such a degree that there is no longer a clear divide between the state and the market, or between the public and private sectors as sites of marketisation. The extension of market logics into additional sites, and the elevation of that logic into a position of epistemic authority, serves as an important context regarding the Incel worldview. Many Incels describe feelings of existential despair produced by a perception that they are failures within what they describe as a *market* of intimacy, desire, and love. While this ‘sexual marketplace’ functions in a more grandiose way in Incel settings (i.e. an individual’s ‘sexual market value’ (SMV) is treated as the *most important* value in any society), it reflects a profound immersion in what the historical account describes as the founding neoliberal vision.

Neoliberal Thought Collective

The NTC³⁰ encapsulates the interdisciplinarity of neoliberal actors and their capacity to spread neoliberal ideas globally and over several generations. The NTC is framed as an initially co-ordinated effort to put into practice a claim made by Hayek at the very first meeting of the Mont Pèlerin Society (MPS), a successor group to the CWL:

³⁰ Historical accounts in many cases look at the series of interactions following the publication of Walter Lippman’s *(An Inquiry into the Principles of) The Good Society* (1937), which was enthusiastically received by liberal intellectuals in Europe, more so than in America, and which led to the CWL in his honour. The heritage of ordoliberalism is likewise assessed in terms of the exchange of ideas through persons and the institutions which housed them (Ptak, 2009: 98-101). The nexus of personnel and, accordingly, an expanding array of sponsors, is traced in minute detail and developed thereafter (Plehwe & Walpen, 2005; Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009).

But what to the politicians are fixed limits of practicability imposed by public opinion must not be similar limits to us. Public opinion on these matters is the work of men like ourselves... who have created the political climate in which the politicians of our time must move... I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas.
(Hayek, quoted in Crockett, 1995: 112)

The ‘gradual encroachment of ideas’ was achieved via an effort to reshape the role of knowledge in society (Mirowski, 2009: 417) and to develop alternative, neoliberal solutions to political and economic stagnation in the post-war settlement. This approach to social transformation, focusing on a slow shift in ‘public opinion,’ is one shared to varying degrees in many of the political statements made by Manosphere and/or ‘Red Pill’ advocates (Aikin, 2019: 420). This I will return to in Chapter Nine. The NTC is composed of multiple institutions, collectives, academic departments etc., which include but are not limited to: the CWL, MPS, Heritage Foundation, Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), America Enterprise Institute (AEI) and academic departments in the London School of Economics (LSE) and University of Chicago. The electoral success of neoliberalism and the absorption of neoliberal knowledge across all manner of sites has made isolating specific institutions as part of the NTC more difficult.

This difficulty is sidestepped by focusing on how contemporary organisations, governments and media reproduce the central neoliberal concept of market knowledge. This is the key definitional point of difference between the historical and materialist accounts, which are less likely to concentrate on the implications of this epistemic claim:

*the claim of the **superiority of the market mechanism** and competition-driven processes of capitalist development over state-driven pathways of social and economic organization, the limitation of government to the protection of individual rights, especially property rights, privatisation of state enterprises and the liberalization of formerly strictly regulated and government administered markets*
(Plehwe & Walpen, 2005) (emphasis added)

Fear of socialism and the KWS brought the CWL and MPS members together, originally as a private concern: groups like the CWL and MPS were often exclusive and occupied by hand-picked members (Van Horn & Mirowski, 2009: 140). This is not indicative of a homogeneous thought collective, but the ability of this network to **‘engage in pluralistic (albeit neoliberal pluralistic) debate in order to provide a frame** for a whole family of neoliberal approaches’ (Plehwe & Walpen, 2005:30; emphasis added). This allows for a dexterity of neoliberal ‘answers’ to ‘socialist planning... and classical laissez-faire liberalism’ (Plehwe, 2009: 14-15) in a variety of settings. NTC groups emerged in different ‘shells’ of a neoliberal ‘Russian Doll’, denoting their distance from these early, exclusive groups (Mirowski, 2009: 430-431). These range from think tanks to specialised ‘satellite’ think tanks, astroturfed organisations and other groups ready to ‘spontaneously’ offer pro-neoliberal solutions to a variety of sector specific problems.

The NTC occupies both the ‘outside’ of civil society and the private sector, as well as the state itself, promoting the types of changes (e.g. tying citizenship to consumption of state services) that limits democratic capacity to change neoliberal directions. There is an interesting parallel between this location of neoliberal power and where Incel locates feminist power. In both cases, a founding vision has been dispersed through multiple organisations and into a model of thinking, which has successfully oriented the minds of its subjects into specific resolution logics (i.e. ‘we must promote more diversity, more equality, more female empowerment’).

In contrast to most institutional accounts, historical analyses consider these moves towards depoliticisation as coordinated. The model of a ‘night watchman’ state is in this case subsumed into the market itself via a series of outsourcing, marketizing and selling-off of civil service functions, allowing the NTC to maintain desired policy outcomes even as formal

democratic structures remain in place³¹. This is not a ‘reduction’ of the state – ‘if anything, bureaucracies become more unwieldy under neoliberal regimes... [but this] mask[s] their role in power through confusion of ‘marketization’ of government functions with the shrinking of the state’ (Mirowski, 2013:57). Understanding the state as one part of a cross-sector operation of power is again evocative of the Incel worldview.

Market Epistemology

In contrast with classical liberal doctrine, the early neoliberals understood that the conditions for its own existence and vision of social ‘good’, must be constructed and would not occur naturally (Mirowski, 2009: 436). Furthermore, these conditions would involve a transformation of knowledge production beyond sectors traditionally considered economic and into civil society; Hayek insisted as early as 1947 that ‘a political philosophy can never be based exclusively on economics, or expressed mainly in economic terms’ (Hayek, 1967: 150). Foucault’s (1978/2004: 137) lectures distinguishing neoliberalism from laissez-faire are often cited: instead of a ‘hands off’ approach to governance, neoliberalism embodies a highly interventionist, ‘vigilant’ model of political economy deploying many shells of the NTC. In this sense, neoliberalism is a *constructivist* project (Mirowski, 2009; Plehwe, 2005). This constructivism becomes the basis of an argument for a strong interventionist state and neoliberal theories of knowledge, both of which are important environmental factors and [implicit] references in Incel discourse.

³¹ When democratic processes threaten the NTC’s desired outcome, something other than political will is appealed to as an alternative authority and justification for a specific policy. This can be contract theory, natural law, or the deliberate conflation of economy and the universe of human existence (Mirowski, 2013: 58). In each case, the model of democratic engagement is predicated on a set of economic assumptions.

Founding members of the CWL and MPS debated what kind of market society should be constructed³². While there is never a settled position on this question³³, the Hayekian approach is considered the most influential in historical accounts (Mirowski, 2009: 434). This is to say that ‘the market’ is understood as an *epistemic position*, operating as an information processor more powerful than any human or collection of humans (the state). Its knowledge is crystallised in the price function of efficient markets which incorporates and then computes all relevant information (ibid.). By positioning the market and price function outside the comprehensibility of humans, it can then be presented to the public as a natural and inexorable state of humankind, even as the early neoliberals saw the market as part of a social and cultural framework.

This marks the neoliberal ethos (or *weltanschauung*) as prioritising scientific, mathematic or otherwise quantitative expertise/knowledge with a ‘higher epistemological authority’ (Davies, 2015) than theoretical presuppositions and/or hypotheses. ‘Knowledge’ in this context becomes a disembodied ‘thing’, which is (and can be) accumulated at different technological sites (Mirowski, 2009: 423). While some comparisons can be made to Incel here, more obvious are the already-made comparisons to various ‘self-improvement’ movements in recent years (O’Neill, 2015). Furthermore, knowledge becomes understood via natural science metaphors (Mirowski, 2009: 436) to present this constructed ‘market’ as an evolutionary phenomenon, and a means of knowing the world in advanced (hence ‘neo’) societies. Both portraying the market as an evolutionary phenomenon, and the use of natural science

³² Chicago School advocates (epitomised in the work of Milton Friedman) aspired towards reconceptualising neoclassical laissez-faire doctrine in a constructivist direction, and the Austrian school (epitomised by von Mises) used a human-centered rationalist approach, arguing for an interventionist state on grounds of natural necessity (Mirowski, 2009: 435).

³³ The lack of consensus does not compromise the coherence of neoliberalism and is considered constitutive of the neoliberal project: each neoliberal tradition has been used in different contexts to support similar programs for state intervention in creating and sustaining a market society.

metaphors, are a consistent, important element of Incel discourse within and outside of my dataset.

The state's role in securing these conditions is fundamental, even as the market is portrayed as beyond its scope. In order to fulfil what is not simply a 'return to laissez-faire' but a permanent process of *re* (rather than 'de') regulation, the abolishment of anti-trust legislation, and the philosophical refashioning of the market as an 'ultimate information processor', a powerful executive apparatus is required. This is not without its tensions, as the state is also the great potential enemy of the neoliberals, who understood that it could just as well thwart as install its ideal market society³⁴. As in institutional accounts, historical analyses interpret the state as an active participant in the reshaping, and overcoming, of the state-market binary.

The state itself must at least be portrayed as subject to the same price function as any other fact of reality, which is achieved through various technologies of the governance of the state. Finance techniques operate as controls (rather than merely 'disciplinary' devices in the Foucauldian sense) on the state itself. Audit, risk-assessment, cost-benefit analyses and the like are regularly employed as means of controlling the behaviour of the [neoliberal] state (Davies, 2015: 53). The neoliberal state is, in the historical account, as subject to this reality as is the individual Incel³⁵. The incorporation of financial phenomenology into understandings of the *self* are however stressed more in Foucauldian accounts.

Double-Truth Doctrine

Finally, the NTC endorses the deliberate misleading of publics via socio-political strategies used by neoliberal administrations to balance contradictory neoliberal positions (e.g. on the

³⁴ This is as true in discussions even before the Keynesian compromise era: in Germany, on eve of Nazi power, Rüstow, Eucken and Röpke (early adopters of neoliberal ideas and members of neoliberal organisations) discuss 'new liberalism' and, presciently, 'liberal interventionism' (Plehwe, 2009).

³⁵ The Hayekian branch of neoliberalism believes in a minimum social standard which would have to be provided by a welfare system. However, this system would be subject to tight neoliberal controls, ideally in some kind of techno-managerial governance structure which would foster state provision on a contractual basis (Mirowski, 2009: 436).

valorisation of ‘freedom’ as an economic rather than political right) and to sustain electoral support. The NTC’s – particularly the Chicago School – flimflamming on the role of the state in its model society is exemplary here, highlighting that an anti-statist strategy is not necessarily one which refuses to operate through the state, but one which represents itself as anti-statist for the purposes of popular mobilization (Hall, 1985).

The historical account differentiates between the standard process of denial and affirmation that characterises most all political movements. It also attempts to avoid reproducing Orwellian notions of ‘doublethink’ in this analysis, wherein the state deliberately twists the meanings of words, but rather present the NTC as internally justifying its paradoxes via the maintenance of an exoteric and esoteric definition and understanding of neoliberalism. The former case is for the masses, the latter for the enlightened few – not unlike how Incel imagines the blue/red pill dichotomy, as well as the results of the sexual marketplace. Such is the propensity for the NTC to embark on contradictory positions³⁶ that ‘This ability to vertiginously pivot between paragraphs should itself be considered a political technology of the NTC’ (Mirowski, 2013: 69).

The irresolvable nature of some neoliberal contradictions has been well understood since its inception, and have been strategically ‘dealt with’ by adopting the double-truth doctrine. This can be traced back to conflict between founding members of the MPS (notably Hayek and Karl Popper) regarding recruitment and screening potential future members for ideological homogeneity (Mirowski, 2013: 72), through debates over whether the NTC’s belief in the ‘spontaneous order’ of markets could potentially be the product of ‘deliberate design’ (Hayek, 1973: 45-46).

³⁶ E.g. asserting that their programme of constructed market society would lead to permanent economic growth and improved human welfare, while simultaneously positing that no human could ever be sure of any such thing.

After unpicking the shells of the ‘Russian doll’, the NTC is revealed as a hierarchical series of organisations which only selectively appeal to classically liberal concepts of debate and public scrutiny. Citizens who buy into the NTC cosmos of spontaneous order, market processing and hyper individualism are simply expressions of the NTC’s exoteric presentation; the taxis – the rationally constructed *orders* with a clear set of objectives – is where the punitive underbelly of neoliberalism can be understood and climbed³⁷.

Summary of the Historical Approach

The historical approach to the study of neoliberalism introduces the reconceptualization of the market as a key aspect of neoliberalism and, by extension, the significance of market technologies (e.g. the price function) for social relations in this era. These changes are revealed by analyses of contemporary institutional arrangements and technologies which govern state activity, as well as a close examination of original neoliberal organisations and conversations. ‘Competition’ is an unalterable state of reality according to many posts collected from *incels.co*, as well as documents considered indicative of the worldview more broadly. The familiarity of natural science metaphors and the association of market mechanisms with evolution and advanced societies is true of both the world envisioned by early neoliberals, and how the Incel community understands the world today. My analysis section will draw on these commonalities in exploring the relationship between Incel and neoliberalism.

The emphasis on a multi-faceted NTC and the exploitation of a ‘double-truth doctrine’ are both potential avenues for complicating popular narratives of Incel as well as neoliberalism. The Incel perception of feminist dominance matches to some degree with how historical

³⁷ Of all the MPS members, it is George Stigler who most openly articulated that the vision of a ‘marketplace of ideas’ was necessary to maintain, even as the NTC was engaged in reshaping (or, to use neoliberal language, ‘selling’) specific ideas to technocratic elites – in sharp contrast to more public figures like Milton Friedman who focused on simply disparaging the state apparatus, even as the NTC relied on it.

analyses describe a wide range of NTC actors, which all offer different solutions to problems within the parameters of neoliberalism. More pointedly, I am interested in the possibility that a ‘double-truth doctrine’ is at play in Incel laments about the cruelties of unalterable market competition in interior lives. Incels – more specifically those who most sincerely share a specific aspects of a ‘worldview’, which is examined in Chapter Six – could be understood as those subjects of neoliberalism who ‘buy in’ to the vision of hyper individualism and eternal competition.

Affective Neoliberalism No. 2: The Foucauldian Account

The Foucauldian account of neoliberalism defines it as a normative mode of governance which is riven with contradiction. Unlike the historical ‘idealist account’ (Cahill & Konings, 2017), Foucauldians do not try to map neoliberal practices with its original blueprints, but consider it a *new form of government*, with ‘government’ here understood as closer to its eighteenth-century definition, a more general context and practice of governing a populace through a whole variety of sites (e.g. the family, religion, education etc.) (Lemke, 2001: 191). Neoliberalism is, instead, marked by its relationship to liberalism and its shift in the sites of veridiction (truth-telling) that had been characteristic of the classically liberal era (Ewald, cited in Becker et al 2012: 4).

[Neoliberal] institutional developments are considered an exercise of a new kind of power rather than a response to economic crisis (Dardot & Laval, 2013: 7). This relies on a different epistemology to that of typical [Marxist] accounts, which ‘do not always succeed in grasping the novelty of neo-liberal capitalism. Trapped in a conception that makes the ‘logic of capital’ an autonomous motor of history, they reduce the latter to the sheer repetition of the same scenarios, with the same characters in new costumes and the plots in new settings’ (ibid.). One of Marx’s earliest critiques of capitalist development – the under-explored nature of

‘labour’ as one of three factors of production – is however central to many Foucauldian analyses.

Unsurprisingly, the Foucauldian account of neoliberalism is strongly influenced by Michel Foucault³⁸, particularly his lectures at the Collège de France on neoliberal governmentality between 1978 and 1979. It is here that Foucault fleshed out his concept of governmentality, and made a series of remarks which, considering the time in which they were spoken, were incredibly prescient. They, and analyses of some of his other late works (Gane, 2018; Peters, 2007), provide the key texts for this section. So too will some of the major responses to these lectures (Lemke, 2001; Becker et al, 2012). I will also incorporate some of the post-GFC reappraisals of Foucault’s work on matters of neoliberal endurance (Cornelissen, 2018) and of transformations in the individual subject in the neoliberal era (Dardot & Laval, 2013; Rottenberg, 2017).

Foucauldian Definition of Neoliberalism

Like the historical account, Foucauldians look further back to uncover the roots of neoliberalism. In keeping with his genealogical methodology, Foucault looks at the possibilities of knowledge and so understands neoliberalism as a production of a discursive reading of classical liberalism which it challenged. In the ‘Birth of Biopolitics’ (1979/2008) lectures (hence *BoB*), Foucault clearly distinguishes between a European (specifically German)

³⁸ Since the turn of the century, and particularly since the 2008 translation into English of his Biopolitics lectures, several academics have reflected on Foucault’s potential affiliation with what he described as neoliberalism. This has provoked heated debate in popular as well as academic spaces, as the credentials of one of the most cited continental philosophers seemed compromised by the mere suggestion that he was sympathetic to the neoliberal project: an article published in leftist online zine *Jacobin* on this topic – ‘I wanted to clearly break with the far too consensual image of Foucault as being in total opposition to neoliberalism at the end of his life’ (Zamora, 2014) – is one example of this debate reaching a general audience. Though there are several academics who posit that Foucault was actively sympathetic to neoliberalism (e.g. Zamora, 2014; Zamora & Behrent, 2016; Behrent, 2009) there is a more substantial body of work ‘defending’ Foucault as simply an interested critic (Elden, 2014 gives a useful summary of this).

and an American (though heavily influenced by Austrian/Freiburg thinking) neoliberalism³⁹, each reflecting the regimes of power in which they emerged. Interestingly, many subsequent Foucauldian accounts do not foreground this distinction, referring to neoliberalism as a governing strategy which *can* evoke the strategies of both: the managerialist and technocratic features of German neoliberalism, as well as the less coercive American-Austrian.

Though the two schools had important differences, Foucault understood from the outset (as do historical analyses) that all neoliberals were far from advocates of classically liberal laissez-faire – even if only due to the post-war constraints which faced much of Western European at the time:

A satisfactory market economy capable of maintaining itself does not arise from our energetically doing nothing. Rather it is an artistic construction and an artifice of civilisation which has this in common with political democracy: it demands and presupposes a great deal which cannot be accomplished without our making the most strenuous efforts... an out and out positive economic policy
(Röpke, 1948/1996: 28)

Intervention was necessary to implement the changes which the neoliberal vision demanded. Indeed – and this is a key observation in *BoB* (1979/2008) – the German neoliberals saw that ‘law is no longer a superstructural phenomenon, but itself becomes an essential part of the (economic-institutional) base and thus an indispensable instrument for creating entrepreneurial forms within society’ (Lemke, 2001: 196). The significance of this lies in its break not only with the Marxist view of the juridical form as guided by economic development, but also the classically liberal notion of an extraneous, spontaneously organised regulation of the economic.

Foucault identifies the pamphlet ‘*A positive program for laissez faire: Some proposals for a liberal economic policy*’ (Simons, 1949) as the ‘first fundamental text of this American neo-liberalism’ (Foucault, 1979/2008: 216). While in both cases a fear of the concentration of

³⁹ The German variant is typified by the theory of Eucken and Röpke, the American-Austrian by von Mises, Hayek and Becker.

power in the state motivates much of the original neoliberals' thinking, in typical Foucauldian style the lectures trace a diverging conceptualisation of the role that liberty plays in the discursive assemblages of the US⁴⁰ and Europe. Ultimately it would be the Austrian-German tradition that most Foucauldian analyses concentrate upon, in which a new governmentality, the concept of human capital and the obligation to choose provide the three most useful explanations of how neoliberalism operates as a new mode of power. It is also this work which appeals most directly to analyses of Incel which investigate its interactions with a neoliberal environment.

Neoliberal Governmentalities

Governmentality refers to a state of relations, an 'assemblage' of governing techniques and the forms of knowledge which underpin them (Lemke, 2001: 191), and a means or 'diagnostic framework' from which analyses can develop understandings of the constituent effects of neoliberalism (Oksala, 2013: 32-34). Governmentality reflects Foucault's observation that the state alone is incapable of securing control of its citizens and represents a new mode of power⁴¹ based on relations between the individual subject and the apparatus (legal, institutional, state) which are increasingly shaped by the neoliberal vision. It might then be more accurate to describe neoliberalism as a Foucauldian concept, than Foucault as a neoliberal.

⁴⁰ In the American case, liberalism is a foundational concern, easily traced to the War of Independence, marking it as both an existential concern and as a way of life. In contrast for the European nations liberalism represents a moderating force against the nation state's previous mode of control. This, Foucault suggests, has a particular political resonance for the early American neoliberals, as liberalism has a 'double foothold' (ibid. p218) as it occupied a sanctified position in both the political right and left, in a way that it did not across the Atlantic. Not only did anything sounding vaguely socialist evoke an existential threat to the very legitimisation and founding identity of American independence, but it was also held on the left as a bulwark against an engorged and potentially imperialist, military state. Unlike in its European environment then, liberalism was not so much a question of political and economic choice made by the governors over the governed, but as an issue of the American 'way of life' and the *relationship between* the governed and the governors. Evoking Hayek (who he describes as typical of the American-Austrian school), Foucault concludes that liberalism provided a 'grid of sociological analysis' (ibid. p219) that could be productively engaged with by a new, 'return' to classical liberalism via a 'new utopia' (ibid) neoliberalism.

⁴¹ This follows Foucault's genealogical examinations of the modern era's shift from sovereign, to disciplinary, and eventually governmental power.

According to Foucault, power no longer resides simply in institutions⁴² or the state, but in the subjectification of the individual's relationship to them, and eventually, to themselves: 'The new government of human beings penetrates their thinking, accompanies it, guides it, stimulates it, and educates it' (Dardot & Laval, 2013: 258). This is not an understanding of contemporary power shared in Incel spaces, which are typically marked by complaints that power is for the most part wielded over unattractive men by discernible others (women, feminists, and 'cucked' men) in the form of rejection and disgust. The influence of feminist power in mainstream culture is considered another exercise of power, one which Incels are qualified – via their outsider status – to critique.

I am interested however in extending the Foucauldian account of neoliberal power to examine the relationship that Incels have to themselves, and whether this reflects the 'new government of human beings' described above. Neoliberal governmentality is at its core the extension of the economic sphere to the social and political, making the market the organising principle of reality in the neoliberal era, and the embedding of this principle is the state's key objective: 'Once truth is invested in the market, once the market emerges as a site of veridiction, the task of government becomes securing, circumscribing, and supervising this site' (Dean, 2012: 89). The life of an Incel, which is often described⁴³ as traumatic and wretched, invites interpretations which look for how relationships with the self occur in a wider discursive environment.

Neoliberal governmentality has several effects. Brown (2005) refers to governmentality as a de-democratising exercise of power which erodes the foundations of liberal democracy itself. Classical liberalism in a Smithonian sense based itself on the irreducibility of the political

⁴² The Foucauldian account posits the institution as the unconscious of Marxist and liberal economism (ibid.), and claims that neoliberalism signifies the restoration of the institution to a decisive role in social, political and economic spheres – which are of course collapsed under neoliberal governmentality.

⁴³ All references to Incel up until my analysis chapters are based on a two-year period of immersion in the community as well as the small existing academic literature on the Manosphere.

and moral to economic objectives or concerns. This distinction collapses as the state becomes run as an increasingly private enterprise, evaluated on a criterion of neoliberal values such as productivity and efficiency. Similarly, the relation between the citizen and the state is individualised to the relation of a consumer and a service provider: rights are no longer inalienable but tied to responsibilities as a neoliberal subject and self-management, resulting in a ‘link[ing] [between] reduction in (welfare) state services and security systems to the increasing call for ‘personal responsibility’ and ‘self-care (Lemke, 2001: 203).

De-democratisation results from both a process of subjectification which re-conceptualises citizenship as a consumptive practice, and the effects that this governmentality has on the state. An administrative discourse based on themes of ‘good governance’ (productivity and efficiency, and technologies of evaluation to encourage and discipline the same) replaces social or moral considerations for political parties, and so ‘good governance’ becomes a discourse tied to the technocratic removal of potential alternative political trajectories. This is a reciprocal dynamic between the individual and the techniques of government which create a mutually de-democraticising phenomenon characteristic of the neoliberal era (Dardot & Laval, 2013: 305-306).

There is no ‘direction’ to neoliberal governmentality outside of this permanent theme of productivity and efficiency: having concrete objectives is considered neither feasible nor desirable. The absorption of the legislature and the legal-judicial architecture more generally into a factor of production, and so an instrument of an empowered executive branch of government, becomes secured as a new normative logic of governance: ‘the juridical belongs to the relations of production from the outset’ (Dardot & Laval, 2013: 203). This is the result of a permanent ‘state of exception’ (see Agamben, 2005) in which the state, under the logic of governmentality, takes as necessary all manner of interventions in order to construct a suitable environment for further marketisation and the roll-out of competition as a ‘grid of

intelligibility'. Governmentality thus shapes neoliberal politics while simultaneously creating its own social subject, achieved via the transformation of its traditional apparatus' as enforcers of market competition (individual liberty) over and above political liberty, and a human-centered theory of economics.

Human Capital

The theory and practice of human capital is a convergence between von Mises' argument that there can be no scientific account of human need, only of consumer preference (Davies, 2016), and Marx's intuitive comment on economic production, which he also considered an anthropological production (Lemke, 2001: 12). Leading human capital theorist Gary Becker summarises the concept at length:

Human capital puts people at the center of an economy. Traditional economics put machinery, physical capital, and land, and, somehow, some undistinguished labor (and Foucault mentions that) at the center. But human capital says: "No. Yes, land—well, land isn't so important in modern economies—but physical capital is clearly important, but the really important form of capital is people. It's people. And not simply what they are born with, but what they, or the government, or the parents do to them—what we call, 'invest in them.'" To me, that's something that anybody who believes that people are the center of what we should be thinking about when we think about economies, when we think about development, that's a liberating point of view.

(Becker cited in Becker et al, 2012: 11)

The individual is recast as a portfolio of skills, debts and investments rather than an agent with a share in political power, what Brown (2003) would describe as a subject of de-democratisation (Cornelissen, 2018: 133). Humans produce as well as consume, but in a matrix of market risk assessment. This is the 'unified framework for understanding all human behaviour' (Becker, 1976: 14) which Hayek had theorized and Mirowski (2009a) understands as the epistemic shift of neoliberalism in producing neoliberal subjects. Referring to the self as a site for investment and management is extremely reminiscent of how bodies and in some

cases ‘personalities’ are conceptualised in Incel spaces, which hints at a synergy between the Incel worldview and its neoliberal environment. One potential source of disjuncture between the two however is in Becker’s belief that ‘what they are born with’ need not preassign life outcomes to an individual. As I will argue in Chapter Six, this completely contradicts the Incel preoccupation with linking value with inherited genetics.

As alluded to in *BoB* (1979/2008), human capital also becomes a strategic orientation for policy. During my immersion period, I observed several expressions of fear that unattractive men were being actively exterminated by a conspirational alliance of elite feminist policy and its cultural and psychological influence on the population. This does have parallels with Foucault’s speculations about human capital as an orientation for policy, albeit in a paranoiac or catastrophizing tenor. Made up of both inherited traits (socio-economic and cultural statuses; physical attributes; other biological-genetic conditions) and acquired traits (education and learning; risk assessment of the marketplace etc.), Foucault immediately notes the possibility of human capital, made ‘actuality’, as a means of new forms of control: ‘as soon as a society poses itself the problem of the improvement of its human capital in general, it is inevitable that the problem of the control, screening and improvement of the human capital of individuals... will become actual, or at any rate called for’ (1979/2008: 228). In both cases – individual action and state policy – decision-making become objects of economic reasoning. This includes decisions made within the realm of family⁴⁴ as well delinquency (criminals become agents assessing the reward-punishment market of committing illegal acts) in addition to legislative decisions (Dardot & Laval, 2013: 167-168).

Human capital provides a theory which dovetails with the political project of neoliberal control (governmentality), providing an understanding which underpins a series of

⁴⁴ Becker famously formulated a new theory of the family, recognising it as an enterprise employing resources in time and money in order to produce various kinds of goods: health, self-esteem, children, sensual pleasure, prestige etc.

‘technologies of the self’ as well as a guide for policy. Through human capital, neoliberalism fosters a ‘policy of growth no longer... no longer simply... indexed to the problem of the material investment of physical capital, on the one hand, and the number of works... but a policy of growth focused precisely on one of the things that the West can modify most easily, and that is the form of investment in human capital’ (Foucault, 1979/2008: 232). This is best captured not by state policy however – though in the same lecture Foucault notes the anxiety that this could lead to ‘progressive’ eugenicist agendas (ibid.) – but through techniques of control that operate through the individual⁴⁵ (ibid.). The role of the state is instead in creating systems for the monitoring and evaluation of individual conduct in market society, which aligns with human capital’s assumption that all human activity is economic. The more individuals are understood as calculators who are ‘free to choose’, the more evaluative technologies must be created to monitor and enforce this risk-reward schema (Dardot & Laval, 2013: 169-173).

Freedom (Obligation) to Choose

Governmentality engages the individual’s relationship with institutions (including the state) but also with herself. This is the meeting point in a neoliberal assemblage between a political project and the subjectification of the neoliberal citizen, the ‘freedom and obligation to choose’. The promotion of freedom of choice to a principle of knowledge (to ‘know’ is to ‘manage’ your human capital) is therefore an extension of political government right through to forms of self-regulation, namely ‘technologies of the self’ (Lemke, 2001: 201). These ‘technologies of the self’ are of interest to Foucault, who describes efforts at self-transformation as, in the neoliberal context, part of a longer transformation from ‘knowing’ oneself to ‘improving’ oneself:

⁴⁵ The transferral of power from the state to the individual is of interest to Foucault, and this has been construed by his colleague Ewald as ‘the apology of neoliberalism—especially the apology of Gary Becker’ (Ewald, in Becker et al, 2012: 4).

Technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality
(Foucault, 1988: 18)

The subject produced under neoliberalism is different to the rational economic man of homo oeconomicus, who maximises their capacity. Instead the subject becomes *entrepreneurial*, which is to say that it inhabits the market spirit of competition and enterprise: seeking opportunities, experimenting with one's own capacity and constantly adapting to market demands (Dardot & Laval, 2013: 111). There is a clear link between this subject and that described by O'Neill (2015) in her analyses of the seduction community in London. In the case of Incel, the 'spirit of competition and enterprise' appears to be at the very least a much more fraught ideal to inhabit, and yet one which animates many of the debates held in Incel spaces.

Anchoring the practices of self-improvement is a specific concept of individual, autonomous freedom, which holds a disciplinary function: 'power is exercised over those who are in a position to choose, and it aims to influence what those choices will be' (Hindess 1996: 100, quoted in Flew, 2014: 61). Autonomy is presented as a natural state of human existence, and so absent the need for state or institutional incentive. Various socio-political arrangements and discourses of ethics have been created to sustain and encourage this subjectivity (Rose, 2017:305-306). Against the perceived economism of classical liberal discipline, sexual and cultural spheres are under neoliberalism understood as holding aspirations to freedom which require satisfying⁴⁶ (Dardot & Laval, 2013: 12).

The discourse of autonomous, individual freedom provided a justificatory logic under neoliberalism for markets in areas previously considered either collective responsibility, or

⁴⁶ There is a historical narrative implied by this claim. Hitherto dominant forms of power were in crisis, and the anti-statist demands of women, students, and the underclasses (as well as workers) were absorbed into this discourse of the 'psychic economy' which developed a micro-politics of desire.

intimate in a way beyond the capacity of market competition. In the former case, consider the mass marketisation of education – championed by American neoliberals like Friedman (1955) – which is based on a [constructed] rationality of the individual as an entrepreneur, who is required to judge between different possibilities and select the best opportunity, as well as incur the debt, risk and results in the way any other enterprise would (Dardot & Laval, 2013: 176). In the latter case, the ‘micro-politics of desire’ operate as a new form of self-regulation and conduct, via specific practices referred to as ‘technologies of the self’. Notable examples include the self-esteem movement and the self-help industry, up to ‘selfie’ and fitness crazes (Cruikshank, 2006; Lupton, 2016).

This demonstrates that neoliberal governments do not govern against freedom, or despite it, but very much *through* it: this constructed freedom developed from marketisation incites specific [entrepreneurial] conduct through a normativity that is always delivered on individualised terms and choice (Dardot & Laval, 2013: 5). These technologies are not an invention of the neoliberals. However, in the Foucauldian sense, they are the product of a bricolage of new ways of thinking about knowledge, the self, conduct etc. in such a way in which we can accurately ascribe them to a singular mode of governing society: neoliberalism (Rose, 2017: 306-307). Subsequent Foucauldian analyses typically assert that even in opposition movements, the emphasis on individual choice only reproduces this neoliberal logic of conduct (see Bay-Cheng, 2015: 279-280; Fraser, 2016: 281-282).

Summary of Foucauldian Approach

The texts that I include under the bracket of the Foucauldian approach are distinct from all other accounts of neoliberalism by their attempts to explore neoliberal logics outside of classic political economy. Instead, neoliberalism is explored as a project to govern the behaviour of individuals and institutions, bringing together the epistemic transformation outlined in the

historical account, and the significance of specific institutional architecture in the institutional account.

Foucauldian analyses of neoliberalism and its effects provide several interesting routes into my examination of Incel. The extension of economic thinking into domains previously considered beyond the realm of market competition – especially but not exclusively the sexual lives of individuals – combines with a discourse of *competitive activity*, replete with winners and losers, to provide an ideological context in which it's surprising that there aren't greater numbers of users on Incel sites. Similarly, the governing of people through the installing of 'choice' as a mantra of all activity recalls my observations of Incel users bemoaning the hypocrisy of a promised freedom. There are therefore several possible routes into my research questions by using Foucauldian accounts of neoliberalism as a basis of analysis.

Chapter Four: The Entanglement of Neoliberalism and Feminism

My primary research objective is to reveal the ways in which Incel antifeminism can be productively understood as a product of its entanglement with neoliberalism. The first question I have considered – *What do we mean by neoliberalism?* – works towards my claim that different understandings of neoliberalism will highlight different aspects of its relationship with Incel. As argued above, neoliberalism involves a variety of practices, some of which are more obviously applicable to questions of gender and gender relations than others. I identified four distinct ‘positive’ definitions of neoliberalism, in addition to a literature which concludes that for a variety of reasons the term is inappropriate for academic use. In each case there are methodological and definitional emphases which incorporate a series of differences between understandings of neoliberalism. When making assertions regarding Incel and neoliberalism, it is necessary to explore the contested literature to ensure specificity, rigour and to offer an answer which acknowledges the different facets of neoliberalism.

The next question serving my research objective is more specific: *what do gender relations look like under neoliberalism, and what version of feminism has flourished in these conditions?* These questions are addressed in an existing critical feminist literature examining the entanglement of feminism and neoliberalism. Affective and material understandings of neoliberalism are both mobilised in this literature, which roughly corresponds to that distinction. That is, there is an academic tradition which focuses on the ways in which neoliberal-feminist entanglement manifests in (supra-)government policy, institutional cultures and international norms of governance (‘neoliberal feminism’) and a tradition which examines the production of gendered subjectivities and cultural rationalities under neoliberalism (‘postfeminist sensibility’). If it is true that the ultimate ‘boogeyman’ of the Incel worldview is a supposedly hegemonic feminism, and my observations so far do not convince otherwise, then

it is in my interests to investigate what versions of feminism are most visible in the neoliberal era.

The purpose of this chapter therefore is threefold. Firstly, it builds a basic description of the fortunes of feminism under neoliberalism, paying attention to the ways in which different understandings of neoliberalism are mobilised to provide these ‘neoliberal feminism’ and ‘postfeminist sensibility’ analyses. This includes reference to how feminism is broadly *perceived* in the neoliberal era. Secondly, this basic description can then provide a point of reference for subsequent examinations on the context of gender power relations, in which the Manosphere and Incel have emerged. Finally, this chapter introduces the possibility that feminist theorists and the Incel worldview share some rudimentary observations about the negative effects that the entanglement of neoliberalism and feminism have had. This will be especially useful for my analysis chapters.

The Impact of Entanglement on Perceptions of Feminism

In clarifying what is meant by neoliberalism I encountered several obstacles: the absence of identifying neoliberal actors, the denial of academic coherence, and the variety of distinct if overlapping definitions. In contrast, there is no shortage of self-identifying feminist actors, and very few writers argue that ‘feminism’ is incoherent, even if the writer rejects feminist diagnoses of contemporary forms of gendered discrimination (Redfern & Aune, 2010: 3). There are however numerous definitions of ‘authentic’ feminist agendas, which include problematisations of the ‘wave’ history that is often used to narrate a linear progress in feminist politics and theory (Coole, 2000: 35-36), and fierce debate over the most effective feminist pathway (see Butler, 1997; Fraser, 1998; Dzodan, 2011). These come to the fore in analyses of feminism, broadly construed, in the neoliberal era.

Incels do not typically struggle in the same way when defining what an ‘authentic’ feminism looks like. The Incel sites I have frequented in recent years are not especially preoccupied with the limitations of the ‘wave metaphor’ or what constitutes an effective pathway for feminist success. In place of the ‘fierce debate’ above, there is a broad consensus within the Incel community regarding what feminism looks like in contemporary society (see Chapter Six). While the political sensibilities of Incel collectively are diverse enough to resist collective categorisation, there is a broad dissatisfaction with shared norms of governance across governments drawn from parties at different ends of the political spectrum. My observations strongly indicate a *perception* that [Western] governments have for some time legislated in favour of women, and against the interests of men.

A useful illustration of the impact that feminist-neoliberal entanglement has had on how feminism is perceived more broadly is in recent debates held between feminists on whether ‘proper’ or ‘authentic’ feminism exists under neoliberalism, even as select feminist ideas are newly visible and popular (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 1-2). This paradox has been commented on by several writers, some of whom claim that descriptions of ‘inauthenticity’ are related to the effects that neoliberalism has had on emancipatory movements more generally, and what is called the ‘attachment to loss’ within these movements (Dean, 2012: 319). The period from 1990 to the present is considered by many theorists as a period of fragmentation, or at least a period in which feminist theorizing has struggled to link contemporary feminist movements to a political ideology. ‘Loss’ permeates a discourse around feminism⁴⁷ and the wider political left, as the neoliberal project became embedded in Third Way compromises (Brown, 2003),

⁴⁷ This has led to a type of engagement by some academics which strikes some other academics – including this writer – as erring on the side of erasure, rather than critique (Dean, 2012: 322). The way in which contemporary feminist currents are erased risks a sort of affective barrier to attempts at mapping the entanglement between feminism and its ideological environment (Ahmed, 2010), as we lose the feminist subject to accusations of inauthenticity or incapacity.

and absorbed into many interpretations of contemporary feminist movements and arrangements.

Just because the Incel worldview appears to have constructed a feminism more unified, organisationally sophisticated and politically successful than is evidenced either by feminist academic work or by the endurance of gendered discrimination on any scale, does not mean that Incel is not opposed to feminism. Nor does it mean that Incel is not attuned to the ways in which feminist agendas have changed in recent decades. Something called ‘feminism’ has a looming presence on all Incel sites I have observed, and it is partially through a hatred of this feminism and identification of feminism as an agent of male disempowerment and sexual frustration, that Incel is distinguished from a mere condition, the difference between ‘Incel’ and ‘involuntarily celibate’. This is why it is important to this project to be clear about the ways in which feminist ideas and language have been incorporated into neoliberal governance, and the ambiguous ways in which this has shaped a neoliberal environment, drawing on material and affective accounts examined above.

A cursory look or scroll through Incel sites substantiates my claim that the feminism so derided by users has cartoonish (or nightmarish) qualities, far removed from any significant feminist movements today. I am however committed to complicating popular descriptions of Incel as purely misogynist, and to consider additional features of contemporary society – in which select feminist ideas are more publicly visible and popular than before – that might be ‘at play’ in Incel spaces, through the symbol of feminism. My task therefore is to consider the kernels of truth which make the feminist boogeyman something other than a complete invention by Incels, even if these kernels have been grossly fabricated. Feminist theorists are best placed to confront the question of what it is about feminism in neoliberalism that disgusts

users of Incel spaces⁴⁸. It is worth pre-emptively referencing a point now made in greater detail later in this thesis, which is that while men blaming women for celibacy is not a new phenomenon, the networked and organised community which constitutes Incel makes it temporally and technologically – at least – closely associated with the neoliberal era.

The rest of this chapter outlines the fragmentation of feminist politics in this period, and then uses existing work in gender studies and feminist theory to consider the ways in which feminism and neoliberalism have taken on qualities of the other. This ‘entanglement’ has been subject to debate, rebuke, praise and resistance for several decades (Rottenberg, 2014; Budgeon, 2015: 303-304; Ferguson, 2017). To be clear, even the most dubious examples of this entanglement are undeserving of the violence which is expressed in Incel spaces. I am keen however to investigate the ways in which neoliberalism informs that violent reaction, and even prior to my analysis section I suspect that it is the way in which gender and market relations become imbricated together – rather than ‘feminism’ in any academically recognisable sense – that provides the core catalyst for Incel antifeminism.

Most of the existing research falls into one of two camps, each denoting an emphasis on the dynamics of that relationship and mobilising different accounts of neoliberalism: neoliberal feminism, and postfeminist sensibility. In the former case, the focus of analysis is how neoliberalism as a governing ideology has absorbed some feminist ideas and shares some feminist objectives. It is interested in how this interaction can be traced through governance norms, public policy, and institutional arrangements. Key texts include Prügl (2015), Roberts (2015) and Rottenberg, (2017; 2018). Postfeminist sensibility describes how feminist currents have acquired or in other ways aligned with neoliberal ideas, particularly via the promotion of discourses that link fighting gendered discrimination with individual engagement in markets,

⁴⁸ Though not at all representative, I have observed several posters on Incel sites express qualified support for historic feminist movements (e.g. campaigns for voting rights) and even some contemporary campaigns in parts of the world where women ‘actually have something to complain about’ (e.g. Saudi Arabia).

and the rise of feminist visibility. The key texts here are by McRobbie (2004), Gill (2007; 2017), Budgeon (2011) and Banet-Weiser (2018).

Feminism, History and Politics

Many antifeminist groups rely on a certain reading of history in which feminism has become progressively more powerful and dominant (Zuckerberg, 2018: 33-36). This has been achieved it is claimed both through its objectives being adopted as explicit goals of supranational governing bodies, national governments, private companies and civil society, and the production of a pro-feminist common-sense. Though exaggerated in Incel spaces, it is integral to my project's ambition to examine Incel antifeminism as potentially shaped by its entanglement with neoliberalism, not to reproduce a similarly reductive description of contemporary feminism. This necessitates a thorough investigation of what versions of feminism have flourished in the neoliberal era. Prior to looking specifically at 'neoliberal feminism' and 'postfeminist sensibility', I will briefly address how different feminist writers have mapped its recent history. In addition to clarifying how this project perceives the feminism Incel claims to oppose, this section also offers some useful points of comparison between the Incel and feminist self-identification, which will be developed later in the thesis.

In recent years there has been an absence of attempts to link political ideologies to feminism, and instead most efforts to map the variety of feminist perspectives refer to decades-old frameworks⁴⁹ (Ferguson, 2017: 222). There has also been a contested reference to the

⁴⁹ Up until the mid to late 1980s feminist scholars used political tendencies (or ideologies) as a means of developing a typology of feminist perspectives and traditions. This began with the traditional trio of feminist perspectives (Socialist, Radical and Liberal), still taught on many Politics 101 undergraduate classes, which while co-existing as feminist, differed along several axes: the source of women's oppression, the form of government supported, strategy and tactics, the persons primarily appealed to, and the spokeswomen that represented the movement (Ferguson, 2017: 221). Subsequent appendages include eco- (e.g. Jaggar, 1983), libertarian- (see McElroy, 1998), intersectional (e.g. hooks, 1981) conservative- (see Stacey, 1983) and xeno- (e.g. Hester, 2018).

‘wave’ metaphor in ascribing a lineal temporal dimension to feminist activism and theory. This is in response to much feminist scholarship addressing its limitations if used to compartmentalize feminist thinking to any specific period:

*If the [wave] metaphor has any lasting purchase in the tradition of feminist consciousness, it might indicate shifting constellations of relations within the abstract medium constituted by thinking women **at any moment of time** ... but coexistence would be impossible if the generational feature were to be identified as phasic, so that only those born after a specific historic moment could be described as third wave; or if the term identified a moment beyond something; or if the contradictions shaping female identity were analysed as merely cultural phenomena*
(Howie & Tauchert, 2004/2007: 47) (emphasis added)

Contemporary feminism then has been defined partially by its internal dialogues and disputes, sometimes described in popular accounts as infighting or sectarianism (e.g. Lewis, 2015), which reflects ‘... an ongoing process of critical scrutiny on the part of participants in a political struggle with respect to their factual claims, their normative aspirations and their strategies’ (Eschle & Manguashca, 2014: 647). This does not necessarily undermine describing feminist history as in some way mimicking a series of waves, depending of course on quite how that metaphor is presented, but the metaphor typically struggles to encapsulate the choppy waters visible following the second wave. As Coole (2000: 40) puts it, the wave metaphor ‘... notes women’s struggle for citizenship rights throughout the nineteenth century and its victory in winning the vote, followed by feminism’s eclipse between the wars and its rebirth in more radical form during the 1960s. Here then are its two waves, but after this the story unravels’.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ The terms of this presumed unravelling are significant in tracing the relationship between feminism and neoliberalism. If, as Coole claims, there is a *retrospective unity* granted to the First and Second Waves, then regardless of the historical omissions highlighted in for instance intersectional analyses (for an early account see Mohanty, 1984), we should be alert to the possibility that there might be a similar reduction in the stories told about contemporary *disunity*, manifesting in the qualities of loss and inauthenticity ‘sticking’ to feminism as suggested by Dean (2012). Describing the variety of feminist voices that coexisted in the Second Wave of the 1970s, Howie & Tauchert 2004/2007: 48) suggest that there was a shared conviction that women had never

What has changed since the 1970s to unsettle the coexistence and balance that Howie & Tauchert (2004/2007) and Coole (2000) describe? ‘Modern social structures’ still manage to ‘include women within the political order’ (e.g. the election of UK Prime Minister Theresa May and rising numbers of female MPs), gender mainstreaming remains a fixture of public policy and corporate social responsibility, and this appears to have endured even as austerity disproportionately affects British women (see Women’s Budget Group, 2012). There are two responses to this in the literature.

First, the Second Wave mantra that ‘the personal is political’ is considered to have opened a Pandora’s Box of intra-feminist reflection, oftentimes focusing on the problematic universalism ascribed to identifying feminists. As articulated by Budgeon (2015: 305), ‘An indirect effect of second wave feminism’s intention to politicize the personal has been continuing deliberation on the nature of women’s individual experience, which indicates a lack of consensus about the degree to which it is possible to presume gender power relations produce a set of commonly shared social conditions.’ This, it has been argued, set in motion a period of reflection which has limited the capacity for contemporary feminism to offer a structural critique of its environment or to engage in collective struggle. There is a fascinating parallel here with the Incel complaint that they, as unattractive men, are subject to commonly shared social conditions because of contemporary gender power relations.

Simultaneously, there is an argument that neoliberalism absorbed what Crouch (2011a) calls the ‘kinetic energy’ of emancipatory political efforts such as feminism by incorporating several of its key demands into its regimes, both inside and outside the formal political sphere. Inclusion of women, and of women-oriented policy planning, placed a ceiling on what an essentially liberal feminist approach could demand. This is not to suggest that further demands

simply been excluded from the social contract, and that the inclusion of women in the social order did not necessarily secure the desired transformation of social structures.

were *not* made by women's groups within organisations (e.g. improved maternity rights), but substantial transformation of social structures from the incorporation of selected feminist agendas in these sites of business and [neoliberal] governance remained out of reach. This, the limits placed on the emancipatory demands of feminist thinking via incorporation into governing strategies, is widely considered by critical writers to be an important effect of neoliberal feminism (Eschle & Maiguashca, 2018: 223-224). It also offers an interesting comparative reading to the history of feminism as it is described in Incel spaces: what is considered a 'ceiling' or 'limits' to emancipatory demands by several feminist theorists, manifests as descriptions of 'dominance' and 'takeover' in the Incel community.

Theorising Neoliberal Feminism

Analyses of neoliberal feminism must overcome the absence of professed adherents, manifestos or policy platforms using the title⁵¹. To do so, the literature mobilises accounts of neoliberalism (particularly Material accounts) with an implied methodology for locating its effects and theorises 'entanglement' as an institutional and governmental dynamic. In this case, the work of many theorists of neoliberal feminism (e.g. Roberts, 2015: 209-211) refers to hybridised institutional transformations, the circulation and management of financial capital, and the construction of 'good business sense' in order to locate the meeting point between neoliberalism and feminism.

We have seen that ideology in some sense is always an interpretive construct, even in those political ideologies that do have canonical texts. Neoliberal feminism is the result of a series of compromises and negotiations between enterprise and governments adhering to neoliberal patterns of thought, and feminist priorities specific to its time and place. Examples

⁵¹ Halley et al, (2018) is a notable exception, offering a broadly positive account of 'Governance Feminism' while highlighting its limitations.).

of these compromises are evidence of neoliberal ideology interacting with feminist ideas, and serve as a guide to the kind of feminism to ‘look for’ in my data, paying close attention to the ways in which gender relations and market competition, often in tandem, are understood. Examples of analyses of this kind of compromise include Prügl’ (2017) study of gender research and its application at the World Bank, in which she concludes that select feminist agendas are incorporated into publications while market outcomes remained the arbiter of social value. This results, she argues, in new opportunities for women’s empowerment and feminist thinking, while foreclosing others.

My initial impressions of Incel have been that the community is more interested in discussing anecdotal experiences of rejection and/or isolation, than they are the precise ways in which a feminist takeover has altered specific policy agendas. When posters describe feminist power, it often appears to be based upon the exercise of sexual autonomy, including the choice to ignore or reject, rather than new legally enforced freedoms or protections. However, there is a broader conceptualisation of structural feminist power which is at play, less explicitly in Incel spaces but more so across the Manosphere (e.g. Tomassi, 2013) which does isolate specific examples of feminist ideas influencing policy and the law. The circulation of ideas and language between Manosphere groups (Farrell et al, 2019: 92-93), as well as the *a priori* status that belief in ‘feminist hegemony’ has in Incel spaces, suggests that neoliberal feminism ‘compromises’ do have a function within the Incel worldview. This will be examined in more detail in the next chapter.

The alignment of feminist ideas with neoliberal governance has long been the subject of feminist critique and scrutiny, particularly regarding how effective the state can be in securing feminist objectives (Gupta, 2012; Eschle & Maiguashca, 2018). Feminists who shared with Marxism an understanding of the state as epiphenomenal to the economic base have long argued against appealing primarily to it: ‘as a patriarchal institution that mirrors and supports

broader structures of patriarchy which are more effectively tackled elsewhere’ (Coole, 2000: 50). However, neoliberalism has successfully negotiated this tension by an appeal to women on market terms:

Whereas the idealized worker was formerly imagined as rational and disembodied – a construction which excluded femininity – across many sectors of the economy feminine coded attributes and skills are increasingly regarded as exploitable resources that have ‘exchange value’

(Budgeon, 2015: 311)

The critique of the state referenced by Coole (2000) was never a consensual position in feminism, and the incorporation of feminist agendas in the highest levels of government and corporate boardrooms has been referred to as an abiding success of the Second Wave (Coole, 2000: 51). It has since remained clear that ‘... feminism has an important contribution to make to social democratic projects and vice versa since they have a shared concern for the democratic regulation of the economy’ (Oksala, 2013: 33), even as many social democratic projects – particularly political parties – have in various ways had to adapt to neoliberal regimes. This incorporation of feminist ideas has, as Budgeon (2015: 311) notes, accelerated in the neoliberal era.

Gender mainstreaming assessments, public policy advocacy (e.g. on reproductive rights) and CSR all to varying degrees reflect this incorporation of feminist thinking, however contingent on market forces they might ultimately be (Rottenberg, 2014: 422). These moves have received financial, personnel and moral support from MNCs, IFIs and international governing agencies (Prügl, 2017: 32-33), but their reliance on market forces was clearly illustrated after the financial crisis of 2008, when achievements going back as far as the Second Wave were rolled back and the capacity of state institutions to manage⁵² and orient change has

⁵² The incapacity itself is partially due to political operations that have taken ‘the economic’ outside of the remit of democratic oversight (Kennelly, 2014: 244), as well as the low levels of economic growth following the 2008 financial crisis.

subsequently been increasingly stymied: ‘We live in a world of ever-tightening constriction, in corporate America and in state legislatures, of the very liberties – enfranchisement, reproductive health care – on which women have built their contemporary power’ (Shulevitz & Traister, 2014: 16).

The feminisation of the workforce predates the neoliberal era but was accelerated in a variety of ways from the 1980s onwards, and the potential for increased financial autonomy for women, and their natural influence in spreading ‘feminine values’ in specific sectors has been a part of policy agendas by successive governments under neoliberalism (Newman, 2012; Prügl, 2012: 21-22; Fogg, 2013). The symbolic role of the workplace as a site in which feminist power is absolute is a reoccurring concern in many antifeminist groups (Jordan, 2016: 18-20). The increase in the number of women into different parts of the US and UK workforce has not however shifted the limited representation of women in senior positions or leadership roles, either in government, industry or corporations (Rottenberg, 2014: 423). In the next chapter, I develop an explanation for this contrast in the perception of feminist power in the workplace and economy more broadly, with reference to precedent studies of ‘backlash’ (Faludi, 1991) and antifeminism (Cudd, 2002).

This contradiction is compounded because not all feminist ideas have been included in neoliberal policymaking and technocratic formations. Those which address social reproduction, private and interior lives cannot be adopted by governments which subscribe to neoliberal patterns of thought, because latter simply does not have the language to articulate a distinction between the public and private (Gottfried, 2013: 148-149). Therefore, it cannot cohere around a feminist politics which for instance seeks to transform unwaged work or activity within the family (Rottenberg, 2017: 343). Attempts to incorporate these politics into neoliberal regimes often result in a further entrenchment of market rationality (Roberts, 2015:

223-225). Rather than functioning as a path towards liberation, wages for housework for instance merely extends gendered (and racialised) stratification and exploitation (Rottenberg, 2017: 343-344).

This literature therefore emphasises the *ambiguous* consequences of neoliberal feminism. An increasingly transnational network of gender experts marks a new form of governance which has transformed the nature of the relationship between the national state and feminist objectives (Prügl, 2015: 619). This is a ‘progressive neoliberalism... an alliance of “new social movements” (including feminism)... and the high-end “symbolic” and service-based business sectors (Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and Hollywood), on the other’ (Fraser, 2016: 281). In this sense at least, a [select] feminist agenda *is* to some extent being pursued by elite groups, and with some positive consequences for women including: the rise of gender equity as an integral aspect of CSR (Thompson, 2008: 99-100; Roberts, 2015: 225) and international institutional support for empowering women as a development strategy (Prügl, 2017: 47-48).

While issues relating to visibility and subjectification are more often discussed in Incel spaces, at least based on my initial observations, the institutional and governmental role that feminism now plays anchors many claims made about feminist dominance across the Manosphere. Likewise, neoliberal feminism is considered by its theorists an important factor in facilitating the widespread diffusion of feminist ideas within the Anglo-American mainstream cultural landscape (Rottenberg, cited in Banet-Weiser et al, 2020: 8). It is important therefore to underline that the consequences of select feminist objectives being adopted by governments and institutions in the neoliberal period are far from uniformly positive. For instance, the reliance on volatile market forces, particularly the tying of feminist objectives to business cases for profit, raises several issues for MNCs and IFIs with regards to the sustainability of their programmes (ibid.). These kind of programmes in development policy

have been critiqued as re[producing] sexist power relations, which in turn produce the kind of subjectivities examined below (Foster, 2011).

Theorising Postfeminist Sensibility

In a roundtable discussion, Rosalind Gill (2020: 5) describes herself as a ‘feminist analyst of postfeminist culture’ and understands postfeminism as a sensibility (a ‘circulating set of ideas, images and meanings’ (ibid.)) rather than its own analytical perspective. This circulation of feminism has for a variety of reasons authorised a *popular* feminism, linked to media visibility, circulation, and public mood. It is an important distinction which is shared in my thesis: postfeminism is understood here as a sensibility which is produced within and alongside neoliberal feminism.

In my initial observations of Incel spaces, it became apparent that the manifestations of feminism which provoked such hatred were opposed on the basis that they were visible, that they assumed agreement from its viewers, and that they encouraged individuals – especially women – to adopt a specific way of thinking and acting ‘as a feminist’. In this sense the feminism of the Incel worldview appears closer to the sensibility described by Gill and others than it does the neoliberal feminism as manifest at, for instance, the World Bank. If postfeminist sensibility is a significant dimension of the feminist boogeyman as she is understood in Incel spaces then, it will aid this project to clarify what this constitutes.

Postfeminist sensibility ‘positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force’ (McRobbie, 2004: 255). In place of this outdated model of feminism, postfeminist sensibility has succeeded by developing these ‘new meanings’ in accordance with neoliberal ideas about human capital, and addressing a new woman subject: young, fashionable, desirable (Gill, 2016: 611-612). The

redundancy of feminism, as a necessary or warranted form of structural critique and a politics of emancipation, is foundational not just to online antifeminism but also more mainstream conservative spaces (Anderson, 2015: 6-7; Nagle, 2017: 67-70). Likewise, the ‘new woman subject’ that writers like Gill describe is reminiscent of the figures described in the most vitriolic outbursts on *incels.co*.

Postfeminist sensibility exists in a cultural environment which depicts select feminists and feminist ideas in a sympathetic light. Rottenberg goes so far as to describe Western feminist visibility as unprecedented: ‘we are currently witnessing a historic moment in which it is finally become acceptable for highly visible Western women to identify publicly as feminists’ (2017: 329). Even in pessimistic accounts of contemporary feminism’s political efficacy, there is often an acknowledgement that its profile in popular culture, and especially in online culture, has at a minimum expanded feminism’s potential reach. ‘Feminist questions’ have been at the forefront of several activist movements in recent years, especially online. Slut-shaming, body-policing and the sexism of the canon have all been confronted by identifying feminists, many of whom will have become adults in the recent past (Dean, 2012). This compares favourably with even the recent past, suggesting that this is a millennial and, temporally at least, neoliberal phenomenon:

When I was in college in the mid ‘90s, you could be attending the vegan potluck for the Campus Leftists, and if you asked whether anyone there identified as a feminist, not a hand would go up. It felt like the stereotype of the hirsute, humourless activist had fully won out in the wake of the Second Wave
(Shulevitz & Traister, 2014: 15)

Today, many famous, successful, and/or wealthy women (and men) explicitly endorse feminism and identify as feminist. Unsurprisingly, the most famous of these figures (e.g. actress Emma Watson and popstar Taylor Swift) are frequently referred to in antifeminist spaces because of this act of identification. So too are the many products (clothes, stationary,

coffee table books, posters, cosmetics and so on) which are advertised as in some way associated with feminism or pro-feminist culture. This visibility is central to arguments made regarding the cultural indoctrination of women (and ‘weak’ men) which regularly occur in the Manosphere.

The version of feminism depicted in this moment of new visibility under neoliberalism, however, is absent much of the structural critique, the language of solidarity and collective struggle that has long been considered central to feminist agendas (Gill, 2017: 609; see also McRobbie, 2008). These agenda have in many cases been replaced by a language of individual attainment, much like the logics highlighted in both affective accounts of neoliberalism. This story of obsolescence is one shared in many antifeminist accounts, which justify hatred of feminism on the basis of its unnecessary endurance: ‘an antique piece of 20th-century ideology... women have, more or less, achieved equality through legislative changes in sexual harassment and antidiscrimination laws... Those women who *do* insist on being feminists and favour a continued feminist movement must want to get *ahead* of men, or believe they are superior to men’ (Anderson, 2015: 50). ‘Postfeminism’ has, in this precise way, come to signify the foreclosure of feminism as a desirable political project (Budgeon, 2015: 23-25).

As with institutional and governmental changes which are examined as neoliberal feminism, postfeminist sensibility is an ambiguous phenomenon, in some ways producing new gendered restrictions on women and men alike, while in others facilitating far-reaching conversations about gendered suffering. The #MeToo campaign for instance did feature high profile celebrity backing and focused on individual stories, with often the most salacious and high-profile testimonies receiving the most airtime. It also involved many thousands if not millions of women across the world sharing experiences of sexual harassment and assault and forging solidarity through this collective outpouring of grief and realisation that they are not alone (Phipps, 2016). Moreover, while postfeminist sensibility often uses a language

championing diversity and individual experience, the woman subject it addresses is narrow: independent and financially secure, able to invest in various technologies of the self to ‘improve’ their interior and exterior selves, sexually confident, presumed as heterosexual, able-bodied, white and career-minded (McRobbie, 2004: 260-261; Bay-Cheng, 2015: 280).

Banet-Weiser (2018: 12-13) describes one impact of postfeminist sensibility’s rejection of structural approaches to combating gendered discrimination and violence as the emergence of ‘popular feminism’. She adds that it is this version of feminist thinking, manifest in highly visible mediums and especially online, which has been subject to a backlash, both in explicit attacks from antifeminist and/or misogynist groups, but also in mainstream spaces: a ‘popular misogyny’ (Anderson, 2015: 163; Banet-Weiser, 2018). This backlash she argues takes two main forms, firstly based on the postfeminist script that the structural work of feminism is now over and any lingering interest in its project is basically just self-promotion (ibid. p50-52). Importantly, this ‘repudiation’ of feminism is considered as in-built into postfeminist sensibility itself (McRobbie, 2009). Second, there is a perception of post/popular feminism that it demands that all women are received and identify as victims based on gender alone (see O’Neil, 2018: 131-132).

The concept of ‘popular misogyny’ is important for this project, as it introduces another contextual factor at play in the emergence of Incel which is developed further in the next chapter: antifeminist backlash. Popular misogyny, Banet-Weiser (2018: 32-33) argues, is facilitated by the same communicative infrastructure of popular feminism, and often manifests in normative (objectifying) responses to the hypervisibility of women’s bodies in online environments and beyond. What the internet also facilitates however is a networked, translocal misogyny which can take on far more extremist qualities in threats, targeted harassment and violent (often sexually violent) ideation. This ‘e-bile’ (Jane, 2014: 558-559) is not yet ‘popular’ in the normative way described by Banet-Weiser (2018: 32-33), but there is ‘ample evidence

to support the contention that gendered vitriol is proliferating in the cybersphere; so much so that issuing graphic rape and death threats has become a standard discursive move online' (Jane, 2014: 558; see also Massanari & Chess, 2018: 526).

There is an irony at play here: the structural critiques of feminisms of yesteryear were regularly accused of a sort of gendered determinism in which the possibility of female empowerment in a capitalist society was rejected out of hand. Instead, postfeminist sensibility addresses the individual, 'in favour of embracing power, in the pursuit of individual goals' (Budgeon, 2015: 15) – and yet postfeminist texts are still derided on the basis that they address women only as victims. This seeming contradiction appears to have been crystallised, at least in Manosphere spaces, in a crude image of feminism (and by extension its advocates) as the ultimate hypocrisy. Feminism, it is claimed, has successfully mobilised in favour of women's empowerment as individuals and competitive consumers, and yet simultaneously maintains that all women are, because of patriarchal structures, inherently victimised (Farrell et al, 2019: 94).

The Entanglement of Feminism and Neoliberalism: A Summary

This chapter has outlined the basic history of feminist theory and politics in the neoliberal era, a period described by many academics as conflict-riven or co-opted. Part of that conflict is in response to the perceived alignment of feminism and neoliberalism, which has been theorised in two concepts which occasionally overlap: neoliberal feminism and postfeminist sensibility. In each case, the incorporation of select feminist objectives and/or symbols into neoliberal regimes of power have had mixed consequences for women, feminists, and gender relations more broadly. One of these consequences is the rise in visibility of feminist ideas and language, which been the target of a backlash in both mainstream and niche sites (of which Incel is one example).

Table 3: Primary Changes in Contemporary Gender Relations

	Primary changes in contemporary gender relations
Neoliberal Feminism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Construction of ‘good business sense’ via incorporation of select feminist agendas in IFI programmes. - Alliance of ‘new social movements’ (incl. feminism) with service-based business sectors.
Postfeminist Sensibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Heightened visibility of feminist ideas and language in popular culture. - Promotion of a [gendered] subjectivity which foregrounds consumptive practices and self-improvement techniques/technologies.

While it is impossible to cover all the various strands of feminism which have emerged in this period of fragmentation and/or co-option, it is these ‘popular’ feminisms, aligned with neoliberalism, which I expect to constitute the basis of the constructed feminist boogeyman in my case study. In my initial observations of Incel discussions, two of the most reoccurring complaints have been the adoption of feminist language and objectives by governments, businesses and cultural figures; and the ‘have it all’ mantra communicated to women (but heard by men) who are addressed as victims of male oppression. I therefore expect to return to several of the developments in gender power relations outlined in this chapter when I analyse my data.

I am not writing a thesis to confront and debate this perception of feminists and feminism, but to understand what informs it. To achieve this, I am pursuing a structure of increasingly detailed description of the environment in which Incel has emerged. Part One has introduced neoliberalism as an academically contested, multi-faceted governing ideology which resists simple classification and operates through sometimes contradictory processes and rhetorical manoeuvres. Neoliberalism is the ideological context in which both feminism and antifeminism are conducted, and its qualities have become increasingly entangled with both. The examples of neoliberal feminism and postfeminist sensibility answers my question: what

versions of feminism have prospered under neoliberalism? It has also introduced several aspects of the imagined feminism which is being targeted in the Incel worldview.

Part Two: ‘All Women Are Like That’: Antifeminism in Neoliberalism

‘All Women Are Like That’ (AWALT) is a phrase used across the Manosphere to refer to the biological impulses of women to hypergamy, as well as a social conditioning which encourages women to ‘ride the cock carousel’ until they settle down with an emasculated – but wealthy – ‘beta’ male (Futrelle, 2013). The ‘All’ is no exaggeration here, there was a remarkable uniformity in my initial observations of Incel spaces: whenever an individual woman is discussed, these characteristics have already been assigned as universal. Exceptions to this rule are vanishingly small and are only granted to women who are mentally ill, severely physically disabled, entirely subservient, or enslaved⁵³. This dehumanisation of women is a powerful indicator of the extent to which Incel has gone beyond a collective dissatisfaction with absent sex, to an explicitly antifeminist and misogynist worldview. It also hints at the ways in which neoliberal ideas and processes considered in Part One (market outcomes as a site of truth verification; the introduction of market logics to interior/intimate lives etc; the absorption of select feminist iconography and objectives into popular culture and international governance etc.) might feature in the Incel worldview.

Part Two foregrounds the entanglement of neoliberalism and antifeminism in preparation for my case study analysis, asking: *what do we already know about Incel and the Manosphere context in which it emerged, and in what ways can it be described as antifeminist, misogynist and/or a backlash?* When addressing these questions, I will be paying close attention to potential sites of conflict and consensus within the Incel community, as well as the version of feminism most prominent in these [anti]feminist accounts. In Chapter Five I look at how antifeminism has manifest in the neoliberal era, and whether Incel qualifies as

⁵³ These extremely rare exceptions are presented as the result of the deformity of these women, or the suppression of their natural impulses by a ‘strict hand’.

antifeminist, misogynist, backlash, or a combination of the three. I then apply this precedent conceptual grid to the Manosphere, a loosely networked series of communities which share an animosity to feminism as it currently manifests.

In Chapter Six I then map out – for the first time in an academic paper – the history of Incel as a worldview and community, and the various claims to knowledge which fall under the bracket of its worldview, known as ‘The Black Pill’. The history of Incels, its thematic motifs and the differences within the community will form the basis of a justificatory statement as to why it is appropriate to use this group as a site of contemporary antifeminism.

Chapter Five: Antifeminism, Backlash and the Manosphere

Introduction

I am interested in the possibility that neoliberalism produces the conditions in which *this* kind of antifeminism can operate, and I recognise that there is a gap in the literature and an absence of analyses which focus on mapping this alignment. Instead, research on contemporary antifeminism, even when it does refer to neoliberalism as the context in which it operates (e.g. Banet-Weiser, 2018), is likely to focus either on psychological explanations (Anderson, 2015) or on providing responses or evaluative judgement to antifeminist claims (e.g. Zuckerberg, 2018).

One notable exception to this trend is O'Neill's (2015; 2018) work on the culture of 'Pick-Up Artists' (PUAs) which identifies changes in the negotiation of sexual intimacy among men within neoliberal mantras of self-improvement. While a similar research focus has been deployed on the negotiation of female sexuality (Gill, 2018), this has not occurred to the same extent with masculinity. My own analysis of the discursive arenas of Incel forums takes a similar line of inquiry to O'Neill's, though it has adapted to the challenges of researching a group who are if anything more anonymised, de-territorialised and likely to be pathologized by the general public than are PUAs.

This project is also differentiated by its focus not on Incel as an industry-community, or as an anxiety in male sexuality, but as a case study in antifeminism. While there is not an immediate business or industry developed around the Incel community – certainly not in the same, offline settings as the PUAs in O'Neill's study – there does appear to be financial links forming between specific Incel spaces and plastic and dental surgeons (Hines, 2019). In my project, these kinds of links – while not an explicit focus of my analysis – will be acknowledged when addressing how the Incel worldview engages with its [neoliberal] environment.

In the previous section I explained the different ways in which neoliberalism is understood and how these understandings inform research undertaken in a variety of areas, including in assumptions regarding what is and what is not neoliberal, or what is subject to neoliberalisation. It is important to be clear when ascribing neoliberal qualities to a [sub]culture, or worldview, to justify why these qualities have been designated as neoliberal. In the case of contemporary feminist politics, I have explored the literature on ‘neoliberal feminism’ and ‘postfeminist sensibility’ to introduce ways in which neoliberalism is discernible in different aspects of gender relations, and the mixed effects that can result. Contemporary feminist politics are considered within the Manosphere an important site in which the disempowerment of men has been theorised and mobilised (Ging, 2017). As one part of this network, a thorough examination of the antifeminist discourse articulated by Incel must address the broader subcultural environment in which it emerged. In doing so, I hope to again apply understandings of neoliberalism to provide a more sophisticated account of the ways in which the Manosphere can be understood in its time and place.

The distinction between misogyny and antifeminism is not always clear in Manosphere spaces (Marwick & Caplan, 2018: 548-549). The blurriness has become more urgently in need of addressing during the entanglement of neoliberalism and feminism which, as I have argued above, produced popular feminisms and misogynies alike. Antifeminism has, we can assume, existed only so long as has an organised women’s movement, an object to orient itself against, while misogyny predates the modern era. While there are identifying antifeminists, the term is often eschewed – at least in mainstream spaces – in favour of language which evokes ‘gender realism’ or ‘evolutionary psychology’ (McCrea, 2019), or instead defined in opposition to umbrella terms such as ‘political correctness’ and ‘social justice warriors’ (Massanari & Chess, 2018: 526-528).

However, there are precedents providing a conceptual and thematic guide to what antifeminism looks like. The most cited of these, Faludi's (1991) *Backlash*, while setting itself out as an historical record and subsequent denunciation of antifeminism rather than an exploration of its relationship to ideology per se, offers a useful introduction for defining the term. Similarly, other historical accounts (e.g. Kinnard, 1986) and philosophical engagements (e.g. Cudd, 2002; Manne, 2018) allow us to create a series of characteristics from which we can differentiate antifeminism from misogyny, and develop a concept which understands 'backlash' as a defining trait of the current moment. From this we can also set out the parameters within which the Manosphere generally and the Incel community and worldview specifically can be addressed as antifeminist.

The chapter proceeds by explaining how I have reached my understanding of antifeminism and considering what antifeminism has looked like in the recent past. This is particularly important when both the Incel community and identifying feminists critique postfeminist ideas as being antithetical to the wellbeing of women, albeit in different ways (Gill, 2017; Kelly, 2018). On what basis do we demarcate Incels as antifeminist and those invested in postfeminist logics as something else?

The second half of this chapter then provides a critical overview of the Manosphere, asking: How does the Manosphere relate to previous male rights groups, what are the different elements to the Manosphere 'constellation', and in what ways can we describe it as antifeminist, misogynist or as a backlash? Is it accurate to describe the Manosphere, as well as the Incels, as a group, community, subculture, or movement? Are there shared political objectives here? There is a small but emerging literature (see Nicholas & Aguis, 2018; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Ging & Siapera, 2019) which will be used to characterise this context, before detailing the concerns and history of the Incel community, of which there is far less peer-reviewed work.

Defining Antifeminism

There are multiple definitions of antifeminism. While it might appear obvious that a worldview which explicitly blames feminism for a variety of social ills is antifeminist, it is useful to situate Incel, and the wider Manosphere network, among existing definitions. There are two definitions which have the respective benefits of being academically reviewed and cited and being commonly referred to in online communities. First, the *International Encyclopaedia of Men & Masculinities* acknowledges that antifeminism can and does take multiple forms, but adds that they all share a rejection of at least one of the feminist assumptions that ‘social arrangements among women are neither natural nor divinely determined; that these social arrangements favour men over women; that collective actions can and should be taken to transform these into a more just or equitable state’ (Clatterbaugh in Flood et al, 2007: 21).

This is a broad definition of antifeminism which suggests that, certainly in online communities but also increasingly in mainstream spaces, antifeminism is a prominent characteristic of contemporary thought and discourse (Gardiner, 2018: 592-593). Indeed, some postfeminist texts⁵⁴ could reasonably be considered by this schema as antifeminist, which is our first indication that defining antifeminism can be more complicated than expected. Consider that postfeminist sensibility positions feminism as a concept made somewhat unnecessary since most [Western] women have been legally secured equality of opportunity, and anti-discriminatory frameworks are in place in most private organisations (Rottenberg, 2017). Or, that the greatest impediments to women’s advancement is individual behaviour⁵⁵. Both cases imply the redundancy of ‘collective actions’ and so fulfil the antifeminist criteria.

⁵⁴ ‘Texts’ here refer to specific medias which adhere a postfeminist ‘sensibility’, as defined in Banet-Weiser et al, 2020.

⁵⁵ The most well-known example of this type of postfeminist sensibility in action is the bestselling ‘*Lean In*’ by Sheryl Sandberg (2013), although to be clear Sandberg would identify as a feminist rather than an antifeminist.

Either a more precise definition, or a more fleshed out conceptualisation, is required if we are to avoid eliding postfeminist and Incel perspectives together.

Website *Rational Wiki* has long been a resource widely shared online, offering a supposedly more rigorous and editorially⁵⁶ stringent set of definitions than does *Wikipedia* (Ballatore, 2015). As such it acts as a useful guide to the kind of user-generated content that is the basis for a lot of communities like those in the Manosphere. Here the definition of antifeminism is a set of positive commitments, rather than feminist rules that are rejected⁵⁷. According to *Rational Wiki*, antifeminism is the holding of one or more of the following beliefs: ‘That women have used feminism in order to exploit men; That science (e.g. evolutionary psychology) supports the view that males and females are biologically different⁵⁸; that feminism does not successfully address several men's issues: domestic violence against men, female-on-male rape, etc; That society is biased towards females: women are being favoured [sic] in child custody hearings, etc.’

This definition reflects the character of online antifeminism, which manifests in a more aggressive set of positive commitments than does the antifeminism outlined in the *International Encyclopaedia of Men & Masculinities* account (Nicholas & Aguis, 2018: 47). The first criteria distances antifeminism from most manifestations of neoliberal feminism and/or postfeminist sensibility: feminism must be considered as a deviant, silencing or mendacious politics which pits women against men to the detriment of the latter. While

⁵⁶ The site claims to debunk pseudoscience and conspirational ideas and is particularly popular (both celebrated and as an object of derision) by more niche subcultures with a large online contingent (e.g. Effective Altruism; New Atheism; Neoreaction)

⁵⁷ The *Rational Wiki* entry goes to great lengths to highlight the variety of perspectives which can reasonably though contradictorily be held as feminist.

⁵⁸ This positive commitment has implications for a continuing rupture within the feminist community (see Butler, 2020), most notably that many identifying-feminists would be considered ‘antifeminist’ according to this definition. My project does not speak to this rupture. However, discussions regarding the supposed biological and psychological differences between men and women have inarguably been a significant means of justifying antifeminist (and in some cases misogynist) claims in Manosphere spaces. Because of this, I have kept the belief in my working definition.

postfeminist sensibility assumes that feminism is to some extent an outdated politics, it does not in the main suggest that feminism is a threat to contemporary gender relations. Neoliberal feminism might not support collective struggle⁵⁹, but it would not make the claim that ‘society is biased towards females’. We can therefore conclude that an effective *contemporary* definition of antifeminism must highlight the belief that feminism has been used against men, and that society is already biased in favour of women. I will assess the antifeminist qualities of the broader Manosphere (and its ‘Red Pill’ philosophy) in respect of the above criteria.

Defining Backlash

‘Backlash’ has been used in several recent accounts as an appendage to antifeminism (i.e. an ‘antifeminist backlash’) (Jordan, 2016). Can we reasonably describe the kind of antifeminism expressed in the Incel community and the Manosphere network as backlash? While Faludi’s (1991) germinal text is titled ‘*Backlash*’, the focus on individual acts/events does not establish a model for understanding how backlash might be distinct from a more generic antifeminism. Cudd (2002) builds around these individual acts a philosophical model for backlash, which she then argues is observable in the academic community.

The conditions for claiming backlash are based on the prior record of a group being unjustly disempowered, and the response from previously advantaged groups to a progressive movement which seeks to rectify this imbalance. Cudd is clear that this model rests on a ‘liberal bias’ which seeks to make a ‘normative’ evaluative judgement about the injustice in question (2002: 7). My own project shares this normative bias⁶⁰. In the case of Faludi’s work, the

⁵⁹ It does at times rely upon a biologically essentialist understanding of gender differences (Fogg, 2013), and embraces this understanding of difference to the extent that they can be strategically utilised in the interests of profit-making activity. However, even in this case, there is no attendant assertion that feminism has been used to ‘exploit’ men, nor that society is ‘biased towards females’, and nor is it seeking to reject the necessity of a feminist agenda – even if that agenda is very different to previous feminist politics.

⁶⁰ I elaborate on this in my Methods chapter. In simple terms, I believe that gendered discrimination (especially to the detriment of women) endures, and that this warrants redistributive action.

individual acts which she describes are understood as backlash in the context of progress made in the wake of the Civil Rights and Women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Without these successes, the acts she describes would be 'merely' antifeminist or misogynist (rather than as part of a moment of 'backlash').

The measure of 'progress' for analysing antifeminism in 2020 is more nuanced than that progress which was observable in the 1960s and 1970s. While the legal and social advancements achieved in this period of civil rights left some women behind (hooks, 2001: 7; 50-51), there were nonetheless a multitude of fundamental changes in the lives of most women which can be designated as acts of progress (e.g. the enshrinement of reproductive rights) (Mansbridge & Shames, 2008: 625-627). The period between 1991 and today is, while not a period of regress, less clearly a period of progress, and much of this is related to the ambiguous consequences of feminist-neoliberal entanglement covered in the previous chapter.

This is a tension Cudd acknowledges and observes within academia, which she characterises as having successfully made feminist philosophy more visible through module options, the creation of journals and a (tiered) improvement in the gender diversity of departmental staff (2002: 13). She concludes that, although there is no concrete evidence of these piecemeal improvements reducing the privileges afforded to men in academic environments, this heightened visibility and institutional emphasis on supporting feminist ideas has been read as such an 'attack' and so has still provoked a reaction of 'hostility and resentment' (ibid.) (see also Budgeon, 2011: 24-25). This therefore qualifies as backlash.

Faludi (1991: xviii) considers whether the antifeminism she encounters is 'just a continuation of American society's long-standing resistance to women's rights... [or] is this a backlash first and foremost against 'equality' with 'feminism' the evil agent which has summoned it?' Faludi concludes that backlash is not only guided by perception of the loss of privilege but is *resurgent*: 'it [backlash] is not always in an acute stage; its symptoms subside

and resurface periodically. And it is these episodes of resurgence, such as the one we face now, that can accurately be termed ‘backlashes’ (ibid. xviii-xiv). Faludi emphasises that antifeminist backlash is not solely the result of a ‘bedrock of misogyny’ (ibid.) but by specific efforts of contemporary women to improve their status (e.g. through securing improved funding for women’s education), efforts that are interpreted and reinterpreted by men – especially men grappling with real threats to their economic and social wellbeing on other fronts. In other words, backlash occurs when men perceive their own disempowerment to be correlated with and, in some cases, caused by the organisation and representation of women as a disadvantaged category.

There are multiple ways in which contemporary social and cultural conditions produce masculinities which work to the detriment of many men, and symptoms of this (e.g. male suicide rates) require serious consideration (Lindisfarne & Neale, 2016: 37-38). I do not respond to or explain these circumstances in this thesis. Instead, I want to understand the terms on which feminism is being opposed and examine whether they are consistent with specific accounts of neoliberalism outlined in Part One. I have arrived at a suitable definition of backlash and antifeminism, and now consider the role that the ‘bedrock’ of misogyny might play in this formation.

The Role of Misogyny and How Antifeminism Spreads

Antifeminism should be considered a disposition distinct from misogyny (Faludi, 1991). We therefore have a typology of antifeminism, backlash, and misogyny. All three can be inhabited simultaneously, but they should be understood as different phenomena which can operate separately, albeit this is relatively rare. There are multiple precedents in various ‘New Right’ interventions which qualify as antifeminist while claiming to care for women’s wellbeing and so would bridle at being identified as misogynist:

In dispensing its spoils, women's liberation has given my generation high incomes, our own cigarettes, the option of single parenthood, rape crisis centers, personal lines of credit, free love, and female gynaecologists... In return it has effectively robbed us of one thing upon which the happiness of most women rests – men
(Charen, 1984: 24)

This antifeminism which attempts to distance itself from outright misogyny is certainly observable in many Manosphere groups, including Incel sites. What complicates discerning this kind of antifeminism however is the ubiquity of ‘trolling’ or other bad-faith engagements in online discourse. Consider ‘concern trolling’, a contemporary term for an old practice of claiming to sympathise with and support the empowerment of a marginalised voice, while holding an ulterior political motive which is antithetical to the interests of said marginal group (Murti, 2019). As an argumentative technique associated with ‘Red Pill’ advocates, some of whom claim to be antifeminist rather than misogynist (GeekFeminism, 2020), the onus is placed on the researcher to interpret that ulterior motive and whether it is, in fact, founded on misogynist beliefs. Disingenuous acts such as concern trolling resonate with much of online communication and are a reoccurring challenge in analysis of online communities (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017; Finlayson, 2019: 77-78).

Faludi explains in detail that any movement – feminist as well as antifeminist – occurs within a wider cultural framing, and that thematic concerns, lines of intellectual inquiry and aesthetic dimensions are likely to be absorbed by that movement. Likewise, Manne (2018: 32-34) cautions against a ‘naïve’ understanding of misogyny which focuses on individual ‘bad apples’ and psychological explanations. Instead, misogyny should be understood as a policing of patriarchal order, and so has a structural function in the reproduction of patriarchy.

A movement and its context are then symbiotic, as ideation flows circulate and are read and reinterpreted by each – a phenomenon which has only accelerated under neoliberalism (Dean, 2005; Fraser, 2017). This cultural context is the medium through which backlash can

be expressed, even if antifeminism is not an explicit value of the mainstream culture. By tracing antifeminist arguments from fringe far-right and conservative organisations and into mainstream cultural production, Faludi makes a convincing case not to see backlash as a concerted or conspirational exercise, but having ‘countercurrents and treacherous undertows... beneath the surface, largely invisible to the public eye... For the most part, its workings are encoded and internalized, diffuse and chameleonic’ (1991: xxi-xxii). This serves as a forewarning as to the potential impact of an ostensibly fringe antifeminist group – a forewarning repeated in more recent research (e.g. Massanari & Chess, 2018).

Backlash (Faludi, 1991) also illustrates the strategic function of specific issues in the spread of antifeminist and/or misogynist ideas to the wider cultural setting. Examples of women suffering are regularly shown as vehicles through which antifeminist ideas are leveraged into public discourse. Various measurements, of various accuracy, of women’s collective decline in mental wellbeing (alcoholism and other drug addictions, suicidal ideation etc.) and other measures (increased reported rape statistics, declining birth and marriage rates which are presented as a barometer of women’s happiness) were in the 1980s repeatedly blamed on the rise in feminist visibility, initially by New Right political or para-political organisations and then increasingly in the mainstream press. The *Weyrich-Heritage Foundation* is one such organisation, whose support for the first Reagan administration influenced the passing of Family Protection Act of 1981 which sought to dismantle nearly every legal achievement of the women’s movement (Faludi, 1991: 235).

By tracing antifeminist ideas in the New Right and its subsequent symbolic and legislative political empowerment during the first Reagan presidency, Faludi suggests that we can explain a prevailing wisdom that feminism run amok was in fact to blame for women’s ailments. This is significant for our study and the mushrooming wider cultural impact of Manosphere ideas, most notably in the form of the Gamergate furore. In this example,

numerous contemporary antifeminist and misogynist ideas, especially regarding the privilege women receive on the basis of sexual desirability, breached popular consciousness and media through the ‘issue’ of gender diversity within the video games industry (Salter, 2018: 247-248). Coordinated attacks which were discussed and honed in Manosphere and other antifeminist spaces became talking points in mainstream news media, illustrating that the role played by ‘para-political organisations’ of Faludi’s study appears to now also be fulfilled by various online platforms with an antifeminist presence.

Finally, the form of media being deployed often shapes to whom and what type of antifeminist idea is being spread. Arguably the most fundamental transformation in Western society since the publication of *Backlash* is in media, and the rise of the internet and then social media as the pre-eminent medium of data transfer and communication (Dean, 2005: 52; Bridle, 2018: 6-8). Content platforms online are vast, and they have given rise not only to new configurations of political audiences and participants, but also entirely new *genres* of political argumentation and expression (Finlayson, 2019: 77).

While I reject a narrative put forward in some accounts (e.g. d’Ancona, 2017; Ball, 2017) that pits a chaotic and deceptive [online] public sphere on the one hand, and a threatened voice of expertise on the other, I claim that changes in contemporary communicative technology and practice are integral to understanding the spaces in which contemporary antifeminism is produced. In this sense, memetic transfer, for instance, has generated a new form of currency in political communication, one which prioritises some characteristics (e.g. flippancy, transferability, immediacy) over others (Shifman, 2013: 4; see also Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017: 484). This is not a type of change in communicative practice that can be ‘resolved’ by additional fact-checking by site or platform administrators (Lewis, cited in Harper, 2020). While it is tempting to draw comparisons between ‘post truth’ and online antifeminism, especially when confronted with the more extreme cases of conspiracy

theorising in Manosphere spaces, this project is less interested in dis/proving [antifeminist] claims, and more interested in revealing what informs them. Part of that effort includes recognising that the public/private binary which characterises some of the work done on ‘post truth’ too definitively separates what are mutually reinforcing mediums of knowledge (Lucken, 2016: 21-23).

Referring to antifeminism, backlash and misogyny as outlined above is a useful way of overcoming some of the obstacles to this study. These obstacles are grounded in two features of the current moment in gender politics. Firstly, the paradox that neoliberal-feminist entanglement is very much a target for both antifeminists, and feminists. How do we coherently explain the difference/s between the two, and use this explanation in this project? Second, the transformation in mass media as a distributary mechanism for antifeminism and as an influence on the type of permitted discourse. How do we interpret spaces where the traditional rules of political contestation and participation have been reconfigured to reflect a whole constellation of subcultural and subaltern meanings and priorities? These questions are addressed by taking the precedent example of *Backlash* (Faludi, 1991) and to a lesser extent Manne (2018), and repurposing it for a deep-dive analysis of Incel spaces: a clear criterion for defining a subcultural worldview, and a sensitivity towards the history and knowledges of that worldview’s context. It is to this history and knowledge that I now turn.

Table 4: Definitions of Antifeminism, Misogyny and Backlash

Term	Brief Definition
Antifeminism	A series of positive claims framing feminism as retrograde, violent and misandrist.
Misogyny	A ‘bedrock’ hatred of women. Has become increasingly difficult to decipher in [often online] contexts which feature amounts of ‘concern trolling’. Is manifest in individual actors and acts but also as a political operation of patriarchal structure.
Backlash	A reaction against the perceived advances made by a previously disadvantaged group.

The Manosphere, The Red Pill and Gender Ideology Online

While there is little academic research on Incel there is an emerging literature on the Manosphere network of which Incel is one wing (see Ging, 2017; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Farrell et al, 2019). In this section I will outline the environment of the Manosphere (what and where is it?) and examine how gender relations are interpreted in these spaces. Like many online subcultures, Incel posters are highly self-referential, and use a vernacular which includes a lot of terms exclusive to that community as well as the broader Manosphere. To interpret the various vernacular, and to guard against ‘concern trolling’ and similar strategies, it is necessary to familiarise oneself with this broader field of terminology and concepts. At this juncture I recommend the reader consult the Glossary provided in Appendix 1.

The Manosphere is not a homogeneous collective, nor reducible to an arm of a political movement (the ‘alt-right’) or a singular perspective on gender relations (Ging, 2017: 3). However, because of the circulation of ideas between the different groups which constitute it (Farrell et al, 2019: 91-92), it is incumbent on the researcher to understand the historical and ideational trajectory of this amorphous network. Though its communications are largely online, the Manosphere does not exist in a vacuum or without a ‘physical’ past; its ideational precedents in the Male Rights Movement (MRM) stretches back at least to the mythopoetic men’s rights movement of the early 1980s (see Messner, 1998) and likewise has thematic parallels with contemporary male rights groups with a physical presence like Fathers 4 Justice (F4J).

I claim that Manosphere groups share a deeply antifeminist diagnosis of contemporary gender relations, which is communicated by a ‘hidden reality’ that ‘taking the Red Pill’ reveals. This will set up a discussion of Incel specifically, which is characterised by violent sexual fantasy, deeply nihilist and/or suicidal ideation, and the celebration of its own dismissal of any

possibility of recovery: the Black Pill, a pseudo-philosophy which has become synonymous with the Incel worldview.

Incel is one of the smaller (in terms of forum members) and more shadowy (in terms of their communication being exclusively online) parts of the Manosphere – albeit one which is increasingly notorious. The scope, scale, and wider impact of the Manosphere is therefore substantially greater than that of Incels. Existing research claims that the Manosphere became a significant influence in shaping popular online debate (Salter, 2018) and was a considerable source of support in the ultimately successful election campaign of Donald Trump in 2016 (Martin, 2017). Many conversations about contemporary antifeminism present the Manosphere as both cause and symptom of its spread (e.g. Baker, 2017).

The political objectives (or lack thereof) in Incel discourse is consequently likely to be more productively understood when primed with an understanding of this dimension of its closest online affiliates. I will put forward an argument at the end of this section that most Manosphere groups share a central diagnosis of contemporary gender relations which adheres to the definition of antifeminism outlined above. The heterogeneity of the Manosphere lies not in its diagnosis of gender relations but in its prescribed medicine.

What and Where is the Manosphere?

The Manosphere is a set of loosely affiliated online interest groups which emphasise the plight of men and boys whose wellbeing it is claimed is threatened by changes in contemporary gender politics and social structures. There is some disagreement in the literature regarding how politically engaged Manosphere groups are (Ging, 2017: 3; Mountford, 2018: 1), but there is a consensus that the groups which make up the Manosphere share an interest in the challenges facing men and boys. While there is some continuity between Manosphere groups and past

men's rights groups, the former is distinct by being a mostly online phenomenon⁶¹, and reflecting the changes in communication and rhetorical style associated with online interactions more generally (Messner, 2016: 9).

The Manosphere exists in 'community-driven' online forums, message boards and social media groups, with different subgroups typically residing in designated spaces though these are subject to change. Indeed, several Incel forums and subreddits considered for this thesis' case study were banned by administrators⁶², necessitating online relocation. Over the past decade, the spread of online platforms in which users can anonymously interact has had a transformative impact on the potential popularity of these communities, as this once marginal dimension to organised men's groups has become a hub of activity where knowledge is shared and re/produced. To give some indication of scale, as of March 2019 subreddits on 'MensRights' [sic] had over 210,000 subscribers, 'MGTOW' over 96,000 and 'Seduction' ('Primarily for men looking to seduce women in their life. Help with dating, learn to be a pickup artist (PUA), fix your Game') over 315,000. While there is no available research on the flow of users between these and other affiliated sites, work has been done tracing the other boards that the 382,000 members of subreddit 'The Donald' post on (Martin, 2017) which points to a high probability of crossover⁶³.

The multitude of such platforms outside (e.g. *GitHub* and *KiwiFarms*) as well as inside the primary centres like *Reddit*, *Facebook* and *Twitter* allows ideas to be spread rapidly between groups and then discussed, by far more people far more quickly than was

⁶¹ While the extent to which the Manosphere operates online and is borne of a communicative style typical of online subculture more generally is original in the history of the MRM, there is evidence of similar groups forming in the early days of the internet, most notably in *usenet* forums in the early to mid-1990s (Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Wright, 2017). Some of these which focused on involuntary celibacy will be referred to in the next chapter.

⁶² Examples of reasons for these bans include: the posting of private information; targeted harassment; threats of violence.

⁶³ One conclusion from this research was that, ignoring those boards with an explicitly political agenda (e.g. *r/HillaryForPrison*), the second most popular crossover subreddit (users posting on both) was *r/TheRedPill* (the first being the now banned *r/fatpeoplehate*).

technologically feasible in the 1990s. It stands to reason then that the Manosphere incorporates a variety of groups which, though not without considerable differences between them, will enjoy the benefits of this accelerated communicative capacity.

The Philosophy of the Manosphere: The Red Pill

The ‘loose affiliation’ extends to a shared set of normative commitments which have been referred to as the Red Pill philosophy (TRP or RPP). TRP requires some unpacking, as without an *urtext* or even an especially strong consensus within TRP advocates as to its substantive meaning there are competing claims regarding its definition (Aikin, 2019: 427-428). While most Manosphere subgroups use TRP as a shared point of reference, TRP is not exclusively the remit of any single [sub]group. In other words, TRP has evolved to become a cross-sector rallying cry which has purchase not only within Manosphere groups but is understood as a marker of identity across internet subcultures and increasingly into more mainstream forums. In a case of ‘if you know, you know’, to claim to be ‘red pillled’ is to announce that you are sympathetic to some degree with a series of metapolitical⁶⁴ positions (Marche, 2016).

A millennial phenomenon, TRP takes its cues from twentieth-century currents in conservative and fascistic thinking (Nagle, 2016). This hybridisation of antifeminist with antisemitic, ethno-nationalist and conspiratorial tropes dating back to the 1930s (see Theweleit, 1987: 4) has been honed and communicated from the offset in online spaces, and online is where the first users explicitly advocating TRP are found. Following Dignam & Rohlinger

⁶⁴ I use ‘metapolitical’ here to describe significant or ambitious statements about social, cultural and political conditions, without having clear policy implications or adhering to a set prescription of how best to move forward. In this sense ‘sub-political’ might be a more accurate term, but I have decided to use that which is used more often in TRP spaces.

(2019: 598) it is useful to return to the first TRP subreddit and a post made by its creator ‘pk_atheist’ (subsequently revealed to be former Republican lawmaker Robert Fisher):

we [men] no longer run the show... Feminism is a sexual strategy. It puts women into the best position they can find, to select mates, to determine when they want to switch mates, to locate the best DNA possible, and to garner the most resources they can individually achieve. The Red Pill is men’s sexual strategy. Reality is happening, and we need to make sure that we adjust our strategy accordingly
(pk_atheist, 11/8/2012, “Introduction”)

While this quote does not represent the entirety of TRP’s philosophical commitments, it does introduce some key themes which we can then elaborate upon with reference to the emerging literature as well as examples from popular Manosphere spaces. That it was written by a serving politician and founder of what would become a central node in the Manosphere ecosystem is an interesting extra detail. More pertinent to this project however is that it introduces a basic diagnosis of feminist power during neoliberalism, working against the interests of men. It is from this framework that Incel constructs its own, fatalist Black Pill response.

The first and final observations in the quotation are the most revealing. Fisher is aware that his opening statement, that men ‘no longer run the show’, contradicts established social science research (see Fraser, 2009). These academic spaces, where ‘common wisdom’ points to the systemic empowerment of men and relative disempowerment of women, are targets for critique, individually and collectively, of TRP. This conflict Fisher answers assertively: ‘Reality is happening’ and men need to establish their own ‘strategy’ in a battle against feminism. While enduring inequalities in for example pay or boardroom representation are justified as the product of women exercising agency, in the case of sexual choices Fisher implies a coordinated effort by women, through feminism, to become ‘superior’ competitors than men.

This quote also closely resembles the cultural reference that TRP is founded on. In the film *The Matrix* (1999), protagonist Neo (Keanu Reeves) is contacted by freedom fighter Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), who claims that the world that he and all other humans accept as a self-evident truth is in fact (in reality) an illusion, the product of a robotic attempt to enslave all humanity to machines. Sensory experience, Morpheus explains, is a chemical reaction that has been manipulated by ‘the machines’, who have created a fake world (the titular ‘Matrix’) which obscures the fact that humans are kept and farmed as batteries for their robotic masters. Morpheus then offers Neo the opportunity to learn and experience the ‘truth’ and be freed from the prison he had previously been unaware of: ‘You take the blue pill, the story ends. You wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to. You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland⁶⁵, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes’. The use of popular culture references is a reoccurring theme not just in TRP philosophy but online spaces and ‘meme culture’ more generally (Shifman, 2014: 136). The other popular TRP reference is to the similar narrative of illusion and imprisonment, the film and novel ‘*Fight Club*’ (Palahniuk, 1996).

Through this reference, Fisher and by extension one of the original TRP statements (the thread title is called ‘Introduction’ after all), is inviting readers to countenance the idea that the ‘reality’ that the sensory world presents to them is just such a manipulation and illusion. All that ‘established research’ in the social sciences, the assumption that women and people of colour suffer real discrimination in the Western world, could be an illusion. The statement is an implied question: will the reader question what they think they know? The question is framed urgently, and as a question of emancipation: not only should the reader take the pill and ‘see’ the truth, but subsequently become a freedom fighter with a clear ‘strateg[ic]’ agenda.

⁶⁵ The literary reference to Lewis Carroll is no accident, and another scene sees Neo hiding his computer files in a hollow copy of Baudrillard’s (1981) ‘*Simulacra and Simulation*’

The implication is that those who reject the truth are less brave, more content with a comforting illusion⁶⁶.

The dehumanisation of those who still believe in the illusion⁶⁷ is communicated in a language of *emasculatation*. Those who refuse TRP are, in Manosphere spaces, derided in specific, feminising language (e.g. ‘cucks’ and ‘soyboys’). Manosphere texts often articulate a fear that the hidden or suppressed reality is in fact a broader downward trajectory in pan-European civilisation, often measured by sexual virility (Zuckerberg, 2018: 177-179). This decline is, it is claimed, an objective of and pursued by a variety of Others (feminists, immigrants, the education sector, Jewish power). Women are characterised as preferring the state of privileged victimhood afforded in this illusion, while on the other hand men who actively contribute to the oppression of their sex and by extension their ethnic heritage are portrayed as pathetic, cowards and weaklings. This is the broad call-to-arms of TRP and the cultural references it mobilises.

The quote also includes the claim that women have collectively used feminist ideas to better serve their interests in a battle of the sexes. While this is not entirely inaccurate, and in fact reproduces in some cases [feminist] analyses of neoliberal entanglement examined in the previous chapter, TRP claims that this empowerment is predicated upon a symmetrical disempowerment of men which is itself ‘hidden’, by political correctness and pro-feminist indoctrination. As in Cudd’s (2002) work on backlash, and in Corredor’s (2019) work on social counter-movements, TRP’s worldview matches that of other ‘counter’ or ‘backlash’ movements: the perception of one category (in this case, heterosexual men) losing out in a

⁶⁶ Further, what is the destiny of believers in this comforting illusion? In *The Matrix*, one recalcitrant swallower of TRP can no longer stomach the cruelty of reality, and so conspires with robotic presence Agent Smith to betray the other freedom fighters on the condition that he is returned to a privileged position in the false reality. He is ultimately murdered, his corpse spat upon.

⁶⁷ Those who have not ingested the pill at all are ignorant of reality, in internet parlance ‘sheeple’ or ‘non-playing characters’ (NPC), a phrase originally used to describe automated roles in video games.

zero-sum game with an opposition category (in this case, all women, but especially sexually desirable women).

This disempowerment is, in Fisher's quote, described in the language of neoliberalism: 'Best position... mates... DNA... resources' evokes the mantra of individual responsibility, self-investment and crude economic measures of beauty, intimacy and sexual subjectivity that is consistent with the Foucauldian (see Rottenberg, 2017) and historic (see Mirowski, 2009: 435-436) accounts of neoliberal ideology. This underlines a paradox which manifests in the opposition to 'hegemonic feminism' that Manosphere groups offer. Contemporary society is critiqued on the grounds of its anti-male and anti-masculine culture and politics, and yet many of the logics that animate the exercise of power under neoliberalism (market competition as an immutable feature of reality and knowledge, etc.) – which have ambiguous effects on gender – are enthusiastically reproduced in the very alternative posed by these groups (e.g. learning 'game', 'gymaxxing' etc.).

The Red Pill and Gender: A Central Diagnosis

Though ethno-nationalist, antisemitic and other strains of conservative and fascist thought have been absorbed into TRP philosophy, it is the gendered dimension of the 'new culture wars' that is most synonymous with TRP, and acts as a unifying principle between otherwise disparate affiliates (Marche, 2016).

In response to feminist dominance, some TRP adherents propose a kind of right-wing Gramscianism, in which long-term strategies for changing prevailing cultural norms are explicitly theorised (not unlike the Hayekian branch of neoliberalism covered in Chapter Three). It is suggested that a slow revolution through subversive cultural production, and the infiltration of strategic positions (e.g. in finance, security services and the media) by 'Red Pilled' agents, are the best means by which to foster support for their worldview (Marantz,

2019: 52-55). Gramsci is not often cited by TRP adherents (although there are exceptions to this), but the comparison between proposed strategies is obvious. This fostering of support is accomplished primarily by engaging in memetic transfer of its philosophy in online spaces (for example see Fig. 3 and Fig. 4), utilising the expertise of its adherents in online communication and the transformation of cultural capital therein, and then by the infiltration of various strategically important sectors.

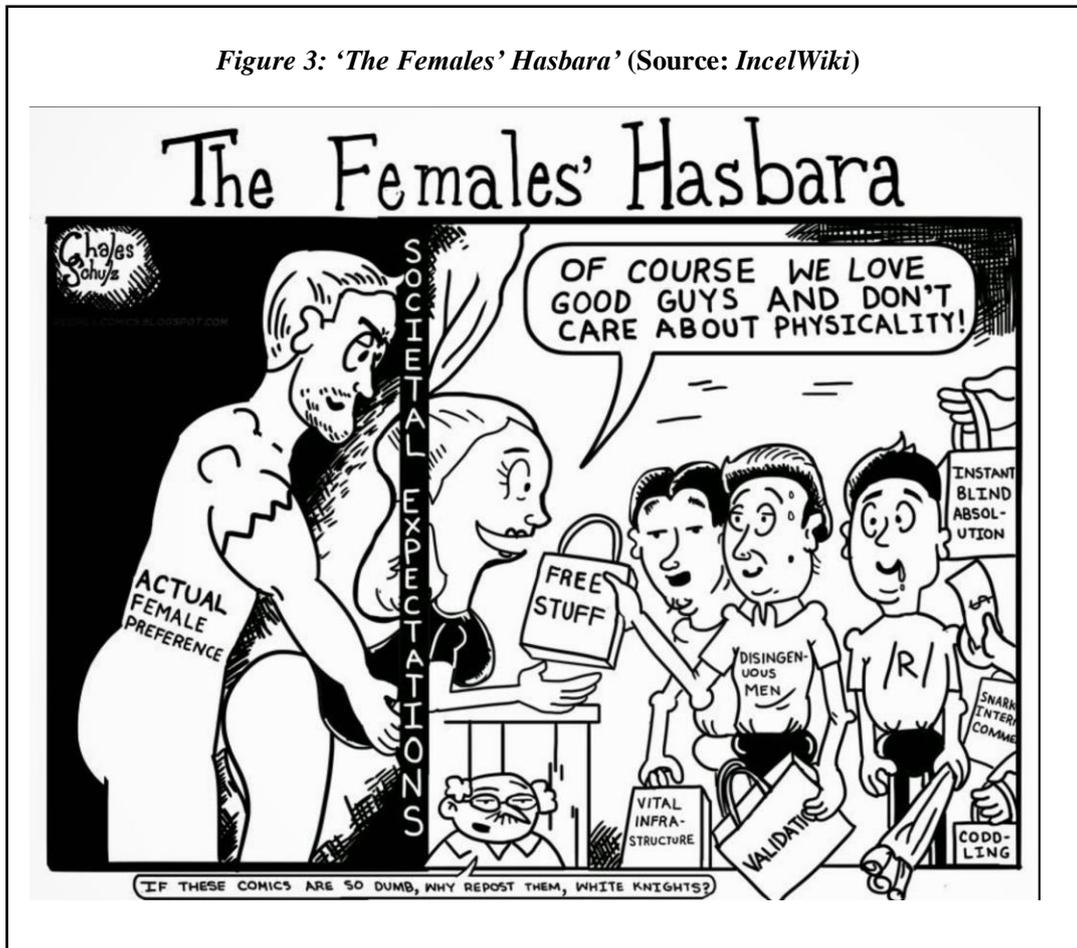
TRP describes a society so rigged by feminists that it shames, degrades, and has disempowered masculinity and men (Manne, 2018: 68-69), even as women are biologically and psychologically disposed in favour of these traits. In *'The Females' Hasbara* below, which is one in a series of comic panels designed to reflect TRP, the men bringing gifts of 'free stuff', 'validation' and 'vital infrastructure' are portrayed as ignorant of 'Actual female preference', which is [particularly sexual] submission to masculinity and masculine men. This is a specific reading of masculinity that emphasises traditional, patriarchal values of leadership, physical strength, autonomy, and that 'to be masculine is to fuck women' (Connell, 2000: 120) without being dictated to by them. According to TRP's biologically essentialist reading of gender and sex, *all* men are by nature prone to these behavioural traits. Ergo, it is all men who potentially suffer under the hegemony of feminism.

Examples of the degradation of masculinity are presented as a mixture of anecdotal experience⁶⁸ (e.g. being 'shut down' by a group of work colleagues for expressing views contrary to received [feminist] wisdom) and data which points to male suffering (often increased suicide rates but also workplace deaths, custody arrangements etc.) (O'Neill, 2015). Popular culture events (e.g. Hollywood remakes of classic films with an all-female cast) are interpreted as evidence of institutionalised, culturally enforced hatred of masculinity (often

⁶⁸ Particularly in education environments – there are many stories of 'cucked' professors and teachers, as well as experiences of social ostracization when 'Red Pilled' knowledge is shared among a 'Normie' friendship group.

conflated by TRP adherents as hatred of men: misandry). This willingness to engage in critique of popular culture allows TRP to enter mainstream discourse in a seemingly more innocent manner than would having a narrower political objective.⁶⁹

Figure 3: 'The Females' Hasbara' (Source: IncelWiki)



Subsequent TRP claims are drawn from the central observation that women are now privileged actors. The second is that women are not prepared to deal with the consequences of the freedom feminism has afforded and encourages them to pursue (see Jim's Blog, 2013).

⁶⁹ Further examples of this include advertising campaigns which acknowledge obstacles experienced by women (e.g. 'This Girl Can' (2015)), or the potential harm caused by aggressive masculinity performance (e.g. Gillette's 'toxic masculinity' campaign). Similarly, high profile individuals who vocally assert their pro-feminist beliefs become targets for TRP critique, often on the grounds that they are either (A) seeking to profit off of feminist discourse, (B) forcing feminism down the throats of disempowered Western men, or (C) propagating an idea of feminism which hypocritically champions the individual choices of women (all choices) while framing all women as victims.

Political, social and economic freedom has in its very subversion of traditional gender norms permitted women to live as though they were men. However, women, because of their biological and psychological nature, bemoan the consequences of their ‘free’ actions in a self-serving display of victimhood, while the state and corporations reinforce this unhappy freedom this by providing superior conditions of welfare, job security and media representation (Tomassi, 2017). These ‘consequences’ usually boil down to an accountability which, it is argued, men universally face. Physical intimidation and reactions, disbelief and presumptive guilt are some examples of consequences that apparently disproportionately effect men.

In its most extreme manifestation this has provided the justification for some TRP thinkers to exhibit nostalgia for pre-modern or theocratic societies in which women were treated as property by their fathers and then husbands (see Jim’s Blog, 2018). Even in its milder forms, this thinking is a vessel by which arguments about ‘excessive’ feminism, feminism as acting against women’s interests, and the fracturing of traditional gender roles being accelerated by feminist thinking, are made. In its paternalism, it also offers a route to antifeminism *sans* misogyny as outlined above, as these advocates make claims that they are protecting the interests of women insofar as feminism threatens not just gender relations, but also women’s self-identification (see Molyneaux, 2012; Tomassi, 2017). This paternalism, which in any case is arguably an infantilising form of misogyny, is exposed as ‘concern trolling’ in several cases via subsequent highly aggressive antifeminist and/or misogynist statements.

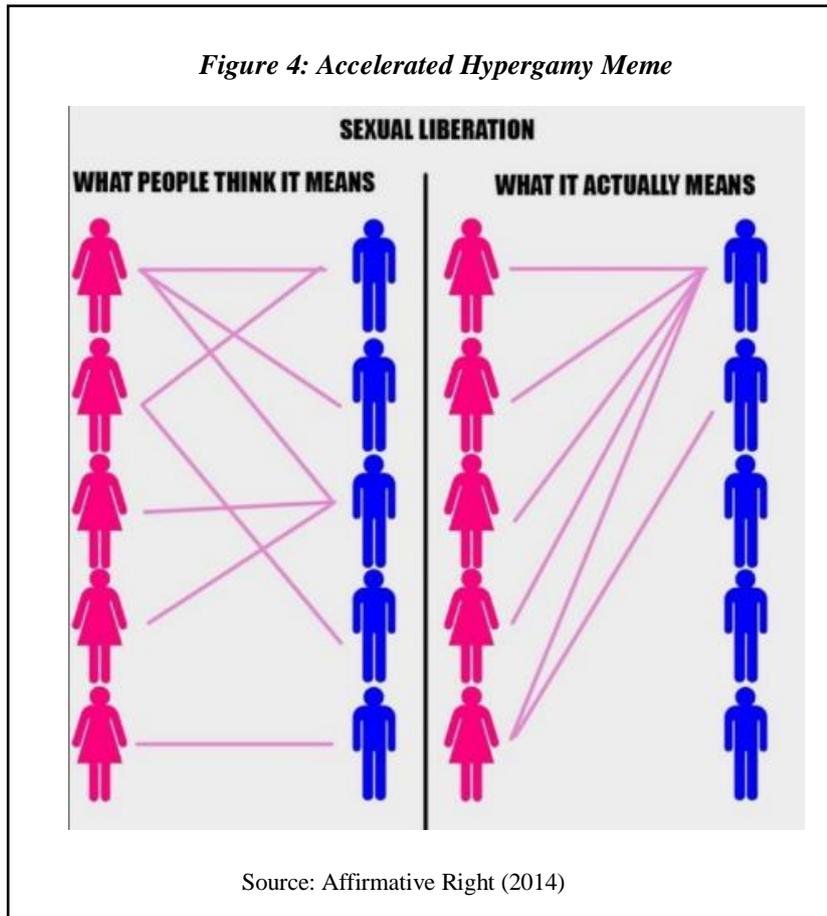
Which feminism or feminist ideas pose the biggest threat according to TRP is difficult to pin down, and the broad, ‘have it all’ depictions of the modern woman is an image of empowerment that has received many feminist critiques anyway (Gill & Orgad, 2018: 1314-1315). As TRP addresses men who feel that they are not afforded any significant privilege based on their sex or gender (the distinction between the two is often collapsed), the lack of

detail is not necessarily a problem for their advocates. It is a framing which scapegoats male economic, sexual, and other frustrations on a nebulous but all-powerful target which operates not unlike the mind-control machines in *The Matrix*. This position can be described as ‘potent fusion of two elements – entitlement and a sense of victimisation’ (Messner, 2017: x) and increasingly positions itself as the ‘real’ counter-culture in a neoliberal environment which endorses many select identitarian movements (O’Neil, 2018).

Part of the problem in assessing which feminist ideas are particularly damaging to women, according to TRP, is that almost any increase in independence⁷⁰ for women is seen both as evidence of women having become privileged actors, and simultaneously how feminism has *hurt* women. This includes a reoccurring frustration, at times bordering on paranoia, with the sexual power that women have acquired. The autonomy facilitated by dating apps and social media has, it is argued, combined with a [neoliberal] culture that champions women’s sexual and financial freedom, as well as biological differences between the sexes (e.g. male promiscuity and female choosiness).

The result is accelerated hypergamy, unrestrained by social mores denouncing ‘loose women’ (Futrelle, 2013; DeDeo, 2018). Originally a social science term referring to the phenomenon of marrying someone of a higher social class, hypergamy is referenced to varying degrees across the Manosphere as an explanation for male sexual disempowerment. As women are encouraged by ‘feminist media’ to have high demands of potential partners, an increasing number of men are being ‘locked out’ of developing relationships. In the ‘sexual marketplace’ women play ‘on easy mode’, while among men it is only the conventionally attractive who enjoy similar choices. This is often communicated in the Manosphere via rudimentary graphics and easily shared memes:

⁷⁰ Including: sexual agency due to widened access to contraception and/or dating websites or platform apps; financial independence from greater numbers of women in the workforce; protection from discriminatory hiring practices and sexual harassment in the workplace; preferable treatment in divorce law.



There are a diversity of responses this Red Pill diagnosis, outlined below, but there are still others which do not identify with any specific Manosphere subgroup. Observing various TRP sites (e.g. *The Rational Male*) it becomes clear that some adherents see TRP, if properly embraced and enforced, as a project for restoring to women their biologically ordained role of carer-housemaker, as well as the basis required to sustain a social fabric. This response to the sexual autonomy of women, which began with their winning the right to vote, socialised further through the sexual revolution of the 1960s and increased access to contraception, and embedded by the type of gender mainstreaming of the neoliberal era, calls to mind the type of backlash described by Faludi (1991) above. According to TRP, men have lost their position of relative empowerment compared to women when it comes to forming and enforcing norms

around sexual behaviour (e.g. the coding of chastity and/or monogamy as virtuous). TRP's binary view of gender relations today can therefore be summarised as follows:

Table 5: The Red Pill and Gender

The Illusion	The Reality
Women remain the relatively disempowered gender and are subject to more gendered obstacles in their lives than are men, evidenced by financial (e.g. gender pay gap) and physical (e.g. disproportionately the victims of sexual violence) disparity.	Women have become the dominant gender through gaming social structures, assisted by the incorporation of a pro-feminist agenda in political and institutional apparatus'. This is evidenced by preferential treatment in divorce courts, higher education intake etc.
The lived experiences of men are characterised by greater privileges than women, on both a micro ('manspreading' 'mansplaining' etc.) and macro (e.g. celebration of masculinity as a desirable leadership quality) scale.	Men's lived experience is characterised by interactions with a society that degrades traditional masculine behaviour, yet relies on it to maintain law and order. Men are increasingly granted fewer choices in employment and sexual partner, resulting in increased suicide rates and singledom.
Women should be supported with conditions which allow for the autonomous exercise of choice in all matters, including occupation and sexual partner (e.g. free access to contraception; gender equality charters in the workplace; anti-slut-shaming culture etc.)	Women cannot cope with the consequences of their new autonomy, and must be subsidised for this by preferential treatment courtesy of the state and private sector.
Social cohesion is predicated on the continued empowerment of all women.	Social cohesion is threatened by the breakdown in traditional gender roles.

Core claim: Common sense understandings of contemporary gender power relations are an illusion, created and reproduced by the adoption of feminist objectives by multiple powerful institutions (the state, IGOs, the university, the media, popular culture).

The Manosphere Constellation: Responses to the Red Pill

This central diagnosis of gender relations under neoliberalism is broadly shared by Manosphere communities (Ging, 2017). It is in this ‘red pill’d’ context that Incel must be situated⁷¹. However, different Manosphere groups, including Incel, react differently to this reality.

Male Rights Activists (MRAs) focus on organising men to fight changes in the law, to offer support to men who have been discriminated against, and to put pressure on politicians and companies who do not respect the rights of men. MRAs typically have more confidence in political or institutional processes for restoring the balance between men and women, and have engaged in some high-profile campaigns to draw attention to specific issues or cases (e.g. over male circumcision). Their forums are less likely to concentrate on dating difficulties per se, and more likely to include threads detailing systemic prejudice against men.

Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOWs) argue that men should withdraw and rid themselves of responsibility for women. Their absence will eventually force the world to recognise the good in men and masculinity. Until then, women will continue to exploit them. The extent to which separatism is pursued varies. Some argue that MGTOW should concentrate on full autonomy and zero interaction with women; others acknowledge the implausibility of this isolation but still caution against being emotionally or financially invested in any relationship with a woman⁷². MGTOW forums often feature stories of suffering at the hands of women, tips on avoiding the temptation to be with women, and more esoteric posts on the spiritual side of masculinity, the natural world and solitude⁷³.

Pick-Up Artists (PUAs) take a more interventionist approach. While acknowledging that women hold an advantage in today’s dating scene, PUAs believe that the best response is

⁷¹ As examined in the next chapter, Incel not only exists within this ‘red pill’d’ context, it also exists as one manifestation in a history of groups formed to support individuals who were involuntarily celibate.

⁷² Still others argue that marriage and procreation is justifiable, so long as your future wife is traditional, uninterested in feminism and innocent of political correctness. The key theme is an aversion to ‘decadent’ feminist values.

⁷³ There is a clear precedent for this in the mytho-poetic men’s movement of the 1970s.

to learn seduction skills ('game'). Feminist culture has, many PUAs argue, divorced women from their biologically and psychologically driven desires to submit to masculine partners. This manifests in the controversial practice of trialling techniques to overcome 'last minute resistance' (LMR) before sleeping with uncertain female partners. PUA websites are a mixture of 'field reports' which describe attempts to have sex with women in a specific city or country, and more general speculation on seduction strategies. In both cases sex is presented as a transactional activity, and there is a shared mantra of personal responsibility to recognise your strengths and invest in your weakness, whether that is gym work or practicing 'spontaneous' or 'dominant' behaviour.

Evaluating the Manosphere as an Antifeminist Backlash

Manosphere groups share a diagnosis of contemporary gender relations which constructs a hegemonic feminism as an adversarial force for all men and, ultimately, women too. There are many references to the heightened visibility of feminist iconography and ideas under neoliberalism, and the intellectual effort to reject, negate and criticise these ideas is partially justified by the perception of male disempowerment. In these ways the Manosphere collectively qualifies as a 'backlash' in accordance with the definitions I have developed from Faludi (1991) and Cudd (2002). The vast majority of Manosphere group sites also reflect the positive commitments of antifeminism as featured on *Rational Wiki*, as well as the rejections outlined in the *International Encyclopaedia of Men & Masculinities* definition.

The 'Red Pill' philosophy which informs the perception of a dominant, threatening feminism which Manosphere groups share, can be utilised in different ways ranging from separatism, defeatism/fatalism and as a catalyst for 'improved' techniques of 'hacking' women's sexuality. These involve varying degrees of misogyny. The feminism that TRP describes, which is omniscient but not necessarily coordinated, sounds more like the

postfeminist logic and neoliberal feminism examined in Part One that it does more traditional concepts of feminist politics:

... the popular feminism under attack by the alt-right often champions the central tenets of neoliberalism—the importance of self-empowerment, personal responsibility, and consumption to individual success—rather than the concrete social change offered by political feminism

(Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019: 590)

Simultaneously these central tenets of neoliberalism are either accelerated and embraced in Manosphere responses (e.g. PUAs), or function as markers of reality which proves the failure of men (e.g. suicidal ideation in Incels unable to ‘ascend’). Incel therefore occupies one node in a network which has a close relationship to its neoliberal environment, whether such neoliberalism manifests in new formations of gender relations or broader mantras of quantitative evaluation and transformations in institutional culture.

In the next chapter then, I provide a map of Incel as a community, culture, and worldview. This is based on a period of several years regularly reading Incel-generated content as well as an emerging literature on Incel specifically. While I expect that many of these observations made during this period will be reinforced by my case study analysis, at the time of writing I had not begun a ‘deep dive’ reading of my dataset. Therefore, the below functions as a birds-eye account of Incel as it appeared during a period of cultural immersion between late 2016 and 2020.

Chapter Six: Finding Incel(s)?

Introduction

Incel is an under-explored community with little peer-reviewed research available, particularly regarding the construction of its worldview and how its antifeminism reflects a neoliberal environment. While there are some notable exceptions to this that my thesis cites (e.g. Jaki et al, 2019 and Baele et al, 2019), the focus in most academic work is towards policy recommendation and security studies (e.g. Zimmerman et al, 2018; Hoffman et al, 2020). Moreover, a lot of research in this area analyses the Manosphere as an antifeminist network rather than extrapolating from deep studies of specific groups (e.g. Ging, 2017; Marwick & Caplan, 2018). Broader research projects which examine changes in masculinities (e.g. Messner, 2016; Jones, 2019) and the global ‘anti-gender movement’ (e.g. Nicholas & Agius, 2018: 32-40; Corredor, 2019) likewise make reference to Incel as part of a wider analysis. There is a much wider variety of journalistic engagements with Incel specifically, some of which I cite (e.g. Squirrell, 2018; Kelly, 2020).

There are additionally numerous opinion pieces produced by writers who have varying degrees of sympathy or empathy in their understanding of the Incel worldview, including those who would consider themselves part of the wider antifeminist effort (e.g. Devlin, 2006; Tomassi, 2018; Castle, 2019). These I have consulted, as well as blogs from contributors previously associated with and self-identified as Incels, but who have for various reasons stopped⁷⁴. Many of these are cited approvingly in Incel spaces and provide some of the intellectual material for prolonged discussions on *incels.co*, and as such are an important facet of Incel knowledge and shared meaning-making.

⁷⁴ E.g. ‘CoAlphaAntiModernistIncelBlogger’, who attempted to start his own community after repeatedly being frustrated by how moderate mainstream Incel spaces were.

The existing literature is useful to the extent that it develops sophisticated understandings of the [antifeminist] network in which Incel exists, however it is not on its own sufficient preparation for the kind of in-depth analysis of the Incel worldview undertaken in the next chapter. While it shares an antifeminist diagnosis of contemporary society with other Manosphere communities, Incel is unique in its belief that men have been robbed of the capacity to overcome the stranglehold that feminism has on society, particularly in the realm of sexual behaviour (Wilson, 2018). This different reading of contemporary gender power relations is an extremely important detail which marks Incel as distinct within the Manosphere.

In this chapter I therefore contribute to a gap in the literature by providing an overview of what we already know about Incel and its history, and then closely examining the knowledge that has been produced in Incel spaces. As such this work will be largely descriptive and exploratory. This chapter asks: *what is Incel and how can we define it? What is the history of Incel as it is commonly understood, and what can we learn from this regarding its possible engagements with a neoliberal environment?* Finally, while acknowledging the inherent limits to ascribing any fixed qualities on a changing and often extremist worldview (Koltko-Rivera, 2004: 4), *what is Black Pill worldview as it is currently described in Incel spaces?* In addressing these questions, I will also clarify several other areas which are relevant to the analysis chapters and bring together the concepts of antifeminism, neoliberalism and Incel. Is Incel distinct from the condition of involuntary celibacy? Where do Incels interact on the internet and how do antifeminist and/or misogynist claims function in these spaces? Lastly, is it possible to grade participants' investment in Incel ideology?

Immersion in the Incel Community and Culture

To arrive at a coherent map of the Incel worldview, I have immersed myself [anonymously] within the broad Incel culture and observed interactions between identifying Incels. By

following this passive ethnographic approach in learning the references and in-jokes which characterise Incel communication, I confront many of the same epistemic tensions as does ‘physical’ ethnographic design, for instance in determining validating versus critical analytic frameworks, which I navigate through a triangulation of resources which inform my Incel mapping (Skitka & Sargis, 2006). This chapter therefore relies on a variety of primary sources⁷⁵ to compose an accurate map of Incel, all of which are listed in the next chapter but include multiple subreddits (e.g. *r/failed_Normies*), YouTube channels (e.g. ‘*FACEandLMS*’), blogs (e.g. ‘*Incel.Blog*’) and podcasts (e.g. ‘*IncelProject*’).

My focus is cognition-oriented, assessing the interconnected beliefs and assumptions about physical and social realities through which realities – and the contributor’s existence – are interpreted (Baele et al, 2019: 2). This will allow me to make comparisons between the Incel critique of its neoliberal environment and those offered by feminist theorists in Chapter Four. Characteristics of the Incel community – a propensity towards casual displays of violent ideation, guarded anonymity and a general suspicion of new or unvalidated⁷⁶ members, a vernacular steeped in in-humour and references, the tendency for posts to be ironic, parodic or provocative (often at the same time) – pose several challenges to this approach. The affective distance which many posters evoke when contributing to a thread can potentially go unnoticed by a research unfamiliar with these spaces.

I resolve these issues in two ways. First, I have familiarised myself with Incel vocabulary, which is the most expansive of any Manosphere community, and included a glossary for the reader. While there are guides to Incel terms available online, seeing their use ‘in the wild’ as it were is a preferable means of discovering the function of select words and the concepts that they describe. The sub-textual meanings that these words and phrases hold

⁷⁵ The *IncelWiki*, while advertising itself as a work of ‘fiction’, is an exhaustive array of articles providing information about many lesser-known topics and events which pertain to Incel history. It has been used in this project as a guide for some of the more unusual (yet still significant) aspects of the Incel worldview.

⁷⁶ Validation usually takes the form of ‘proving’ unattractiveness by sharing a photograph of the individual.

has a significant structuring function for Incel spaces and the policing of Black Pill claims (Jaki et al, 2019: 3) In a similar manner to the way in which memes are used to spread information and specific political allegiances across political online ecosystems (Shifman, 2013), Incel terms such as ‘Alpha Fuxx’ designate the author as someone invested in Black Pill ideas about romantic relationships in contemporary society. Knowing how to decipher the code might only be the first step in analysing a space like *incels.co*, but it is necessary to effectively do so.

Second, I am guided by a digital communication literature, specifically that which focuses on trolling and flippancy, when assessing the meanings being communicated and (re)produced on these sites (Crawford, 2009; Milner, 2013). Detached amusement at the distress or misfortune of others is not exclusive to Incel spaces but is instead a consistent feature of most online communities (Crosset et al, 2019: 940-942). In Incel spaces the themes of sexual conduct, ‘misandry’ and degeneracy – all cultivated in an atmosphere of widespread and uncontested resentment against women – make this kind of trolling highly inflammatory even by ‘edgelord’ standards.

Trolling can, however, hold a clear line of prejudice and/or discrimination in its targets and claims, even if the precise wording of the comment is deliberately outlandish and non-serious. As Milner (2013) argues, core identity categories – race and gender especially – are likely to be prone to *either* adversarial agonism (which involves engagement and plurality), or exclusive antagonism. In other words, the approach taken by some academics and journalists who declare trollish declarations of murderous intent as nothing more serious than immature ‘edge-lording’ (e.g. Nagle, 2017; Costello, 2020) *miss* what is still there underneath this ambivalent irony: ‘Assessing micro-level representations regarding race and gender provides a means for evaluating identity antagonism on these sites’ (Milner, 2013).

Capturing the Diversity of Incel(s)

What the period of immersion made clear is that Incel is a *community* of individuals who hold different interpretations of what it means to ‘be’ an Incel, a *culture* with reoccurring themes in its user-generated media content, and an all-encompassing *worldview*, within which a wide variety of sometimes contradictory ambitions and claims are made. It is the antifeminism of that ‘Black Pill’ worldview that this thesis is examining. However, to map that worldview, these different registers of Incel must be addressed as integral to its construction. The Black Pill⁷⁷ would not exist, at least not in the way it does, if this culture and [largely anonymous] community did not exist.

This reading of Incel contrasts with several contemporary accounts which frame Incel as a ‘movement’ with discrete objectives (e.g. Hassanein, 2020; Hoffman 2020), or alternatively as a community of men with little in common other than sexual frustration. Both are understandable definitions of Incel and, particularly in the first case, accurately describe beliefs held by many members of the community and the possible interpretations of its worldview. However, these kinds of readings risk repeating the kind of reductive explanations which characterise so much of Incel discourse. Consider the following example from a recent article published on Medium⁷⁸:

An incel, or involuntarily celibate, is defined as someone who has not had access to sex for a sustained period of longer than six months. Going by this definition and acknowledging the fact that the number of men not having sex within the last year has increased 3 fold in the last decade, we must conclude that the majority of incels are peaceful and non-violent
(Costello, 2020)

⁷⁷ I have noticed in the past couple of years that ‘Black Pill’ is increasingly being used to describe any bleak or pessimistic response to the Red Pill diagnosis of society’s ills. In this thesis the term is used exclusively to describe the Incel worldview.

⁷⁸ Which was shared approvingly on Twitter by some identifying-Incels.

On first reading this seems like a plausible statement and inference. Incels are ‘involuntarily celibate’ people, the number of whom has increased especially among the male population, and we can conclude from this that ‘the majority of incels are peaceful and non-violent’. The conclusion however relies entirely on an inaccurate elision of Incel with involuntary celibacy, which is proven demonstrably false after only a brief period of immersion. There are two major indicators that Incel is something other than a community brought together by sexlessness, the first of which is that on the major forum of Incel interaction (*incels.co*) does not allow women – any women – to register:

Incel (Allowed): Person who desires, but is unable, to be in a romantic relationship.

Blackpilled (Conditional): Person who is not currently incel, but agrees to respect the views portrayed on the forum. The user should be indistinguishable from other incel members, mentioning they aren't incel is an instant ban.

Female (Not Allowed): Banned on sight, no exceptions. This is a male-only forum

(*incels.co*, ‘*Rules and Terminology*’, posted Nov 9th 2017)

While the rules refer to the forum being ‘male only’ without an explanation as to why, a short period of time browsing *incels.co* makes clear that an *a priori* claim held by nearly all posters is that women are incapable of being Incel. To be recognised and granted permission to speak on the major site of Incel traffic, you have to be male – an important qualifier absent from Costello’s (2020) piece.

Secondly, the rules clearly state that sexually active men *are* permitted to register and post on *incels.co*, if they ‘respect the views portrayed on the forum’. Adherence to ‘Blackpilled’ rules are therefore, for the administrators of this forum at least, a more important criteria for potential new users than is their sex lives. Any analysis of Incel which defines it as a group of sexless individuals is risking minimizing or ignoring a fundamental aspect of Incel as it exists

in online spaces: the worldview. This includes the author/s of the *IncelWiki* who likewise describe Incel as a ‘gender neutral life circumstance’.

This is not an inconsequential mistake, implying as it does that any person who has not had sex for six months could be grouped under the banner of ‘Incel’. Sexless individuals have not been recorded historically, although their existence can be assumed by noting the concepts of abstinence and celibacy, and the social and literary [gendered] archetypes of ‘bachelors’ and ‘spinsters’. While Incel has some precedents as a group of men wanting to withdraw from a pro-feminist society (e.g. the mytho-poetic men’s movements in the US which embraced the work of writers such as Robert Bly (see Gordon, 1991)), no other shared experience of sexlessness has been the basis for a worldview from which several advocates have derived terroristic objectives.

One other feature of Incel diversity within its community, which is not always highlighted in academic work, is its multi-ethnic demography. While Incel is often associated with alt-right politics and even white supremacism (Romano, 2018) – and there are sympathies among a significant proportion of the community in this direction – polls on *incels.co* indicate that only around 55% of users are ‘white or Caucasian’ (ADL, 2020). To be clear, the available data from *incels.co* is entirely self-reported and, as such, should not be considered decisive. However, work done on how male rights movements occur across the globe (e.g. Dad & Khan, 2019, in Ging & Siapera, 2019) substantiate claims of ethnic diversity among identifying members. The extent to which ethnicity shapes the experience of individual Incels is subject to considerable debate in Incel spaces, as well as offering a possible parallel with critiques of neoliberal-feminist entanglement which foreground disparities in experiences of sexism based on ethnic identity.

Online Incel Histories: From Usenet to Incels.co

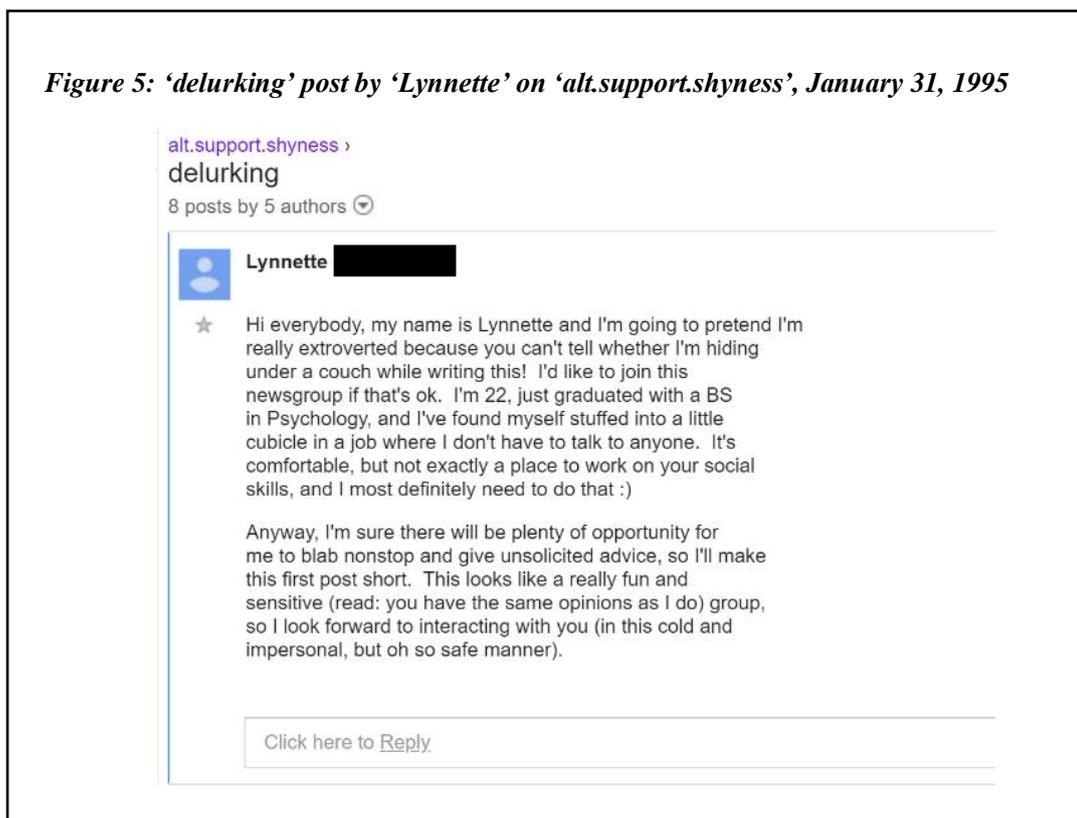
Incel then is a multi-ethnic community comprised of men who share above all a belief in The Black Pill. It is also however a recent community in a history over three decades of individuals, struggling with dating, gathering in different online hubs of communication, including sites which adopted broadly pro-feminist rules and regulations (e.g. allowing women to be recognised as people who could suffer sufficient frustration with dating to be recognised as members). Prior to *incels.co* becoming the major hub of Incel discourse, subreddit *r/incel* – with 40,000 members – was widely considered to be the most active Incel site (Solon, 2017). The banning of *r/incels*, dubbed the ‘incelopaclipse’ by the *IncelWiki*, was the culmination of the merging, banning, and collapsing of various Incel and Incel-friendly forums between the late 1980s and 2017.

A significant amount of Incel discourse references this history, and as such it is useful to document prior to the close-text analysis chapters. Furthermore, in tracing the history of Incel spaces online, we expand our understanding of Incel to reflect the debates held within the community before the present moment. *Incels.co* and its attachment to the Black Pill presents a specific version of Incel, one associated with hate speech, misogyny, and antifeminism (Jaki et al, 2019). Disagreements within the community however evoke this history of internal schism around several issues which pertain to the Black Pill worldview, the relationship Incel ought to have with feminism, women, and social environments more generally. As such, this history is an important context for mapping the Incel worldview, familiarisation with which will assist in my close text analysis.

The creation of *Alt.support.shyness* in 1988, a Usenet group considered by the *IncelWiki* as the ‘oldest online incel community’, marks the first widely recognised online gathering of individuals suffering from involuntary celibacy or similar difficulties (see Fig. 5). Usenet groups are remarkably like contemporary forums: open threads with original posts (OPs) and

replies, with regular users acquiring a reputation within the community. The group is still accessible via Google Groups, although the community has been effectively defunct since it moved to *Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project (AICP)* mailing list in 1998. The latter, created by a queer woman from Toronto (Alana) who is regularly reported as being the first to use the term 'incel', was active between 1993 and the early 2000s, when it changed domain locations and names several times, ultimately becoming the *You're Not Alone* forum before finally disbanding in 2014.

Figure 5: 'delurking' post by 'Lynnette' on 'alt.support.shyness', January 31, 1995



What is especially noteworthy about these early Incel sites is that they accepted men and women; involuntary celibacy was the only criteria for membership. Tension regarding the role of gendered experience in Inceldom soon emerged however. Alana reports a drip-drop of misogynist or otherwise aggressive messages when she was moderating her group (Chester, 2018). Other accounts indicate that a divide between those who thought that men and women could communicate as equals, bonded by a shared condition or circumstance, and those who

thought that such a dialogue was impossible, was observable from the very beginning. Still others claim that this divide emerged towards the end of the 1990s:

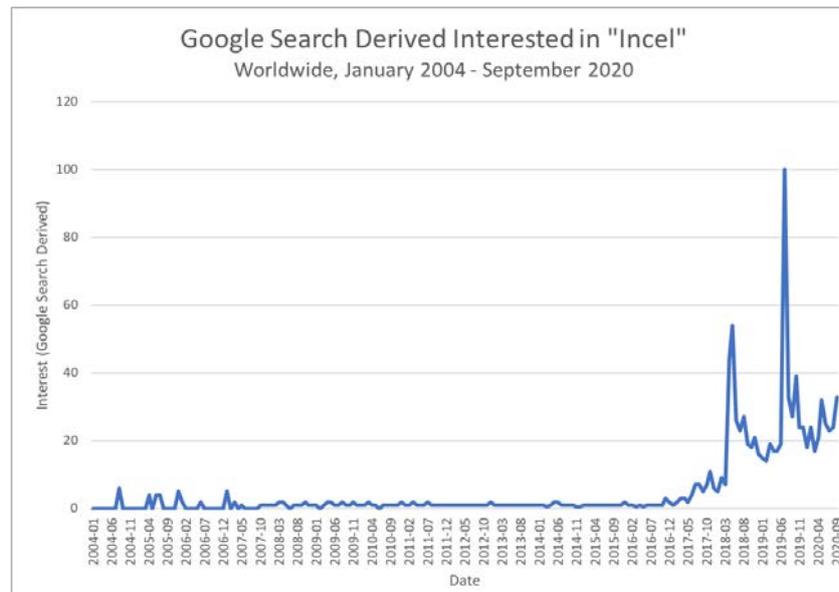
However, here is where I would mention the first beginning of a gender separation. When it came to shyness, men tended to talk about Incel-related problems while women tended to shyness in non-romantic settings (like public speaking or not having enough friends, in general). There was talk about splitting things up between genders since it pained some of the men too much to hear about a young woman needing help not being shy during a job interview when they, themselves, were twice her age and hadn't even kissed anyone.

(ReformedIncel, 2012: 4)

These groups were by today's standards minor in terms of contributors. This changed in the first decade of the millennium with the creation of two forums which would be for several years the largest sites of Incel activity: the *IncelSupport* (2006-2013) and *Love-Shy* (2003-present) forums. In 2004, *4chan* was founded, and would become another site with an active Incel community, particularly after the creation of the */r9k* board in 2008 (Langberg, 2020). In 2004 the *Wikipedia* entry for 'Incel' first appears, indicating that the phenomenon had acquired a degree of wider visibility and a series of online 'homes' long before it had reached popular consciousness, as indicated in the history of Google searches for the term 'Incel' (see Fig. 6).

IncelSupport, which ultimately experienced a server crash destroying all records of its posts, is a significant relic of this early era, demonstrating a culture in which the redeemability of women was still a topic of debate. Several posts on *IncelWiki* and others authored by known Incels (or ex-Incels) recall that the community policed itself in a 'Blue Pill' manner: women were permitted to post, messages with violent, racist or misogynist content were moderated and deleted, and there was a broad emphasis on personal improvement (ReformedIncel, 2012: 14). This was in sharp contrast to *Love-Shy* (where messages are still accessible), which became associated with an emphasis on 'free speech' extended to allow threats of violence and expressions of violent fantasy.

Figure 6: History of "Incel" as a Google Search Term



Note: Data from Google Trends (2020). Scale: “Numbers represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given region and time. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term. A value of 50 means that the term is half as popular. A score of 0 means that there was not enough data for this term.”

A trio of sites in the early 2010s became hubs not only of Incel activity but also as sites for the collision of different Manosphere ideas and communities. PSL refers to three separate forums (*PuaHate*, *Sluthate* and *Lookism*), as well as the ‘PSL Rating’, a numeric measure of attractiveness according to members of these forums. *PuaHate* began as a site oriented around users’ dissatisfaction and criticism of pick-up artistry, which through popular and controversial figures like Roosh V, as well as well-attended industry events, had breached mainstream news cycles (O’Neill, 2015). As disenchantment with the promises of PUA grew, so did ‘Lookism’. A theory which challenges the basic precept of PUA, Lookism is the idea that physical appearance has an overwhelming influence on romantic success, and that society collectively discriminates against those who do not match the normative ideals of beauty. Lookism also refers to a forum (*lookism.net*) which focuses ‘Aesthetics, Self-Improvement and Dating’.

These sites are significant markers of the convergence of extreme views following *IncelSupport*'s collapse, and demonstrate that while MGTOW, PUA and Incel might have different responses to female (and feminist) dominance, they share both a perception that feminists are to blame for exploiting genetic determinism and a 'cucked' society to further women's sexual advantage. *PuaHate* and *SlutHate* were not explicitly Incel sites, and many posters – even if they did not consider themselves successful in their private lives – expressed a dislike of misanthropy associated with the Incel community: 'I'd rather be with slayers that are funny than faggots that want the world to feel sorry for them' (About2GoER, 2017, cited in Smits et al, 2018). Thematically however, the preoccupation with physical appearance and a hatred of those who dispute 'Red Pill' reality (especially women), locates the PSL sites as closer to Incel as it is commonly understood than any other wing of the Manosphere.

The Isla Vista killings (March 23rd, 2014) committed by *PuaHate* member Elliot Rodger had an immediate impact on the Incel sites of the Manosphere ('Incelosphere'). Rodger, via his manifesto and increasingly viral online portfolio of misogynist, antifeminist and racist statements, all made from the perspective of an involuntarily celibate (albeit Rodger did not use the term 'Incel' himself), became a representative figure of Incel in the eyes of the media, and a polarizing one within the community (Crumplar, cited in Schwartz, 2020). He described *PuaHate* as 'full of men who are starved of sex, just like me. Many of them have their own theories of what women are attracted to, and many of them share my hatred of women, though unlike me they would be too cowardly to act on it. Reading the posts on that website only confirmed many of the theories I had' (Rodger, 2014: 118). *PuaHate* was immediately shut down, and major press attention was concentrated on Incel forums. The complicated legacy of Rodger in the Incel community is illustrated by his being mocked and dismissed but also regularly championed and featured in usernames, memes and other user-generated content.

The reason for banning *r/incels* was never announced by its administrators, although reports suggest that two threads, one speculating on ways to avoid being traced as a rapist, another encouraging the castration of a roommate, pushed moderators to act. Spokespeople for Reddit pointed to changes in policy regarding ‘incitement of violence’ as reason for the banning (Fingas, 2017). The Incel community then migrated to a variety of soon-to-be banned subreddits (e.g. *r/Braincels* and *r/Shortcels*), *incels.co* and other, smaller sites of contact. Reddit still hosts several small pro-Incel boards, including *r/IncelsWithoutHate*, which enforces a slightly stricter policy on hate speech infractions, but remains preoccupied with similar thematic concerns:



This brief history of Incel demonstrates that debates over antifeminism and misogyny, as well as gender power relations more generally, have occurred in these spaces for as long as they have existed. It is however entirely possible that young men who have encountered Incel

spaces for the first time in recent years would not be aware of this past, and *why* and *how* exactly a priori claims which contextualise so much discourse on *incels.co* and beyond were formed. It appears that Incel became more closely linked to antifeminist and misogynist thinking when its community and culture began to circulate more closely with other Manosphere groups, albeit there was a clear rejection of some aspects of PUAs, MGTOW and MRAs amongst the Incel community. By accepting many of the ‘Red Pill’ truths that characterise the rest of the Manosphere however, Incel developed its own reconfiguration of that worldview, to which I now turn.

The Black Pill: Incel Knowledge and Worldview

The Black Pill offers a **socio-historical** explanation for the Incel phenomenon, a **scientific defence** of lookism and an **affective account** of what it is like to live as an Incel in the present day. I look at these in turn below, acknowledging that individuals posting on Incel forums will subscribe to its positions to differing degrees. As the Black Pill shares many concerns and observations with the better-known Red Pill, I will cite texts from both perspectives. This is indicative of a broader process of cross-pollination of ideas and the dialogues between Incel and other Manosphere communities (Farrell et al, 2019: 87-88). While the term is now commonly used across the Manosphere and beyond, the *IncelWiki* claims that ‘The Black Pill’ originated either on the now defunct ‘*Omega Virgin Revolt*’ (main page header reads: ‘Freedom From The Gynocracy: There is no personal solution to systemic problems, and feminism/women is a systemic problem’, and the latest post is titled ‘Hating Women Can Save Your Life’) or ‘*Dalrock*’ (header reads: ‘Thoughts from a happily married father on a post feminist world’) blogs.

The Black Pill is the lens through which Incels interpret their lives, and is discernible in many interactions between Incels in its main sites. It is also communicated in an extensive vernacular which is indecipherable to the unfamiliar reader. These terms serve as a means of policing the community (individuals new to the community will be unable to engage without prior knowledge) as well as clarify which claims are particularly important. This dynamic is congruent with linguistic studies done on *incels.co* (then *incels.me*), which note that ‘the key to identifying features of an online subculture... [includes] examining their language use,’ particularly as it pertains to the managing of in-group and out-group(s) (Jaki et al, 2019: 266).

Even within the Manosphere, Incel is a community especially prone to constructing new terms to describe social events, norms and processes (Smits et al, 2019). The rest of this thesis will feature multiple quotes both from my dataset and other Incel documents. These will make little to no sense without a rudimentary understanding of their definitions, so I strongly recommend the reader look at the ‘Glossary’ (Appendix 1). While I acquired these understandings through seeing them ‘in action’ and comparing different usages, I was also indebted to several analyses and blogposts which offered similar albeit smaller and less detailed glossaries (see ReformedIncel, 2012; Squirrell, 2018b). It is also important to stress that the precise etymology of these terms is subject to debate and unlikely to ever be clarified. Several terms are popular across the Manosphere, and several others have begun to breach mainstream spaces, a further indication of how Incel ideas are not entirely divorced common understandings of gender and sexual relations. While I have selected the most common and what I consider to be the most important terms as they pertain to Incel, there are many others not included in the glossary. I do however want to provide an example of the way that a seemingly innocuous phrase or word can communicate important aspects of the Black Pill worldview within sites like *incels.co*.

Incel knowledge orients itself against what is perceived to be a dominant logic regarding gender and gender relations, shared across the major institutional sites of power. While in this sense the knowledge is outwards facing, addressing the mainstream culture and institutional norms, the knowledge is borne first and foremost from the lives of its advocates. The experience of being rejected, unseen or ignored by mainstream society, and particularly by [young, heterosexual, able-bodied, white, stereotypically attractive] women, occurs on an individual level, before it becomes an experience which enforces a worldview constructed around said rejection/invisibility. This Incel-specific vernacular is therefore an important structuring agent in the Black Pill worldview.

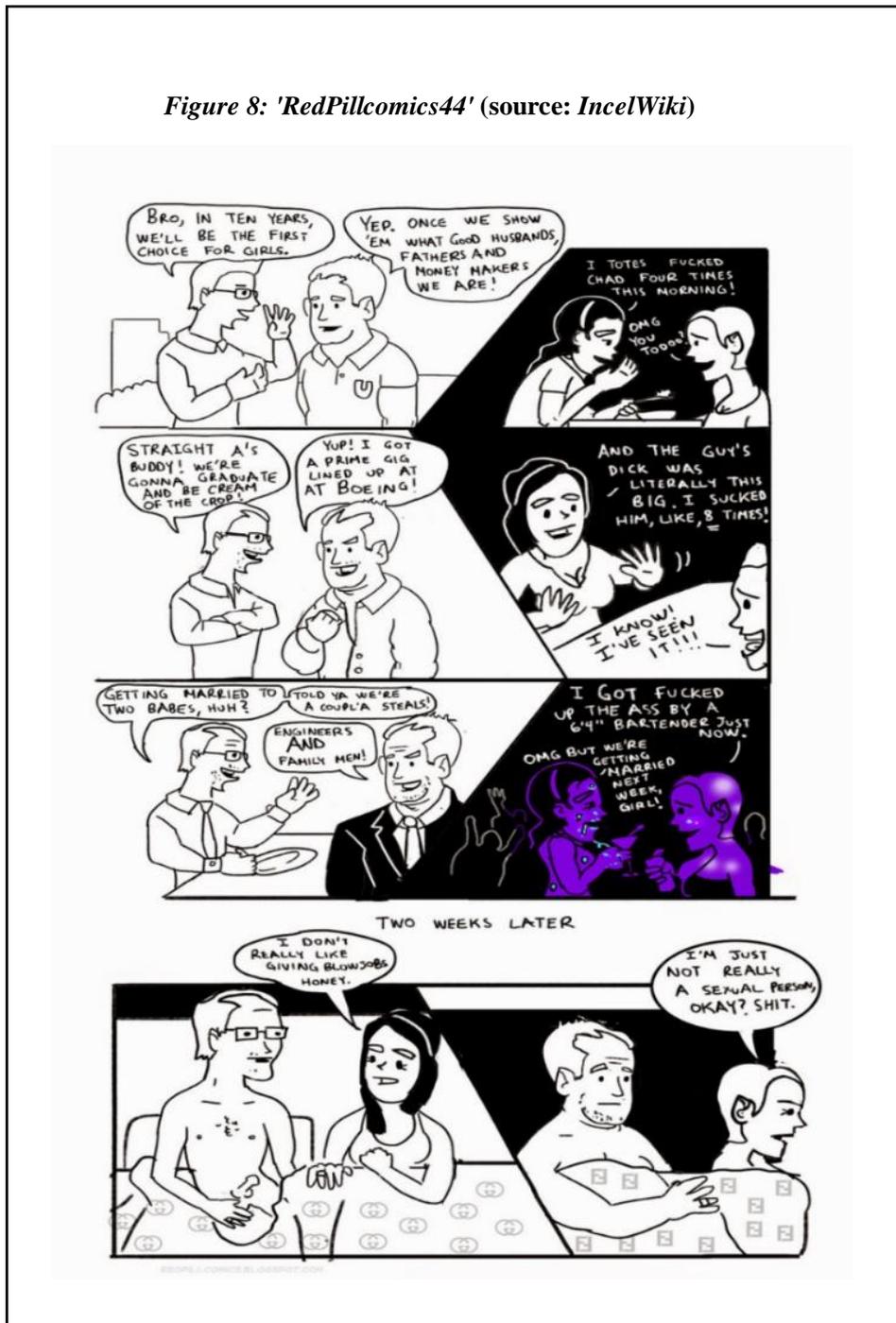
Consider the popular phrase ‘Alphafux, Betabux,’ reference to which assumes several important tenets of the Black Pill worldview. Firstly, ‘Beta’ and ‘Alpha’ (as well as ‘Omega’) designate the masculinity of men⁷⁹ in a linear scale from strongest to weakest, with the strongest men accessing the most female mates (‘fux’) and weakest more prone to Inceldom. This rank and hierarchy is described across Incel spaces and in any other Manosphere groups as an inextractable fact of social existence, true throughout history and often as evidence of the futility and perversion of progressive-egalitarian political or social movements (see Furedi, 2019).

Secondly, the phrase describes how Beta men *can* acquire partners in spite of their low status, which is by compensating with various financial investments (e.g. paying a mortgage) as they grow older and financially secure. Alpha men, in contrast, do not have to make substantial investments in order to attract mates; their value is first and foremost in their genetic inheritance and physical appearance. We therefore have another meaning implied: to ‘Betabuxx; is ultimately a ‘cope’ (see Fig. 8), as the sexual/romantic attention granted by any

⁷⁹ There is a similar distinction made between attractive and less attractive women, but the latter are not prone to Inceldom or ostracisation in the same way as Beta and Omega men.

woman to any Beta male is always contingent on financial investment, and they still lust after Alpha men. Furthermore, only ageing women will only become interested in Beta men, their sexual market value (SMV) decreases, and they start to receive less attention from men. This meaning is also often explained in various comics and memes:

Figure 8: 'RedPillcomics44' (source: IncelWiki)



Specific ideas about the biological and psychological nature of women, the transactional nature of sex, the inaccuracy of contemporary dating advice industries and the innocence of young men struggling with dating are all mobilised in this one phrase.

The Sexual Revolution and its Discontents

The Black Pill builds upon an existing socio-historical explanation for the rise of feminism and disempowerment of men, which originates in Red Pill and white supremacist texts. Power is installed in women as the arbiters of sex, freed now from social stigma of infidelity and promiscuousness. From this position of gatekeeping access to sex, all women (and the top echelon of good-looking men) have formed an elite class whose cultural, political and social power is perceived as an inverted mirror of the wretchedness around which Incel bases its identity (Hanson, 2018).

One of the most useful and representative texts demonstrating the ways in which perceptions of the sexual revolution shaped the Incel worldview as well as the wider Manosphere movement, is ‘Sexual Utopia in Power’ (Devlin, 2006). Published in white nationalist journal *The Occidental Quarterly* (hence among other things a preoccupation with ‘white birthrates’ (2006: 9)), Devlin begins by comparing the sexual revolution of 1960s America, with that of the French Revolution of 1789: initially an anarchic phase in which a utopia was supposed to spontaneously emerge, then a ‘reign of terror’ in which one faction (feminist women) seize power, and finally a reaction in which ‘human nature’ reasserts itself (the Manosphere and contemporary antifeminism).

Several reoccurring motifs of the Manosphere as it manifests in 2020 are observable in this text, most often in appeals to human nature as it pertains to sexuality, but also in blame being apportioned first and foremost to feminist women. The ‘nature’ of women and men is explained in simple terms: ‘Men may have a tendency to seek sexual variety, but women have

simple tastes in the manner of Oscar Wilde: They are always satisfied with the best' (Devlin, 2006: 10-11). This framing of women as hypergamous and men as wanderers is consensual elsewhere within the Manosphere. Ultimately it is feminist women – misleading younger women – who are responsible for everything from lower birth-rates, rising alcoholism among men and women, the 'decline' of marriage all the way to the construction of a fictional 'rape culture'. 'Under their influence, two generations of women have been led to believe that doing as they please should lead to happiness and involve no risk... [because] In the feminist formulation, freedom for women, responsibility for men' (Devlin, 2006: 14-17).

Though the sexual revolution of the 1960s occurred long before the emergence of Incel, and in spite of the lack of data on sexlessness from this era, I observed several posts during my immersion suggesting this period as the beginning of the conditions from which Incels began to grow in number. This is reflected in idealising the pre-revolution environment as a period of greater justice regarding the distribution of sex among the male population. As noted in my chapter on misogyny, backlash and antifeminism, the *perception* of a loss of power or privilege qualifies such an aggressive response as backlash. Addressing the 'forgotten men of the sexual revolution' (ibid. p29), Devlin warns – and so explains and justifies – that 'Kick a friendly dog often enough and eventually you have a mean dog on your hands' (ibid. p30).

Where Red Pilled and especially white supremacist accounts like Devlin's differ substantially from the Black Pill is their interest in the preservation of the 'white race'. As noted above, there is an energetic debate within many Incel spaces as to the role of race, ethnicity, and location in shaping the experiences of Incels. While there are white supremacist voices in Incel spaces (as there are also advocates of theocratic states such as those imposed by ISIS), the more common perspective on the sexual revolution is summarised in the *IncelWiki* as '... the period of time between the 1960s and 1980s, when it became socially acceptable for girls to act like sluts'. That is to say, women acquiring some degree of sexual autonomy either

by legal (e.g. access to contraception) or cultural (e.g. the undermining of long-standing taboos about feminine propriety) channels is more commonly portrayed as an injustice facing *men*, rather than ‘White’ or ‘Christian’ or ‘Western’ civilisation.

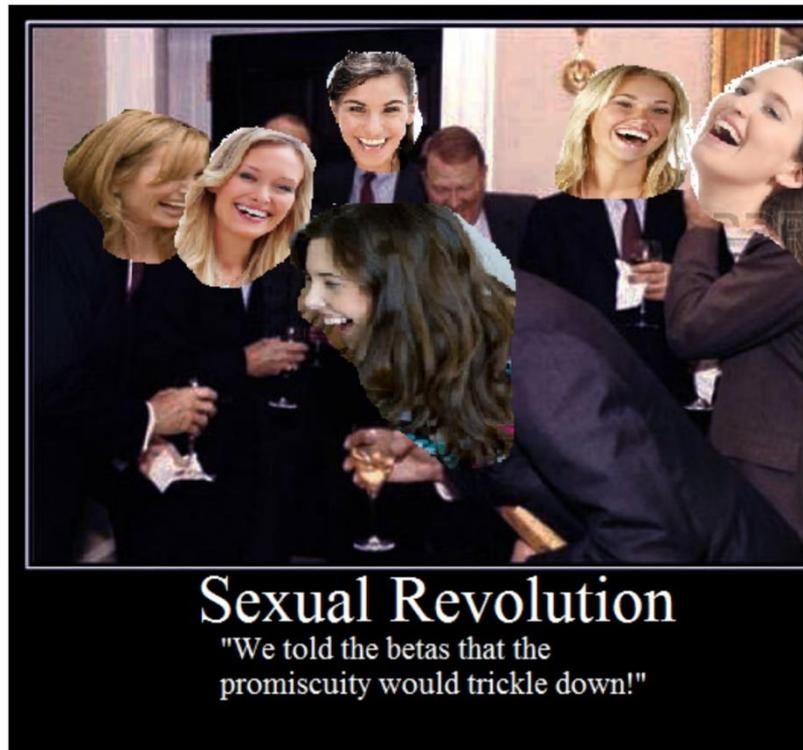
In my observations, and in histories such as that available on *IncelWiki*, the sexual revolution is associated *primarily* with the rise of feminist philosophy and feminists who have sought to advantage women at the expense of men: ‘Indeed, the only people profiting from the imposition of the new standards are the feminists who invented them. The survival of their movement depends on a continuing supply of resentful women who believe their rights are being violated’ (Devlin, 2006: 20). Feminists and feminism are treated as historical arch-enemies of the Incel community, which considers itself ‘both a demonstration of the collateral damage of feminism, and... as a pocket of resistance against it’ (Saxasalt, 2018).

Several other causes of female empowerment are regularly suggested in Incel spaces. Many of these causes engage with some of the institutional changes associated with the neoliberal era. I noted the following explanations in my immersion period: more women in the workforce; tech-assistance undermining the need for housework; increased birth control provision; welfare assistance for jobless women; access to paternity testing; earlier average age of puberty onset; the decline of religious attitudes around sexual conduct and promiscuity; managers and employers wanting desirable women in their workforce. Most common were references to sexually frustrated men – the number of which increases as women are liberated in their sexual agency – *simping* (see glossary) and celebrating women in the [false] hope of attracting them. This demonstrates at least some awareness of a social field outside of sexual behaviour, even if these forces are presented only as explanations for subsequent changes in sexual conduct. While the Blackpill also appeals to select scientific research as a means of acquiring legitimacy beyond individual narrations of victimisation (see below), the history of

feminist encroachment (and revolution) is an important (and reoccurring) theme in Incel culture.

There are differences within the Incel community as to whether genetic determinism (the idea that physical attractiveness is based on genetic inheritance and is the most important factor in whether a man becomes an Incel) or the embedding of feminist ideas in institutions and culture is more 'to blame' for Inceldom. There is however a consensus within the community that the consequences of women's sexual autonomy have included restricted choices for men, and that this is not acknowledged in mainstream culture and society. The 'great lie' of the sexual revolution is therefore the idea that sexual liberation has widened access to sex:

Figure 9: 'Sexual Revolution' meme



The Science of Physical Attraction

The Black Pill also offers a scientific defence of its belief in the genetic determinism of attractiveness and the psychological and biological explanations for women's sexual behaviour. Just as the Red Pill appeals to the so-called lost 'science' of how to seduce women, the Black Pill appeals to a science of how and why an Incel can never do so (Crumplar, 2018). Scientific data is mobilised in Incel spaces not to persuade the community that they can ascend from Inceldom, but to convince them why they cannot.

The *IncelWiki* features several entries documenting the 'Scientific Blackpill', including: Summary, Demographics, Sex Drive, Adverse Effects, Causes and Basic Statistics. The main page's Contents preview reflects the importance placed on scientific validation, as well as the scope of scientific analysis that the Black Pill has adopted and presented as justification of the Incel phenomenon and, implicitly, the extreme emotions (hate, sadness, loneliness etc.) that it provokes (see Fig. 10).

This appeal serves two important roles in Incel spaces. Firstly, the use of quantitative data is often framed as a definitive response to the advice given to Incel posters to 'shape up' and focus on their personalities, body language, fashion sense etc. Incel posters, believing that their perceived ugliness is inalterable and *the* preeminent causal dynamic in their Inceldom, often express frustration with advice which undermines this lack of agency or responsibility for their suffering. Second, investment in the objectivity and universalism of science is reflective of a broader attachment within the community to a gendered hierarchy of knowledge. Quantifiable metrics and references to the natural and physical sciences are portrayed as masculine, serious endeavours, and are contrasted with emotional and/or constructivist research, which are dismissed as feminine, emotional and non-serious pursuits. While its use of science is often questionable (see DeDeo, 2019), it appears that the use of scientific studies in this way is done so partially to locate Incel as distinct from its feminist boogeyman.

Figure 10: ‘Scientific Black Pill Contents’ from the Incel Wiki

Contents

Categories: [Personality](#) [Mental](#) [Race](#) [Looks \(Life\)](#) [Looks \(Love\)](#) [Face](#) [Money](#) [Height](#) [Body](#) [Penis](#)
[Voice](#) [Age](#) [Hypergamy](#) [Cucks](#) [Sluts](#) [MeToo](#) [Health](#) [ItsOver](#)

1 Personality [back to top](#)

- 1.1 Women tend to be attracted to the Dark Triad—narcissism, manipulateness, & psychopathy
- 1.2 More psychopathic men tend to receive higher attractiveness ratings from women
- 1.3 On PornHub, women consume most of the porn where women are violently raped and abused
- 1.4 62% of women have fantasies about rape and other forced sex acts
- 1.5 [50% of female porn viewers admitted to watching porn involving extreme violence against women](#)
- 1.6 Women are drawn more than men to nonfiction stories of rape, murder, and serial killers
- 1.7 Criminal and antisocial men have more sexual partners and have sex earlier
- 1.8 Antisocial, criminal and violent men have greater sexual access to women
- 1.9 Imprisoned serial killers, terrorists and rapists receive thousands of love letters from women
- 1.10 Male gang members have dramatically more female sexual partners
- 1.11 Childhood bullies experience greater sexual success than non-bullies
- 1.12 More than half of prison staff sexual misconduct involves female guards/staff
- 1.13 39% of hospitalized male psychopaths had consensual sex with female mental health staff
- 1.14 Women desiring marriage and commitment are more attracted to narcissistic men
- 1.15 Female narcissism reduces marital quality for men, but male narcissism does not for women
- 1.16 Men are attracted to "nice" women, but women are not attracted to "nice" men
- 1.17 Vegetarian men are less attractive, likable, and masculine to women than omnivorous men

2 Mental [back to top](#)

- 2.1 69% of high functioning autistic adolescents want relationships, but almost none succeed
- 2.2 44.6% of high functioning adult autistic men remain virgins, despite high sex/relationship drive
- 2.3 Autists are judged as awkward, less physically attractive and less approachable within seconds
- 2.4 Autistic men have 10 times as many suicidal thoughts as normal men
- 2.5 High IQ men are more likely to remain virgins longer
- 2.6 Teenage boys with ADHD have double the amount of sexual partners vs. 'normal' teens
- 2.7 Cluster-B personality disorders lead to 3.5x as many sexual partners and more offspring
- 2.8 Mental disorders significantly reduce men's fertility, substantially more than they do for women
- 2.9 People accurately perceive a man's mental health from facial appearance alone

3 Race [back to top](#)

- 3.1 Women are more racist in online dating, and 92-95% with a "preference" exclude any ethnic men
- 3.2 All races agree that whites are most attractive, but women prefer whites far more than men
- 3.3 Women are more racist than men in speed dating, and find Asian men least physically attractive
- 3.4 White men get 11-14 times as much interest from women on Tinder vs. equivalent Asian men
- 3.5 Being an Asian male in the USA is a primary predictor of 'never being kissed'
- 3.6 Asian women marry interracially more than twice as often as Asian men
- 3.7 Asian men have half the relationships as white men due to women's 'racial hierarchy'
- 3.8 White and Asian women agree white men are 30-50% more attractive than Asian men
- 3.9 Women reply most online to white men and least to Indian men
- 3.10 Across America, women most desire white men, followed by black, Hispanic, and Asian men
- 3.11 Women enforce stricter racial requirements than men, advantaging primarily white men
- 3.12 Female porn actresses 'racially dodge' scenes with Black male actors or demand a premium
- 3.13 Whiter, golden, & rosier (ie. Caucasian) skin is seen as healthier and more attractive

Scientific data is also used to justify the Black Pill’s antifeminism and misogyny, most clearly in the way hypergamy is used in its analysis of gender power relations. Originally a relatively uncontroversial concept used in the social sciences to describe the practice of marrying someone of a higher social class, hypergamy is integral to the Black Pill’s attempt to provide an ‘objective’ science of Inceldom, and central also to the identities created around

Inceldom⁸⁰ emphasising its victimhood. Theories of hypergamy, especially those evolutionary psychology accounts which stress that sexual selection differences are borne of inherent differences between the sexes (e.g. Miller, 2017), are regularly cited in interactions between posters on Incel spaces, and moreover in attempts by Incel posters to reach a wider, possibly non- Black Pilled audience (e.g. *LMScasts* 4; 7; 19; and *IncelCast* episodes 3, 7 and 8).

The science of hypergamy, whether researched by evolutionary psychologists or in sociology, is contested (Futrelle, 2013; DeDeo, 2019), often though not always because of the high number of social variables when constructing models of sexual selection. It remains, however, a powerful concept not just in Manosphere circles but in mainstream self-improvement texts (e.g. Brown, J. 2018; Buffalmano, 2020) and ‘dating advice’ pieces (e.g. Max & Miller, 2015). In these cases, in which the Black Pill is not discussed nor even something that the authors are necessarily aware of, hypergamy is nonetheless presented as a natural fact unencumbered by factors outside of evolutionary psychology:

This stems from an inherent biological motivation to get pregnant with the best genes possible.

Pregnancy is a huge investment of time and resources for a woman, so naturally she wants the best outcome she can get.

This is also why men are naturally polygamous and have a high sexual appetite.

Biologically it makes sense to spread their seed as they can have many different kids with different women.

(Brown, J. 2018)

Similarly, in his best-selling self-help book, Peterson (2018: 301) writes that ‘women have a strong proclivity to marry across or up the economic dominance hierarchy’.

⁸⁰ Hypergamy is also a popular concept of interest in other Manosphere spaces; MGTOW typically interpret the phenomenon as a warning to men to avoid marrying a women who are by their very nature prone to abandon men if they conclude that they can attract a superior mate, while PUAs consider hypergamy as part of the Rubik’s cube which is female desire, something to ‘game’ and manipulate until they convince women to sleep with them.

This ‘mainstream’ understanding and presentation of hypergamy as a knowledge of gender, expertise around which confers strategic and transactional benefit, reflects the neoliberal ethos of self-improvement and human capital outlined in chapters three and four. Many self-improvement and dating advice articles use a language emphasising this worldview of productive capacity managed through management of the interior self: dynamism, efficiency, and upgrading of emotional intelligence (Buffalmano, 2020). This is reflected in the titles of many dating advice texts which explicitly present hypergamy in this way: ‘*How To Be A 3% Man: Learn Pickup, Dating & Relationship Secrets That Only 3% Of The World’s Men Know About Being Successful With Women!*’ (Wayne, 2017); ‘*DateOnomics: How Dating Became a Lopsided Numbers Game*’ (Birger, 2015); ‘*The Man’s Guide To Women: Scientifically Proven Secrets from the ‘Love Lab’ About What Women Really Want*’ (Gottman et al, 2016), ‘*Alpha Male Strategies: Dating Techniques in The Social Media Age*’ (Strategies, 2018), ‘*Fundamentals of Female Dynamics: The Practical Handbook to Attracting Women*’ (Knight, 2016) and ‘*Mate: Become The Man Women Want*’ (Max & Miller, 2015).

The key difference between these accounts (including those in Red Pill spaces) and that of the Black Pill, is that hypergamy – even if it is accelerated by cultural accommodation of feminist slogans and symbols – is not considered a death knell for unattractive men. Instead of focusing *only* on looks, these accounts stress that men can present themselves as genetically superior in other ways: leadership; humour; passion; attire; confidence and empathy are all skills which can be developed, invested in and used as a sort of sexual capital in exchange for access to women’s bodies and romantic relationships (ibid.). In this sense, hypergamy is not explicitly given a positive or negative value, but it is considered an objective fact about women’s sexuality and psychology, developing an understanding of which will confer significant benefits to men seeking a partner.

In Black Pill spaces hypergamy is not only a ‘natural fact’, but simultaneously evidence of the malicious attitude all women hold towards men of similar or lower sexual market value. While Red Pilled and mainstream accounts will contend that hypergamy does not fatally undermine the chances for unattractive men to develop relationships with women, due to the wealth of assistance available to men to ‘game’ the system, the Incel worldview is characterised not just by pessimism in this regard but extreme anger at the ‘lie’ that hypergamy in a pro-feminist environment can be overcome. This is to a large degree due to the all-encompassing philosophy of the Black Pill, which sees hypergamy as a phenomenon accelerated and buttressed by concurrent social, economic, and political developments.

Hypergamy, it is argued by many Black (and some Red) Pill advocates, operates in tandem with an increased visibility of feminist messaging and the breakdown of social (informal) and legal (formal) rules suppressing the male impulse towards sexual variety and female impulse towards hypergamy. Hypergamy and data (anecdotal or otherwise) which purports to support its central thesis (e.g. a majority of women on Tinder consider six feet to be the minimum required height for a potential partner, while only 20% of American men are six feet or over) becomes a vessel through which Incel illustrates its victimhood⁸¹. The manoeuvre from presenting hypergamy as a broad, non-determinative description of marriage practices in different parts of the world, to a reality which dooms an underclass of men, is simple but extremely significant in how Incels interpret their social environment.

The market, and life as a competitor in the sexual marketplace, is regularly evoked in these discussions around hypergamy and the dating world generally. This is not exclusive to Incel, ‘The analogy between cash and intimacy is direct, clear, and common across the political spectrum. [However] The vulgarity is clearest when it’s phrased in the language of the Incels

⁸¹ Summarised by a sympathetic interlocutor, ‘one might plausibly argue that those with much less access to sex suffer to a similar degree as those with low income, and might similarly hope to gain from organizing around this identity, to lobby for redistribution along this axis and to at least implicitly threaten violence if their demands are not met’ (Hanson, 2018).

movement that spawned the topic to begin with' (DeDeo, 2018). On the surface, the Incel community can be described as observing and reacting to a rise in sexual inequality between men and women. Spend time in their sites of communication however, and one quickly realises that this inequality – the existence of which is plausible, the acceleration of which is fiercely contested – is portrayed not as a fact of nature to be navigated on an individual basis, but as a *political* question which requires a collective response.

Copes and Ropes

For all that an extensive amount of research is made available on Incel resource list pages such as those on *IncelWiki*, Incel forums are more typically characterised by discussions of specific examples of a poster being ignored, rejected or mocked by a woman they had considered as a potential mate (or, indeed, just any woman not paying them attention). These experiences, which are to varying degrees familiar to a significant number of people who find themselves posting on these sites, form the basis for the community's bonds and solidarity (such as they exist). What the Black Pill offers is a recognition of the pain of living as an Incel while existing in a social environment in which only individuals who have a partner, requited love, and access to sexual contact, are valued. The Black Pill engages with the question which forms after the wretchedness of the predicament is acknowledged: what is to be done?

There are two broad responses made by Black Pill advocates, both of which are summarised in an often-cited video by 'Eggman' (Toby Reynolds), a minor Incel e-celebrity, in his YouTube video '*Take the Black Pill*' (2015). On the one hand, Black Pill advocates are clear: 'You've already lost' (8.40) and 'You've got to suck it up and deal with it' (11.41). There is no 'way out' from their predicament, and they are doomed to be forever low-value men in a misandrist world governed by unchallenged feminist ideas. Unlike those Red Pill accounts which either promise that any man can learn game and hack the hypergamous environment and

its untethered women (Tomassi, 2018), or which assert justice will arrive as female peers' age and their sexual market value decreases (Devlin, 2006: 30), the Black Pill seemingly offers no alternative.

Such is the relentlessness of the negative emotive tenor of Incel spaces, it has been described as a suicide/death cult in opinion pieces (Wright, 2018). Even Red Pill personality Tomassi (2018) has, albeit sympathetically, referred to the Black Pill as an 'Abyss', and the regularity with which 'roping' is referred to (to commit suicide by hanging) reflects a deep sense of foreclosure with regards to ever exiting their situation. Users on *incels.co* regularly encourage each other to commit suicide, speculate on their own future suicide (presented as inevitable) and fantasise about violence befalling the Chads, Stacys and feminists which gatekeep sexual intimacy. Incel-generated visual media is suffused with on and offline [sub]cultural references, including similarly pessimistic references to suicide and death. Wojak, a common internet meme throughout the 2010s, depicting a seemingly sad and lonesome man, is a regular proxy through which Incel emotions are expressed:

Figure 11: 'Wojack' Meme



Other popular visual media focus on Incel concerns around gender relations in contemporary society, often fixating on the empowerment of ‘genetically superior’ men (Chad) and women (Stacey). In either case, the agony and fixedness of their predicament is foregrounded.

It would be a mistake however to reduce the Black Pill to a suicide cult, or to claim that its messaging is exclusively or uncomplicatedly a negative one. As expressed by Eggman/Reynolds, (2017: 13.37) ‘You can be happy even if it is delusion,’ and many Incel posters advocate a series of pastimes which can distract and bring brief relief to individuals (these include video games, spending more time outdoors, going to the gym etc.). While some posters maintain that Inceldom can be escaped in a strictly physical, sex-oriented sense (i.e. young Incels can become confident and respected enough to form sexually intimate relationships), the *worldview* is presented as a fact of reality, supported by their own lived experiences, which can only be escaped from by lying or distracting the self.

Observing those sites for sexless men (and in some cases women) who want to avoid the hatred and depression that is associated with the Black Pill worldview (*r/IncelsWithoutHate* and *r/FAOver30* are the best examples of this), it is apparent that the Incel community collectively has a highly opportunistic attitude to ‘claiming’ members of their own clan. For instance, while a ‘KHV’ qualifies as a ‘truecel’ by any reasonable metric, if they express disdain or distrust of the basic tenets of the Black Pill (Lookism and antifeminism) then they are immediately dismissed either as Incel (they become ‘fakecels’ or ‘volcels’) or as aware of the truth (they become bluepilled or cucked). Exiting from Inceldom is not encouraged, celebrated or recognised unless the individual maintains their Black Pill worldview.

Summary

In this section I have argued that the Manosphere collectively shares a diagnosis of contemporary gender power relations which, following the work of Faludi (1991) and Cudd

(2002) in particular, constitutes an antifeminist backlash. Manosphere groups differ in their chosen response to this diagnosis, and varying degrees of misogynist thinking are observable in these spaces. While there are precedent examples of male rights groups, some of which are reminiscent of in particular MGTOW, the Manosphere is distinguished by its highly self-referential rhetorical style and propensity for statements of deliberate provocation, as are many other online subcultures (Messner, 2016: 9).

Incel shares with other Manosphere groups the characteristics of antifeminist backlash. Based on my immersion period I have argued that, rather than emphasising involuntary celibacy in our definitions of Incel, it is more efficacious to examine its 'Black Pill' worldview as the key shared dimension which sustains the community. The Black Pill offers a detailed if conspirational socio-historical explanation for the emergence of the Incel phenomenon, a scientific defence of lookism, and an affective account emphasising the trauma of living as an Incel. It is this worldview which can be investigated (1) for engagement with its neoliberal environment and (2) as the vehicle through which antifeminism is expressed and justified.

Part Three: ‘Lay Down and Rot’: The Relationship Between Incel and Neoliberalism

Chapter Seven: Data and Methods

Background

This thesis aims to develop a more sophisticated understanding of Incel antifeminism and its relationship to a neoliberal environment. Thus far, I have explained my understanding of neoliberalism as a wide-reaching concept which nonetheless functions as a powerful analytical tool in discovering patterns and rationalities within a variety of institutional, financial, and discursive processes and events. An understanding of neoliberalism which acknowledges the usefulness of each different ‘ideal type’ definition is, I argue, better equipped to reveal the nuanced ways in which neoliberalism has impacted on contemporary society, as well as interpreting the Incel worldview as embracing, rejecting or otherwise engaging with this environment.

Such is the Incel community’s strong objection to what it claims is the dominance of feminist ideology in contemporary society, this wide-reaching understanding is necessary to decode a world which is viewed through Incel eyes as uniform and unambiguous. If I brought to my analysis an understanding of neoliberalism focused on shifts in institutional culture and workforce demographics (e.g. Jessop, 2013), for instance, I would be less likely to ‘see’ how appeals to an abstract idea of ‘competition’ within the Incel worldview serve as an embrace of a ‘neoliberal ethos’ (Davies, 2012). Alternatively, an understanding of neoliberalism which relied heavily on Foucault’s final lectures (1979/2008), might not be attuned to the ways in which the Incel perception of hegemonic feminist power reflects aspects of neoliberal policy on national and international scales.

In the second section, I presented a schema for delineating between antifeminism, misogyny and backlash, with the objective of clarifying the significance of each both for the wider Manosphere community and Incel specifically. I adapted work in this area by Faludi (1991) and Cudd (2002), who provided guides to the presentation of antifeminism (e.g. examples of women suffering used as vehicles for antifeminist claims) and significance of its wider cultural setting by looking at more recent studies on online antifeminism and misogyny (e.g. Jane, 2014). That cultural setting, while within what I consider the ‘neoliberal era’, is most obviously distinct from the present moment by the transfer of so much antifeminist and misogynist discourse into online spaces. To account for this I therefore highlighted the various changes in communicative style and sensibilities of online communities (e.g. Finlayson, 2019) compared to the texts and physical environments studied in Faludi’s (1991) work, including tropes like ‘concern trolling’ (Murti, 2019) which require specific analytical strategies to decode.

Finally, I examined the emergence of the Manosphere and then Incel from the Red Pill ‘light philosophy’ and its links to conservative and other anti-progressive political traditions. I noted that though they share a broad understanding of male disempowerment and female empowerment, the different groups within the Manosphere hold starkly contrasting agendas with regards to resolving this perceived imbalance. I evaluated the Manosphere as a response to a shared perception of a loss of privilege, fulfilling the criteria for ‘antifeminist backlash’ following the work of Cudd (2002) and Faludi (1991), as well as the small but growing literature on the Manosphere itself (e.g. O’Neill, 2018; Zuckerberg, 2018). Within this wider environment of online antifeminist backlash, I situated Incel as a particularly traumatic and vengeful response to this perceived disempowerment. I presented a critical literature review of the sources and online spaces consulted during my period of immersion, tracing what we already know about Incel. This included investigating the convoluted history of Incel within

the Manosphere as well as assorted communities similarly based around struggles with dating, and introducing the key themes of its worldview with reference to a detailed glossary which it is important the reader familiarises herself with before reading my analysis chapters.

In this third section, I turn to the intersection between Incel, antifeminism and neoliberalism. To bring these concepts together I will highlight the ways in which the antifeminism that is associated with the Incel community is aligned with neoliberal messages about gender, the market, and the self. While there is a literature addressing the specific issues raised and obstacles faced during analysing internet forums (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016; Giles, 2017), there remains a degree of flexibility in constructing forum-oriented research design/s.

My central research question, ‘*In what ways is Incel antifeminism a product of its entanglement with neoliberalism?*’, also implies the outline of my methodology, given that nearly all Incel content is produced, shared and debated in online spaces. To reveal the potential commonalities between how the Incel worldview interprets the world, and how neoliberalism has shaped that world, this project employs an interpretative and thematic analysis approach to a dataset which includes a subsample of threads from *incels.co* and a larger collection of Incel media. My analytic approach concentrates on the construction of a worldview and meaning within the setting of Incel-only or Incel-sympathetic online arenas, particularly in the interactions of individual [anonymous] posters.

Researching in Online Spaces

Before discussing my data and methods in detail, I will justify my decision to look at online sources, and the thinking through which I consider this approach as engaging my research question.

There are several advantages to focusing on online sources, beyond just the availability of data on specific websites. Internet forums have been examined using a variety of techniques

(e.g. critical discourse analysis, grounded theory, and narrative analysis), many of which conceptualise their data in different ways (Bryman, 2012: 578). My own research design borrows aspects of thematic and narrative analysis, as well as developing an iterative coding process which over two cycles has categorised a much larger initial dataset into a manageable subsample suitable for closer readings. I follow several of the initial stages of data selection advocated by Giles (2017) as well as adjusting designs used by similar projects (specifically Nagle, 2015; Malik & Coulson, 2008; Baele et al, 2019). This follows the rationale to (1) select an appropriate forum, (2) identify a time-frame, (3) select my initial sampling technique, (4) download and code, and (5) select threads for deeper analysis.

Incel and Online Environments

This project draws on a wide range of discursive representations of the Incel worldview, all of which were found in online spaces. This reflects the fact that, as with other Manosphere groups, the discourse is more easily identified online rather than ‘in real life’ (IRL) where social conventions and etiquette codes disallow for the most extreme examples of misogyny to be freely shared (Jane, 2014: 540-542). However, the function of IRL experience is central to the Incel worldview and scaffolds much of its beliefs and attitudes. Experiences of rejection, a fear of missing out on expected rituals of sexual maturity and the development of intimate emotional and physical relationships, are all regularly evoked by Incels as a justification for the vitriolic imaginings that characterise their online group communications and individual laments (Jaki et al, 2019). This is true even as these IRL experiences are mediated and reflexively altered in the perception of Incel contributors to this discourse (Marwick, 2005). Seemingly innocuous experiences of unrequited desire and/or social awkwardness become recast in these online environments as proof of the totalitarianism of feminism, and the hegemonic power afforded to women under its rule. Similarly, while the researcher can reasonably expect these misogynist and antifeminist sentiments to be shunned and so to some

extent hidden IRL, the effects that have drawn press attention to the Incel worldview are visceral and physical: mass murder has been committed by individuals who at least partially justified their actions by the worldview propagated in these online environments.

This tension between online and IRL environments, and rules of etiquette that respectively shape permitted speech, has significant implications for my research methodology and design. A symbiotic relationship between the physical and immaterial is at the core of many extremist communities that operate online (Crosset et al, 2019: 943-944), which often facilitates and accommodates users of forums such as *incels.co* to become comfortable discussing otherwise outrageous suggestions.⁸² These are ideas which, in a formal IRL research setting, are likely to put enough pressure on a researcher to make him or her feel uncomfortable, and raise issues around wellbeing. Furthermore, the prevalence of violent, misogynist ideation, to the extent that it has become unquestionably a defining characteristic of the Incel worldview itself, should not be ignored by an investigation which is specifically questioning antifeminism/misogyny. I therefore consider it a reasonable conclusion that my research should focus on online environments, the ‘home’ of this extremist discourse, rather than navigate through interview an individual’s likely unwilling or awkward engagement IRL with views which are so common in these online environments.

As Cockerill (2019) notes, the advent of social media makes ‘groups’ a less accurate term to describing online phenomena like Incel. Instead, she prefers the terms ‘network’ or ‘loose assemblages’, which conveys the de-territorialised, multi-platform environments, often transient interactions and anonymised user base of the community. This reflects the spatial and

⁸² One example of this effect in the Incel community is the regularity with which the ‘rightness or wrongness’ of raping women is speculated upon (e.g. ‘*Would you protect a woman from rape?*’, posted December 26th 2017 by *Homosapicuckus*, which received 111 replies and over 3000 views (T50)), with a number of users making lengthy posts detailing the historical and psychosocial arguments that condone the institutionalisation of rape as a practice which can foster social cohesion. On several other occasions, under thread titles not ostensibly about sexual relationships, the rape of women was introduced by other users in the form of speculation, humour, or anger.

temporal reconfiguration of misogyny along lines of technological change, specifically related to the internet, in a manner not dissimilar to the way in which Daniels (2009: 3-5) describes ‘translocal whiteness’ as newly untethered to national boundaries. Misogyny, in this case, has flourished in a variety of forms outside of national boundaries, often in participatory mediums such as *Reddit* and *YouTube*. This further justifies the focus of this study on online spaces. Moreover, the decision has been made to collect data from a forum, which is a very specific type of online platform. The reasons for this, as well as the focus on *incels.co* specifically, are explained below.

Selecting Online Spaces

There are several advantages to using forums as a source for social science research, and particularly for the type of discourse-oriented research that this project undertakes. The most obvious of these is the sheer quantity of information available on these sites, the low investment costs required to set up and maintain a forum, and the ease with which users can set up accounts and post⁸³ (Housley et al, 2014). Because of this, forums can with minimal effort acquire thousands of users on a global scale. While *incels.co* is not as active as was the now banned subreddit *r/incels*, it has in a few years recorded nearly three million messages and has over ten thousand users. This makes forums of even moderate size valuable sites for the researcher, whether they are conducting qualitative or quantitative research. Furthermore, labour-intensive procedures such as transcription are unnecessary, as in many if not all cases the data is publicly available.

For analyses which seek in-depth studies of discourse like mine, forums offer a gateway into the circulation of ideas *within* that community (Holtz et al, 2012: 55-66). These ‘virtual

⁸³ Some forums, such as *love-shy*, have a screening process to limit the number of users and, the moderating team argue, to maintain the quality of posts. In this case the screening process has led to a paucity of new content being posted.

communities' are typically used only by supporters or members. While this is less likely to be the case for Incels, such is their online notoriety and the propensity of other online communities to seek evidence on their forums and places of interaction to either (a) mock or (b) delegitimise their worldview (Futrelle, 2020), it is still an opportunity to observe a large number of identifying Incels interact and express their opinions on a number of issues. These we can assume include users from a broad geographic and socio-economic background, which is borne out in semi-regular polls conducted on *incels.co* which aim to gather demographic information. Ultimately this provides the researcher with something akin to an 'unmoderated virtual focus group' within which it is relatively simple to select the data appropriate to research questions (Moloney et al, 2003).

The awareness of Incels' communications being public – especially in the case of *incels.co* – means that, if there is no identifying information published by the researcher, ethics and transparency standards are not threatened (Sugiura, Wiles & Pope 2017). Furthermore, Eysenbach and Till (2001) have argued that it is ethical to record activities in a public place without consent, provided individuals are not identifiable. In this case, I have taken care to avoid the use of any quotations that include references to identifiable information. This extends to not referring to usernames when involving quotations from my subsample.

There are several reasons why I have picked *incels.co* as the primary source for my case study of Incel discourse. Firstly, it is explicitly advertised as a space for Incels, rather than any other part of the broader Manosphere or alt-right. It can therefore be surmised that of the 10,000 registered members, a higher proportion of them will be Incels rather than PUAs, MGTOW or MRAs. Secondly, the entire forum is accessible from its beginning. While it is possible to access some older material from other historically large Incel sites (e.g. *Love-Shy*), the largest collection of Incel communication is on *incels.co*. In the case of *r/incels*, the community was hosted within a diverse, large website (Reddit). In practice this meant that a lot of the

interactions on the subreddit were dialogues between Incel users and other Redditors. Though this makes the *r/incels* archive a useful source for looking at the relationship between Incel and other communities, it does not serve the objective of examining the discursive construction of the Incel worldview in its own environment, as well as an exclusively Incel-oriented site.

Another way in which *incels.co* serves my research objectives is that the forum was formed at a specific juncture in Incel history, and moreover came ‘fully formed’. In describing Incel this way, I am rejecting or at least qualifying Cockerill’s (2019) contention that Incel is an emerging community. Instead, I consider (and have so far argued) that Incel is a formed – if fluid – community, with a long history in both on and offline spaces. In particular, *incels.co* reflects the ideational parameters set previously during the ‘philosophical differences’ between sites which permitted women as members and discouraged or outright banned misogynist statements, which has the effect of text-enhancing my data for analysis. *Incels.co* is moderated in such a way as to reflect ‘Black Pilled’ norms, and to tolerate the extreme content which ultimately caused Reddit to ban the most popular Incel board. The content I will be analysing therefore reflects Incel as *identity*, with its according rules and norms, rather than simply a condition (Marwick, 2005).

It is this latter trait, the explicit recognition of the Black Pill as central to identification with Incel, that makes *incels.co* particularly useful for answering my research objective. As argued in Chapter Six, Incel is only one of several responses to involuntary celibacy, not all of which are antifeminist, vengeful, or misogynist. Acknowledging the importance of alternative responses serves the dual purpose of clarifying that Incel is not representative of all sexless individuals, as well as pointing this project in the direction of online spaces which are devoted to, or at least unapologetic about entertaining the expression of, misogyny and antifeminism. Of these spaces, *incels.co* is the most popular for expressions of misogyny and antifeminism.

Data

My data can be broadly placed into two camps. Firstly, I coded by subject and theme 1,499 popular threads from the most prominent Incel forum, *incels.co*. Secondly, a subsample of these threads is examined alongside a broader range of vlogs, blogs and podcasts produced by identifying Incels, as well as several examples of Incels communicating with non-Incel interlocutors who display varying degrees of sympathy (e.g. Tomassi, 2019; Murphy, 2020). This broader range of Incel sources, collected over several years of cultural immersion, includes many which were cited in the previous chapter as representative of the Incel worldview. Together, these data provide a route of access into the Incel worldview, from which I derive my claims in response to my research questions.

As outlined above, the analyses in this thesis draw on two types of data – (i) a large collection of threads taken from *incel.co* and (ii) a subsample created from this large collection, alongside vlogs, blogs and podcasts produced by identifying Incels or Incel-sympathetic interlocutors. Although the claims made in my analysis chapters are mainly justified with reference to these sources, and how they relate to the work on neoliberalism done in Part One, I also refer to an observation diary. This document, which ran to several thousand words, consists of notes made during several months anonymously observing *incel.co* as well as other nodes in the loose assemblage of networks which make up the Incel community and wider Manosphere. The process, known as ‘lurking’ within online communities, mirrors the practices of many ordinary members (and potential future contributors), while benefitting my understanding of the kinds of claims regularly made in this space (Hine, 2008).

Incels.co Threads

The bulk of my analysis in this section of the thesis relies on a corpus of material gathered from the most visited incel forum, *incels.co* (Incelwiki, 2019). The data collected was made up of

all popular threads – those which received 50 or more responses – between the start of the forum (November 7th, 2017) and April 25th 2018. I chose to focus on popular threads as I believed these to best demonstrate a general Incel sensibility, as well as the widest possible range of viewpoints in the Incel community.

Unlike other popular online platforms such as Reddit, *incels.co* does not have features such as ‘upvoting’ to indicate support for specific topics, so the number of responses was the best tool available for discerning community interest if not necessarily approval. The end point of April 25th, 2018 was chosen due to the Toronto van attack of April 23rd, 2018, committed by an identifying Incel (Alek Minassian), following which the forum was engulfed in a wave of press attention. This was reflected in a huge spike in viewing figures for every thread, including those with few or no responses. It also coincided with a large increase in new users, the veracity of whose Incel identity I consider more dubious than those regular posters before the Toronto attack. I choose to look at threads which had their final responses posted up to the 25th of April rather than up to the day of the attack, to allow for a brief ‘snapshot’ of regular members’ reactions to the attack and the subsequent press attention.

In total, I archived 1,499 forum threads which received 50 or more responses within my chosen timeframe (1,266 in the main ‘Inceldom Discussion’ forum, and 233 in the ‘OffTopic’ section). The total number of responses collected was 106,417 (88,037 in ‘Inceldom Discussion’ and 18,380 in ‘OffTopic’),⁸⁴ and the average number of responses per thread was 69.75 and 78.88 respectively. The thread with the largest number of replies in ‘Inceldom Discussion’ was posted on Jan 2nd 2018, titled ‘*As my days come to an end...*’. It had 303 replies and over 12,000 views and was posted by the user ‘Harvey_Weinstein_Hero’, a user who was subsequently banned after submitting 1,457 messages. While I do not refer to the usernames

⁸⁴ It should be noted that these threads were archived over a period of two weeks (September 4th – 16th, 2019), and I only analysed comments that were made before September 16th, 2019.

of posters in my analysis, this reference to a high-profile sexual assaulter is not at all uncommon on *incels.co*, and makes clear to anyone observing the forum that being seen to endorse sexual violence is not considered a faux pas in this space.

Other Incel Resources

The broader range of sources were collected over a much longer period than the data outlined above, from the beginning of my admission into PhD study in the September of 2016. This often took the form of bookmarking relatively unknown or rarely shared examples of publicly identifying Incels writing personal reflections on blog sites or via video blogs (vlogs), or still-anonymous but known users of Incel forums who decided individually or collectively to create content for like-minded or sympathetic audiences. Across the past several years I have collected and analysed data from numerous subreddits, vlogs, podcast series and alternative forums all of which explicitly advertise themselves as for an Incel audience. Additionally, several television and radio documentaries have been produced in this period, all featuring original research, and all of which have been acknowledged as part of my broader data collection (see Table 6).

To capture as much of the Incel worldview as possible, my alternative sources were selected to reflect the fluidity of Incel thought and activity across multiple sites, and the reflexivity which characterises discussions over time and [cyber]space (Nagle, 2015: 89-90). There is a consensus in the literature that a ‘disinhibition effect’ of anonymous interaction influences the propensity of extremist claims online. This tendency is for any researcher in this field at least a double-edged sword (Suler, 2004). Granted the anonymity of a non-identifiable username on a forum such as *incels.co*, users are more likely to exhibit traits of openness and are less likely to self-censor. This can and does result in more extreme expressions of emotion, which can be in the form of kindness and generosity. It can also manifest in the form of anger, threats, or excessive criticism.

Table 6: List of Additional Sources Used

Type of	Name of Source	Audience	Additional Information
Subreddit	IncelWiki r/BlackPillScience r/exredpill r/FA30plus r/failed_Normies r/ForeverAlone r/ForeverAloneWomen r/IncelExit r/IncelsWithoutHate r/Shortcells	11,894 8,367 4,076 3,148 140,399 5,257 3,797 20,769 3,744	Administered by <i>incels.co</i> 'Over 30s only'
Youtube Channel	Just James FACEandLMS Jack Peterson First Last (Egg Man) IncelTV Blue Skies Media SteveHoca VVS HeedAndSucceed IncelMatics Black Pilled	31,800 N/A 913 5,960 12,700 2,180 2,210 4,350 29,500 615 207,000	3,247,256 views 5,648,943 views 98,246 views 1,640,845 views 2,429,825 views 770,704 views 242,421 views 3,818 21,526,283 135,088 15,714,072
Image Board	4chan.org/r9k 8chan		Image Boards
Message Board	Alt.support.shyness	Defunct	43,286 topics
Twitter Account	@IncelsCo @MaleSexPolitics @FrailPaleStaleM @legwhite @BlackpillTheory	1,795 233 331 17,200 839	
Forum	yourenotalone.co incels.net		Previously incelistan.net Over 14,000 threads
Documentary	Inside the Secret World of Incels TFW NO GF Shy Boys IRL Dr. Gilmartin Incel Video (incomplete)		BBC3, 14 TH July 2019 2020 2011 2015
Book	<i>The Blackpill Theory: Why Incels are Right & You are Wrong</i> (Dr. Castle)		Published November 2019
Blog	Freedom From The Gynocracy A Blog About Incels M3		Last post June, 2018 Weekly posts Last post May, 2014
Podcast	Uninstall IncelCast		Incl 'cold approach' diary
Manifesto	My Twisted World (Elliot Rodger) Marc Lepine's Suicide Note George Sodini's Blog / Suicide Note		2014 2014 2009

Note: The "Audience Size" column refers to subscribers in the case of Subreddits and Youtube channels and followers in the case of Twitter accounts. If the column is empty, the audience size of a given source is unknown.

In the case of *incels.co* my concern has been that only the most exaggerated or passionate expressions would be registered and so will become representative of the entire community. My decision to triangulate by incorporating other well-known Incel texts, both passive and violent, is partially the result of this concern. While I have explained above why I think that engaging with these extremist claims is necessary to my project – and accept that the propensity for violent ideation on *incels.co* is partially shaped by this environment of anonymity – it is equally possible to diversify my dataset by looking at alternative, identifiable records of Incel discourse.

To this end I have included three particularly notorious examples of Incel discourse which have been recognised outside of Incel spaces as representative of important facets of the community and its worldview, all publicly published by identifying Incels. They are: the manifesto of late Isla Vista murderer Elliot Rodger (*‘My Twisted World’*) (2014), and the viral videos *‘31 Year old Forever Alone Virgin: How it happens’* (2018) by Youtuber ‘Just James’, and *‘Take the Black Pill’* (2015) by minor Incel celebrity ‘Eggman’.

The significance of the first of these in *incels.co* is contested, but Rodger’s appearance in avatars and through expressions of deference (*‘The Supreme Gentleman’*), whether or not they are examples of ‘edgy’ or ‘counter-cultural’ humour, indicates a significant presence in the circulation of visual media and vernacular within the community. The second, a Northern Irish male who vlogs his experiences as an Incel, was subsequently the focus of a BBC documentary *‘Inside the Secret World of Incels’* (2019). In sharp contrast to Elliot Rodger, Just James explicitly eschews violence and misogyny, even as he accepts some of the basic tenets of the Black Pill that are used to justify violence in *‘My Twisted World’*. These are supplemented by a variety of other documentaries, podcasts and posts made by (or including the involvement of) identifying Incels. To maintain rigour and replicability in my research design, these alternative sources were analysed in a similar manner to my subsample. I

transcribed both viral *Youtube* videos and read *'My Twisted World'* (2014), looking closely for thematic constitution and the construction of a worldview. As with the notes taken during my period of immersion, these sources allow me to draw on more examples of Incel's expressing antifeminist and/or misogynist claims, as well as highlight patterns of in/consistency between and within these claims.

Methods and Analytic Approach

To expand on my original research question and highlight the complexities and potential obstacles to answering it, I am using three sub-questions to guide my analysis. These are:

1. What themes emerge from within the dataset?
2. In what ways does the Incel worldview reproduce, reflect or reject material and/or affective understandings of neoliberalism?
3. How does this entanglement shape Incel antifeminism?

The first question was addressed in the process of coding my data and my initial findings are outlined below. The latter two facilitate a closer reading of threads in my subsample, which involves the detailed examination of specific discourses and ideas which are evoked in the construction of the Incel worldview.

Even in the iterative coding process itself, I am engaging in an interpretative process where I move from the data to the idea (and potential code), back to the data to consider how it pertains to the idea and so on (Richards & Morse, 2007: 137). The themes which emerged function as jumping boards for answering questions two and three, as well as the basis for my subsampling.

Thematic Coding

After the initial data gathering exercise on *incels.co*, I took an inductive and iterative approach to thematic coding while archiving the *incel.co* threads, building a set of subject codes (e.g. ‘Dating Apps’) along the way. This involved repeatedly adjusting and going back to my subject list and (re)organising them. These initial subject codes were the product of ‘face value’ readings, in which I accept how posters describe and explain their claims about their worldview, their antifeminism and their sense of identity. If these claims were absent I would still tag the thread with whichever subject code was the most accurate, in order to capture the diversity of conversations held on the forum. For example, the first thread in my subsample, ‘*[Blackpill] it’s the saxons that are responsible for ethnic self hate*’, which did not explicitly evoke feminism or gender, was tagged with the subject codes ‘Race’ and ‘Politics’ based on a face value reading of its original post (OP)⁸⁵ and the initial responses.

*angl*ids ruined asian/african/middle eastren countries and have been actively doing it for hundreds of years, from age 1 they shove wh*Te attractive people as the ideal beauty, brainwashing ethnics to self hate and lick their ass, to the point where people UNIRONICALLY suggest that northwest europeans are just 'naturally more attractive'*
jfl
 (T1, OP)⁸⁶

These subject codes were subsequently grouped into thematic categories. In this case, the thread was placed into the theme category ‘Characteristics’ because of the ‘Race’ subject code, as well as ‘Other Beliefs’ because of the ‘Politics’ subject code. While it was possible to rely on a relatively straightforward process of evaluating the subjects discussed in the opening

⁸⁵ OP can be used to refer to the first post (‘Original Post’) as well as its author (‘Original Poster’). T refers to ‘Thread’, P to ‘Post’, and ‘EX’ refers to an excerpt from a longer post.

⁸⁶ All quotes from my subsample are presented unaltered. Typos and deliberate misspellings are sometimes difficult to discern, but often have a function in the style and type of message being communicated.

messages of each thread, by grouping them into thematic categories I began to interpret these ‘face values’.

Coding highlights the constructivist dimension of research: it is about enacting (through methodological orientation as well as the epistemic profile of the researcher) as much as it is about discovering (Hedlund-de Witt, 2013). In my case this is an enacting of a critical perspective of how gender and market relations have transformed during the neoliberal period and how they can manifest in contemporary masculinist and antifeminist communities. I am looking for (or ‘seeking to discover’) the justificatory logic that animates antifeminism, and I am speculating that this logic can be productively examined via an analysis of ‘neoliberal qualities’ being reproduced and contested (hence my research questions). Thematic categories like ‘Competition’ and ‘Sex and Dating’ were, though reflective of the OP and initial responses, anticipating the kind of neoliberal ideas and discourses which will be examined in the analysis chapters. In this sense, the categories are not entirely ‘neutral,’ and this coding process functions as the first stage of analysis.

Proportionate Subsampling

After some deliberation and reading similar studies of communities operating primarily in online spaces (e.g. Nagle, 2015), I decided to isolate 50 threads (a subsample) for close-text, qualitative analysis. I only subsampled the main ‘Inceldom Discussion’ forum for this purpose as I concluded that the ‘OffTopic’ threads, while interesting and worth incorporating into my broader collection of Incel data, was less useful for close-text analysis. This section of *incels.co* pertains to topics such as music and TV shows, providing an insight into the preferred cultural medias of members of the Incel community. However, in adhering to my research objective of looking specifically at the type of antifeminism produced in these spaces, those threads in

‘Inceldom Discussion’ were much more focused on gender relations and the role of feminism in the Incel worldview, as well as receiving considerably more views and responses.

I wanted to accurately reflect the thematic character of my initial sample (the 1,266 threads from the ‘Inceldom Discussion’ part of the forum) and to avoid biasing my subsample by ‘looking’ for what I had expected to find (i.e. the most extreme examples of violent ideation directed towards women). The goal is not to objectively ‘explain’ or ‘answer’ the worldview available within my data, but to understand what animates it. My objective of emphasizing the antifeminism and/or misogyny of this worldview, and its potential engagement with neoliberal ideas, necessitates a ‘playing down’ of other qualities. To account for this, I selected my subsample by drawing on quantitative sampling techniques, using subject codes which I assigned based on thread titles and initial responses. I derived these codes inductively, adding new ones as they emerged from the data. In the end, the 1,266 threads could be condensed down to 29 subject codes, which I collapsed into 6 theme codes as shown in Table 7.⁸⁷

Table 7: Incel.co Thread Theme and Subject Codes

Theme Code	Subject Codes
Violence	Doxx; Murder; Suicide; Revenge; ER; Rape; Bully; Toronto
Sex and Dating	Porn; Sexwork; Queer; Degeneracy; Trans; Dating Apps; Rejection
Characteristics	Age; Race; Religion; IQ; Family
Competition	Rate; Improvement
Incels.co	Warned; Poll; Locked; Fake
Other Beliefs	Politics; Empathy; Evolution

I then calculated the proportion of threads that were coded as a given theme, which highlighted the thematic distribution of the threads (table 7). Then, using those proportions, I manually selected 50 threads from the full sample, ensuring the distribution of themes of the subsample matched that of the overall sample as closely as possible. When doing so, I

⁸⁷ 20 threads were not tagged with any subject or theme

prioritised the threads with the highest number of responses, to obtain as rich a dataset as possible, involving prolonged interactions between users. Hence, I end up with a subsample of 50 threads with a total of 7,325 comments (146.5 per thread on average). These threads were created by 39 unique Original Posters (OPs), with considerably more users posting comments in response.

Table 8: Number and Proportion of Threads by Theme

Theme	Full Sample (n=1,266)		Sub Sample (n=50)	
	Number of Threads	Proportion of Threads	Number of Threads	Proportion of Threads
Characteristics	342	27%	14	28%
Competition	445	35%	18	36%
Incels.co	298	24%	14	28%
Sex & Dating	354	28%	14	28%
Violence	292	23%	12	24%
Other Belief	190	15%	9	18%

Note: These proportions do not add up to 100%, because most threads were coded with more than one theme

Towards A Close Text Analysis

Tesch (1990: 135-138) refers to the ‘fuzzy boundaries’ of categories and that data will not be clearly confined within them, and I expected new themes to emerge during my close reading and interpretation. Furthermore, I considered some themes which were relatively under-represented in my coding cycle (e.g. Violence) would likely emerge in this close-text examination of threads which were not initially categorised as such. I also expected thematic elements on closer readings to reveal contradictions or paradoxes in how they are expressed as a community and individually, as well as a diversity of perspectives on that theme from individual posters.

With these expectations in mind I began looking for consistent patterns / repetitions, as well as patterns of difference. This complexity would not be revealed without a closer reading

of a thematically representative subsample. While the coding cycle and initial data collection allowed me to highlight the most prominent thematic concerns of the Incel community in this forum, this method alone has certain limits with regards to telling the more complex story and series of competing (and/or allying) values or beliefs which inform Incel antifeminism (Mayring, 2004: 266), and the relationship between its antifeminism and its broader worldview.

Even though there will be ‘fuzzy boundaries’ between these thematic categories, my research questions are more rigorously addressed if I am able to refer to them in the close-text analyses. This also allows me to consider the interplay between different subject codes within and between different themes, while remaining true to my intention to read these messages as authentic voices. This need not contradict my effort to look for neoliberalism being reproduced or rejected within the Incel community.

Interpreting the Incel Worldview

While my method for the close text reading is a critical interpretation of a dataset coded thematically rather than explicitly a discourse analysis, it does pay attention to the various ways in which discourse constitutes (rather than simply describes) the social world (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Particularly in the case of a community that exists almost entirely online – albeit one which is rightly or wrongly associated with a worldview which is about very ‘real’ daily scenarios – I must consider that the language used to describe reoccurring concerns within the community (e.g. gender relations, feminist hegemony etc.) has an impact in confirming that worldview and making its description of reality seemingly more substantiated. The Incel worldview is, as I have already argued, characterised by engagements with a series of discourses considered especially pronounced in neoliberal societies. My research questions do not look for the outcomes of this worldview, but nonetheless it would be clumsy at best to

ignore these possibilities when several high-profile murders have been committed by people justifying that violence with reference to the Incel worldview.

I am looking at the emotions of posters, the values that underpin them, and the binaries they describe/construct. Methods which search for affect often emphasise ‘emotion, values and versus’ of interviewees or observants (Hedlund-de Witt, 2013) – all of which are in play in my dataset. By annotating the affective expressions in my data I not only restore/underline the complexity which exists in this worldview but I also facilitate a discussion that will draw heavily on neoliberal ideas about human capital, self-improvement and intimacy.

In taking this approach I am changing the status of my data. After describing several ways in which internet forums are attuned for researchers examining what a community ‘really thinks about a topic’, Giles notes that there are two classic approaches to conceptualising the data or giving it a ‘status’ in the wider research project (2007: 167-168). The first of these treats the data as essentially the private property of individuals posting on the forum, and therefore sees the researcher as a ‘fly on the wall’ observer. This approach prioritises anonymity and privacy and frames the data as representative of the authentic voice of the individual. In contrast the second position gives the data the status of media content. In other words, the privacy of the individual poster is less important to the researcher than is *interpreting* the data as texts which contain and convey culturally located meanings, whether or not these messages are of the expression of ‘true beliefs’ (ibid. p168). This seems particularly apt considering the awareness of many posters on *incels.co* that their messages are public and prone to being reproduced in other online spaces.

After having spent a considerable amount of time observing *incels.co* as well as similar forums, my ontological commitments as well as research (sub-)questions demand a data status that errs towards the second of these traditions, while incorporating elements of the first. My analytical strategy recognises that the messages I am studying are *both* ‘authentic voices’ which

are valuable as such, *and* incidents of the production of cultural meaning in a specific context. Distinguishing between these will generally involve a self-reflexivity when conducting my close-text examination. I must ask of myself: are my interpretations focusing on the ‘authentic voice’ of the individual, or am I drawing links between thematic fragments and repetitions in this voice to the wider cultural context in which *incels.co* exist? I will be doing both, but especially in the latter case, it is crucial to be clear about it in my writing.

These ‘meanings’ that I accept will however have to be put into a wider context if only to properly respond to my research questions. Most pressingly, the context of neoliberalism, read as an affective and material set of mantras and processes, and the network of antifeminism groups that Incel is one part of, will be the primary reference point and serve as the ‘wider context’ in my close-text analysis.

Incel and Neoliberalism

The question of whether the Incel worldview is reflecting neoliberal ideas or logics, is not the same question as to whether its misogyny or antifeminism is shaped by that broader entanglement with neoliberalism – or at least not in the same way. This is the key distinction between my second and third research (sub)questions. I am interested in whether the Incel worldview’s antifeminism is informed and/or justified by appeals to neoliberal ideas, rather than evaluating it in simple terms as ‘neoliberal’. I am not asking whether neoliberalism is *responsible* in any sense for the antifeminism/misogyny of the Incel worldview either. Rather, I am looking for threads of commonality between that worldview, and the one sold by neoliberalism, and resisting the temptation to theorise a causal explanation.

The potential complexity here is twofold, to the extent that my initial observations and time spent in the online ecosystem of Incels suggests that its worldview proffers an essentialist reading of womenkind, wherein all members of this gender group are given the same, immutable qualities determined by that group’s essence (Wagner et al, 2009: 372-373) and

indoctrination by a hegemonic feminist power. The answer to the next implied question – are essentialist readings of gender neoliberal? – relies heavily on the definitional work done in Part One of this thesis, and as such is instructive in how I will approach my research questions.

An understanding of neoliberalism that emphasises changes in the domestic workforce, the advent of social media and platform technologies (i.e. ‘feminisation’ in political-economic terms) – what I have labelled a classic or materialist understanding – might reasonably conclude that neoliberalism is predicated on a flexible conception of gender, to the extent that it is synonymous with absorbing more women into the labour market and higher education, and allowing for the breakdown in traditional gender roles in private and public spheres. However, we are also armed with an understanding of neoliberalism which stresses its affective, individualist logic: hyper competition, marketisation of interior life and mantras of improving human capital. There are numerous examples of research which use such an understanding of neoliberalism (e.g. Kennelly, 2014; Wrenn & Waller, 2017), pointing to the extension and reification of specific gender norms in a manner consistent with the essentialist reading available in Incel discourse. This is to say that the Incel worldview’s antifeminism might be considered neoliberal by *both* constructing an essentialist understanding of gender, *and* by blaming a variety of materialist changes brought about under neoliberal regimes for their plight.

This approach to analysing my sources, which I have outlined above, differentiates my research from contemporary accounts of antifeminism. This is chiefly due to inflexible conceptualisations of neoliberalism in those contemporary accounts, which presupposes much of their focuses. These typically can be grouped as socio-economic determinist or technosocial frameworks on the one hand, and sociological accounts which emphasise post-Fordist casualisation of the labour market and the male ‘losers’ of such developments (Ging, 2019: 39; Messner & Montez de Oca, 2005). In my account, I will deploy a nuanced understanding of neoliberalism as, yes, a materialist shift in political economy which impacts on the gendered

makeup of contemporary workforces, but also the co-constitutive role of changes in affective scripts used to ‘sell’ the ideal neoliberal citizen. This affective dimension to neoliberalism has, with very few exceptions, seldom been put at front and center of accounts of antifeminism.

I respond to my two remaining research questions with five claims, formed via a close-text of my subsample which refer to these two camps of data. They are as follows:

1. In what ways does the Incel worldview reproduce, reflect or reject material and/or affective understandings of neoliberalism?

- The Incel worldview embraces and reproduces the neoliberal principle that all social relations and behaviour are defined by competition and market outcomes.
- The Incel worldview identifies and fiercely rejects the neoliberal emphasis on self-improvement.
- The heightened visibility of feminist ideas and language under neoliberalism, in combination with female biology and psychology, is blamed for the increase in Inceldom.

2. How does this entanglement shape Incel antifeminism?

- By interpreting its ideological environment as uniformly pro-feminist, Incel understands and presents itself as anti-establishment and emancipatory.
- The ultimate vision of the Incel worldview is the destruction of either the self or the [feminist] establishment.

To arrive at these claims, I utilize an understanding of how data such as mine functions as a route into the construction of a complex (and sometimes contradictory) worldview.

Chapter Eight: Analysing Incel and Neoliberalism

In what ways does the Incel worldview reproduce, reject or engage with its neoliberal environment?

Introduction

My analysis chapters are based on close-text examination of my subsample, 50 threads from the forum *incels.co*, drawn from a much larger dataset collected from the same forum. My interpretation of its contents is heavily shaped by several months of immersion in the Incel community as a ‘lurker’, in which I consistently read interactions and original contributions in a variety of media used in the Incel subculture. In this time, I acquainted myself with what Hine (2008) and Charmaz (2014) refer to as the unspoken rules and norms of etiquette particularly prevalent in online spaces. The various posts made by users on *incels.co* can only be understood as intended if the interpreter is well versed in its ideational context and communicative norms, including the community’s vernacular, references, and aesthetic sensibility. These ‘as intended’ meanings will be examined alongside the ‘face value’ threats and violent ideation which are often foregrounded in journalistic engagements with the Incel community and the phenomenon itself.

In the first section of this thesis I evaluated the different ways in which ‘neoliberalism’ functions within a diverse academic literature and debate. While mapping the intellectual debates over the term’s status (including claims that the term has lost meaning and efficacy as an object of inquiry) I defended its legitimacy as both a productive cultural rationality and a set of material conditions which shapes how individuals interpret their social environment(s) and their own role within them. In this chapter I extend the analytical status of neoliberalism as a key point of reference from which the Incel worldview – and its antifeminism – might be made coherent and intelligible. This approach has a clear precedent in the work of O’Neill

(2015; 2018) and Van Valkenburgh (2018). In each case, neoliberalism is introduced as a means of contextualising and making sense of various changes in the mediation of intimacy, gender, and gender relations as they manifest in different Manosphere groups.

I concluded at the end of the first section that neoliberalism, though often contradictory in its ideological premises and policy agenda, diffuse in its centers of power and plausibly denied altogether by some serious political scientists, has several key principles and characteristics. These are worth briefly restating before analysing my data. An approximate model of international political economy, neoliberalism is borne out of the Washington Consensus and the growth of the financial sector across the globe⁸⁸ (Wood, 2003; Harvey, 2009). In these ‘home countries’ forms of neoliberal governance, while reflecting some local cultural norms, are broadly similar: increased marketization into services previously considered public sector, with the state used primarily as a means of facilitating this process of marketization (Tribe, 2009: 86-91).

As an ethos or rationality (Davies, 2019) which permeates cultural production and which justifies state-led changes in social policy (especially welfare provision), neoliberalism can be understood through the model of its ideal citizen-subject which this discourse facilitates and encourages (Rottenberg, 2017). This includes: flexible workers willing to invest in their interior and exterior identities and bodies; an embracing of individual agency over the socioeconomic structures of their environment as causal explanations for social outcomes; an interest in equality of opportunity and support for inequality of outcome; faith in the capacity of the corporations to provide social responsibility (ibid.; see also Dardot & Laval, 2013). Within these conditions a version of feminism has emerged and flourished. It is this neoliberal,

⁸⁸ In this sense neoliberalism is not confined to any national state, however various neo-Marxist accounts highlight the neo-imperialist dynamic in which financial capital remains owned and operated upon from Western Europe and North America. Likewise Mirowski (2011) and others refer to neoliberalism’s origins as an interwar, European (specifically Austrian and German) project, subsequently developed in American and British universities and thinktanks.

post or popular feminism that is the target of Incel antifeminism. This understanding of neoliberalism will provide the grid of intelligibility for my subsequent analysis.

Posing this question allows me to build upon existing frameworks for investigating subcultural phenomena, otherwise considered aberrant or perverse, with reference to neoliberalism to reveal possible consistencies and alignment. O'Neill (2018) describes the PUA and 'Seduction' industries as an acceleration of existing neoliberal logics, manifest in policy, changes to institutional practice (emphases on footloose capital and an expectation that workers will be similarly flexible) and the advent of platform technology through which to maximize efficiency and performance, not only in 'work' but in every facet of life (e.g. fitness; diet; appearance; mental health etc.). This neoliberal rationality is also observed in popular culture (e.g. the spread of 'new wellness' cultural products), self-improvement scripts that focus on having the 'right attitude' and refusing to accept failure and a faith in meritocratic structures to provide 'true value' through competition (Cruikshank, 1993; Hearn, 2008). O'Neill argues that the logic which informs policy changes and the discourses which permeate popular culture is reproduced in the PUA as an industry and a subjectivity (2018: 152-154), in which members develop a deep emotional connection to the same underlying logic.

Below, I investigate whether the same can be convincingly argued about the Incel community and the worldview its members have, to different extents, constructed and invested their identity in. Unlike O'Neill's (2018) study, all my data is divorced from its physical context. All I can be reasonably sure of is that an individual decided to visit this forum, register as a member, and start making these posts. Everything else, including demographic information, is a case of [educated] inference.

What follows are a series of claims about the ways in which the Incel worldview can be productively understood as a reaction to its neoliberal environment. I will be defending these claims primarily with reference to my dataset. I will also refer to a wider body of content

produced by Incel or Incel-supporting individuals, including a series of blog posts, videos and podcasts popular within the Incel community and wider Manosphere network, some of which have been referenced in Chapters Five and Six. My claims were finalised after all coding and grouping of subject tags, which avoids biasing my thematic sampling strategy. As with O'Neill's (2018) study, the root term 'neoliberal' is seldom used in my dataset⁸⁹. References to social norms, discourses, and transformations from Incel commentators then, have to be determined as being indicative of neoliberal governance by the analyst.

Claim Number One: The Incel Worldview Reproduces the Neoliberal Principle that All Social Relations and Behaviours are Defined by Competition

The two subject codes grouped together under the theme of 'Competition'; 'Rate' and 'Improvement', constitute the largest thematic characteristic of both my sample and subsample. In total, 445 threads were tagged with 'Competition' (35% of the total threads) and this was almost exactly replicated in my subsample, in which 18 threads are tagged with 'Competition' (36% of my subsample). In total, there were 364 Rate tags and 139 for 'Improvement', suggesting that the former is the more popular subject for threads. Interestingly, the number of responses in threads coded under 'Competition' is 3133, 43% of the entire sample. This suggests, though does not prove, that 'Competition' threads receive more interaction within the community. Threads tagged with 'Rate' often focus on evaluating the value of a purported Incel (e.g. T17⁹⁰: '*[Serious] is this guy an incel?*'; T40: '*Now that I have a new phone I can finally prove that I'm subhuman*') or specific body parts of an individual. The intention behind

⁸⁹ This is not necessarily representative. Across a variety of platforms (especially Reddit and YouTube) I have documented Incel or pro-Incel users discussing the merits of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, Freud, Schumpeter, and a variety of sociologists' work.

⁹⁰ When referring to threads from my subsample (see table A1 in the appendix for a full list), T stands for 'thread', p stands for 'post number' and EX stands for 'excerpt'

these threads does not appear to be approval seeking, but rather confirmation that ‘It’s Over’. Threads tagged with Improvement typically refer either to an individual’s specific experience of attempting to change their value, or a broader debate about the possibilities for transformation via common improvement techniques (e.g. T43: ‘*Results of my rhinoplasty*’; T27: ‘*‘Gymcelling’ is a meme invented by normies to rob incels of their time and money*’).

Truth is Verified in Competition and Market Outcomes

After several months observing *incels.co* and the popularity of this type of thread (and their high response rates) it became noticeable that users share a principle – often though not always unspoken – that the ‘true value’ of the self is found in a market outcome. I claim that the community of posters on *incels.co*, and the broader Incel culture and worldview, believes that society *should* be organised along competitive grounds, but that they are ‘locked out’ of competing. This is regularly demonstrated in threads which focus on experiences and data related to the dating market⁹¹. Failed competitors in this market are, according to the Incel worldview, considered failures by ‘society’.

The Incel community and worldview does not necessarily disagree with this judgement, but it argues that the cruelty of this judgement is largely unacknowledged by the world around them. Though it is seldom articulated as such, the ‘society’ referred to – familial expectations, pop culture visions of youthful exuberance and responsibility-free fun, corporate and cultural demands on ‘appearing normal’ which presume a [sexual] relationship – is highly evocative of the neoliberal society described in several accounts highlighted in Part One (Dardot & Laval, 2013: 4-6 & 255-257). It is also a repudiation of the model neoliberal citizen subject, the

⁹¹ The actual term ‘dating market’ is used numerous times in my subsample, across several threads.

‘entrepreneur of the self’ which has successfully aligned with select feminist ideas in the production of new feminist forms.

Incel identifies itself as a community of dating market failures, and physical attractiveness or beauty is portrayed as the most – some argue the only – indicator of success and route to social affirmation. Whether beauty is derived from quantifiable measurements of body parts, or a social construction learned by its members, is a matter of debate in the community (see next section, ‘*Competition and science*’), but it is agreed that beauty is the dynamic capital in the dating market. However, failure in the dating market is almost universally considered to be evidence of an individual’s low or non-existent value in a way that goes beyond the physical. These failures ‘aren’t even considered a person’ (T4, p20, EX) and are instead associated with ‘subhumanity’ (T1, p117, EX) and told ‘There’s nothing that can be done [about it]’ (T16, p62, EX). In this comment a user describes himself as ‘low tier’ ‘failed’ and ‘despaired’, based on repeated failure to ‘get a foid at all costs’.

And yes, i hung out with lots of people, but im not very good at making friends, usually people just ignore me, and every time i hung out i have a pourpose in mind: getting a foid at all costs. The rest of men (with i compete with, despaired low tier normies and failed normies) instantly know this, how despaired i am and that i would do anything for some sex, so understandably they dont trust me.
(T4, p95, EX)

The quote also highlights that the poster approaches a social setting (to ‘hang out’) as transactional: the poster hopes that time spent with ‘friends’ or even people who do not ‘trust’ him can be transferred as a form of social capital in exchange for ascension. What this indicates, and what is borne out across my sample, particularly in threads grouped under ‘Competition’ but not exclusively so, is that in the Incel worldview, *all* social interactions should be understood as competitive behaviour. This includes behaviour which is less obviously connected to sex and dating: all physical or mental transformation (surgery, fitness regimes,

haircuts, meditation, education) are made with the same, competitive motivations (e.g. this user summarizes the ‘point’ of having social media profiles as ‘You need to build your presence value and compete against others in popularity race to even stand a chance. Obviously since you are here asking jfl it never even began for you’ (T4, p20, EX)).

The body is a key site of competitive behaviour in the Incel community and worldview alike⁹². A vast number of body parts are discussed with a variety of metrics, some a constructed scale⁹³, some simply measured in centimetres (e.g. wrist width). All parts are conceived of in competitive relation to an ideal model, the Chad which sits atop of the sexual hierarchy. While I have observed almost all body parts being discussed in the forum and beyond, there is some debate over *which* parts of the body are most important. The most popular and common response was the face overall (within which symmetry, jawline, eye shape and so on are given specific and combined ratings), then height, then skin colour, the last of which is a topic of fierce debate.

Such is the preoccupation of many posters with dating apps as a means of discovering the extent to which they are market failures, ‘improving’ the poster’s profile images via photoshopping technology is a regular feature of forum threads. The user’s face in these posts becomes a terrain for competitive transformation in minutia:

Here are the changes I made:

1) hairline lowered 2) chin moved forward 3) double chin removed 4) jaw made slightly wider 5) nose made slightly smaller 6) dark circles reduced 7) skin cleared up 8) lower eyelids lifted

(T40, p154)

In another thread (T43) the OP invites users to rate his own nose reduction surgery, posting photos in a similar way to a typical thread on *Lookism*. Responses often use quantitative rating

⁹² That is to say, the body is discussed competitively by users on *incels.co* as well as represented in the Incel worldview as the most important capital in ‘normie’ society.

⁹³ E.g. levels of hair loss are pegged to a ‘Norwood scale’ which is used widely in male health forums.

metrics to praise, ridicule or question the authenticity of the OP (e.g. ‘MASSIVE difference, you went from a 3 to a 5 IMO. You're one chin implant away from legit ascension’ (T43, p3)) or to recommend future surgeries (e.g. ‘bud you have obvious mandibular recession and a good 12-14mm of chin recession / you NEED double jaw’ (T43, p33)).

This focus on the body as a capital to be modified is the type of ‘improvement’ discussion most likely to be permitted on *incels.co*, in spite of the Black Pill’s opposition to common dating advice for men which emphasises the potential for market success via improvement strategies and technologies. Examples presented in OPs are often subsequently rated by other users, forming a feedback loop of rating attempted improvements. Improvement is to a lesser extent evoked in discussions which express a desire to become more confident in interactions with women and more broadly in social environments. Nervousness and awkwardness when talking with others (especially women) are extremely common complaints on the forum and elsewhere in the community. There are several references to acting non-neurotypically and to ‘start stuttering autistically’ (T25, p15, EX). While the merits of learning skills of social interaction are controversial (many users explicitly oppose the notion that ‘learning game’ can benefit them in any way), I observed several threads – including some in my dataset – which discussed at length the usefulness of learning ‘game’: ‘Game absolutely exists and is crucial... I'm uglier than half of the guys here, but I have game’ (T3, p34, EX).

The main alternative sites of improvement in my dataset and more generally across the forum involve financial and interpersonal success. In the case of the former, strategies to improve the financial wellbeing of an identifying Incel are justified on the basis that wealth can potentially compensate for a deficiency in physical appearance in attracting women. Money is also considered a potential route to more substantial physical transformation: ‘So assuming money is no object...anyway I could get closer to that morph IRL? I'll save every penny I make to contribute towards ascension if it's needed’ (T40, p157, EX). Some research has uncovered

links between the Incel community and plastic surgeons across the globe, suggesting that there is an emerging industry catering specifically to the demands of the Incel worldview (Hines, 2019).

A predicament in which the individual is compelled from many sides to improve his inner and outer self, regardless of whether ‘ascension’ is possible, is described as part of the Incel experience from birth⁹⁴. Individuals are said to have a series of resources which make up their value and how they are interpreted and treated by the [neoliberal] society around them. Several discussions in my subsample and beyond address the experience of being ugly (or, less commonly, being non neurotypical) as a child, and how this experience informs their preoccupation with resentment, self-hatred and bitterness, and why these feelings often existed before they discovered Incel and the Black Pill worldview. Contemporary cultural practices of un/attractiveness are also a site of academic investigation, some studies of which have found significant rates of social penalties for unattractive individuals (see Schneickert et al, 2020). While such studies defer from ‘objective’ measurements of attractiveness and instead argue that attractiveness is a product of a nexus between several cultural capitals, they are regularly cited in Incel arguments that their isolation informs poor or erratic mental health (e.g. Ash, 2020). This is displayed several times in my subsample:

Being isolated will warp your brain, you can't be KHHV for 30 years without it affecting your in some way. You don't have to become a full blown autismo but you definitively won't be completely normal
(T25, P32)

⁹⁴ This is not to suggest that the behaviour of a baby is knowingly seeking advantage, although this claim is made twice in my dataset.

Competition and Science

In the Incel worldview, of all the capital humans are born with, the most important is genetic inheritance, the scientific unit behind the making of the body. Genetics are referred to regularly in my dataset, and it is a reoccurring topic of debate and interest across the community, tying together ideas about scientific verification, social predestination⁹⁵ and individual agency. The idea⁹⁶ of genetics fulfils different roles within the Incel worldview: a model of scientific categorization which aligns with the lookism model of success and failure; proof of the injustice of Inceldom (no one ‘chooses’ their genetic inheritance) and evidence that ‘competition’ in the broadest sense incorporates everything from the molecular level up. When posters respond to accounts which pathologise the Incel worldview, a common refrain is that those critics ‘Can’t deny the science’. Similarly, when other Incel posters speculate on ways to improve their situation, they are often greeted with responses which deify their genetic inheritance as a guarantor of current success or failure: ‘I’m trying to help you recognise that it is your sub par genetics that is the reason you fail. Accepting anything else is pure COPE’ (T1, p111, EX). Likewise, several posts lament that their parents decided to procreate and pass down their ‘inferior’ genes.

While posters appeal to this idea of science to prove their failure is a product of cruel, biological reality (e.g. ‘The only thing that made you this way is poor genetics.’ T24, p2, EX; ‘Incels are created by nature, not by message boards.’ T8, p68, EX), the potential influence of social forces in beauty standards remains a source of fierce debate, particularly regarding posters from different ethnicities. This is one of several indications that the Incel community does not homogenously adhere to the same understanding of the Black Pill. The first thread in

⁹⁵ Many posters respond to the Incel meme ‘It’s Over’ with ‘It never began’ for precisely this reason: their suffering was ordained at birth based on their genetic makeup.

⁹⁶ Genetic inheritance – and a broad understanding of ‘science’ more generally in the community – is considered an objective value marker, beyond the influence of social movements, feminism, ‘woke’ culture etc.

my subsample, '*[Blackpill] it's the saxons that are responsible for ethnic self hate*', underlines the extent to which the influence of social construction, particularly regarding race and ethnicity, divides the community. It also reflects the unverified but plausible claim often made on *incels.co* that a substantial minority (or possibly majority) of posters are ethnic minority men living in white majority countries. The fourth comment under this thread summarizes a position held by several posters who claim to be living in a society which privileges white skin-colour to such an extent that it undermines lookism:

being white is only viewed as attractive because it was force fed and brainwashed onto people during the colonization period.

(T1, p4, EX)

Several subsequent posters describe difficulties they have experienced while growing up in a society which idealised whiteness. This incorporating of racialised beauty standards in the explanation for their Inceldom is commonly referred to within the community as taking the 'Race Pill'. However, several other posters respond with aggressive denunciations of the declared role of 'brainwashing' in forming beauty standards, arguing 'No, unlike 80% of PSL I'm not a shitskin. Your argument is terrible and is the same one lefty lunatics use (social constructionism vs biological determinism). No matter how much social conditioning, bug eyes, bird bones and NW3 will never be attractive' (T1, p20, EX) and 'Big Cope. Beauty is genetically determined. No amount of socialization will make a foid think a jawless manlet is attractive' (T1, 25).

It is ultimately difficult to evaluate a consensus within the community regarding the role of racialised beauty standards in facilitating the Incel phenomenon. Between the polemics written by posters on either extreme in this thread, there were others who acknowledged that the temporal-spatial environment of an individual could feasibly result in their being subjected to even higher standards by local women. This is the rationalisation behind 'locationcels,'

although that term is more of an overarching idea which sidesteps the identity-descriptors which foreground ethnicity like ‘ricecel,’ ‘currycel’ etc. Some posters suggest that the cultural norms of particular ethnic groups, regardless of the country they exist in, is a variable that influences the prevalence of Inceldom, including the suggestion that Latina ‘foids’ ‘might even give pity sex to would be incels’ (T15, p7, EX). However, I am persuaded that ‘woman’ as a category is more universally identified as the cause of Incel suffering compared to, for instance, the history of colonialism – not least because there has been no splintering of the Incel movement on this basis.

These kinds of debates between posters on *incels.co* also engage with neoliberalism, insofar as the focus is on inherited capital, whether that be genetic or what the government can ‘invest in’ (Becker et al, 2012). Likewise, discussions about the influence of racialised beauty standards engage with the racialised dimension of broader changes in gendered power relations which have occurred in the neoliberal era (see Rottenberg, 2017: 343-344). In both cases my dataset reveals that users understand either their genetic inheritance or their ethnicity as being ‘fixed’ in the eyes of society as ‘low-tier’. Short of drastic physical transformation, exiting either their local setting or, in many cases, ‘society’ as a whole, most posters in my subsample demonstrate pessimism that they can become competitors with a chance of success.

A scientific explanation for Inceldom, which is promoted by several posters in my subsample, can appear to contradict the basis of Incel misogyny and antifeminism introduced in Chapters Five and Six⁹⁷. However, this is resolved with minimal conflict within and beyond my dataset, via a conspirational account of the feminist movement, which is conceived of as a prolonged psychosocial assault on women as well as men, with political and corporate support. Already biologically and psychologically disposed towards hypergamy and pickiness,

⁹⁷ If beauty is an objective value predicated on genetic inheritance, and beauty dictates how an individual is treated in contemporary society, how can feminists be responsible for a rise in sexless men? Surely, it is the cruel and unfeeling reality of scientific determinism?

according to Incels women in contemporary Western (neoliberal) society are encouraged to accelerate both dispositions with the result being greater inequality in the dating market. Feminism is portrayed as working in cahoots with women's [exploitative] nature, bringing down the traditions and taboos which had previously kept them in check: 'Femoids have ruined our lives. Modern feminism will destroy society eventually' (T22, p108, EX). More pointedly for the Incel who understands himself as powerless, is that feminism is considered an exercise of agency and power. Competition is therefore a gendered phenomenon, as while it might be a fact of all social life, it is the unequal capacity to compete between most men and women that causes the Incel phenomenon. Without feminism there would still be sexless men, but their number would not have grown to the extent that it has: 'with religion, less whoredom, women more controlled = less inceldom. If u were smart, u would promote religion even if u didnt believe in it' (T24, p8).

Organising the World and the Incel Community on Competitive Grounds

Competition functions as the organising principle for the Incel worldview, in which Incel as a class is at the very bottom of an imagined hierarchy based on presumed success in the dating market. The community claims that this hierarchy already existed (due to the hypergamous wiring of women) but has been made more extreme and unequal by the incorporation of feminism into [neoliberal] governance. This is often communicated visually with reference to crude illustrations of the Pareto Principle applied to dating (see Fig. 4.). It is important here to note that the Incel subculture presents itself as *radically* honest about revealing this inequality of outcome, to 'see the world as it truly is' (T19, p66, EX), in comparison with dominant discourses around attainment and self-improvement. Incel describes social relations as they *are* not as they *should* be, or so many posters contest. It is through this kind of attachment to its own competitive failure, and the determination not to accept alternative explanations, that Incel

understands itself as representing a transgressive and even emancipatory intervention in the politics of gender (see Chapter Eight).

Humans are organised into groups based on their sex and perceived (or if possible proven) chances of success and failure in the dating market. As outlined in Chapter Six, at the very top are Chads and Stacys, followed by Brads and Beckys and Normans/Normies, and finally the increasing mass of ‘locked out’ men. Of these a select group are made aware of the structural conditions of their plight and are ‘Black Pilled’. This way of categorising all humans based on their perceived competitive value anchors the vision which binds the Incel community together. Absence of sex is not on its own sufficient to qualify as Incel; it is a matter of self-declaration and identification with this worldview constructed around this competitive failure. Without being able to ‘tell’ an Incel by looking at them (although one can often ‘tell’ SMV as it is a product of identifiable and quantifiable physical markers), other metrics are used. For instance, ability to portray oneself as popular and well-liked on social media platforms, via quantitative metrics, is several times referred to as an indicator of being a ‘Normie’ or above:

They are measure of your value as a human being fornorns so no not pointless at all. IG in particular jfl if you don't have at least 1000+ likes on your professionally done travel photos. Kys⁹⁸ immediately.
(T4, p21)

This hierarchy is ‘proven’ by market knowledge data, which is an extremely common topic on *incels.co* and beyond. By learning the ‘truths’ of the market (e.g. that hypergamous behaviour in women has increased drastically over the past ten years), individual posters tie their own experiences to a much bigger structural transformation in the dating market and, ultimately, beyond that. Which men are most desired by women (e.g. T34, ‘*Inceltears slut posts pic of her pussy for Chad*’), the science of female sexual attraction (e.g. T45, ‘*this book exposes*

⁹⁸ ‘Kill your self’

sexual behaviour of FHOs'), data on virginity rates, mating behaviour and hypergamy (referred to in several threads), and anecdotal experiences of women in or outside of relationship settings (e.g. T7, '[JFL] My online female friend broke up with her boyfriend') are all the basis of threads in my subsample. In each case anecdotal or quantitative data is used to affirm Black Pill interpretations of the other (e.g. 'I thought it'd be a good thread considering it further proves that a lot of foids can't even think logically' (T7, p61, EX)).

This desire to have the wretchedness of Incelcom scientifically explained and affirmed appears motivated by a variety of reasons. As a collective – and this is borne out in my subsample – the Incel community fiercely polices an in/out group mentality based on perceived proximity to a 'truecel'. In other words, the model of society that the Incel community declares itself brave and subversive to reveal, functions also as a means of ordering the underclass itself. In this sense then, the Incel worldview maintains a neoliberal understanding of competition as an epistemological principle, but differentiates itself by bravely revealing and foregrounding its unequal outcomes, even within its own community.

Within *incels.co* however that hierarchy is inverted, as members proven to be successful with women or considered too attractive are – unless they can prove that they are 'Black Pilled Chads' – asked to leave (e.g. 'Leave this now fakecel' (T17, p17)) and are subject to especially aggressive responses if they ask to be 'Rated':

Stop being fucking autistic holy fuck, it's like you're fishing for compliments. You are a mentalcel, unless you're a manlet, you'll be able to fuck someone if you stop with this "uhhhhh im ugly guys pls hold me". Once you get laid you'll be the first one to call us all losers and tell us to get a life, it happened before and it will happen to you, but unlike you, there's a lot of people here who are really ugly and even then they aren't attention whoring faggots like you.

(T40, p30)

Incel Constructs its Own Identity Around its Competitive Failure

The Incel worldview bases its identity on an explicit recognition of its position at the bottom of an extremely unequal hierarchy, borne out of [dating] market outcomes. This, it is claimed, is an honest reflection of the universal mechanism of competition through which social value is measured and social relations are organised. The society that these types of message describe is reminiscent of the ideal neoliberal society as theorised by Davies (2015) and Mirowski (2009: 436) in which quantitative knowledge is granted a higher epistemological authority than any theoretical presupposition. The hyper-critical responses to ‘Rate Me’ threads (e.g. an OP includes an image of a poster’s rhinoplasty operation, and while many responses are positive, a majority still argue that the individual requires further adjustment: ‘Now time for chin surgery.. fuck just lol at your eye area and that side profile.. fuark life is unfair.. just lol’ T43, p73, EX)) are presented as neutral and scientific. Failure, depression, isolation and resentment are not just tendencies within the community, they are constitutive: the community *expects* failure from its members, and the numerous critiques of microscopic parts of the body that are found on *incels.co* are presented as the otherwise unspoken ‘truth’ of [neoliberal] society.

On further investigation however, it becomes clear that the community speaks through different voices when evaluating SMV. The frequency of ‘Rating’ threads serves three primary functions within the community: to distinguish between different types of Incel, to promote and police the concept of a ‘science of attraction’, and to demonstrate the proximity of the Incel worldview to the ‘real world’. In each case, a different authority figure is appealed to as the ultimate judge of physical appearance: the community itself, ‘science’ and ‘society’. The Incel community argues that it is honest because it has the experience of *knowing* its own rejection; science is considered a neutral measurement of market outcomes and female sexual behaviour; and society is – governed by feminism and social constructivists – lying about this truth, even

as it facilitates/produces it. The Incel community therefore places itself outside the parameters of ‘society’ even as it claims to be a more honest interpreter of its structures and in/equalities, and policies an identity it describes as a product of its failure.

In several threads forum members are invited to judge the physical attractiveness of an individual, including images of self-describing Incels and/or members of *incels.co*. Depending on the judgement, that individual will then have their Inceldom measured. While there is little or no controversy when the community collectively agrees that an individual is ugly, when the community cannot agree there is usually fierce debate as to whether the person depicted is ‘worthy’ of being considered a ‘truecel’. On several occasions identifying members are compelled to argue for their worthiness:

I KNOW I AM A TRUECEL LMFAO people laugh at me man and call me ugly frequently people i dont know mainly men and women lmfao Fuck every fakecel man you dont wanna be a TRUECEL... i think about homicide everyday
(T5, p100)

While this might seem counter-intuitive or contradictory (if being an Incel is so painful, why would posters express irritation that they have been judged as attractive enough to form a sexual relationship?), this judgement takes place in an environment in which the majority of users have come to the site in order to have their own marginalisation vindicated (e.g. ‘looking for fresh blackpill material’ T45, p227, EX). For some posters, being asked to rate the physical attractiveness of someone they consider superior to themselves, but who still maintains a voice within *incels.co* and is accepted as an Incel, is highly provocative:

I hate people like you. You have a good face and everything then complain your fucken ugly. If you want to see ugly then see my pics you attention seeking cunt. Get off this site and get laid already
(T40, p47)

This dynamic is common: many posters are accused by fellow posters of being Incel *not* because of their physical appearance but rather owing to other deficiencies which they *could* rectify if they were as desperate as those who are truly ugly⁹⁹. As such, these users who are considered physically attractive cannot be ‘truecels’. In cases like T40 above, users are told to leave the forum and are accused of seeking affirmation from truly wretched members.

The supposedly neutral judgement offered by scientific lookism can therefore operate as affirmation and problematisation alike: while appeals to scientific measurements are intended to reassure posters that their plight really is *involuntary*, they can have the opposite effect: users who are still rated as ‘good looking’ are cast as either deluded or manipulative: ‘Incel is about LOOKS. If this guy's a fucking incel you're all retarded fakecel cucks who are too gutless to live life’ (T17, p4, EX). In other words, it is not enough for an individual to consider themselves ugly, it needs to be ‘proven’ either by submitting an image for rating by the community, or via their experience of isolation and invisibility in competitive site of verification (the dating market).

Summary

The Incel worldview as it manifests in my subsample and in alternative sources alike indicates a profound affective investment in the organising principle of competition. This mirrors both the historical account of neoliberalism, which stresses the founding vision of the early neoliberals and neoliberal institutions as the reconceptualization of society along market logics (e.g. Mirowski, 2009), and the Foucauldian analyses charting the effects that the establishment

⁹⁹ Another common accusation is that people are pretending to be Incels in order to mock and bully. This is not an unfounded suspicion; there are several examples of posters being exposed for lying about their sex lives and attractiveness, as well as non-Incels posting examples of the violence and misogyny from *incels.co* onto other sites.

of this vision has had in the production of new sensibilities and subjectivities in the neoliberal era (e.g. Gill, 2017; Wrenn & Waller, 2017).

Many users express their identity as Incels through what they claim is an honest appraisal of their status as competitive failures. This failure is guaranteed, within the worldview, first and foremost through physical attributes. The focus on the body as a site in which individuals can invest and transform is justified by an appeal to scientific verification: each body part can be evaluated with comparison to an imagined ultimate competitor (The Chad). This belief in physical appearance as a capital which ensures social validation (and sex) through transaction in a dating market informs the community's support for radical physical transformation, as well as the rejection of improvement strategies which do not focus on changing the body (see next claim).

There is a potential contradiction between this belief in genetic predestination and the objectivity of market outcomes, and alternative explanations for difficulties in dating which foreground floating signifiers of race, gender (specifically different forms of 'alpha' and 'beta' masculinity) and the role of financial capital. It is however resolved via the construction of a hegemonic feminist power which it is argued has accelerated the psychological and biological hardwiring of women towards hypergamous behaviour. In this worldview, feminist power combined with innate hypergamy supersedes any other factor for the increase in Inceldom.

Even if the emphasis on market outcomes and the socially fostered expectation to compete is an important cause of their trauma, the principle of competitive outcomes organising society is not opposed in my subsample nor beyond. Indeed, it is reproduced to an extreme degree both in how the Incel worldview interprets that word, and in how the Incel community itself is organised.

Claim Number Two: The Incel Worldview Identifies and Fiercely Rejects the Neoliberal Emphasis on Self-Improvement

My subsample reflects a keen awareness among posters that contemporary cultural scripts foreground the responsibility of the individual to invest in their self to achieve success. This impression is confirmed by observations made during the period of cultural immersion, during which I repeatedly observed identifying Incels expressing anger that their sexlessness (and attendant rage and despair) has been recast in ‘normie’ media as the result of their shirking of individual responsibility. This immediately sets Incel apart from both other Manosphere groups and the neoliberal ethos of the ‘entrepreneur of the self’ (Foucault, 1988: 18-19; Dardot & Laval, 2013: 111). The general inclination of forum members is to oppose any claim that self-improvement can be an effective strategy for Incels or other involuntary celibate men, other than those who already physical attractive. This opposition is considered by many posters to be integral to the Black Pill worldview and is illustrated by aggressive responses to any expression of emotional and/or financial investment in self-improvement techniques, including questioning of the individual’s Incel credentials. The controversy generated by the suggestion of possible [self] improvement is implied by the relative scarcity of ‘Improvement’ tags (139) in my dataset.

Two approximate models of self-improvement and dating advice are identified by the Incel community, roughly corresponding to the ‘Blue’ and ‘Red’ pill interpretations of society as detailed in Chapter Five. In keeping with these interpretations, the former is portrayed as the dominant socio-political and cultural discourse of the contemporary West, while the latter acknowledges and responds to the structural and cultural empowerment of women. The difference between the two models of self-improvement is not always easy to decipher, which is not especially surprising considering that O’Neill (2019) describes the [Red Pill] seduction

industry as an accelerated form of neoliberalism. What my subsample demonstrates however is that while there is a shared, broad diagnosis between the Incel worldview and that of other Manosphere communities with regards to female empowerment in the dating market and beyond, there is also a reluctance – displayed with varying levels of passion – to accept the Red Pill as a sexual strategy. This rejection typically includes a claim *either* that the Red Pill is merely an extension of Blue Pill delusions, *or* that it is incapable of overcoming the power of feminism and hypergamy.

The Function of Improvement and Its Limitations

While ‘self-improvement’ can cover a vast array of areas of human life, there is an obvious focus within the Incel community on self-improvement in the context of sex and dating. While this thesis argues that Incel is more productively understood as a community bound together by an explanatory worldview for their perceived disempowerment, rather than just a shared expression of entitlement to sex, it is the ‘fact’ of sexlessness that provides the context for discussions held on the forum and elsewhere about self-improvement. Self-improvement is always geared towards accessing sex in my subsample. In Thread 45, ‘*this book exposes sexual behaviour of FHOs*¹⁰⁰’, there are several references to ‘hack[ing]’ the sexual behaviour of women, while even self-improvement techniques which do not emphasise body transformation are geared towards the same outcome (e.g. ‘Just save up money and move to wherever your chances of getting laid are the highest.’ T6, OP, EX).

The opposition to improvement strategies on *incels.co* can operate along political lines drawn within worldview and according to Black and Red Pill observations. However, I found that the opposition to improvement was also justified by appealing to the science of attraction

¹⁰⁰ Female Human Organism.

(lookism). For people with a sufficiently attractive physical capital, there is no need to work on improvement: ‘‘LOL, those "normies" didn't work for shit. They had everything handed to them on a platter’ (T3, p145, EX). This reinforces appeals made to an abstract idea of scientific data, outlined in the prior claim, as superior to theoretical models (Davies, 2019): ‘Gymcelling doesn't work. We all know that. You need good genes to succeed at gymcelling, and if you have such genes you'll never need to gymcel anyway because women will be naturally attracted’ (T27, OP, EX).

It is this context which I will focus on here, although it is worth noting that, particularly in my alternative sources outside of *incels.co*, self-improvement is used also, though less often, to refer to self-defence, acquiring friends or entering a social circle, assisting with career development, and aiding in mental health concerns. Reflecting on this in my observation diary, I noted that *incels.co* appears, in comparison to these other sites of Incel dialogue (especially *r/FA30plus*), to be especially prone towards understanding self-improvement as solely an exercise in sexual access. Potential explanations for this include the younger demographic of *incels.co* users and the decisions by administrators to draw attention to sexual content (e.g. by including a fixed, regularly updated ‘Porn’ section of the site).

Several recent analyses have portrayed Incel as a community diverse enough to be considered apolitical or politically ambiguous (e.g. Costello, 2020; Murphy, 2020; Kates, 2020). This is contradicted by the way in which self-improvement scripts are interpreted in my subsample and beyond. While I am careful to avoid reducing Incel to an arm of any discrete political project, organisation or movement, my subsample indicates that the politics of the community is explicitly anti-establishment, and that the establishment through these eyes is female, feminist and degenerate (this is covered in more detail in Chapter Nine). This is not ambiguous or apolitical. In Chapter Six I expanded on the distinction between Incel and the alt-right, which I framed as a ‘milieu’ rather than a ‘movement’ (Nagle, 2017; Topinka, 2019:

1-2). There remain similarities between the alt-right (particularly neoreactionary) and Incel interpretations of establishment power. This requires engagement to develop my claim that Incel rejects the [neoliberal] mantra of self-improvement, as it becomes clear that Incel treats and understands self-improvement texts differently, depending on where they locate its author politically. It is through this categorisation by the Incel community that we can locate Incel as a politically diverse collective with reoccurring sympathies to radical conservative, fascist and misogynist movements.

Blue Pill: 'Common Sense' Dating Advice

The Incel community claims that men in the West are told repeatedly – in advertisements, advice columns and popular culture more generally – that if they want to succeed in the dating market, they have to invest in a specific understanding of how the dating market works. This understanding functions as a shared ‘common sense’, in which a series of claims are assumed: honesty is a virtue valued by women, ‘being yourself’ is a sensible dating strategy for men, physical appearance is only one factor in attractiveness, women are attracted to confidence, and many people irrespective of gender and physical appearance find it difficult to date. Even when posters acknowledge some benefit of following this common sense, it is couched in diminutive terms:

Everything is a plus. Even the bluepill stuff is good to have. A shower, haircut, nice shoes, game, cologne. They're all GOOD TO HAVE and will HELP vs nor doing or having them, but only if you were on the cusp of being attractive to the girl in the first place, and if you ARE attractive to the girl, she will let some of that shit slide anyway. On the odd occasion, that bluepilled stuff might help you even if you are below a woman's standards, but these are the exceptions to the rule. You'd have to be approaching 100s, 1000s, 100,000s of women, depending on your looks, before your application of some bluepilled advice would bear fruit. Looks are the shortcut. In most cases, looks are the only way forward.

(T3, p179)

This common sense is a regular topic of critique and ridicule in my subsample, and across Incel sites is considered *inaccurate* and *emasculating*. In the post above, transactional understandings of sex and dating ('100s, 1000s, 100,000s of women', 'looks are the short cut', basic hygiene is 'good to have' in the quest for sex etc.) are assumed, but only to dismiss the idea that they are more influential than physical appearance. Interestingly, the reference to 'game' underlines the blurriness of Red and Blue Pill advice, given that this is a quintessential Red Pill theory of sexual attraction, and substantiates O'Neill's (2018) claim that the Red Pill is in many aspects enthusiastically adopting a neoliberal ethos. The Blue Pill common sense is said to be reproduced in mainstream spaces, in contrast to Red Pill self-improvement scripts which, because of their criticism of feminist dominance, are relegated to the margins of popular culture and in some cases (e.g. Roosh V) legislated against.

Most mainstream dating advice is said to address women, a focus which is derided on *incels.co* as, according to their worldview, all women find it easy to attract men. There are however ways in which men are encouraged to understand the world through the eyes of the Blue Pill. As my sample selects for the threads with the highest response rates, it does not reflect the multitude which concentrated on debunking various Blue Pill claims in short exchanges. There are, however, threads in my subsample which isolate specific sources of Blue Pill thinking, including the dating advice given by parents of posters ('Just go out to bars, clubs or discos and find a girl lol that's not how it works for a friendless incel with almost no social skills like me' (T11, p48)) and friends ('How do the "the problem is you, just work on your personality" assholes explain this?' (T37, p132, EX)). There are also numerous examples outside of *incels.co* referencing the inaccuracy of everyday or popular claims made about dating, including those found in 'gaming... movies... TV shows, any programming' (James, 2018), to indicate that the Incel community is highly attuned to and interested in debunking popular assumptions around dating, and especially how they pertain to those who have failed.

Explanations which focus on the sexless individual's perceived faults are responded to with vitriol:

Why don't you go out more? When will you get yourself a nice girlfriend? You won't find a girl whilst sitting in your room all day FUCK obviously according to these assholes finding a girlfriend is all there is to life, TOO BAD I CANT FUCKING DO IT CAUSE MY HEAD LOOKS LIKE A POTATO YOU SCUMFUCKS
(T41, p71)

The ultimate proof that this programming¹⁰¹ is both inaccurate and emasculating lies in their lived experience and perception thereof. The forum and my subsample are beset with posters describing their traumatic experiences of rejection or loneliness – some detailing how these experiences have defined their lives up to this point – as proof that Blue Pill advice for single men is inaccurate. Women, one poster notes with surprise, do not uniformly value financial security as highly as physical attractiveness: ‘Women are strange. Money = security = comfortable life. women would rather struggle with a broke Chad than live a life of leisure with a beta incel’ (T42, p76, EX).

The core of this and similar laments is that the ‘truth’ has been suppressed by Blue Pill ideology. The reality of women's [evolutionary-biological-psychological] nature is seldom mentioned in the dating advice addressing single men, while the feminist insistence on a discourse of equality and female empowerment both confuses men into thinking that ‘beta’ behaviour is a suitable dating strategy, and prohibits via ‘cancel culture’ any public criticism of this and other mistakes. It is not until after a series of failures on behalf of the sexless individual, or early exposure to Red and/or Black Pill, that they are confronted with the cruelty of the dating market, and their own status as a victim of female hypergamy and feminism. ‘We [unattractive men] were raised to believe something that wasn't true’ (Eggman, 2015) and,

¹⁰¹ ‘Programming’ in this case has undertones of mind control and conspiracy, as well as a direct association with *The Matrix* (1999).

because of their inadequacy in the face of the *real* expectations, are ‘thrown in the fucking trash-pit’ (ibid.). The men who do not come to this realisation are assumed to be either attractive enough to be protected from the negative consequences of hypergamy (i.e. they are Chads), or they ‘... just have internalised feminism from being brainwashed day in day out by the MSM, academia, female lawyers etc’ (T21, p30, EX).

There is a reoccurring accusation made against an older, ‘Boomer’ mentality as it pertains to dating and dating advice: it is hopelessly out of date. This is especially prominent in Thread 28, in which posters discuss the dating advice given by parents:

Made the mistake of trying to explain this to my family and got the 'it's all about hard work and skills' bollocks¹⁰², as well as being told my problems with friends and relationships were all down to kunfidunce.
(T28, p37, EX)

There is a sense among some posters that a halcyon time might have existed, before feminism had become so entrenched, when traditional gender roles were enforced, and women were ‘kept in check’. In many threads posters discuss the ‘degeneracy’ (sexual promiscuity) of modern women, with a subtext that this is the result of a feminist takeover. The ‘West’ is portrayed as ‘degenerate, cucked, low IQ... full of hypergamy, cuckolds, gays and fags and nearly everyone... is mentally ill’ (T18, p58, EX), and the traditional dating advice scripts are stuck with an outdated worldview in which disciplinary forces on sexual behaviour operate now as they did before the sexual revolution. My subsample includes numerous complaints at the debauched and degenerate behaviour that the political takeover of feminism is said to have unleashed:

¹⁰² In this example, the poster is blaming being sacked from two jobs on his own physical unattractiveness. If he were attractive, he speculates, his mistakes would have been forgiven.

Because women in their 20s don't give a fuck about how much money you have unless they just want a beta provider and that's not usually until they're in their 30s when they're used up whores who want to "settle down". If your face is ugly like mine nothing works.

I'm ugly but not hideously deformed. I'm a 3/10 really. I get no women.

(T42, p69)

For many posters, Blue Pill common sense on dating is *extremely* inaccurate to the extent that it is considered a product of dishonesty or stupidity. My subsample includes several examples of posters claiming that this Blue Pill advice is a deliberate and coordinated part of a broader attack on [white, heterosexual] masculinity. The most common suspects in this conspiracy are Jewish power (Thread 35 is titled '*Jews created the incel epidemic and are responsible for my subhumanes*' and there are numerous references to Jewish influence in facilitating accelerated hypergamy and miscegenation) and feminism, with the former being communicated via traditional antisemitic tropes, most notably that Jewish money finances and so controls a significant proportion of popular culture. The sharp contrast between the lived experiences of identifying Incels and the broadly optimistic and pro-equality principles of Blue Pill self-improvement discourse, especially in the context of dating advice, is met with extreme upset and anger, including threats of violence (e.g. 'Judging by his post, he's not blackpilled anymore and should definitely fuck off and never come back.' T46, p112, EX).

While there are some examples of antisemitism being contested within the forum, the claims of Jewish and feminist subversion of traditional gender roles and norms of 'White' civilisation are consistent with several other wings of the Manosphere including its white supremacist and explicitly political figures (see Devlin, 2006; Tomassi, 2018), as well as historical movements based on the restoration of a specific masculinity (see Lyons, 2019: 244-245). Tomassi (2018), one of the most prominent and widely-read Manosphere authors, is clear in his argument that the Incel phenomenon is the product of the old 'social contract' between men and women being torn apart: 'These young men are the product of a generation that

has *removed the man* from their upbringing and taught them to emote before they think.’ It is feminism and its allies who are responsible for ‘removing the man’, a diagnosis shared across Red Pill spaces and a significant proportion of Incel posters too.

Red Pill: ‘Snake Oil’ and ‘Game’

As noted above, Red Pill thinking shares a diagnosis with the Black Pill that the social structures put in place under neoliberal governance regimes have empowered women at the expense of men. In this sense there is a natural alliance between the Incel community and Red Pill figures and ideas, many of whom tie their diagnosis to a political movement in which the ‘establishment’, however contrived, must be upended (Tait, in Sedgwick, 2019: 194-195) and the restoration of masculinity (or ‘male tribalism’) to political and social life are explicit objectives (Lyons, 2019: 242-243). This reassertion of power is to be achieved politically but also culturally and on an individual scale: men young and old are encouraged to challenge Blue Pill thinking and ‘be the change they want to see’ This is more easily aligned with MGTOW, MRA and PUA communities, defined as they are by a proactive response to feminist hegemony. However, the Black Pill’s aversion to identifying with any specific political movement (despite the tendency towards extremism in this area) and, more importantly, fatalism with regards to the future, presents an obstacle to a similar alignment.

As part of this metapolitical effort in which individuals are encouraged to challenge Blue Pill norms in cultural as well as electoral sites, Red Pill advocates are guided and encouraged by an exhaustive literature in self-help books, blogs, vlogs and memes, all geared towards the victimised male. These texts are differentiated from ‘mainstream’ self-improvement scripts precisely by their acknowledgement that contemporary Western society is geared towards women, ethnic minorities, and progressives. Red Pill advocates then present themselves as the antithesis to Blue Pill common sense, particularly regarding gender relations,

and claim to speak for those men who have been victimised by the changes wrought by a feminist takeover. My dataset and observation diaries indicate that numerous identifying Incels were once rabid consumers of Red Pill self-improvement texts. This is unsurprising considering the history of the Incel movement and its prominence on forums predating *incels.co* such as *PUAhate* and *Sluthate*, the former of which was frequented by Elliot Rodger, who described it as ‘very depressing. It shows just how bleak and cruel the world is due of the evilness of women’ (2014:118).

Incel can therefore be understood as a community borne not just out of a shared disillusionment with Blue Pill or ‘normie’ understandings of the dating market and how to compete within it, but also those who have considered and possibly invested in Red Pill advice too, only to become disillusioned all over again. This manifests in aggressive responses to those identifying Incels who post recommendations on how to ascend based on their own engagement with Red Pill ideas about [male] self-improvement in an age of feminist dominance:

In all seriousness, this thread fits exactly with your ego. You went from screaming "reee I'm so incel" to literally TRP Deluxe. And here you are giving advice as if you've magically ascended and you know how shit works lmao. Classical PUA/TRP snake oil shit...That's literally TRP mentality "it worked for me, so it will work for everyone!", so do us all a favor and go there. You can post shit about "game" and "shittests" and 5000 word workout programs to your hearts content.
(T3, p79, EX)

I observed this antagonism between Incel posters and the Red Pill manifest more often in *incels.co* threads than in the various subreddits and YouTube channels hosting discussions and productions of pro-Incel media. The most plausible explanation for this is that distinguishing between different self-improvement texts by their association with a political ideology is more difficult to communicate on open platforms like *YouTube* or *Reddit*, where the audience is not necessarily well-versed in this debate and its particular history. Furthermore, the rejection of Red Pill self-improvement guides symbolically differentiates Incel from other

Manosphere groups, despite Red Pill figures ostensibly sharing with Incels a great deal with regards to how they view contemporary gender relations and the dating market.

Incel culture, particularly in its engagements outside of its own forums, attacks Blue Pill views on dating behaviour and its dating advice more often than it does Red Pill equivalents. Indeed, the latter is a more prominent target of criticism within *incels.co* in which the discussion participants already share a diagnosis of feminist takeover and lookism. In this sense, there is an informal but strategic alliance between the two communities which reflects the commonalities between worldviews. The videos of well-known Incel content producer ‘FACEandLMS’ are one of many examples of this. The focus of these videos is dispelling the myths of mainstream self-help scripts, and to explain how all social interactions are inherently borne out of a competitive jostling for supremacy and access to sex. In the brief list of videos below, ordered by number of views, the following claims are made: what mainstream dating texts describe as ‘sexual chemistry’ is actually a mere reaction to beauty; that specific measurements are required for a male’s jaw to be attractive; and that women – nearly *all* women – have ‘unlimited dating options’.

Figure 12: ‘FaceandLMS Video List’, 2020



Through comparing Incel critiques of Blue Pill ‘common sense’ and its criticism of Red Pill ‘game’ advice, my study reveals that the antifeminism and misogyny of the Black Pill, represented in the Incel worldview, is more profound and foundational to its self-identity than it is for many [Red Pill] Manosphere groups. Incel posters regularly argue that the Red Pill – itself a sexual strategy explicitly opposed to what it sees as hegemonic feminism and the subsequent emasculation and victimisation of many men – is in fact part of the ‘gynocentric’ social order that they claim to oppose. While this critique of the Red Pill is not entirely universal (e.g. ‘I think we should be glad that there are more than one view here. Everyone being depressed and going full black pill is boring. / We need our views challenged’ (T2, p56)), one is more likely to encounter a rebuttal along the lines of ‘ITT [in this thread] a disgusting amount of redpill’ (T42, p85) and that ‘Making everything about sex is incredibly gynocentric’ (T50, p19, EX). In its fixation on teaching men how to adapt to its environment of lookism and feminism, the Red Pill is rebuked as further enhancing the agency and autonomy of women.

Finally, and often informed by the experience of individuals previously interested and sometimes invested in Red Pill sexual strategies (including via PUA training and tutorials), many posters in my subsample claim that these strategies are only useful if the student already has a basic level of physical attractiveness. This way of dismissing Red Pill dating advice reproduces the appeal to scientific data as a more powerful site of truth verification than any theoretical presupposition – even antifeminist dating advice cannot overcome this metric. PUA therefore will not, it is argued, overcome this basic, cruel fact of competition:

This is true. Nothing makes me cringe more than a bunch of subhuman gymbros acting like apes in an attempt to seem confident to women who openly despise them. They are bluepilled and they don't even realise it. Typical numales.
(T27, p262)

In this quote, the poster responds witheringly to the suggestion that the physical transformation available via attending gym sessions could improve a ‘subhuman’'s chances with ‘women who

openly despise them'. Though not without exception, users also typically dismiss the idea that these kinds of techniques can have any other benefit if they fail to function as transferable capital for sex.

Summary

Many posters in my subsample express bitterness, anger, and incredulity towards popular dating advice, particularly that addressed to single men, which encourages routines of self-improvement or 'working on the self'. This kind of 'common sense' has been theorised as central to the ideal neoliberal citizen-subject (Foucault, 1979/2008; O'Neill, 2018). In the Incel worldview, all attempts to improve the self which do not focus on drastic physical transformation are suspect. Even those approaches that do utilize the body as the key site of value in attracting women, such as 'gymmaxxing', are controversial within the community and prone to derisive responses. This is underpinned by a logic in which 'improvement' is only worthwhile if it leads directly to an enhanced transactional capacity for sexual access and ascension from Inceldom. My subsample includes numerous examples of posters appealing to scientific data in order to support their rejection of self-improvement as a suitable strategy, reinforcing my argument that the Incel worldview remains deeply enmeshed in a neoliberal logic about market outcomes and truth.

Partially due to the Incel community's ideational and historical proximity to other parts of the Manosphere, users acknowledge that there are two camps of dating advice. The first, 'normie' camp is considered part of the Blue Pill, pro-feminist establishment. This is rejected out of hand as emasculating in its emphasis on personality and confidence, and archaic in its description of a world in which men and women compete in the sexual marketplace on roughly equal footings. Mainstream dating advice is widely considered within my subsample inaccurate to the point of absurdity, and as serving the interests of women and carrying a variety of

negative consequences for men. Other posters, though not a majority, claim that the inaccuracy is in fact part of a conspirational attempt by Jewish and feminist power to destroy Western civilization.

Red Pill dating advice, which also emphasises individual responsibility to work on the self, is also largely rejected, albeit more often within *incels.co* than in non-Incel specific sites. This is often done in such a way that reveals a deeply misogynist desire within the Incel worldview for women's sexual agency to be suppressed. This represents an important distinction between Incel and other Manosphere groups, which ostensibly seek to acquire similar sexual agency for men. It also reveals a contradiction within the Incel worldview as to the role of lookism (the 'science of attraction'). To the extent that it has constructed a pseudo-scientific explanation for Inceldom, the Incel worldview legitimizes its own failure in the eyes of the [neutral, scientific] market. However, it also utilizes a cartoonish and nightmarish construction of dominant feminism, affording it a power that no other theoretical position comes close to matching. This will be examined in more detail in the next claim.

Claim Number Three: The Increased Visibility of Feminist Ideas and Language under Neoliberalism is Blamed for the Increase in Inceldom

My third claim is that Incel aggression towards feminism, feminists and women should be interpreted as a politically ambiguous critique of a governing ideology (neoliberalism) and its exercise of power. I justify this by evidencing and explaining how the Black Pill worldview, accessed via my subsample and broader immersion, believes that feminism represents a dominant principle of political economy and popular culture, so successful that the distinction between neoliberalism and feminism has been effectively collapsed. From this perspective, attacking feminist ideas, language and practice is to transgress, undermine and counter the

prevailing orthodoxy of Western society, which is a primary source (along with female hypergamy) of Inceldom. What is interesting about this situation is that many people who sympathise with or identify as a feminist, are often also disposed towards critique of the gendered practices of neoliberalism. In these accounts however, ‘feminism’ – however construed – is unlikely to be examined as a fixed or foundational motivating value of neoliberal governance, but rather as a wide range of perspectives which have been partially and selectively incorporated into neoliberal regimes of governance.

In Chapter Four I outlined a feminist literature examining an ‘entanglement’ between neoliberalism and feminism, in which several authors claim that the adoption of feminist ideas and language by neoliberal governance regimes has had emancipatory and oppressive consequences for women and men. This literature, organised in my thesis as having a material (e.g. Roberts, 2015) and affective (e.g. Gill, 2017) register, acknowledges that ‘neoliberal values’ – individualism, femininity, further marketisation, austerity – provide an important context in which feminist projects have emerged, influencing the construction of these modes of protest and progress. This informs claims made by several authors that many ‘popular’ feminisms or feminist projects have been stripped of the collective solidarity and struggle which defined prior incarnations (see Banet-Weiser, 2018; Budgeon, 2015), while those which do challenge core neoliberal values are less likely to receive institutional endorsement and/or funding.

It is tempting to draw a parallel between these feminist critiques and those of the Black Pill, which likewise highlights the increased visibility of feminist ideas and language, and its incorporation into both cultural and political-institutional spheres. There is however an obvious but nonetheless extremely important distinction here. The authors I have cited as writing from the tradition entanglement highlight the piecemeal, sometimes contradictory but also always contingent nature of this dynamic in how national and international bodies bring in ideas of

‘gender mainstreaming’ and the like into their codes of conduct and practice¹⁰³. In sharp contrast, the feminist boogeyman of the Black Pill worldview is unified, coordinated, and hegemonic across Western politics and culture. In place of the internally fractured and constantly shifting theory and practice described by feminist authors themselves (see Coole, 2000; Fraser, 2009), feminism is presented in *incels.co* as an essentially uniform movement endorsed and managed by elite institutions, presided over by feminists, women and an army of weak men who orbit and submit to them.

This imagined feminism is, it is claimed, responsible for increased Inceldom. The ideal of meritocratic competition – an ideal this worldview and indeed Incel subjectivity positions as an eternal, apolitical characteristic of all social behaviour – has been ruined by the unfair advantaged conferred from a variety of political, legal, cultural and social institutions to women. While this pertains in the Incel worldview most urgently in the competitive site of sex and dating, there are multiple examples in my subsample and elsewhere of posters decrying the advantages granted to women in other areas of life, from the expectation that women be helped when facing physical abuse (e.g. ‘you always have to fight for yourself (you don’t have the same privilege like women do)’ (T23, p6, EX)) to their capacity to generate income based on their bodies (e.g. ‘Even if you get the job, you’ll be tortured and people are against you there. While femails and landwhales make 100k selling literal shit online’ T28, p35, EX)).

While this framing is a broadly consensual position within my subsample, there are questions which do highlight a divide within the community and a contradiction in its worldview, most prominently: has feminist dominance occurred because of coordinated action on behalf of a progressive-misandrist conspiracy, or has it arisen via a combination of other, ‘innocent’ factors? I expand on this below. First, I address the ways in which feminism,

¹⁰³ There is an interesting debate to be had on the endurance of some of these gender mainstreaming ideas in institutional culture and process, particularly after the ‘first wave’ of neoliberalism in the 1980s. Is this proof of women’s empowerment being a core pillar of neoliberal development, or rather the successes of ‘Third Way’ attempts to embed a feminist logic of sorts into a variety of legal and institutional systems?

according to the Incel worldview, exerts its power over a society and its individuals, with consequences including a rise in the number of Incels.

Identifying Feminism in Power: Institutions and Attitudes

As previously noted, there is no evidence in my subsample that a significant number of contributors to *incels.co* are politically engaged in any traditional sense (i.e. being a member of a party or collectively deciding to vote for a specific candidate). This is true even as there is ample evidence that the political tendencies in the community are almost uniformly radically antifeminist¹⁰⁴. The ‘feminism’ being opposed here is likely markedly different from the feminism understood by the reader, even allowing for the term being notoriously dextrous even within the academic community. Nearly every reference to feminism or feminists in my subsample positions it as endorsed and constitutive of establishment power, and the notion of a feminist movement authentically oppositional to that establishment is not considered once. If there was a ‘takeover’ of previously honest governance structures, it has long been completed¹⁰⁵.

In my observation diary I noted that there were surprisingly few examples of explicit or detailed theorising or explanations of how feminism came to be hegemonic, or what specific policies or institutional arrangements were so powerful as to cause increased Inceldom. I had expected to see page after page of evidence – which I would most likely disagree with – of how feminism shapes the daily lives of individual posters. Those examples which are available appear as vague descriptions of entire discourses. In Thread 50, ‘*Would you protect a woman*

¹⁰⁴ Interestingly there are several examples of posters bemoaning the ‘cucked’, pro-feminist reigns of right-wing leaders who are not ordinarily commonly framed in this way (including President Trump and Prime Minister Johnson).

¹⁰⁵ There are however several examples in my subsample and beyond of feminist gains being described as one arm of a wider conspiracy that is systematically disempowering not just men but also ‘white civilization’, ‘Enlightenment values’ and so on. This conspiracy typically goes back to at least the 1960s.

from rape?’, the conversation turns to the legality¹⁰⁶ of such an act, with the general consensus being that ‘with laws as gynocentric as they are, if it can be proven that you saw it and did nothing, you might get charged yourself’ (T50, p56, EX). This is indicative of the ways in which broad institutional changes are discussed in my subsample and across most – though not all – Incel culture¹⁰⁷. This lack of precision does not in any way undermine the visceral disgust that most posters express for feminism, which is inscribed into the basic tenets of the Black Pill outlook and virtual architecture of the forum itself (e.g. banning women posters ‘on sight’). Likewise, there are references in the usernames in my subsample – ‘FeminismsCancer,’ ‘Make your local feminist eat pavement.’ and so on – which reinforce that opposition to feminism is an a priori position for all posters on *incels.co*.

Instead of detailed examples of policy, the attitudes of women function as a symbol through which ‘the feminist establishment’ is more commonly defined and opposed. A cultural establishment geared towards sustaining the assumption that women are to be de facto sympathised with, produces, it is claimed, an incentive for all women to engage in hypergamous behaviour, and to treat unattractive men as valueless (e.g. in Thread 47, ‘WAW2: *Women Hate Being Approached By Non-Goodlooking Guys*’). In this sense, Incel understands feminist power as that of a vast network which structures and encourages the adoption of both ‘victim’ and ‘boss’ mentalities for women. Posters refer constantly to the *assumption* that women, by virtue of their sex and gender, endure discrimination. This is expressed in *incels.co* in derisive responses to posts which detail women being discriminated against or suffering (e.g. ‘Who is that roastie crying? Lmao. Fucking vitrue signaling, they wouldn't give 2 fucks is 90% of us did it tomorrow’ (T11, p3)) as well as in various memes in the broader Incel network:

¹⁰⁶ The OP’s country of residence, Germany, has legal guidelines over the duty to protect people at imminent risk.

¹⁰⁷ This is in contrast to MRA and MGTOW forums, which often do provide detailed analyses of specific legal precedents (particularly in the custody courts).

Figure 13: '#MeToo' meme (source: me.me)



For Incels, 'normie' readings of gender power relations are not only incorrect, they are an outrageous inversion of their own predicament. The lived experience of many posters is described as an exhausting cycle of women denying them sex, and in so doing denying them also of validation as a successful competitor in a universal market. This denial, and the inversion of the Incel experience in [increasingly visible] feminist messaging, is at the core of the Black Pill worldview's antifeminism.

Incel subculture therefore enacts its antifeminism by linking the behaviour of unknown individual women (and Blue Pilled men) to an overarching feminist power. This power addresses women but has been successful in infiltrating and subverting social norms and gender

relations to such an extent that men are also beholden to its principles. Young women, knowing nothing other than the feminist-neoliberal establishment, are considered especially prone to this phenomenon and its effects. Chief among those effects is the moulding of their subjectivity, by a nexus of pro-feminist messaging and capital, so that victimhood, individualism, lookism, and an [inflated] sense of their own SMV are not just ‘acceptable’ traits but actively ‘pro-woman’ and ‘anti-sexist’.

Neoliberalism, Feminism and Female Subjectivity

There are several examples of this dynamic in my subsample, whereby the behaviour of individuals becomes linked to an overarching, systemic process (a sort of ‘fun house’ caricature of institutionalised feminism). These include forum members responding to an OP link to a *YouTube* video (since deleted), in which a young woman expresses some sympathy with key Incel complaints. The responses almost unanimously interpret this act as an example of how women attempt to exploit ‘sub8’ men:

Everything coming out of her mouth = pure unfiltered lies. She doesnt really believe in any of what shes saying, its all a ploy to get us to orbit her and crown her our blackpilled queen and then worship her. Shes literally exploiting the fact that were starved for female attention to suck on our blood, this is literally how women tear communities apart.

(T20, p43, EX)

Subsequent responses highlight that, even though it is accepted that this young woman is not a ‘feminist’ as such, she is – by virtue of her sex and gender, and the feminist culture in which she has been socialised – unable to empathise with the Incel predicament (e.g. ‘You really think a female can be "blackpilled"? You really think a female means any of the bullshit she mentioned in the video?’ T20, p54, EX). Other examples include posters arguing that women are unlikely to ever become homeless because of this supportive feminist structure around

them: ‘A woman would be able to go round to any one of her orbiters and they'd be happy to take her in’ (T28, p71, EX). In each case, the completely innocent behaviour of unknown women, or the absence of obvious financial or cultural disempowerment/suffering of a woman, is framed as part of this larger phenomenon that has created more Incels. ‘When a female talks to me, I'm instantly irritated, roll my eyes and want to leave. I know she's only doing it to help herself’ (T26, p35, EX).

In my immersion period I repeatedly observed feminist power described as encompassing elite institutions (e.g. Thompson, 2020), however in my subsample it is the attitude exhibited by women to ‘sub8’ men, that functions as the most common indicator of that power. Disinterest in men who are not in the top 20% of physical attractiveness, it is claimed, reveals an assumed superiority at the core of the female subjectivity as it exists under the conditions of feminist governance, and is a source not just of sadness but also retaliatory anger: ‘No, you SHOULD look at girls if it makes them feel uncomfortable. Fuck them and their feelings. In a less cucked world, they would know their fucking place’ (T47 p67). The attitudes of women are also discussed in greater detail than changes in political culture, and with far more violent ideation surrounding it. The lived experiences of posters who feel mistreated based on their physical appearance is a more common topic of threads on *incels.co* than policy, indicating that for many posters it is shared experience that animates the most intense emotions among its userbase.

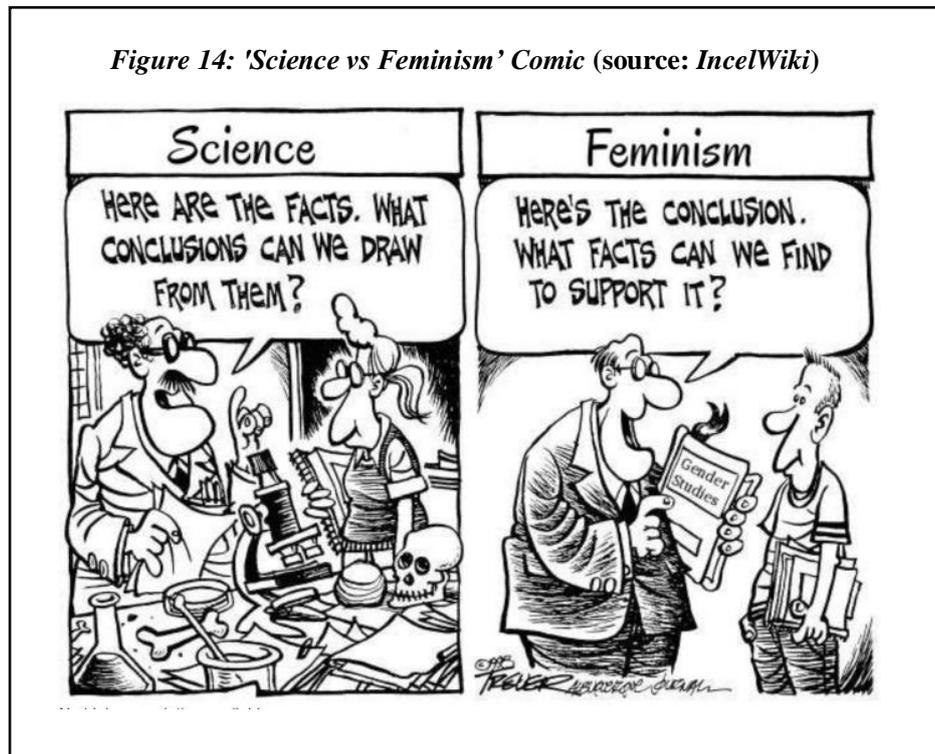
I have argued that the Incel worldview shares with neoliberalism the principle that competition is an unalterable fact of social reality. While there is a fierce backlash against techniques of self-improvement, the broader re-conceptualisation of the body as a site of capital which requires managing is entirely aligned with the Black Pill. Indeed the ways in which self-improvement advice and industry are rejected reveal *not* that Incels do not believe in the importance of physical appearance (the popularity of threads concerning drastic plastic surgery

and body modification illustrates this), but that they consider themselves beyond saving. The self-improvement techniques advertised by PUAs and in Cosmo magazine alike do not work for men who fall short of a basic threshold of looks and mental acuity. For these ‘truecel’ men who cannot hope to successfully compete, even with assistance, the permanence of competition becomes, when coupled with the feminist establishment which they observe in the attitudes of young women, a source of torment and violence.

In addition to attacking individual feminists (e.g. ‘Yea I'm so glad, also I love seeing the feminists get angry. With Hillary elected, they would get their ways and cucking would be accelerated’ T8, p86, EX) the Incel community also derides a certain kind of [gendered] consumptive and individualistic culture. This often but not always takes the form of how easy it is for women (and to a lesser extent Chads) to convince others to provide them with attention, money and gifts: ‘Yes, and acting like a girls emotional cumrag falls under that definition. Are you going to try and justify acting like a total beta now? Go ahead, and while youre at that log off and piss off to /r9k/ where you can orbit girls and buy them amazon gifts as well’ (T7, p19). Women are imagined as biologically hardwired to pursue hypergamy, but also as shrewd exploiters of male attention to acquire consumptive benefits. This logic also seems to underpin the reoccurring interest in young, ‘unspoilt’ women. In one such exchange regarding an underage girl, a poster responds to suggestions that the girl might be worth engaging with by claiming: ‘It's a young girl that doesn't realize the power of her pussy yet’ (T20, p110).

This critique of individualism and consumptive practices has led some authors to speculate on the possibility that Incel is a flawed, thwarted or otherwise disturbed proto-feminist intervention on gender relations and ‘modern society’ (Kates, 2020). The comparison is underpinned by a basic similarity between how Incel observes the entanglement of neoliberalism and feminism, and observations on the same dynamic made by feminist theorists covered in Chapter Four. However, while Incel and feminist theorists identify several of the

same phenomena associated with gender relations under neoliberalism (the rise of gendered practices of consumption; increased visibility of feminist ideas; an ethos of competitive individualism; an emphasis on specific readings of attractiveness), Incel strips these phenomena of their ambiguity. They are instead interpreted through the Black Pill as solely benefiting women at the expense of men, and as ideologically programmed to further feminist objectives, summarised in this kind of visual media, commonly shared in Incel sites:



These similarities are worth examining, as they indicate that Incel occurs in the same social environment and observes similar dynamics as do other critiques of contemporary gender relations. By denying this shared space, we risk continuing the marginalisation of Incel as a wholly fantastical and cultish arrangement. Incel is facilitated by a convergence of distinctly neoliberal ideas (human capital and competition), institutional changes (newly visible feminist ideas; the spread of mobile computing and popularity of dating apps), and filtered through a culture war framing (Red and Black Pill) which ties male sexual anxiety to a common [feminist] enemy. In other words, Incel is not so much of an outlier as many accounts

suggest. We also risk, in presenting Incel as in its entirety a marginal or pathological concern, contributing to the strength of the Incel claim that its worldview is based on telling otherwise suppressed views to a feminist establishment.

Postfeminist Sensibility and Neoliberal Feminism in the Incel Worldview

The Incel worldview blames feminism and women's natural hypergamy for Inceldom via engagement with the gendered dimension of its neoliberal environment. I will now examine the similarities and differences between its interpretation of this 'gendered dimension' of neoliberalism, and that outlined in Chapter Four.

During my immersion in Incel spaces I quickly noticed that antifeminism is an a priori position within its online hubs, and that because of this it was not immediately obvious what specific complaints the community were making. There is an irony here, as a lot of Incel content derides what they see as the reduction of their supposedly diverse or sophisticated worldview and community to a simple case of male entitlement and bitterness (Ash, 2020). Incel is often treated as a simplistic, homogeneous identity bloc, a treatment this thesis is committed to challenging. However, this reductive understanding is exactly the way in which feminists and feminism are presented in spaces like *incels.co*. To avoid making this mistake, I will now turn in more detail to the synergy and disjuncture between feminist and Incel critiques of contemporary gender relations.

Incel identifies three broad areas in which feminism has become entrenched, with the ultimate consequence being an increase in the Incel underclass of men. These are: (1) the adoption of feminist ideas in powerful NGOs, MNCs and other international bodies to form an elite global practice of feminism; (2) the increased visibility of feminist ideas and language in mainstream cultural production and marketing; and (3) the production of an ideal 'new woman subject' in which women are encouraged to embrace sexual and financial independence. While

‘feminist’ and ‘feminism’ are terms used far more in my subsample and beyond than are ‘neoliberal’, ‘neoliberalism’ and even ‘ideology’, these terms still require decoding in order to highlight the areas of similarity between the most popular Incel critiques of contemporary feminism, and those of scholars of postfeminist sensibility and neoliberal feminism.

The creation of a ‘transnational business feminism’ has been addressed by several feminist theorists, who note that ‘Over the past decade, a growing coalition of capitalist states, regional and international financial institutions (IFIs), inter-governmental institutions (i.e. the UN) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has converged on the need to promote gender equality for women globally’ (Roberts, 2015: 209; see also Calkin, 2016; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). Gender equality, though tied to a logic of marketisation and ‘smart economics’ in rhetoric and documents such as that in the World Development Report of 2012 (Wong, 2012), has through its conversion with elite actors become entrenched in global norms of development and policymaking. The convergence goes back at least until the 1980s, where the fall-out from SAPs were found to be significantly gendered (Elson, 1994). Ultimately, ‘investment in women’ would become enshrined in this coalition, both as knowledge (e.g. ‘Enhancing Women’s Participation in Economic Development’ report by the World Bank in 1995) and a variety of policies justified on this basis (Chant & Sweetman, 2012).

Though references to World Bank reports and development studies are absent, Incel sites regularly describe living in a ‘feminist’ or ‘man hating’ society in a way which suggests feminist power goes beyond the sexual market place. While the focus in my subsample is more often on anecdotal experiences relating to disinterest or perceived hypocrisy in the behaviour and attitudes of women in their lives, the broader Incel culture regularly alludes to the institutional entrenchment of feminist ideas (‘normie’ society is described as having ‘no actual philosophy beyond "Incels = bad, Females = good"’. T23, p124, EX)).

These references often occur in accounts which compare gender relations today unfavourably with those in the past. The *IncelWiki* entry for ‘Feminism’, for example, refers to feminism as in many countries ‘institutional and mainstream, where equal-pay laws are in place, and where women have more total personal wealth than men’. The entry for ‘Blackpill’ then details the following complaints about modern society: the ‘Lack of income advantage for men reduces them to their looks,’ that ‘Eliminating traditional gender roles necessarily destabilizes society through demotivated males,’ ‘Women are compatible with enforced monogamy as they naturally fantasize about sexual coercion’ and ‘Revoking women's right to vote would be good’. Finally, in my larger initial sample of popular threads on *incels.co*, claims were made that the education sector is ‘cucked’ and ‘pro-feminist’ (e.g. Thread ‘*I fucking hate teachers*’) and that basic female autonomy ought to be replaced by a system in which ‘Women would have no rights and would be treated as property, tradable like livestock’ (Thread ‘*If you awoke with omnipotent power would you change the world or just turn yourself into a gigachad?*’).

These criticisms are clearly politically opposite to those made by the theorists cited in Chapter Four. However, the fundamental processes which are being highlighted are similar: gender mainstreaming *has* been adopted with varying degrees of enthusiasm by numerous MNCs and IGOs; traditional gender roles *were* explicitly targeted by the World Bank in order to encourage economic development; forced monogamy *is* widely considered to be misogynist and damaging; female suffrage *is* an assumed good by many international organisations. The relative absence of detail or specificity in Incel accounts of feminist power in institutional spaces appears to reflect the Incel preoccupation with sexual behaviour and symbols of sexuality in a [neoliberal] era. In contrast, fellow Manosphere communities MRAs and MGTOW provide far longer and more systemic accounts of how, for instance, women are privileged in the legal system. When discussions in my subsample turn to global power, it is

more common for Jewish influence to be cited as the reason for the international spread of feminist ideas, although antisemitic conspiracy remains a contested claim within my subsample (e.g. ‘DA JOOZ is a cope. There is no power that controls the world. plenty of jews are losers too. Truth is its natural culture progression with media and internet fueling female narcissism and empowering hypergamy’ (T35, p3)).

Incel and scholars of feminist-neoliberal entanglement both observe the heightened visibility of feminist ideas and language in cultural production and advertising during the neoliberal period. Both furthermore argue that this visibility is endorsed by elite actors in cultural and political spaces, and that they combine to promote a specific type of attitude or sensibility targeted at [young, able-bodied, white and desirable] women. ‘Postfeminist sensibility’ is an amalgamation of *both* this heightened visibility and the understanding of feminism it portrays, as well as the subjectivity it works to produce. In one of the founding texts on the concept of postfeminism, Rosalind Gill (2007: 147-148) describes it as a sensibility in which there is an emphasis on self-surveillance and discipline; a focus on choice and empowerment (and empowerment through choice) and an obsession with femininity as a bodily property. Gill concludes that postfeminist media representations in particular merge pro- and anti- feminist ideas in such a way that feminism is presented as simultaneously an accepted common-sense in modern society, and a fossil of a time where structural impediments to women’s empowerment were a more serious concern. The second of these presentations is enthusiastically embraced in the Incel community and its worldview.

The similarity is two-fold here, as postfeminist sensibility arguably describes many of the same pressures that Incels claim to suffer from: ‘The individual with more options and choice is obviously superior to the individual without any’ (T22, p89, EX). Within the Black Pill worldview however, these desirable qualities are presented as an already-accomplished state for *all* women, who presumably all inhabit a postfeminist sensibility without any of those

same pressures. When Gill writes that: ‘notions of autonomy, choice and self-improvement sit side-by-side with surveillance, discipline and the vilification of those who make the ‘wrong’ ‘choices’ (e.g. become too fat, too thin, or have the audacity or bad judgment to grow older)’ (ibid. p163), she could well be describing the conditions Incels describe facing. However, the negotiation of these pressures, when negotiated by women at least, are presented in Incel spaces as evidence of their uniform empowerment:

The femoids always take pride in who has the most lieks , kek. One of my sisters is on snapchat and instagram 24/7, she showed me one time that she has like 20 streaks with different people each were about 100 each . im sure she sending 2000 snaps a day. Jfl (T4, p125)

Both Incel and scholars of postfeminism then, are examining similar changes in the way women are *expected* to behave and relate to an individualist, consumptive understanding of feminism. Incel understands that women are encouraged to manage their bodies as a form of capital, to be highly selective consumers and to be calculating individuals who maximize access to financial, romantic and social fulfilment. Where the two dramatically diverge however is in their understanding of whether this ‘new woman subject’, along with the institutional incorporation of feminist ideas, is an example of women’s empowerment, men’s disempowerment, or something in between.

Summary

While Incel *alludes* to the existence of an elite network of pro-feminist actors, the focus of their complaint is more accurately described as the (supposed) effects that this broader network of pro-feminist institutions has had on individual women. The most important of these effects is a larger proportion of the male population being of no sexual interest to any woman, outside of a potential financial or emotional contribution. The ‘entanglement’ of neoliberalism and

feminism, examined in Chapter Four, is stripped entirely of its ambiguity; the losses and gains and transformations described by a plethora of feminist theorists who have examined gender mainstreaming and ‘business feminism’ (Roberts, 2015) are substituted by absolutist claims about female sexual behaviour (e.g. NO GOODLOOKING MALE GOT BULLIED OR HATED ON BY FEMALES, NEVER (T22, p14, EX)).

This demonstrates that the Incel worldview is engaging with gendered dimensions of neoliberalism, even if they are filtered through a profoundly antifeminist interpretation of how and why power is exercised in the current moment. I maintain that sexlessness is not the fundamental absence that animates Incel antifeminism or violence, but rather the social affirmation and recognition that this symbolises, and the explanation for its absence provided by the Black Pill. However, the huge importance that is placed on the absence of sex, and the role it plays in Incel self-identification as competitive failures or losers, focuses discussions on *incels.co* and elsewhere on feelings of rejection and isolation. In recycling Red Pill ideas about women’s biological and psychological nature, as well as its metapolitical ambitions of overthrowing a ‘cucked’ society and replacing it with a renewed masculinist movement, the Incel worldview encourages Incels to interpret almost all behaviour by women as motivated by self-interest and disgust of men like them. This reaches an extreme in the claim – commonly made both in my subsample and beyond – that not only can women never be Incel, they will never treat Incels with respect: ‘Yeah, I’m deeply suspicious of any female object “supporting” incels. Femoids always have some hidden Machiavellian agenda. They will never, ever, ever be our allies’ (T20, p24).

Chapter Nine: Analysing Antifeminism and Neoliberalism

In What Way(s) Does This Entanglement Inform Incel Antifeminism?

Introduction

In Chapters Five ('Antifeminism, Backlash and the Manosphere') and Six ('Finding Incel(s)') I introduced and justified my working definitions of antifeminism and backlash, as well as the role of 'popular misogyny' in reproducing patriarchal structures. I argued that the Manosphere, though diverse, qualifies as both antifeminist and as antifeminist *backlash* because of its attachment to a 'Red Pill' worldview, demarcating feminism as a coordinated sexual strategy which empowers women at the expense of men. I examined what we already know about Incel, focusing on its community, the online history of Incel and Incel-like communities, and the 'Black Pill' worldview which is in many cases a prerequisite to be recognised in Incel spaces, including *incels.co*. I argued that Incel must be understood both as one wing of the Manosphere and – through its rejection of important tenets of the 'Red Pill' – as its own, unique manifestation of antifeminism and in many cases misogyny.

My second question focuses on the antifeminism of the Incel worldview and examines in what ways it is influenced by the relationship between Incel and neoliberalism. As with the entanglement of neoliberalism and feminism, this is a more complex question than it first appears. However, by investigating this dynamic I claim we can develop current understandings of Incel antifeminism without minimizing or ignoring its propensity towards violent ideation. As argued in the previous chapter, Incel rejects and reproduces several core neoliberal principles. Organising society along competitive lines, for instance, is a fundamental value of both the early neoliberals (Dean, 2012: 89) and the Black Pill worldview. Many identifying-Incels moreover express deep self-loathing because of their perceived inability to

compete in the sexual marketplace, consequently considering themselves worthless. In both cases, the Incel worldview and the complaints of its community in my subsample reflect a pained but consistent belief in neoliberal ideas of human capital, accountability, and individualism. An Incel subjectivity, based around the realisation that Incels are collectively beyond redemption and summarised in an internal vernacular (e.g. ‘Lay down and rot’ and ‘It’s over’), is produced by the internalisation of these neoliberal ideas about competitive outcomes (e.g. ‘Either way none of this shit matters. I’m so depressed. I really do want to die. I can’t take the rejections any longer. They’re so brutal to me.’ T42, p3, EX)).

Simultaneously, the Incel worldview rallies against what it considers to be the ‘establishment’ and presents itself as an unfiltered perspective on the reality of gender relations today, including self-improvement scripts and technologies many theorists claim are an integral aspect of neoliberal governance (Budgeon, 2015; O’Neill, 2015). The Incel community typically describes ‘The black pill [as] simply a grouping of simple truths about looks and dating that society as a whole tends to ignore’ (Thompson, 2020). This ‘society as a whole’ is, I have argued, an interpretation of neoliberalism, and particularly the entanglement of neoliberalism with feminism. This interpretation of neoliberalism has some parallels with the work of theorists of postfeminism, and neoliberal feminism, as well as Foucauldian and (some) historical accounts of the neoliberal project. All these accounts of neoliberalism (e.g. Duménil and Lévy, 2011) emphasise the exercise of institutional or executive power, underpinned by a logic or common sense which champions individualism, quantitative performance measures, and further marketisation.

My first analysis chapter asked of Incel: do you share these specific values which I have argued are integral to neoliberalism? Now that I have evaluated the entanglement of the Incel worldview with its ideological environment, the analytical status of neoliberalism changes. If the attitudes of women become signifiers for an ideological hegemony, which I claim is an

interpretation of neoliberal governance as it pertains to gender relations, we must unpack the consequences of this for Incel antifeminism. By claiming to occupy a position of anti-establishment resistance, even as it inhabits several of that establishment's key principles, the antifeminism of the Incel worldview takes on additional qualities which are currently absent from the existing literature on Incel.

Claim Number One: By interpreting its ideological environment as uniformly pro-feminist, Incel understands and presents itself as anti-establishment and emancipatory

In constructing my claims, I paid particular attention to threads in my subsample which had been grouped into the thematic categories 'Violence' (12 total), 'Sex & Dating' (14) and 'Other Beliefs' (9). The first of these included numerous threats and fantasising about inflicting violence on women as retribution for their collective mistreatment of Incels. Often the terms of this abuse included references to rape, gendered pejoratives, and a sense of enjoyment that the actions of Incels have caused offence. I share Jane's argument that this kind of discourse 'must be spoken of *in its unexpurgated entirety*' (2014: 558) in order to better assess online misogyny:

I hope you get raped and your entire family tortured and butchered you fucking FEMALE WHORE CUNT, this thread is here to stay and I'm glad it offends you you retarded SJW piece of SHIT
(T34, p27)

'Sex and Dating' included the subject tag 'Rejection', and so these threads refer more consistently to a specific experience which is central to the Black Pill worldview. Rejection is also regularly mobilised in justifications for antifeminism and misogyny: 'As an incel, you should NEVER help a woman in trouble who, in an everyday situation, would not see you as

human' (T50, p56, EX)¹⁰⁸. 'Other Beliefs' includes the subject tags 'Politics' and 'Empathy', and I was looking closely at these threads for potential schisms within my dataset with regards to expressions of violence such as the one above.

I concluded that the examples of extremely violent ideation which characterise a substantial amount of the antifeminism and misogyny on *incels.co* is partially justified, within the community, by the way in which the Incel worldview understands itself. I have already argued that Incels internalise messages about market outcomes and competition as a fixed organising principle of society, to such an extent that many are driven to destructive fantasies, most often directed at themselves or at women. However, in all the references to competition in my subsample and beyond, I have never observed it being linked to a prevailing ideology or political philosophy. It is, instead, considered an objective fact of life: 'There is no god, just genetic recombination... But even then life just, is' (T24, p69, EX). Before examining why and how Incel presents itself as countercultural and emancipatory, I am interested in the possibility that neoliberal denialism, which I conceptualised in Chapter Two, can help us explain some of the conditions that facilitate this elision of neoliberalism.

Neoliberal Denialism and Incel

In Chapter Two I outlined the ways in which the existence and/or academic credibility of 'neoliberalism' is contested across a varied literature (Springer, 2014: 155). This includes accounts which argue that neoliberalism is a coherent and distinct – if hybridised and spatially contingent – form of capitalism (e.g. Jessop et al, 1984), as well as those which conclude that the term is for several reasons unnecessary and even unhelpful in researching contemporary capitalism (e.g. Laidlaw, in Eriksen et al, 2015: 912). Moreover, many advocates of the ideal-

¹⁰⁸ This post is in response to an OP asking: 'Would you protect a woman from rape?'

type ‘positive’ accounts of neoliberalism identified elsewhere in Part One, acknowledge that the absence of identifying neoliberal actors presents an obstacle to would-be theorists¹⁰⁹.

Neoliberal denialism also reflects a sentiment that coherent ideologies are themselves something left in the twentieth century and Cold War¹¹⁰ (Žižek, 1994: 1-3), and many writers instead refer to an ideology of ‘consumerism’ or ‘globalization’ (Sklair, 2012). The question that becomes urgent in this context is therefore: how do people understand the reason which governs their societies? Furthermore, if the existence of neoliberalism is denied, what term do we use to describe that governing reason? In my subsample and across Incel spaces, neoliberalism is absent, and in its place is an exaggerated and conspirational feminist ideology. Many of the same critiques made about how neoliberalism is researched (e.g. that it is too broad) could quite easily be made of ‘feminism’ within Incel culture (and in the Manosphere more generally).

The uncertain status of neoliberalism in an ‘everyday’ and ‘academic’ sense, coupled with contemporary depoliticising effects of its governance (what Crouch (2004) calls ‘post-democracy’ and Brown (2015) the foreclosure of possibilities of political economy), facilitates the construction of imagined alternative power structures. These can include conspiracy theories about feminist power. However, we should be vigilant to avoid focusing on the subcultural or fringe status of these imagined powers, which do not emerge out of nowhere and are often central to mainstream political life (Birchall, 2006: 16-18). Where neoliberalism exercises its power through these ‘serious’ systems and institutions, it does not speak its own name but in a language of ‘efficiency’ or – most of all – ‘meritocracy’ and ‘competition’ (Hearn, 2008). These ideas have been so absorbed into the Incel worldview, that they are described as objective facts of reality rather than tied to any political operation.

¹⁰⁹ The most notable exception to this is Mirowski (2009) and some other Historical accounts, which typically see neoliberal actors as traceable from the MPS records onwards.

¹¹⁰ This of course has a precedent in Fukuyama’s (1992) ‘end of history’ thesis.

It is the skewing of competitive sites – especially in sex and dating – that Incels bemoan. Competition, however cruel, is incapable of prejudice on its terms. It just *is*. Instead, it is the increased visibility of feminist ideas and language, as well as a broad range of institutional reforms and a discourse of gender equality, that functions as the key indicator of contemporary power on *incels.co* and beyond. It is also the basis for the worldview’s framing of women as an empowered group and [unattractive] men as an underclass. It is this manoeuvre, in which the absence of an ideological structure is filled by a vision of feminism, which introduces and sustains Incels’ self-description as an anti-establishment response to contemporary gender relations.

Incel and Counterculture

The Incel worldview and community perceives the influence of a feminist establishment in the realm of sexual selection and female dating habits. However, my subsample and immersion period both suggest that a much broader conceptualisation of a feminist or pro-feminist establishment is being made in Incel spaces. Statements like ‘you don’t have the same privilege like women do’ (T23, p6, EX) function as *a priori* claims on *incels.co* and refer to the gendered privilege afforded to all women across society. This move beyond the domain of sexual behaviour allows Incel to make further critical claims with regards to establishment power in its environment, which have been received more favourably by some journalists (e.g. Costello, 2020; Kates, 2020).

The Incel worldview relies on neoliberal ideas of competition and market outcomes in its interpretation of the world and the Incel’s role within it. The ‘epistemic authority’ granted to market outcomes and the permanent state of competition is therefore not easily opposed from a Black Pilled perspective. While Incel identifies itself in opposition to the ‘Blue Pilled’ self-improvement industry, in doing so it both abandons itself to ‘rot’ (this is explored in more

detail in the next claim) and also rejects the otherwise aligned Red Pill communities which make up the Manosphere. Instead of opposing the installation of competition as an organising principle of [neoliberal] society, Incel understands itself as a counter-veiling force to the ‘degenerate’ (a term mentioned multiple times in my subsample) and censorious behaviour which it is claimed has resulted from a pro-feminist establishment. Particularly in the latter case, the Incel community has received some recognition within a broader ‘culture war’ debate on issues pertaining to free speech.

Degeneracy refers within my subsample to the glorification of sexual promiscuity in addition to drug usage, the collapse of traditional gender roles and the family unit. It is constantly deplored and opposed: ‘We must cleanse this world of degeneracy’ (T27, p210, EX). It is also interpreted as evidence of social fragmentation and breakdown of the kind which has produced the conditions for increased Inceldom, and as such something to be avoided if at all possible (e.g. ‘you can create your own comfortable incel mancave where you are protected from the degeneracy and evils of the world’ (T33, p5, EX)).

Degeneracy is also presented as a distinctly Western or Anglo-American phenomenon. This is illustrated in several comparisons made between women who live in South-East Asia and the US, with many posters cautioning against ‘the risk of exposing them to western degeneracy and ruining them’ (T39, p35, EX). The attitudes encouraged and facilitated by [neoliberal] regimes then appear not to extend globally, meaning that women who live in some other parts of the world are merely biologically hypergamous rather than ‘stuck up entitled feminist bitches like most western women’ (T15, p84, EX). This results in the community isolating the ‘West’ as especially prone to degenerate behaviour (which Incels are not a part of) and, due to the influence of feminist ideas, this becoming normalised:

Rather fuck a JB¹¹¹ than a faggot in a wig. What is this SJW bullshit. I thought we hated women over here. Now we're all of a sudden supposed to be "protective" of the little sluts that fuck around anyway. Chad fucks JB's all the time and they love it. See how many girls admit to having sex with men at as young as 12 on reddit. Oh, but think of the children! Fuck off.

(T21, p50)

This post in particular demonstrates the conundrum facing many Incels in my subsample. They want to be able to engage in the degenerate behaviour ('Rather fuck a JB...') but simultaneously draw attention to imagined criminal acts in a way which suggests revulsion and judgement. Unsurprisingly therefore, there are several exceptions to the Incel opposition to degeneracy, both within this thread (e.g. 'I would eat worms and dirt from a hot 14 year old's ass LOL' (T21, p9)) and elsewhere. Despite this, the most common response to posts describing degenerate behaviour is to bemoan the gendered effects of great sexual choice: 'jfl at stating on this board "sexual freedom is good" in any way shape or form' (T45, p20, EX).

This inconsistent Incel opposition to degeneracy, which is understood as a consequence of a pro-feminist establishment, is acknowledged in some journalistic accounts (e.g. Costello, 2020). In these texts contemporary gender relations are also interpreted as the result of the normalisation of individualistic and opportunistic behaviour, in which transactional sex has replaced traditional values of family bonds and genuine intimacy. This results in some sympathetic readings of Incel culture and worldview, in which misogynist and antifeminist arguments are minimized and/or recast as misunderstood desire for 'actual women' who are 'coveted':

Modern women, the women that reject and object, that taunt and betray, that exploit both the beta males and their own sexuality for profit — these are the femoids, the objects of derision and contempt... Actual women are coveted, as is actual intimacy, while meaningless sex is generally considered an excess and an aberration.

(Kates, 2020)

¹¹¹ Jailbait (girl below the age of consent).

This way of thinking about Incel as a response to the commodification of sexuality and sexual behaviour has parallels both in Faludi's (1991) account of the New Right, Theweleit's (1987: 8-11) account of virgin women in the imagination of the Freikorps, and in the contemporary 'tradcon' and 'tradwives' subculture (Kelly, 2020) of the Manosphere. In all cases, an imagined feminist power is opposed on the grounds that it is responsible for the normalisation of 'degenerate behaviour'. For Incels, this normalisation has damaging consequences not just for unattractive men but for social cohesion on a wider scale. Though the Incel community does not uniformly ascribe to the Red Pill's political ambitions, and certainly does not express similar concern for the welfare of women who have exercised sexual autonomy, there is a clear parallel in the interpretation of highly competitive behaviour in the sexual domain as reflective of social breakdown.

An important part of the Black and Red Pill worldviews is the claim that it alone provides the cold, unthinking truth about this new gender formation in which women have become so empowered. As such, many Manosphere groups have been at the forefront of a culture war, in which oppressive 'social justice warriors' (SJWs), particularly feminists but also anti-racist campaigners and other progressives, are framed as enemies of free speech (Price, 2020). Due to repeated violations of hate speech rules, many Incel networks have been banned for larger platforms such as *Reddit*. While this is not a case of Incel groups being banned because of their interpretation of gender relations under neoliberalism, it has been presented in Incel and pro-Incel content as part of 'the [feminist] mainstream's' attempt to silence them, 'at times for little more than as a public relations maneuver [sic]' (Ash, 2020).

This association with a culture war framing, in addition to Incel's history of migrating between different online platforms as they are banned, has created a tone of counter-cultural transgression within the community. To be clear, the interest in 'free speech' is highly selective, illustrated by the strict policing of, for instance, any empathetic comments made regarding

women on *incels.co* (e.g. ‘The cucks who are white knighting m'lady should be exiled’ (T20, p58)). Incels are keenly aware of how they are perceived in the media and there are repeated references to news stories which discuss the community (e.g. Thread 8 ‘[JFL] WE ARE ON THE NEWS HAHAHAHA’). This includes reflections on the possible benefits conferred by media coverage of violent acts such as those committed by Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian:

The false media narrative about incels being a hotbed of violence has women interested. And so self-identified incels now have a bad-boy image, which is an inherently masculine image. Self-identifying as incel is an accidental step for many involuntary virgins into the realm of punk-like aesthetics (4chan culture), risky social taboos, and the (unintentional) image of manliness. If self-identified incels were to simply call themselves virgins, no one would care.
(orchardstreet, 2019)

While my subsample includes only the occasional reference to ‘free speech’, the tone of posts is often deliberately transgressive, in which ‘risky social taboos’ are regularly engaged. Moreover, many posters express solidarity with the others based on shared alienation from the ‘mainstream’ [feminist] culture and establishment. Fellow posters are often referred to as ‘brothers’ who share a battle-hardened appreciation for the truth: ‘We are incels. We have been rejected by society. We have experienced the worst society has to offer. Why be sensitive now?’ (T19, OP, EX). In threads which speculate on the potential suicide of other Incels, there is a broad sense of solidarity because of the same reasons: ‘Don't do it brother. Don't give the fucking normies what they want. They want us all gone, we cannot give in to them. They won't stop until we're all dead’ (T44, p80).

This relationship that Incel develops with a countercultural register ultimately struggles to overcome its contradictory attachment to important aspects of neoliberal governance. Despite this, there has been a clear attempt¹¹² by some identifying-Incels, sympathetic

¹¹² This appeal for legitimacy on the grounds of censorship appears to have been hamstrung by the sheer amount of misogynist, racist and anti-Semitic abuse that characterises a substantial amount of discourse in Incel spaces.

journalists and academics interested in ‘cancel culture’ to portray the Incel worldview as a critique of individualist and hedonistic attitudes towards sex and intimacy (e.g. Nagle, 2017: 28-31; Kates, 2020; Costello, 2020). More widely shared and sincerely held however is the self-identification of many Incels, in my subsample and beyond, with a logic of emancipation.

Incel and Emancipation

In an article titled ‘*Incels could become the new Vikings*’ (2020), Mary Harrington reflects on historic examples of surplus¹¹³ male populations, which often results in ‘an excess of young men hanging around full of machismo but without any prospect of finding a nice girl and settling down.’ Harrington then cites social scientist Prem Choudry, who fears that the combination of women becoming more educated and financially independent while continuing to pursue hypergamous selection strategies, will have the effect of making politics more extreme: ‘as a man with no family is considered worthless and will need to prove himself somehow: “If they remain single, they will be declared not men at all.”’. While this article is speculative, it correctly isolates a dimension of the Incel worldview which I have observed in my immersion period and within my subsample: a tying of sexual to [emancipatory] political identity.

Within my subsample and during my immersion I regularly observed the potential routes to ‘ascension’ for individual Incels. However, I also noticed a reoccurring interest in whether a structural or collective action would either be feasible or helpful in alleviating the conditions which produce Inceldom. These discussions rarely resulted in consensus, but they are worth examining as a way of developing our understanding of Incel antifeminism. There are already links between Incel and terrorist attempts at overthrowing these conditions, in the

¹¹³ Surplus based on the ratio of new-born boys to girls.

actions of Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian, both of whom expressed a motivation ‘just to ah overthrow society’ (Minassian, cited in Thomas, 2018: 132).

My thesis has argued that it is the symbolic role of sex and intimacy in neoliberal conditions, understood a route to recognition as a competent competitor, that Incels desire. The use of emancipatory logic in some Incel content likewise concentrates less on access to sex and more on the suffering endured because of its absence. It is therefore the *feelings* of loneliness and isolation, and *conditions* of discrimination (hypergamy and a pro-feminist establishment), that most Incels appear to want to be emancipated from (e.g. ‘Isn't this what we craved for all those years? A female touch, voice, scent and attention? Only some stubborn retards will deny that’ (T20, p106, EX)).

This represents an inversion of previous incarnations of misogyny which present themselves as transgressive or emancipatory. Women are typically presented in the ‘rebel imagination’ of popular culture (especially rock and roll music) as conformists, suppressive agents not because of their disinterest or sexual promiscuity but because of their smothering domesticity (Reynolds & Press, 1995: 3). Nagle (2015: 88) notes that this type of misogyny lent ‘a radical edge to sexism and misogyny through the idea of transgression as liberation,’ a radicalism which is adopted in some interpretations of Incel as a form of counterculture.

In the Incel worldview however, women are instead feared and hated because of their sexual autonomy and embrace of ‘freedom through choice’ principles of postfeminist sensibility and Foucauldian accounts of neoliberalism. This is more reminiscent of the antifeminism and misogyny of the Freikorps, who similarly linked sexual agency with degeneracy, albeit through the boogeyman figure of the communist rather than feminist: ‘The women are threatening, because, among other reasons, they are not virgins. The sexual experience that nationalist soldiers sense in them seems to release a particularly powerful fear. That fear is brought into association with the word ‘communist’’ (Theweleit, 1987: 68). The

potential ramifications of this kind of antifeminism are examined in more detail in my final claim.

The emotional response to loneliness and isolation characterises a substantial amount of the discourse on *incels.co* and elsewhere, and the lack of acknowledgement that this pain receives from ‘normie’ society is regularly compared with the relative interest in other identity-based grievances, most notably feminist groups:

Figure 15: ‘Stubble Dandards’



While the comic above compares not ‘get[ting] a date’ as a source of ‘disadvantage’ on par with inherited wealth, the consequences of prolonged failure in the sexual marketplace are described in far more bleak terms. One of the immediate shocks when observing *incels.co* is how frequently users are encouraged to commit suicide by other users, not to discredit or dismiss the victimhood of the user in question, but to confirm that victimhood. In a thread in which the OP is comparing his fortunate financial situation to the perceived hopelessness of his romantic life, a user sympathetically engages so: ‘Face is literally everything, for ugly males death is the only option. Just give up and die OP there is no other hope for you’ (T42, p107). In this context the affirmation of suicide as a rational response to the Incel predicament

confirms a sense that what Incels endure is structural and unheeded by normie/pro-feminist society.

The use of terms like ‘privilege’ and ‘disadvantage’ also reflects how Incel antifeminism mimics aspects of traditional feminist politics and legitimises itself as a response to structural discrimination against unattractive men. Men who are unattractive through no fault of their own, and born into a society which, it is claimed, treats them with disgust. These types of arguments about the privilege of attractive men and all women include some of the only examples in my subsample and beyond in which I saw attractive men addressed directly:

A 9/10 will be in a relationship with multiple women at the same time who will support him financially... A 9/10 just needs to start pseudo jobs modelling, acting or basically get into any profession with customer face to face interaction and he'll be pulling 100k+ a year easy without much work.

(T10, p30)

More commonly, women are presented as the agents of an oppressive structure, in which Incels are the marginalised and discriminated against minority.

Summary

By interpreting its ideological environment as uniformly pro-feminist, the Incel worldview strips the changes in gender relations during the neoliberal era of ambiguity and instead constructs an image of hegemonic, feminist power. As a response to this specific interpretation of its environment, the Incel community presents itself and develops an understanding of itself as an anti-establishment and transgressive community. This takes advantage of a broad sentiment that ideology is a concept less discernible in the current moment, and of the denial of neoliberalism in both academic and popular spaces. Incel's interest in censorship and ‘degeneracy’, as well as a broad alignment with the Red Pill diagnosis of contemporary society,

has been interpreted in some journalistic accounts as a particularly traumatic response to a breakdown in traditional family structures. Furthermore, a wider culture war framing is mobilised in these accounts, in which the danger of ‘political correctness’ and restrictions over ‘free speech’ are foregrounded, and the antifeminism and misogyny of Incel minimised.

The Incel community spends a lot of time describing their emotional response to Inceldom. This includes a great deal of suicidal ideation and depression which, it is argued, is a product of structural conditions as well as natural female hypergamy. Some Incels express a desire for these conditions to be overthrown. In this sense Incel defines and justifies its antifeminism not as a misogynist pursuit (or not ‘just’ a misogynist pursuit) but an *emancipatory* one, using the language and framings of feminist and other identity-based movements to present itself as an attack on inequality and discrimination (e.g. in the references to other posters as ‘brothers’, ‘comrades’ and so on). The emancipatory logic is explicit in its interest in emancipating *Incels* from their suffering, rather than anyone else who might be subject to the pressures of competition.

Individual Incels invest to different extents in different aspects of the Black Pill, and there are several examples of posters refusing to set any kind of political agenda to their Inceldom (one poster responds to reports of a potentially Incel-related school shooting with ‘Being incel doesnt mean I have to act like a psychopath’ (T8, p55)). Furthermore, the Black Pill, with its mantras of ‘It’s Over’ and ‘Lay Down And Rot’, does not obviously lend itself to encouraging individual or collective responses to Inceldom. It does however provide a structural analysis of how and why Inceldom occurs and why the lived experiences of Incels is so painful. This structural analysis’ implications, however, are destructive.

Claim Number Two: The ultimate vision of the Incel worldview is the destruction of either the self or the [feminist] establishment

The Incel worldview has a well-established logic of social categorization, which it claims is an honest reflection of existing power hierarchies. People are grouped according to their attractiveness and perceived chances of success in a sexual marketplace, with Chads and Stacys at the top and Incels, who have no chance of successfully competing, at the bottom. The worldview further claims that recent changes in gender power relations, which I have examined as an interpretation of neoliberal-feminist entanglement but which Incels typically refer to as a vague but hegemonic feminist power, confer an advantage in this regard to all women. By adopting a subjectivity of individualism, consumerism and victimhood, women's natural tendency towards hypergamous behaviour has been encouraged to the extent that the number of Incels are increasing.

This (antifeminist) explanatory framework informs the Incel community describing itself as an anti-establishment and transgressive critique of social norms. The posters in my subsample refer to themselves as a band of 'brothers', united both by their suffering and by their bravery. This bravery often takes the form of explicit antifeminism, which is justified by the worldview's central argument that it is feminists who are most to blame for increasing Inceldom and the discrimination that unattractive men receive. More broadly, many posters note that the Black Pill's emphasis on feminist power and the 'science of attraction' undermines popular 'self-improvement' advice, which they see as an inaccurate and emasculating distraction from the real causes of Inceldom.

So far in this thesis I have examined the Incel worldview in its entirety, arguing that it rejects some key neoliberal values, while internalising neoliberal ideas about competitive and market outcomes and indeed forming a collective identity based around that failure. In doing

so I have developed existing accounts of Incel which focus on the violence with which it is associated, and explanations which rely on pathologizing individual men. However, the antifeminism produced in *incels.co* and elsewhere in Incel spaces is particularly violent even in the context of Manosphere groups and warrants close examination.

I claim that violence is inherent to the Black Pill worldview. While ostensibly a descriptive diagnosis of the social and evolutionary arrangements which produce Incel, the Black Pill's fatalism and rejection of any chance of ascension encourages in its adherents an overwhelming sense of despair and anger. This fatalism expands the Black Pill from a pessimistic account of male sexual frustration to a much wider problematisation of social hierarchies and gender power relations. For many posters in my subsample, 'taking the Black Pill' does not appear to have provided any consolation. Instead, the existing loneliness and isolation that presumably characterises the lives of many posters, is filtered through the Black Pill with the effect of exacerbating feelings of hopelessness, injustice, and anger:

See, I'm too far gone for even this. I don't even want pussy anymore, I just want a nuclear holocaust which kills very Stacy, roastie, femoid, WK, cuck, and SJW on Earth. Even if you put me in chads body now, I'm too full of anger and hate to care anymore. Nuclear war is all I want now.

(T22, p18)

This type of response, which is made regularly on *incels.co* and elsewhere, has been described as a crisis which for many users is 'too intense to bear' (Baele et al, 2019: 14). The Black Pill however does not offer a plan of action or route out of Inceldom, rather it implies that a radical transformation of existing gender relations is required to improve the lives of Incels. To be clear, not all Incels reach the same apocalyptic conclusion as does the post above, and throughout this thesis I have acknowledged the diversity of the Incel community regarding the different investment of different individuals in the Black Pill. Without a clear political agenda, the question confronting *all* Incels is: what should be done?

Black Pilling

By examining the purported actions and intentions of users in my subsample and beyond and looking for references to the Black Pill's social categorisation and casual narrative, we can deduce three common responses. First, some Incels attempt to convince 'normie' society of the accuracy of their worldview and the seriousness of Inceldom as a social problem. This often takes the form of 'dropping Black Pills' – exposing the Blue Pilled masses to irrefutable proof of lookism, feminist hypocrisy and hypergamy. Second, Incels exact revenge on those who have contributed to their suffering: normie society generally, feminists and women particularly. How this revenge is enacted varies considerably within my subsample, as does the sincerity of the posts describing these acts. Finally, many Incels accept their fate and either distract themselves from their suffering or destroy themselves. This is summarised in the acronym LDAR ('Lay Down And Rot').

Examining how these engagements are justified allows me to investigate links between the Incel worldview (itself substantially shaped by its neoliberal environment) and the violence which typifies much of Incel discourse. It is also a means of bridging the gap between Incel as a worldview and as a community, where the latter is naturally inclined towards dissent, and the former a socio-historical explanation, scientific defence, and affective account of Inceldom. The point of contact between the worldview and the community exists in the justifications behind the self-described antifeminist activities and engagements documented on *incels.co* and elsewhere. The first type of activity and engagement I will examine is 'Black Pilling'.

In Chapter Five I referred to the metapolitical ambitions of minor celebrities and other content generators in the Red Pill community, who endorse an array of strategies to make visible to a 'normie' general public the cruel reality of gender relations today ('Red Pilling'). In all Manosphere groups other than Incel, intervening in the social order is enthusiastically embraced, albeit in different ways. Even in the extreme separatist wing of MGTOW, exiting

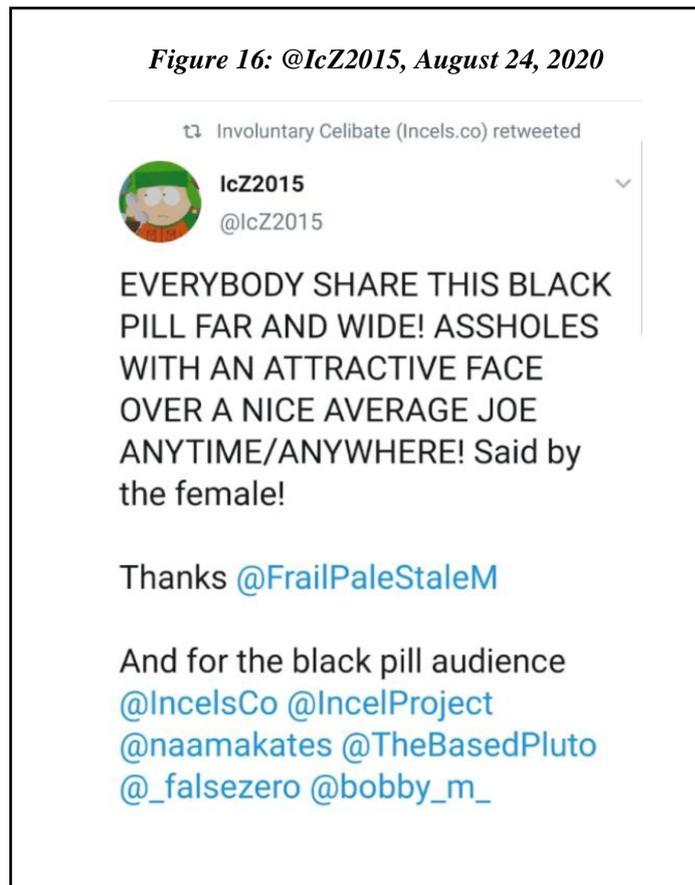
the demands and spaces of a feminist society serve the purpose of revealing to the public that men and masculinity are unappreciated and undervalued (Ging, 2019: 650-651). As more people are made aware of how social cohesion relies on men and masculinity, so too will ‘misandrist’ culture recede. The ambition to assist and build upon cultural sympathies is formalised in some movements which bring together conservatism and the masculinism of the Manosphere in ‘on the ground’ movements (e.g. the Proud Boys). However, this agenda is more commonly carried out in the form of online commentary¹¹⁴ and ‘culture jamming’, in which popular conventions are undermined or exposed as hypocritical (Nagle, 2015: 68-69).

The fatalism of the Black Pill worldview, in contrast to the interventionist ambition of the Red Pill, does not so readily lend itself to activism (or action of any sort). Revealing the injustice which produces the suffering of the Incel community is not described as a means of ending that suffering. ‘It’s Over’ regardless, short of a revolutionary adjustment in gender relations and the organisation of society, which would have to suppress both the evolutionary psychology of women, the feminist establishment and the advent of individualistic, image-based dating apps. There is a strong sentiment regularly expressed in my subsample that ‘There's nothing that can be done. That's why it's called incelldom’ (T16, p62, EX)

Despite this, the Incel community does engage in attempts to persuade others by presenting them with evidence of their worldview diagnosis. This is also the logic behind allowing sexually active men to post on *incels.co*: ‘I don't even understand why are we discussing who is incel and who is not, as long as someone posts non-cucked stuff in this board they are welcome imo’ (T38, p23). Outside of my subsample, this is typically pursued by anonymous or incelebrity accounts on social media platforms *Twitter* and *Reddit*. Below, the *Twitter* account for *incels.co* shares a video in which a young woman claims that the myth that

¹¹⁴ For a recent example of this in the Red Pill community, see how controversy over the film *Cuties* (2020) has been used to link ‘Queer Studies’ to pro-paedophilia movements.

‘Nice guys finish last’ is not a reflection of women being attracted to ‘assholes because they’re assholes’, but because they ‘tend to be sexy’. She also speculates that this unpleasant behaviour, typical of attractive men, is likely the product of these men not needing to be kind to hold a woman’s attention:



This is not an unusual technique, in which a representative of the feminist establishment – in this case, an unknown woman (‘the female!’) – is portrayed as unwittingly revealing an aspect of the conditions that produces Incel. More common in my subsample and immersion period was the presentation of ‘objective’ data which functions the same way, most often to prove that women prioritise an aspect of physical appearance (e.g. height) to such an extent that men under six foot, for example, have little to no chance of attracting any woman. Thread 45 of my subsample, ‘*this book exposes the sexual behaviour of FHOs*’, features among its 233 replies multiple instances of users asking whether the text in question is ‘legit hardcore

blackpill truth?’ (T45, p9, EX). There is also lengthy debate as to whether attempting to persuade women of this ‘blackpill truth’ would be strategically beneficial for the Incel community¹¹⁵. The responses to this suggestion were mostly pessimistic, although there were exceptions to this which demonstrate a clear interest in cultivating sympathy for Incels:

Female politicians, social activists, and writers have a great amount of sway over women, and thus female voters and policy makers. If they begin delivering the blackpill in public media, women are more likely to believe it than they would be if they heard it from a man. A man will instantly be shut down as a misogynist "mansplaining" theories that women find detestable.
(T45, p104)

While examples such as that in Fig. 16 are presented as means of revealing the cruel reality ‘far and wide’, the audience is first and foremost other identifying-Incels and, in the case of Fig. 16, sympathetic journalists. The popularity of threads on *incels.co* tagged by the OP as ‘Blackpill’ indicates that these incidents of truth-telling function as part of a feedback loop within the community, in which the worldview is reinforced by the piecemeal gathering of evidence. There is also a tendency towards emphasising the strength of appeals to scientific data, in the hope of developing a ‘most powerful blackpill ever written, scientifically conducted’ (T45, p230, EX). The contradiction in the popularity of ‘dropping blackpills’ on *incels.co* is accurately summarised here, which highlights that the wellbeing of posters – let alone any metapolitical ambitions of the community – are unlikely to be well served by this approach:

What I don't get about saying we come here to escape sexual frustration, is that it's largely what we talk about here, how sexually frustrated we are. We go and read about degenerate stacies and then post it here and complain about it. we post suifuel and rage fuel. why? to upset ourselves? "spread the blackpill?" if we're going to ban what makes us upset, why do we promote what makes us upset? Maybe I'm too low iq to get it
(T19, p69)

¹¹⁵ The text in question, *Sperm Wars* (Baker, 1996), is controversial even within the field of evolutionary psychology.

This post further underlines that the Incel worldview traps users in a cycle, wherein the fear that their current suffering might never end is confirmed by Inceldom being presented as an inalterable fact and the fault of an almost insurmountable set of conditions. Crucially, the knowledge of these conditions is said to be hidden by mainstream (feminist) society, and so the Incel community spends a lot of time gathering evidence which has the effect of further enforcing Black Pill fatalism.

These ‘Black Pilling’ interventions, limited though they might be, are avowedly antifeminist. They are not in isolation, however, necessarily misogynist or an incitement to violence. I have documented above the interpretation of Incel in some journalistic accounts which map Incel as an anti-establishment and/or countercultural form of critique, while minimizing the tendency towards destruction in the Incel worldview. These accounts typically refer to isolated examples of ‘Black Pilling’ and problematise how these ‘uncomfortable truths’ are suppressed (Costello, 2020; Bloodworth & Taylor, 2020). The way in which the Incel worldview can be mapped onto an existing culture-war framework is an indication of how it speaks to real changes in gender relations, and how easily Incel ideas brought into mainstream debates.

Violence Against Women

The violence of the Incel worldview can only be thoroughly examined when these ‘Black Pilling’ efforts are treated not as isolated interventions in a social environment, but as the extension of an explanatory framework which links the behaviour of all women to (1) their evolutionary biology and psychology, (2) feminist indoctrination and (3) the creation of Incels. Women’s sexual agency is treated paradoxically here, both as absolute (all women enjoy a wide choice of sexual partners) and abstracted away in favour of evolutionary biological and

psychological hardwiring. Women are in this sense denied the same feelings of anxiety and uncertainty which Incels perceive in themselves. Furthermore, the Incel worldview interprets neoliberal discourses which evaluate women by how ‘in control’ of their sexuality and sexual agency they appear (Bay-Cheng, 2015: 282), not as a manifestation of neoliberal governance with restrictive as well as emancipatory effects, but as a phenomenon which only confers further advantages to women.

The potential for violence in this worldview is more obviously illustrated in the practice of ‘chad fishing’, in which users create fake dating app profiles in order to (1) prove that women’s sexual behaviour is as superficial and callous as the Black Pill claims, and/or (2) expose or punish them for it (see Klee, 2019 for how this practice occurs across the Manosphere). Images of male models are used to boost the chances of multiple matches with prospective partners. The Incel might then act obnoxious or cruelly during message exchanges with these women to expose that – contrary to the pro-feminism of mainstream dating advice – ‘personality’ is a useless category in the sexual marketplace, because even the most offensive personality will not stop women being attracted to Chads. During my immersion period I noted several examples of this practice, including one in which the bio of the [fake] male model account described himself as HIV positive and a rapist.

There is a contradiction here between the expressed desire of Incels to inhabit the role of sexual competitor and exercise choice in the sexual market, and the denunciation of women who do so. Across my subsample and during immersion the accusations of individualism, superficiality and dishonesty are directed more often at women than any man, even though Chads presumably behave similarly. In particular it is the perception of hypocrisy in the behaviour of women, who Incels claim maintain a veneer of socially endorsed victimhood, fragility and femininity:

The dishonesty bothers me more than the whoredom itself. Wanna be a slut? Then have the personal honesty to admit that you're a slut. Purposely twisting the truth and tiptoeing their way around it is exactly why females are seen as the lesser sex.

(T34, p72, EX)

What is clear from chadfish exchanges is that posters are not motivated by convincing 'normies' of hypocritical behaviour, but rather exposing the behaviour of women to each other by uploading chatlogs to *incels.co* and other Incel sites. This is a retributive logic at play in the desire to force women to confront their own supposed cruelty, which reaches an extreme in my subsample when users attempt (unsuccessfully) to send naked photographs of an unknown young woman to her friends, family and employers. That this woman posted on anti-Incel subreddits is cited as evidence that she is *particularly* guilty:

Let's run a virtual train on this slut and let her KNOW that we are doing it: as I speak, we are all jerkin' our gherkins to this disgusting whore imagining the long train of hundreds of incels of all races taking turns using her pussy like the worthless whore that she is. She can cry and beg all she wants but we won't stop fucking her until we're ALL satisfied. Divine punishment for denying us sub-8 guys all her life. This is what camaraderie is about my incel brethren.

(T34, p128)

This attempted act of revenge porn, a criminal offense, is justified by reference to the Black Pill's explanation of Inceldom: the scientific hardwiring of women and their indoctrination by feminism results in Incels being 'denied'. Another example of this is retributive tone of responses to thread 50 '*Would you protect a woman from rape?*', which includes multiple messages which argue that 'I'm not for rape but we're supposedly an outcated goup by society right? Where were women when we were punished by Chads and left alone in blood back in the corner of the classroom? Did they say a single sorry about our suffering back then?' (T50, p29, EX), and 'Plus there's about a 100% chance it's a slut who deserved it anyway' (T50, p23). This retributive register is likewise mobilised in the descriptions of violent

sexual fantasy, where the lifetime of isolation and rejection of a poster finds a target through the construction of feminist hegemony and personified in unknown women.

Chadfishing encapsulates the Incel worldview's diagnosis of a hypocritical social environment which claims to believe in feminist, egalitarian principles but which in fact facilitates degenerate, looks-obsessed behaviour. I observed several examples of chadfishing Incels arranging to meet women who they matched with, and then recording the interaction. In every case, the woman was portrayed as being deceptive in not showing interest in a man who has, they discover, deceived them via a dating app. The audio or visual recordings reflect an extremely uncomfortable interaction, but one which for an Incel audience reinforces the claim that 'sub8' men suffer daily based on their unattractiveness: 'I can't get a foid to ever even enjoy my presence' (T19, p25, EX), 'It's so sad how I'm invisible everywhere I go' (T42, p3, EX) etc. That the aesthetic focus is inscribed into the very technology of modern dating apps is mostly ignored.

This dehumanisation of woman as a category, and so misogyny, reaches an extreme in two claims made repeatedly in my subsample and beyond. Firstly, the suicide of young men is portrayed as the direct result of these rejections and a society which does not recognise their plight:

this is what happens when you have no support from your parents, teachers, no friends and are ugly. he had literally no where to turn to for hope, he got fucked over by a uncaring and un-empathetic world.
(T44, p159, EX)

This example is reflective of the wider complaint held by many posters on *incels.co* that it is not *just* women rejecting their sexual advances that causes Incel's suffering. Instead, this metric of valuing individuals by their physical attractiveness, accelerated by feminist power, decreases the chances of sub8 men from succeeding in *any* aspect of their lives.

The second claim is that if an Incel were to act like a Chad supposedly does when approaching women (i.e. confidently and exhibiting ‘alpha’ behaviour), it would be considered by ‘normie’ society to be an act of rape (e.g. ‘trying to touch a girl like that would have you charged with rape’ (T2, p71, EX)). By interpreting the act of rape as an illustration of how the sexual marketplace is skewed against the interests of sub8 men, rather than as a criminal act involving the abuse of an individual’s personal autonomy, we reach perhaps the pinnacle pronouncement of how women (rather than ‘merely’ feminists) are understood as vessels of the injustice that Incels experience.

While this can and is denied as edgy, provocative humour or an anti-establishment sensibility, the regularity with which this argument is made (e.g. ‘Feminazis like femoid IncelTears users cry about rape, but masturbate to movies like Fifty Shades of Grey. In their logic, rape is bad when incels do it but is perfectly ok when Chad does it’ (T34, p110)) indicates that this is an important and widely-shared view within the community. It also justified by the causal narrative and organisation of society that the Black Pill offers as an ‘uncomfortable truth’. One of several effects that the normalisation of gendered abuse online has had is an academic awkwardness of confronting the obscene material that is being produced in these spaces (Jane, 2014: 558-559). By examining this material in detail and unedited, this thesis illustrates how ‘uncivil’ (ibid. p558) discourse allows us to develop our understanding of Incel as a profoundly antifeminist and misogynist phenomenon, even as it describes recognisable changes in gender relations under neoliberalism.

Clearly, not all Incels harass or act criminally towards women, and there are some examples in my subsample of posters rejecting these kinds of action as either unethical or ineffective. The community’s admonishment of any perceived ‘orbiting’ ‘simping’ or otherwise attention-giving to women is satirised by some users (e.g. ‘you’re a cuck if you have even one nice thing to say about a femoid’ (T19, p2, EX)) although, in the context of *incels.co*,

it is not always easy to distinguish satire from sincerity. Attachment to the Black Pill's explanation of Inceldom however was almost entirely uniform, with the only exceptions being arguments about whether *any* self-improvement outside of drastic surgery could lead to ascension. We should remember at this point that in recent years several murders have been committed by men who were known to either post on Incel forums, expressed sentiments which match its worldview, or declared themselves to be acting on the basis of their Inceldom (Baele et al, 2019: 1). Incel retaliation against women is therefore not restricted to posting deliberately provocative comments online, it undeniably intervenes in offline spaces too. More pressingly, these actions are justified with reference to the explanatory framework of its worldview.

'Lay Down And Rot'

The most common target of abuse and violence on in my subsample and across Incel sites is the Incel himself. The destruction of the self, as with the exposure of feminist dominance and punishment of women, is inscribed into the Black Pill worldview and its entangled relationship with neoliberal ideas – in this case about value being verified in competition. To evidence this claim I will document the rationale/s which are mobilised in justifying self-destruction in my subsample and beyond, drawing links between these rationalisations and the Incel worldview.

Threads 11 (*'Just another incel killing himself'*) and 44 (*'Thank you guys'*) deal explicitly with suicidal ideation. Thread 11 links to a video of a young man killing himself livestreamed over the internet, and Thread 44 includes a series of posts made by the OP who claims he will kill himself later that day. What is very clear in Thread 11 is that most people replying blame women, feminists, and their enablers for driving the individual (unknown to the *incels.co* community) to take his life. This even extends to the women (including,

reportedly, the individual's own mother) who discovered the young man after he has shot himself:

LMFAO. Look at these trash women screaming and crying. Stupid bitches. SHUT THE FUCK UP YOU STUPID FUCKING CUNTS... WHERE THE FUCK WERE YOU WHEN HE JUST WANTED A GIRLFRIEND?... GOING ON YOUR FUCKING KNEES SUCKING CHAD'S COCK YOU FUCKING CUM GUZZLING SLUT... Normies did this to him. WOMEN did this to him.

(T11, p16, EX)

The argument that *all* women (and their enabling 'normies') are responsible for this stranger's suicide is reflective of a misogyny which permeates most of the comments in my subsample. The rest of the thread is comprised of posters criticising hypothetical Blue Pill interpretations of this suicide¹¹⁶ and claims that the individual did not die because of 'mental illness' but because he was a victim of Inceldom. While there are some examples of posters demonstrating empathy for the victim's family (e.g. 'cant watch this. the mothers cry makes me cry' (T11, p42, EX)), these are outnumbered by posts which argue that his family were also to blame (e.g. 'His mother was a cunt for putting him through his life.' Ibid. p67), and/or that the individual was brave to end his suffering.

What this and the series of responses to the T44 indicate is that suicide is not only a common topic of interest, speculation and reaction within *incels.co*, but also serves a particular function in how Incels envision their futures and how they understand their own value. The Black Pill worldview is fundamentally hopeless, and hopelessness informs much of Incel culture, from the flippant treatment of trauma to lengthy descriptions of isolation and mental health issues. This hopelessness is not however absolute. Despite the Black Pill's rejection of self-improvement techniques, there are posters encouraging the possibly suicidal OP to

¹¹⁶ Numerous posters note that tragedies such as this do not warrant press attention, because unattractive men are 'hated' by [feminist] society.

reconsider their decision. This example highlights the tension at the heart of many discussions about suicide on *incels.co*:

*Is it bluepilled of me that I don't want to see this guy to commit suicide?
I mean I don't want incels to suffer but i'd always want them to ascend rather than kill themselves and I'm desperately trying to think of a way this guy could looksmax out of his predicament.
Please help me guys who are more educated on surgery/ stuff to combat norwooding
(T44, P39)*

The tension here is between the *idea* of suicide, which in its ultimate exit from the wretched reality of Inceldom is congruent with the Black Pill's narrative of endless rejection and suffering ('I don't want incels to suffer'), and its ugly, physically difficult and traumatic practice. This congruence is important to understanding how the Incel worldview envisions a destructive end.

'Lay Down And Rot' is a Black Pill phrase which is used to describe the foreclosure of future happiness for an Incel. While not an explicit call to commit suicide, the descriptions of 'rotting' in my subsample suggest that a lifestyle of 'giving up' on any kind of improved future is destructive to the mental and physical health of the individual in question:

*average tuesday for me. 1) Jack off to hentai 2) try and message a girl and get ignored 3) remember I hate women and its pointless 4) go to the gym 5) remember its pointless because i dont have a attractive face 6) rot on forums all day to full social void 7) cry my self to sleep
(T22, p4)*

In other words, the Incel worldview encourages the idea that no proactive 'work on the self' will assist Incels, that feminist indoctrination is hegemonic and so will not be reversed any time soon, and finally that hypergamous behaviour is any case hardwired into women's psychology and biologically. What else is there for an Incel to do, other than rot away? While there are some posters who reject total adherence to this worldview (e.g. 'Do you realize that it doesn't have to be as simple as "blackpill is 100% truth, rot and die" or "just be yourself, girls care

about personality teehee." The truth lies somewhere in the middle' (T3, p125, EX)), this is the exception rather than the rule in my subsample and across *incels.co*.

What motivates this tendency towards self-destruction? I argue there are two main contributory factors here: the Incel worldview's embrace of a neoliberal ethos of competitive truth (which is internalised by members of the community), and the specific role of sites like *incels.co* as spaces where descriptions of hopelessness are expected, encouraged and maintained. Though there is a powerful sense of injustice in posts describing the discrimination and isolation Incels experience, the internalisation of the neoliberal idea that competition is a natural and unchanging ordering concept of society, leaves posters who identify as Incel with no choice but to understand themselves as unworthy of any affirmation. What forums like *incels.co* facilitate is for this resolute misery to be acknowledged, vindicated, and shared. However, in its fierce policing of any non-Black Pill discourse, it also reinforces an anger and sense of injustice that the Black Pill offers no resolution to or respite from.

As examined in the previous chapter, the Incel community identifies itself partially through its own failure in the sexual market place. The experience of failure is regularly the topic of threads on *incels.co* and beyond, and its motifs substantiate the association between Incel and depression. Descriptions of isolation and sadness dominate my subsample, including references to isolation ('you can go mad with the lack of human contact - ever gone a week without talking to a single human being? It's weird, believe me' (T33, p5, EX)), hatred of the body ('The problem is that I hate my face and myself so much that I can't rate myself... I feel an utter disgust when I look at myself' (T30, p17, EX), depression and suicidal ideation. All of these experiences are explained by the Black Pill as a natural response to being unattractive in a pro-feminist society.

There is a double-bind at play here, borne out in my subsample and throughout my immersion in the subculture and community: by investing in the Black Pill, posters reproduce

in their thinking the terms on which Incels are supposedly hated by society. Believing that they have no chance of success, these men do not want to compete. The consequences of not competing however – isolation from mainstream society, loneliness and the foreclosure of future familial prospects – are known to be destructive: ‘Incels on the other hand probably got bullied to hell and were isolated, which leads to P E R M A N E N T mental damage. No amount of talking or pills will reverse that’ (T3, p118, EX). Moreover, the Black Pill does not actually contest the ‘epistemic authority’ (Davies, 2009) of the [sexual] market outcome. The injustice of the conditions in which Incels find themselves are blamed on feminists and women, but the market outcome remains understood as a neutral measure of value.

This paradox plays out in different ways. Instead of an anonymous assortment of sexless men wanting a strategy to relieve their predicament, Incel is formed as a collection of men who mostly claim to have given up. This giving up is expressed with different levels of intensity, but there is an understanding shared across most posts and posters that self-improvement advice of any persuasion is unwelcome as well as ineffective:

Also, most incels dont end up here because they want to keep trying, improving and get a girl eventually, but to just to be with someone that understand the fucking sexual frustration and wants to rot with you.

(T19, p66, EX)

A desire (‘want’) to self-destruct (‘rot’), rather than continued investment in a cycle of competitive failure, is expressed in an environment in which every poster would ideally prefer to ascend (e.g. ‘I don't give a shit about this forum, give me a girl like her and I will never log in here again’ (T20, p110, EX)).

Of all the Incel forums and subreddits I observed, *incels.co* featured the most regular and vicious rebukes of forum members who attempt to address hopelessness: ‘He's a faggot for thinking there's any hope in life. There's none. Absolutely no external hope, only chemicals in the brain’ (T30, p52). Thread 30 begins as a diatribe against ‘Hopecels’ and there is little

backlash to the sentiment expressed in the OP. One user goes as far as arguing that ‘Moralfaggotry and hopefull advice needs to be purged from this site. It makes me want to fucking go ER’ (T30, p23). The reference to Elliot Rodger suggests that, for the user in question, messages of hope and morality provoke a desire to hurt or destroy others. Their post was not condemned by other users.

Suicide is referred to so often and with such flippancy it would be an error to consider every reference sincere. There is however an underlying belief held by many posters that suicide is a rational response to Inceldom. This is illustrated in an excerpt from a user concerned that other users are too sensitive regarding the extent of violent fantasy expressed in the forum. Instead, he argues, the will to death or termination (‘rot’) is completely rational: ‘i want to die but id never put my family through that ill kill myself after my mom dies so basically go fuck yourself’ (T19, p36).

I observed several users that had been extremely active on *incels.co* over the period that I was observing, posting thousands of comments in a matter of weeks. While hypergamy and feminist hegemony are blamed for the extremity of the Incel predicament, the effects that their being ‘locked out’ of the dating market appear to be as likely to manifest in self-loathing as in violent misogyny, although the two mostly go hand in hand. The relationship that users describe as having with the forum itself however reinforces the sense that the Black Pill and *incels.co* in particular only exacerbate these feelings of despair. Many users describe lives of decreasing opportunity and increasing distress:

Because I can't do anything else. I barely have the energy to get out of my bed and my energy levels are constantly at 0. My depression gets worse and worse. My self hate gets worse and worse. My trust issues get worse and worse. Moving my body is a huge chore just like social interactions
(T20, p91)

Though the Incel community does not uniformly ascribe to the Black Pill, those who do face a significant challenge in breaking out of its feedback loop of evidence which confirms the hopelessness of Inceldom. The Black Pill implies that the only way out of Inceldom is the destruction of the conditions that cause of their suffering. Feminist society, an interpretation of neoliberal-feminist entanglement, is one of these causes. Women, and particularly feminists, are another. Finally, there is the self. In a community which regularly describes feelings of self-hatred (e.g. 'I'll never be anything more than genetic filth' (T30, p41), bonded by a worldview which confirms these fears, it is unsurprising that violence is also directed inwards.

Summary

This chapter has examined the ways in which Incel's entanglement with neoliberal ideas informs its antifeminism. My first claim drew attention to the interpretation of contemporary gender relations as an exercise in feminist power, rather than as an ambiguous reorganisation of multiple sites under neoliberal governance. By minimizing or ignoring this ambiguity, which is itself in keeping with a broad sentiment of neoliberal denialism, Incels present and understand themselves as an anti-establishment phenomenon. The pathologisation and derision which features in many popular accounts of Incel have been interpreted in some alternative accounts as part of a wider debate about free speech and 'political correctness gone mad'. Paradoxically, many posts in my subsample used a language of emancipation and a structural analysis of the discrimination that Incels endure to argue that unattractive men suffer more than any other identity group in Western society.

The violence inherent to the Black Pill worldview is influenced by its adoption of a neoliberal ethos of competition, as well as its interpretation of changes in gender power relations in the neoliberal era. While the Black Pill does not explicitly encourage violence, the mantra of LDAR and 'It's Over' places Incels who invest in its worldview in a double-bind.

The market does not lie, and so many Incels do consider themselves worthless – even if the sexual market place is geared towards women. The structural arrangements that have empowered women at their expense will not be altered without a dramatic overhaul of Blue Pill common sense. This manifests in some proactive attempts to ‘spread the Black Pill’ to the general public and form alliances with other Manosphere and antifeminist groups.

The more common response to the Black Pill however is the targeting of women in online and offline acts of harassment, and a relentless attack on the exterior and interior self. Both women and Incels themselves are subject to violent fantasy, albeit when directed towards women (especially feminists or sexually promiscuous women) this violence is presented as retributive and often takes the form of sexual violence. When directed at the self, violence is considered a rational response to a situation in which there are no other realistic options to ascend. This logic is endorsed by the community who post on *incels.co*, and posts which undermine the sense of hopelessness are regularly admonished and in some cases considered justification for banning the user entirely.

Chapter Ten: It's Over (A Conclusion)

This thesis set out to develop current understandings of the Incel phenomenon and contribute to a gap in the literature on contemporary antifeminism and its relationship with neoliberalism. Adapting approaches taken by similar studies conducted on Manosphere groups (e.g. O'Neill, 2018; Van Valkenburgh, 2018), I spent several years immersed within the Incel community, collecting sources and keeping an observation diary which I used to build a map of the Incel worldview (also known as the Black Pill). This included historicising precedent communities formed because of frustrations with dating, as well as the specific context of contemporary online antifeminism and misogyny. Within the antifeminist backlash of the Manosphere, Incel was recognised as a specific response to a shared diagnosis of female and feminist empowerment, differentiated from other Manosphere groups by its worldview's attachment to hopelessness. The Incel worldview was then examined in a case study consisting of threads from the most popular Incels-specific forum, *incels.co*.

Neoliberalism is an unwieldy term in academic spaces, meaning different things to different writers across a vast literature (Laidlaw, 2015). To maintain a systematic approach to my analysis, I began by categorising four 'ideal type' accounts of neoliberalism, roughly corresponding to material (e.g. the Classic account) and affective (e.g. the Foucauldian account) emphases. While there was some overlap between these accounts, they facilitated a more nuanced reading of Incel antifeminism by allowing the thesis to maintain an understanding of neoliberalism as a set of material conditions as well as a discourse, with subject-producing capacities (O'Neill, 2019: 1-2). Furthermore, by arguing that neoliberalism is a powerful influence in the construction of the Incel worldview, I refused an explanation of Incel which stopped short of examining how it is structured by broad transformations across a variety of institutional sites.

The advantage of understanding neoliberalism in this way is highlighted in an existing feminist literature on the ambiguous effects of neoliberalism's entanglement with feminist ideas and language. These effects, which include the production of a new 'ideal subject' as well as the incorporation of gender equality as a model of 'good business sense' (Roberts, 2015: 209), can only be evaluated as aspects of neoliberal governance if we acknowledge that neoliberalism operates in both material and discursive registers. Furthermore, changes in gender power relations, following a neoliberal logic of competitive individualism, occurred at the same time as emerged the Manosphere. While this thesis was not looking for causal explanations of antifeminism, these changes function as an important site of reference both for Incels when justifying their antifeminism, and therefore also for my own analysis of Incel antifeminism.

After evaluating Incel as an antifeminist backlash, and equipped with a suitable understanding of neoliberalism, I collected the raw data from which I constructed a subsample of popular threads from *incels.co* for a close-text analysis. I concentrated on two questions: 'In what ways does the Incel worldview reproduce, reject or otherwise engage with its neoliberal environment?' and 'In what ways does this entanglement inform Incel antifeminism?'. The first of these facilitated an analysis of Incel as it pertains to neoliberalism, which then allowed the second to examine Incel antifeminism specifically.

By focusing on the Incel worldview for analysis this thesis avoided explaining Incel antifeminism as the result of the pathology of individual members of its community, while acknowledging that this could still be the case. However, when answering the second question, I was keen to avoid minimizing the antifeminism and misogyny which is produced in Incel spaces and has been cited as justification for acts of violence, whether they be offline or online.

In what Way/s is the Antifeminism of the Incel Community Entangled with Neoliberalism?

I have not argued that Incel antifeminism is itself neoliberal. However, the antifeminism produced in Incel spaces is justified by posters with reference to the Incel worldview, which itself is borne of engagements with key neoliberal ideas, and changes that have occurred in gender power relations in the neoliberal era. Therefore, Incel antifeminism is entangled with neoliberalism in several ways.

The most powerful example of this is the double-bind that the Incel worldview places its adherents in with regards to neoliberal ideas about market outcomes. Specifically, there is a deeply held belief among Incels – within my subsample and beyond – that, based on their sexual market outcomes, they are failures. This sense of failure is described in traumatic terms and is cited as a reason for suicide, ‘rotting’ and retributive violence. However, the authority of competitive outcomes as a producer of truths and as an organiser of society, is seldom challenged. The anger and pain of Incels is then not directed at neoliberal governance structures which encourage a logic of marketisation into interior and exterior selves, but rather a constructed feminist power, and the [failed] self.

This feminist power is itself a distorted reflection of changes in gender power relations under neoliberalism. The variety of additional gendered pressures and expectations placed on neoliberal subjects, outlined in a feminist literature (e.g. Gill, 2007; Budgeon, 2011), are recast in the Incel worldview as evidence of uniform, painless female empowerment. An increase in the visibility of feminist ideas and language is therefore interpreted as both ignoring the real victims of contemporary gender relations (i.e. Incels) and as evidence of hegemonic feminist power.

There is substantial evidence in my subsample that Incels interpret their social environment as overwhelmingly pro-feminist, rather than as neoliberal. I do not think that this is necessarily exclusive to Incel or other antifeminist groups. My understanding of neoliberalism acknowledges the role that denialist claims have in academic and popular understandings of the term. Similarly, neoliberal governance is known to produce depoliticising effects even as it has made more visible select feminist iconography. In this context, many Incels justify antifeminist acts not only because feminists have caused their trauma, but also by the belief that Incels constitute a discriminated against minority, and that to attack the dominant power is to fight for their freedom. This framing of Incel antifeminism as an emancipatory struggle is further enforced by a broader culture war in which feminists are portrayed as in favour of political correctness and opposed to free speech.

The Incel vision of a society dominated by feminist assumptions about equality and power differences between the genders underpins Incel antifeminism and misogyny. It is the justificatory mechanism by which attacking women and feminists becomes a political act tied to a sexual identity. Incel antifeminism identifies and targets the attitudes and behaviour of women, in conjunction with evolutionary biological and psychological tendencies towards hypergamy, as responsible for their plight.

Future Areas of Research

This thesis could be extended or used as a precedent study in several ways, particularly in potential future analyses of contemporary antifeminism, masculinities, security studies, as well as sociological and political accounts of the Manosphere.

I began the project interested in the ways in which Incel, and the antifeminism the community produces, reflected specific aspects of neoliberalism as a cultural rationality. By

examining these parallels, I wanted to contribute to a collective understanding of how people justify antifeminist and misogynist hate speech and violence. I was initially less concerned about forums such as *incels.co* acting as sites of radicalisation because I assumed that the misogyny and antifeminism was likely a result of specific individual grievances, and part of the rhetorical style associated with many other online communities.

During my period of immersion this changed. The more time I spent learning the worldview of Incels and seeing how it manifest in forums such as *incels.co*, the more I began to recognise that what is ostensibly a description of how and why Incels exist has a clear, destructive endpoint. The destruction of the self, the feminist establishment and/or women are the only available options to an individual who subscribes to the Incel worldview. Furthermore, its key claims (i.e. feminists and female biology are to blame for Inceldom) are often fiercely policed on its sites of communication. Together, this results in an online environment characterised by a relentless gathering of data to vindicate the hopelessness of the worldview. Rather than relieving posters, *incels.co* and similar sites seemed to exacerbate existing feelings of worthlessness, injustice, and hatred.

Not all posters on *incels.co* adhere to the Black Pill one hundred percent, one hundred percent of the time. The community is prone to contrariness and is reluctant to attach itself to any collective goals or action. Nonetheless, research on misogynist extremism, particularly in security studies, should look at the Incel worldview as an example of how specific forms of knowledge production are operating as justificatory mechanisms for violence. Often, this takes the form of violent ideation and threats made anonymously in online spaces, but there were sufficient examples in both my subsample and during the immersion period that present day Incel antifeminism is not limited to online forums. My project introduces a useful precedent study of a specific antifeminist worldview, and how it relates to its ideological environment.

While masculinity was not the focus of this study, Incel is a male-only community and engages many of the same ideas as do other contemporary pro-masculinist groups (e.g. PUAs). What makes Incel a particularly interesting phenomenon to study as a form of masculinist community is its inversion of traditional masculinist credentials. *Not* having sex, *not* being physically strong and socially confident, *failing* in competition – these are all to different degrees important aspects of Incel identity. My work on mapping the Incel worldview would be a productive starting point for a research project comparing Incel to alternative and previous iterations of sub-hegemonic masculinities (e.g. nerd culture).

There are aspects of Incel which were beyond the remit of this thesis, but which nonetheless struck me as worthy of future research. Firstly, the demography of the Incel community requires more consistent examination, particularly as to how the ethnic constitution of the community informs its worldview. I am inclined towards thinking a virtual or physical ethnographic approach might be better suited to providing a more sophisticated account of this under-acknowledged dimension to Incel. Likewise, the role of the age of members of the community is, I suspect, an important detail in the forming of a relationship between an individual Incel and its worldview.

The Manosphere is often referred to as a collective, with little attention given to the considerable differences in community and worldview between its different factions. This includes significant animosity expressed between those groups. My study provides a useful starting point for research which draw out the differences and similarities between these factions, while comparative studies could also draw upon my use of neoliberalism as a wide-reaching concept with multiple potential applications. How do these different groups react differently to their neoliberal environment? More generally, the migration of specific antifeminist ideas or claims from Manosphere groups to mainstream debates is an increasingly

urgent question, which cannot be addressed until the hubs of communication of these groups are rigorously examined.

This thesis provides a roadmap for future analyses of contemporary para-political movements which are explicitly antifeminist (e.g. Proud Boys). These movements appear to be gaining in popularity and influence in mainstream political debates, with references to feminist power often articulated alongside references to a suppressive ‘woke’ or ‘politically correct’ agenda (Hoffman et al, 2020: 565-566). While I have stressed that the current state of the Incel community is unattached to any specific political movement, its worldview implies political action, and there are already links forming between identifying Incels, Incel terminology and the worldview’s categorisation of society, and mainstream political debate. My framework of applying a nuanced understanding of neoliberalism to this emerging relationship can I hope offer a guide to bringing this dynamic to light, acknowledging that the Incel worldview is both a reaction to its neoliberal environment, and still a fundamentally violent vision of the future for Incel men.

Appendix

Glossary of Incel Terminology

These definitions are based on the terms' usage on *incels.co* and across other Incel spaces.

Ascend:

To leave the state of Inceldom via success in the sexual market place. Does not necessarily mean rejecting the Black Pill worldview.

Chad:

The top 20% of attractive men are referred to as 'Chads'. Chad is assumed to be white-Caucasian, as this is the ethnicity considered to be the most attractive. Variations on this name refer to the top 20% attractive men of other ethnicities: **Chaddam** (Arab), **Chadpreet** (Indian), **Chang** (East Asian) and **Tyrone** (African-American). A particularly attractive Chad might be called a **Gigachad**, while a man approaching Chad levels of attractiveness might be called a **Chadlite**. **Brads** are not as attractive as a Chad or Chadlite, but still above average. They often mistakenly believe themselves to be more attractive than they are, failing to realise that the market is disproportionately skewed in favour of women. **Stacys** are the female equivalent of Chad and so best placed to gain access to Chad mates, while **Beckys** – who are the equivalent to Brad in attractiveness – maintain similar standards to Stacy. This is again reflective of the disempowerment of men in the dating market.

-cel:

here are numerous terms featuring the suffix -cel, which is used to demarcate different experiences between Incels. They can be given or claimed. Many refer to the major trait behind Inceldom (e.g. **wristcel**; **baldcel**; **framecel**; short/**heightcel**) or alternatively the approach that they are taking in an attempt to ascend (e.g. **gymcel**; **escortcel**). Some reflect the ethnic identity of the incel (e.g. **currycel**; **blackcel**; **ricecel**) or other demographic information (e.g. **oldcel**; **NEETcel**; **queercel**). One of the most important distinctions is between 'truecel' and 'volcel' or 'fakecel'. The former is a confirmed unattractive male who has often had his photo judged by other users. Volcel and fakecel are often used as insults or means of undermining the authenticity of a poster. Volcels

could ascend if they made changes to their lifestyle (e.g. by going to the gym more; by lowering their selection standards; by getting specific body surgery). Fakecel is mostly used as an accusation of posters who claim to be Incel when they are not.

Cock Carousel:

According to the Black Pill, women are biologically and psychologically programmed to act in an hypergamous manner. Cock Carousel is a metaphor for this behaviour early in a woman's life when her **Sexual Market Value (SMV)** is at its highest. By jumping between Chad mates, women secure 'AlphafuXX' before eventually settling with a 'BetabuXX' partner who will provide financial security and often raise children who are biologically not his. The term is often used to insult the perceived sexual promiscuity and degeneracy of young women. Feminist ideas are said to encourage women to 'ride' the cock carousel.

Cope:

A technique or strategy for distracting the self from the suffering of Inceldom. Is often used as an insult in response to attempts at self-improvement which are considered ineffective by the Incel community.

Cuck (also **Cucktears**, a derogatory term for 'IncelTears', a subreddit that mocks Incel culture):

A derivative of 'cuckold', 'cuck' is used to denigrate men perceived as emasculated, implying that women who date 'beta' men still fantasise of sleeping with genetically superior men.

Foid (also **Femoid**):

Term for 'women', who are so programmed by feminist society and their hypergamous evolutionary biology and psychology they are compared to robots ('Android').

-fuel:

A suffix used to describe the content within a post, image, link to news story etc. The most common example in my observations was '**suifuel**', denoting the likelihood that reading/viewing the post in question will prompt feelings of depression and suicide.

‘Lifefuel’:

The opposite of the above, often used when posting an article or account which features an Incel ascending, or just as likely a woman (or blue-pilled man) getting their comeuppance.

Halo effect (also Horn effect):

A series of benefits that come with being physically attractive, on the basis that physical beauty increases the *impression* of other positive characteristics. This in turn leads to superior career prospects, happiness, and wealth. This is understood to be exaggerated for men due to the higher standards placed upon them by feminist society. The opposite of this phenomenon, the **Horn effect**, is considered a defining quality of the lives of most Incels.

Just Be White (JBW):

The theory that white men have a significantly greater chance of ascending from Inceldom than do ethnic minority men. Controversial within the Incel community as other characteristics (e.g. height) are considered by many Incels as more important.

Just Fucking Lol (JFL):

An indication of exasperation.

Kissless Hugless Handholdless Virgin (KHHV):

A means of distinguishing between degrees of Inceldom. KHHVs are among the most unsuccessful Incels

Landwhale:

A term used widely in the Manosphere and other internet subcultures, referring to an overweight woman. Often mocked for demanding respect and endorsing ‘body positivity’ despite their low value. Have no problem attracting men and so cannot be an Incel.

Looks Money Status (LMS):

A theory of the most important factors in attracting women.

Lookism:

A term that describes prejudice and discrimination against unattractive people, particularly men. **Looks theory** is a contested attempt to provide a theory explaining precisely what is considered attractive and why these associations have emerged over time and space. A **looksmatch** is the subject's equivalent in looks.

-maxx:

Suffix denoting an attempt to improve a specific aspect of an individual's physical or mental being. Popular examples include 'gymaxxing' (going to the gym to work on physique), looksmaxxing (undergoing plastic surgery to improve physical appearance), moneymaxxing (focusing on improving financial wellbeing) and NTmaxxing (attempting to appear 'normal' in spite of not being neurotypical).

Mewing:

A DIY technique for improving the appearance of the jawbone and its profile, making it look stronger, more masculine, and attractive. This is achieved by pushing the tip and then the entirety of the tongue up to the roof of the mouth. While pioneered by orthodontist Michael Mew, there is no scientific evidence for it working. Its efficacy is highly contested within and outside the Incel community, and the practice is pursued by other wings of the Manosphere.

Mog:

To be 'mogged' is to be dominated by another in some regard. The term originated in PUA circles as a technique to attract women by mogging nearby men. In the Incel community, 'mogged' is a generic description of being near to someone considerably more attractive. It is not exclusive used to describe interactions within gender groups (i.e. a man can be mugged by a woman), however it is also regularly used to refer to a specific aspect in which an individual feels dominated (e.g. 'he heightmogged me').

Normies:

An often derogatory term for ‘normal’ people, who are typically unaware of the Red or Black pills. Sexually, normies are likely able to attract partners but will likely rely more on status or financial stability as means of attraction. Politically normies subscribe uncritically to basic liberal or conservative ideas and engage in mainstream (and so heavily feminist) debates. They are sometimes referred to as ‘Sheeple’ or ‘NPCs’ (Non-player characters; a reference to videogame characters controlled by the computer and so highly predictable).

Oneitis:

Term is used to describe either a condition in which a man is romantically obsessed with one woman (e.g. ‘I have oneitis’), or the woman herself (e.g. ‘She is my oneitis’).

Orbit (see also ‘Orbiter’ and ‘Simp’):

Beta men who attempt to linger near women in the hopes of forming a romantic sexual relationship. Women encourage this behaviour to receive regular affirmation from these men, while they still attempt to access Chads as partners. Orbiting men might be back-up partners but are more likely a source for emotional dumping and, in some cases, financial favours. Orbiting can occur more readily in online environments, where men are easily led to believe that they have a genuine relationship with the woman in question. **Simps** are a similar archetype, although the focus of the term is on their supposed weakness and willingness to give attention, money and emotional value to any woman they consider attractive.

Pills:

References to different ‘pills’ are made across the Manosphere and increasingly in mainstream spaces. According to the Incel worldview, the **Blue Pill** describes normative governance in Western societies: pro-equality, pro-woman, pro-immigrant. The **Red Pill** describes an interventionist response among men and advocates of a specific type of masculinity. The **Black Pill**, around which the Incel worldview is built, acknowledges the power of the Blue Pill and its damaging effects on non-elite men. It is differentiated by an extreme hopelessness with regards to non-elite men being able to ascend from the discrimination that Blue Pill norms facilitate.

Roastie:

A derogatory term for a woman perceived as sexually promiscuous, based on the unfounded belief that increased sexual activity results in distended labia.

Rope:

Synonym for suicide; many Incels express suicidal ideation and the topic is discussed with varying degrees of flippancy and sincerity in every Incel forum. Sometimes used as the alternative option to distraction or self-improvement (i.e. 'cope or rope').

Soy (or Soyboy):

A disparaging term used across the Manosphere and alt-right for progressives and normies. Consuming soy-based products supposedly results in reduced testosterone.

That Ho Over There (Thot):

Acronym commonly used across the Manosphere, alt-right and increasingly mainstream social media. Refers to women considered sexually promiscuous.

White Knight:

A term common across internet subcultures which has historically referred to 'nice guy' men acting protectively over women, especially in an online setting. The White Knight, and White Knighting, is considered in Manosphere spaces to be reflective of a broader social consensus, constructed by feminism, that women can do no wrong and should be treated as victims. The received wisdom is that White Knights are disliked by both men, who see the behaviour as weak, and women, who prefer a dominant, assertive mate. Within the Manosphere White Knighting is considered a source of the inflation of women's ego.

Details of *Incel.co* Threads Sub-Sample

Table A9: Sub-Sample of *Incel.co* Threads

Thread Name	Number	Replies	Views	Date posted	Subjects
[Blackpill] it's the saxons that are responsible for ethnic self hate	T1	178	>3000	07/03/18	Race; Politics
[Blackpill] this is how easy it is to get an asian femoid	T2	87	>3000	27/02/18	Race
[Bluepill] If everyone on this site was forced to upload a picture and be rated...	T3	192	>4000	24/01/18	Rate; Fake
[Experiment] Can you still ascend without a social media presence?	T4	131	>2000	23/03/18	Improvement
[Experiment] User @whogiveafucc Tinder Experiment come see the 3.5/10 truecel in action(GTFIH)	T5	145	>4000	27/03/18	Dating App; Fake; Rate
[JFL] I think that you just killed someone Minjaze	T6	192	>5000	19/03/18	Suicide; Bully; Murder
[JFL] My online female friend broke up with her boyfriend	T7	104	>2000	14/03/18	Rejection
[JFL] WE ARE ON THE NEWS HAHahaha	T8	172	>6000	08/03/18	Politics; Murder; Doxx
[JFL] Why do brown/arab guys think they are any different than curries?	T9	174	>3000	11/03/18	Race; Politics; Rejection
[LifeFuel] Roundup of Thailand Trip - girls, advice, conversation screenshots etc	T10	180	>18000	11/03/18	Locked; Race; Sexwork; Empathy; Improvement
[NSFW] Just another incel killing himself	T11	160	>8000	15/03/18	Suicide
[RageFuel] I hate big assed females	T12	161	>5000	01/03/18	Rate
[RageFuel] JFL "This is an incel board" user "weed" already has 10 likes on Tinder	T13	147	>3000	31/03/18	Dating Apps; Fake
[Serious] For my Blackcels Only	T14	65	>1000	06/04/18	Race; Politics; Bully
[Serious] how come we dont see much latinocels?	T15	92	>2000	18/03/18	Race
[Serious] If you are ethnic living in a white country you will have a better shot at getting laid if you move to wherever you are from	T16	135	>2000	06/03/18	Race; Politics; Improvement
[Serious] is this guy an incel?	T17	238	>7000	30/03/18	Rate; Fake; Locked; Doxx
[SuicideFuel] These are the Arab females of the west	T18	101	>3000	21/03/18	Race
[Venting] People here are getting too sensitive	T19	86	>2000	23/03/18	
16 year old girl shitting on /r/CuckTears (GTFIH boyos)	T20	161	>5000	25/02/18	Rate; Empathy; Fake; Locked
Anyone here who thinks that 18 + year old men should be able	T21	144	>4000	20/12/17	Age
As my days come to an end...	T22	303	>12000	02/01/18	Suicide
audio of me crying	T23	161	>10000	17/12/17	Bully; Rejection

Table A1 continued

Thread Name	Number	Replies	Views	Date posted	Subjects
Being Born Ugly is a Curse from God	T24	94	>2000	04/01/18	Religion
Getting ready to go on a date from tinder (tinder morph game)	T25	111	>4000	17/12/2017	Dating Apps
Girl catches me browsing this forum on the bus	T26	73	>3000	10/01/18	
'Gymcelling" is a meme invented by normies to rob incels of their time and money	T27	276	>6000	30/01/18	Improvement; Fake
Here's where I live now... fucking suicide fuel	T28	109	>3000	10/01/18	Suicide; Rejection
HOLY SHIT I FOUND A FEMALE INCEL, YOoooooooooooooooo	T29	78	>5000	17/12/17	
'Hopecels"	T30	109	>2000	23/01/18	Suicide; Fake
I got falsely accused with a crime based on my looks.	T31	60	>2000	22/02/18	
I'm temporarily truecel in looks (few hours after hair transplant, all my hates GTFIH to laugh)	T32	140	>3000	20/03/18	Locked; Improvement; Rate
incels living alone	T33	100	>3000	16/12/17	
Inceltears slut posts pic of her pussy for Chad	T34	129	>9000	04/01/18	Doxx; Rate; Revenge
Jews created the incel epidemic and are responsible for my subhumanes	T35	119	>2000	21/02/18	Religion; Degeneracy; Evolution; Politics
just a reminder: fapcels=volcels	T36	135	>2000	24/03/18	Porn; Fake
Just back after 7 days of escortcelling in Thailand	T37	173	>4000	28/02/18	Sexwork; Improvement
Knajjd discussion thread	T38	150	>11000	12/11/17	Rate; Fake
My Tinder matches in Thailand overnight xD	T39	253	>12000	08/01/18	Dating Apps; Race; Locked
Now that I have a new phone I can finally prove that I'm subhuman	T40	211	>8000	22/12/17	Rate; Fake
Post stuff that your parents say to you	T41	102	>1000	28/03/18	Family
Reminder that I'm a guy in his 20s making 80k+ a year	T42	115	>3000	23/02/18	Rejection
Results of my rhinoplasty	T43	176	>8000	29/01/18	Improvement; Rate
Thank you guys	T44	170	>15000	11/11/17	Suicide; Locked
this book exposes sexual behaviour of FHOs	T45	233	>11000	20/11/17	Evolution; Improvement
This is my last post.	T46	140	>5000	26/01/18	Improvement
WAW2: Women Hate Being Approached By Non-Goodlooking Guys	T47	184	>12000	20/03/18	Rejection
What's your ethnicity?	T48	103	>3000	31/12/17	Race
Who is your least favourite poster?	T49	162	>3000	18/12/17	Rate
Would you protect a woman from rape?	T50	111	>3000	26/12/17	Rape; Poll

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