

Platforming Hate:
An Analysis of Incel Ideology on
Reddit's r/Braincels

by Jeffrey Millar

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Jeffrey Millar, declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Arts (Research) in Humanities and Social Sciences, in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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The following research is structured as a conventional thesis, containing six chapters. Sources are cited in the Harvard-UTS style. It contains 49,869 words, excluding the preface, tables, appendices, and reference list.

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Abstract

Involuntary celibates, or ‘incels’, are a community of antifeminist extremists who have recently risen to prominence within the Manosphere (Ribeiro et al. 2020), which is defined as a loose coalition of websites, blogs, and social media groups where men congregate to air their grievances with feminism and contemporary politics (Farrell et al. 2019). The incel belief system imagines a “sexual marketplace” which divides men and women into rigidly differentiated social categories according to their relative value as a sexual partner (Baele, Brace & Coan 2019). Incels believe that their “sexual market value” is so low that they are prejudged by women and marginalised within the sexual marketplace. I performed an ideological analysis on Reddit’s r/Brincels, which amassed more than 80,000 subscribers before being banned in 2019.

Data was collected in the form of 183 webpages retrieved from the internet archival tool *archive.today*, which saves offline copies of webpages that are liable to be deleted. This yielded three distinct types of data that could be analysed: 4 webpages authored by the subreddit’s moderators regarding the purpose, administration, and management of r/Brincels, 179 user submissions, upon which nearly 10,000 comments were left, and the account information of the users who made those submissions. I applied critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995) to each of these data subsets to determine how incel discourses expressed users’ underlying ideology. The results of data analysis show that Reddit’s structure and affordances allow incel ideology to be expressed in several ways. First, the documents authored by the moderation team facilitate the development of a community because in defining involuntary celibacy and setting parameters for in-group membership, they provide its geographically dispersed subscribers with commonality of purpose and identity (Caliandro 2018). Second, the users of r/Brincels form a networked public when they use Reddit’s participatory and connective affordances to exchange personal opinions over shared media content, through which an imagined collective emerges through the interactions of people, technology, and practices (boyd 2010). Third, its members combined Reddit’s username and flair features to create pseudonymous accounts which revealed and performed elements of their incel identity to an audience of their peers, indicating that Reddit affords its users the ability to construct complex pseudonymous identities (van der Nagel 2017). This thesis contributes to the study of the misogynistic ideologies which comprise the Manosphere, as well as how Reddit’s affordances and governance structure enable toxic technocultures on its platform.

Key words: Reddit, incel, Manosphere, ideological analysis, discourse, affordances, toxic technocultures

Chapter 1: Introduction

Involuntary celibates, or ‘incels’, are a community of antifeminist extremists who have recently risen to prominence within the Manosphere (Ribeiro et al. 2020), which is defined as a loose coalition of websites, blogs, and social media groups where men congregate to air their grievances with feminism and contemporary politics (Farrell et al. 2019). The incel belief system imagines a “sexual marketplace” which divides men and women into rigidly differentiated social categories according to their relative value as a sexual partner (Baele, Brace & Coan 2019). Incels believe that their “sexual market value” is so low that they are prejudged by women and marginalised within the sexual marketplace. As a result, incel ideology is characterised by aggrieved entitlement to sex—an attitude which has led dozens of young men to commit both planned and random acts of violence (Hoffman, Ware & Shapiro 2020). This thesis analyses incel ideology, identity, and discourse as represented on Reddit’s r/Braincels.

This introductory chapter is composed of seven short sections. [1.1](#) provides background to the study. [1.2](#) contains the research questions which guide my literature review, data collection, and analysis and outlines the expected outcomes of this research. [1.3](#) describes the method for data collection. [1.4](#) provides a framework to analyse that data. [1.5](#) considers the ethical implications of studying and reporting on online extremist groups. [1.6](#) clarifies researcher positionality. Finally, [1.7](#) outlines the structure of the remaining chapters in this thesis.

1.1 Background

On 23 May 2014, a 22-year-old university student named Elliot Rodger went on a violent rampage through the city of Isla Vista, California¹. His attack began when he stabbed his two flatmates to death. He then attempted to gain access to a sorority house on the nearby campus of UC-Santa Barbara with the intent of carrying out a mass shooting. Unable to do so, Rodger shot three female students in the vicinity and then drove through the city, hitting cyclists with his car and shooting at random passers-by. When he was ultimately confronted by police, Rodger turned the gun on himself. In his wake, six people were left dead and fourteen more were injured.

Rodger’s case immediately captured public attention due to the lengthy manifesto he published to ideologically frame his actions. Totalling more than 100,000 words, Rodger’s manifesto recounts his entire life story from birth, focusing specifically on his inability to lose his virginity and his resulting shame and emasculation. To rationalise his negative self-image, Rodger conjured a worldview in which sex is a commodity that women control and a man can only access if he conforms to hegemonic ideals for embodied masculinity. In this way, Rodger could assign blame for his virginity

¹ For a discussion on the ethics of naming incel attackers, see p.31-32.

to his short stature and biracial heritage, physical qualities he believed women and society at large had prejudged as being undesirable in a sexual partner. Rodger therefore intended his attack to be a dramatic performance of masculine strength and power, which would not only “show the world [his] true worth”, but also act as a “day of retribution” against those he believed had victimised him, namely the beautiful women whose bodies he felt entitled to and sexually successful “alpha” males he imagined himself to be in competition with (Rodger 2014, p. 137).

In the years following his death, Rodger was typically portrayed in the media as a lone wolf attacker whose belief system loosely aligned him with the antifeminism characteristic of the Alt Right (Hankes & Amend 2018). In academic circles, his manifesto provided ample material for both criminologists studying the psychology of mass shooters (Allely & Faccini 2017; Hurt & Grant 2019; Murray 2017a, 2017b) and gender studies scholars who viewed his case as a unique opportunity to study the link between masculinity and violence (Myketiak 2016; Vito, Admire & Hughes 2018). His name would also come up occasionally in journalists’ accounts of other mass shootings, whose perpetrators made social media posts which praised him or endorsed his actions (Collins & Zadrozny 2018; Hankes & Amend 2018). Then, nearly four years later a second terror attack occurred which demonstrated that his ideology had not died with him, but in fact had managed to survive in the misogynistic recesses of the internet known as the Manosphere.

This attack occurred on 23 April 2018, when 25-year-old Alek Minassian drove a rental van into a crowd of pedestrians in downtown Toronto, killing 10 and injuring 16. Like Rodger, Minassian had planned to die by suicide after completing his attack, in this instance by drawing his wallet in a threatening manner so as to provoke a police officer into shooting him (Minassian 2018, p.160). However, the responding officer successfully de-escalated the confrontation, and Minassian was taken into custody unharmed. Because he expected to be killed, Minassian published a pre-composed Facebook message to frame his actions for the media when the van came to a stop. It reads: “Private (Recruit) Minassian Infantry 00010, wishing to speak to Sgt 4chan please...The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys! All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!” (Collins & Zadrozny 2018). In this short post, Minassian not only aligned his actions with Rodger, but did so using new subcultural terminology that had evolved in the online communities devoted to Rodger’s ideology. In such communities, a man who wanted to have sex but was unable to do so was now termed an “involuntary celibate”, or “incel” for short. The beautiful women who incels believed were prejudging them were termed “Stacys”, and the attractive men they prefer over incels were called “Chads”.

Journalists (Beauchamp 2019; Kassam 2018) and NGOs such as the Southern Poverty Law Center (Hankes & Amend 2018; Janik 2018) were quick to report this new ideology emerging from the

Manosphere. However, academic research on the incel belief system is still emergent. While existing studies have been instrumental in advancing academic understanding of this dangerous ideology, research that focuses on the platforms which have provided incels the means to learn, teach, and spread their beliefs is much more limited.

When it comes to choosing which platform to study, there are several options. For instance, the proprietary forum *incels.me* provided data for two separate studies which respectively pertained to incel ideology (Baele, Brace & Coan 2019) and incel discourses (Jaki et al. 2019). Minassian's Facebook post identified the notorious message board 4chan as another site where incels congregate. A third possibility is the news aggregator and social media platform Reddit. Rather than attempting to study incel groups across multiple platforms, this project chooses to focus on Reddit.

This decision is based on several factors. First, Reddit's sheer size provides the site with greater mainstream reach and influence than 4chan or any proprietary incel forum. Reddit currently claims to have an estimated userbase of 330 million monthly active users (RedditInc 2021), making it the third most trafficked English language social media site in the world (Alexa Internet 2021). This massive reach can often make Reddit an initial site for users to be exposed to extremism. In fact, one study found that Reddit users are nearly three times as likely to produce or be exposed to online hate speech than users of similarly trafficked platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram (Costello & Hawdon 2018).

The second reason is Reddit's unique site structure and affordances, which collectively lend themselves well to research purposes. Reddit is made up of more than 130,000 discrete forums called "subreddits" (RedditInc 2021). This site structure has historically allowed Reddit to host a wide array of subcultural communities, including multiple incel subreddits and countless others devoted to the various Manosphere ideologies which the literature describes as intersecting with but predating incel ideology. This intersecting network of Manosphere-affiliated subreddits can provide ample data to not only explore how incel ideology is represented on the Reddit platform, but also theorise its origins from the Manosphere's existing network of misogynistic ideologies. Furthermore, Reddit offers its users a range of connective, algorithmic, and pseudonymising affordances. Here, the term "affordance" is understood as "the multidimensional relationship between the object or technology and the user, and how that relationship offers possible (or actual) outcomes" (Evans et al. 2017). The data taken from these subreddits will therefore allow insight into how incels have learnt to weaponise these affordances to network with other users, produce dangerous othering discourses, and immerse themselves within the incel subculture.

The final reason to choose Reddit is the rich body of literature which exists to describe its platform, community, and governance practices and to critique how these factors have historically

enabled the development of toxic online subcultures (Brown et al. 2016, 2018; Buyukozturk, Gaulden & Dowd-Arrow 2018; Carlson & Cousineau 2020; Chandrasekharan et al. 2017, 2022; Copland 2020; Gaudette et al. 2021; Gillett & Suzor 2022; Ging 2017; Habib et al. 2021; Massanari 2015, 2017; Milner 2013; Waller & Anderson 2021). Here, a toxic online community is understood to be one which relies heavily on the “implicit or explicit harassment of others” (Massanari 2017). Together, these articles allow the findings of this thesis to be easily contextualised and could help inform policy recommendations to mitigate incel radicalisation.

1.2 Research questions

My analysis of incel ideology on Reddit is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does incel ideology as represented on Reddit’s r/Brincels originate from the Manosphere’s existing network of antifeminist ideologies?
2. How do incels use Reddit’s affordances to amplify rhetorics of male victimhood, grievance, and entitlement?

In answering these questions, it is expected that this research will have **two** significant outcomes. First, it supports and expands on the work of previous researchers who have studied incels and the Manosphere by both providing an in-depth analysis of incel ideology as represented on Reddit and then identifying how and where this belief system originated. Second, it details the many ways in which incels have weaponised Reddit’s affordances to amplify rhetorics of male victimhood, grievance, and entitlement—emotional states that have historically been used to motivate and justify ideological violence against incels’ perceived oppressors (Hoffman, Ware & Shapiro 2020).

1.3 Data collection

Due to the historical intersections of incel ideology and violence, it is imperative that incel communities on Reddit are studied unobtrusively. To these ends, data was collected in the form of webpages retrieved from the internet archival website *archive.today*. This website is a free and publicly accessible internet archival tool with no login required, which saves webpages for preservation if they are liable to be altered or deleted. The site is freely accessible by any user of the public internet and provides implicit consent via the availability of its service and the search function of its archives. In its history, Reddit has hosted two major incel subreddits: r/incels (banned from Reddit 7 November 2017) and r/Brincels (banned 30 September 2019). Data collection chooses to focus on the latter subreddit because it was active until recently, and its content is therefore better represented within the internet archive.

A total of 183 unique webpages from r/Braincels were retrieved from *archive.today*, which were then sorted by date and assigned a post ID. These webpages comprise the entire life of the subreddit; the earliest is dated 21 Oct 2017 and the latest is dated 29 Sep 2019. Respectively, these dates correspond with the date of the community's founding and the last day it was active before it was banned and its content removed from Reddit. From this bank of 183 webpages, there are three distinct types of data that can be extracted and analysed.

The first data subset consists of four webpages written by the community's moderators and pertain to the purpose, administration, and management of the subreddit. Post 154 lists the members of the moderation team and the dates they were appointed. Post 126 is a snapshot of the community's homepage and sidebar. A sidebar is an integral part of subreddit infrastructure which moderators can customise to include that community's mission statement, number of subscribers, unique rules, and any other content deemed relevant to group identity or community moderation (see Figure 1). Posts 142 and 150 are two pages that the moderators ask newcomers to read before joining and participating in r/Braincels. They are accessible via hyperlinks at the top of the sidebar, which respectively lead to a page of frequently asked questions and a wiki of incel concepts and terminology.

The second type of data that can be analysed is the content of user submissions, which include both the posts made to r/Braincels and the comments left there to react to, discuss, and debate their content. A total of 179 unique user submissions were retrieved, upon which nearly 10,000 comments were left. These posts were predominantly text or images, with a small number of links, one video, and three posts whose bodies were deleted but whose titles remain (see Table 1). For posts, this data includes the number of upvotes and comments each post received, as well as the percentage of users who upvoted it. For comments, only the total number of upvotes is available. However, it must be noted that comparing upvote and comment data between posts is tenuous due to variations in their age when they were captured by *archive.today*.

The final type of data that can be extracted from these webpages is information about the individual accounts that participate in r/Braincels. Specifically, this includes those accounts' usernames and associated flairs. Flair is a Reddit affordance which allows users to append additional information to their username to vary their self-presentation according to their audience.

Table 1: user submissions by post type

<i>n</i>=179	Number	Percent
Text	116	64.8%
Image	51	28.5%
Link	8	4.5%
Video	1	0.5%
Deleted	3	1.7%

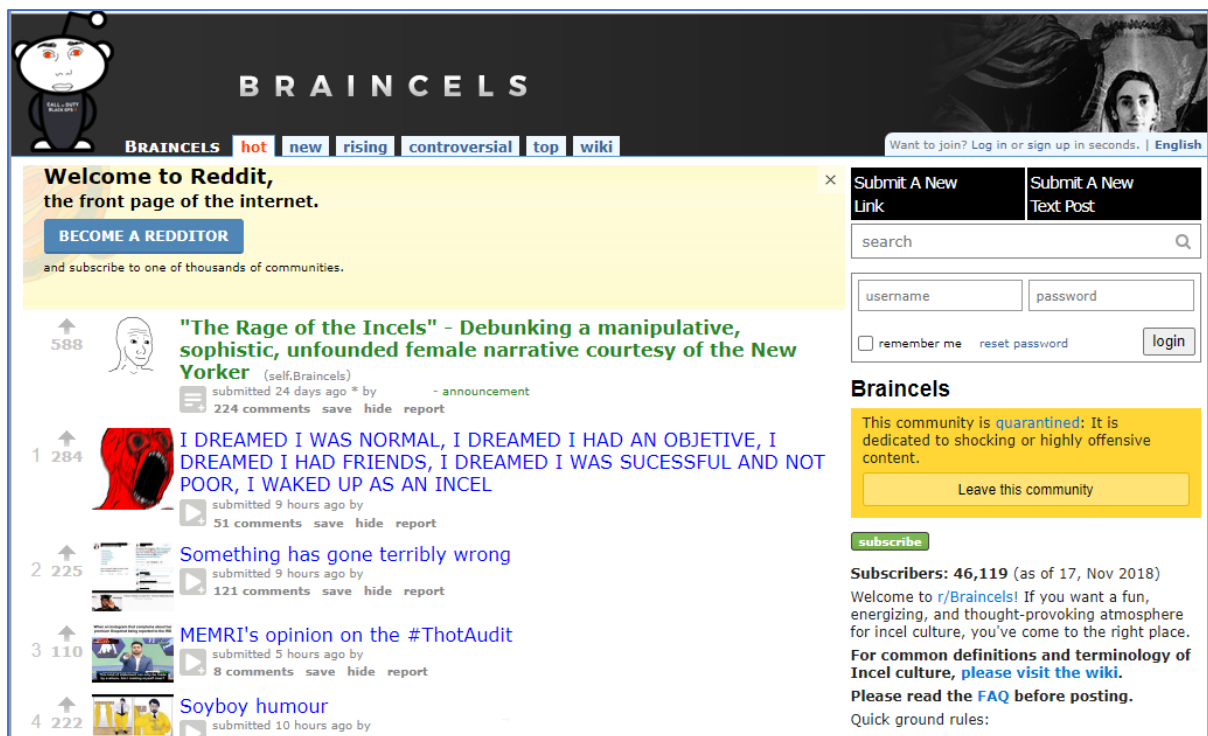


Figure 1: an anonymised screenshot of the r/Braincels homepage (Post 126), featuring custom banner image (top), news feed of user submissions (left), and sidebar (right)

1.4 Analytical framework

Data analysis will interpret how incel ideology is represented within the sociotechnical context of Reddit. In doing so, it will describe how Reddit's platform and affordances shape and influence how that ideology is expressed by members of the incel subreddit r/Braincels.

This analysis will be conducted according to Teun A. van Dijk's (1995, 2006) theorisation of ideological analysis. Van Dijk (1995) defines an ideology as a system of ideas for organizing the social cognitions shared by members of social groups, organizations, or institutions. Moreover, van Dijk (1995, 2006) argues that ideologies can be considered as having both cognitive and social elements. On a cognitive level, ideologies are used to organise a group's identity, actions, aims, norms, values, and relations to other social groups (van Dijk 2006). On the other hand, social aspects of an ideology consist of the specific sociocultural knowledge shared by the members of a group, such as evaluative beliefs, opinions, and social attitudes (van Dijk 1995). As a result of its dual nature, ideologies are frequently expressed through the personal cognitions of group members regarding the planning and understanding of discourses (van Dijk 1995). This process of expressing ideology through discourse is a key part of the social reproduction of the group, as it socialises new members of a group or culture to gradually acquire the requisite systems of ideas (van Dijk 1995). As a result, ideologies are "acquired, confirmed, changed, and perpetuated through discourse" (van Dijk 2006).

Discourse analysis can therefore be a powerful tool to study the ideologies that underpin how individuals express themselves within the context of a social group (van Dijk 1995). While not every

expression made in a social context should be interpreted as representing ideology, the structure of ideologies to divide people into in- and out-groups means that when they are expressed, they are typically articulated along an us-versus-them dimension, in which the speaker tends to present themselves or their own group in a positive light by emphasising their good deeds and properties, while outside groups are discussed in negative terms and have their own positive properties downplayed (van Dijk 2006). Thus, “any property of discourse that expresses, establishes, confirms or emphasizes a self-interested group opinion, perspective or position, especially in a broader socio-political context of social struggle, is a candidate for special attention in such an ideological analysis” (van Dijk 1995).

Rather than examining the content submitted to r/Braincels at a corpus level as discourse analysis is typically done, my ideological analysis will take a critical discourse analysis (CDA) perspective by analysing incel discourses holistically within the “forgotten” social, political, historical, and cultural contexts in which they were produced (Blommaert 2005). CDA is a field of discourse analysis that focuses on the power structures that shape discourse (Fairclough 1995). This contextual approach to studying incel discourses is relevant to Reddit because its affordances and norms for content moderation shape and influence how the members of r/Braincels express their incel ideology. Norman Fairclough’s (1995) model for CDA consists of three interrelated forms of analysis: the object of analysis, the processes by which the object is produced and disseminated, and the social conditions that govern those processes. There were three types of data collected in [1.3](#): documents authored by the subreddit’s moderation team which pertain to the community’s purpose and day-to-day administration, posts and comments submitted by subreddit’s subscribers that discuss elements of incel identity, and the account information of the individual users who submitted that content. Data analysis will occur across three chapters, each of which applies one of Fairclough’s (1995) forms of analysis to a different data subset.

Chapter 3 is focused on the first data subset, composed of documents authored by the r/Braincels moderation team. It applies the first form of analysis in Fairclough’s (1995) model for CDA by examining how the object of analysis—incel ideology—is defined at a community level. Here, the term “community” is understood as existing online when geographically dispersed individuals are “united with commonality of purpose and identity” (Caliandro 2018). My analysis of incel ideology at a community level is based on the data contained within the four moderator documents. The first three—consisting of the subreddit’s sidebar, wiki, and FAQ page—collectively state the purpose of the subreddit, define incel identity, and explicate the incel worldview. These documents provide the disparate members of r/Braincels with a common purpose and identity because they function to inform a user’s decision whether to identify as an incel and join r/Braincels. There are of course notable exceptions where an individual who does not identify as an incel might choose to subscribe.

For instance, members of anti-incel subreddits have been known to monitor and report on the content shared there (Gillett & Suzor 2022). Regardless, any user who chooses to subscribe to this community must position their identity as an incel or non-incel relative to definition of involuntary celibacy laid out by moderators. In keeping with van Dijk's (1995, 2006) definition of ideology, my descriptions of incel ideology in this chapter consist of the major in- and out-groups articulated by members of r/Braincels, the relationship drawn between those groups and the wider socio-political context, and members' evaluative opinions of groups' positive and negative qualities.

Fairclough's (1995) model for CDA also calls on researchers to consider the social conditions that govern how expressions of ideology are produced and disseminated. In the context of Reddit's subreddit structure and decentralised governance model, the social conditions that govern the production and dissemination of user submissions are determined by how its volunteer moderators set standards for participation in the community. Data on these standards were determined by the subreddit's nine rules (later expanded to twelve) and the automated filters configured to remove posts and comments containing select words and phrases, respectively available in the subreddit's sidebar and wiki. The final moderator document identifies the members of r/Braincels' moderation team, which can be applied to the bank of user submissions to identify 38 which were authored by either the subreddit's founder or a moderator acting in an official capacity. Together, these posts allow a narrative of the subreddit's history to be reconstructed, from its founding to eventual ban nearly three years later. In doing so, it becomes possible to track changes to the subreddit's userbase and moderation team, which in turn caused the community's standards for participation to loosen over time to authorise increasingly toxic discourses.

Fairclough's (1995) final form of analysis for CDA is to study the processes by which the object of analysis is disseminated. This analysis forms the basis of the two remaining results chapters, each of which describes how different Reddit affordances give material structure to incel discourses and allow them to be disseminated. First, Chapter 4 describes how networked publics produce incel discourses. A networked public can be said to exist when "an imagined collective emerges through the interactions of people, technology, and practices" (boyd 2010). In the context of r/Braincels, this networking occurs when its subscribers deploy Reddit's participatory and connective affordances to submit posts related to the various aspects of incel identity and then interact in the comment section through the exchange of personal opinions over shared media content. Moreover, this mediated association of strangers can also be considered a networked counterpublic, which is defined as a public whose production of alternate forms of knowledge challenges the dominant knowledge inherent to the mainstream public sphere (Jackson & Foucault Welles 2015). This is because the incel discourses collectively produced on r/Braincels are intended to contest mainstream feminist logics. My analysis

of incel ideology on r/Braincels at the level of a networked public examines the bank of posts and comments submitted by everyday (i.e., non-moderator) users of r/Braincels to determine which elements of incel identity and ideology are discussed and debated there, as well as how this debate functions to challenge the definition of involuntary celibacy laid out by the community's moderators.

Finally, Chapter 5 demonstrates how discourses expressing incel ideology can also emerge through the self-presentation of its users. The study of user self-presentation can be a valuable tool to measure how users immerse themselves within a given subculture (Caliandro 2018). Although Reddit is nominally an anonymous social media site, its username features and norms for participation produce a culture of pseudonymity. In r/Braincels, this is reflected in how users create specialised accounts whose usernames and flairs present and perform aspects of their incel identity to an audience of their peers. To study incel self-presentation on Reddit, a random sample of username and flair data was sourced from the comment section of user submissions. These posts were collected over the span of nearly two years, during which the subreddit experienced a substantial amount of growth and ideological drift (see [3.4](#)). To ensure that this sample of username and flair data was truly random and did not overrepresent one era in the community's history, my archive of posts was organised alphabetically by title, and the account information of their top-voted commenters was scraped until the sample size reached 1500. Removing duplicates reduced the sample size to 767, and this data was refined further by removing any accounts that did not contain recognisable incel terminology. The final sample size was 177 accounts. Thematic analysis was then applied to this random sample to determine how individuals present their incel identity while participating in r/Braincels.

1.5 Ethical considerations

There is ongoing debate within the academic community on the ethics of using social media posts for research. Although such posts are publicly viewable, most social media users do not realise their posts could be used as data in a research project, and nearly two-thirds of participants in a recent survey stated their belief that researchers should obtain consent before using posts in such a way (Fiesler & Proferes 2018). Due to r/Braincels' recent removal from Reddit and the hostility that incels have expressed towards researchers, contacting individual members of this community to obtain consent would be both difficult and place the researcher at considerable risk. Instead, participants' concerns are often alleviated if they are assured that their offline identity would be protected through anonymisation (Fiesler & Proferes 2018). While Reddit already requires users to choose anonymous usernames before participating, as they leave comments over time, it is possible for enough personal information to accumulate that an identity can be revealed (Brown et al. 2018).

For these reasons, in reporting the results of data analysis, I follow the ethical guidelines set by the Association of Internet Researchers (franzke et al. 2020) to protect the identity of any Reddit

users whose posts, comments, and usernames were obtained during data collection. Specifically, in describing the r/Braincels community, all references to the moderator documents are paraphrased slightly, with the lone exception being the moderators' definition of involuntary celibacy, whose specific language is critically important for determining who is allowed to claim in-group identity. Furthermore, only the most impactful members of the moderation team are named, but they are given pseudonyms for additional protection. In describing r/Braincels as a networked public, the title and body of all user submissions are similarly paraphrased to make them unsearchable, and any discussion of specific posts and comments cites the associated post ID rather than the account which submitted that content. Finally, in describing incel self-presentation on r/Braincels, its users are unlikely to be placed at risk due to the subreddit's recent deplatforming and deletion from Reddit, which means that even if an account were to be located, any posts or comments said user made in r/Braincels would not be visible in their post or comment history. Nevertheless, to mitigate the minor risk that these users could be identified, any username that does not include recognisable incel terminology is redacted entirely and labelled "generic", while those which have research value have their contents paraphrased. On the other hand, flairs are not included in any aspect of a user's profile page, so they do not appear in internet searches and can therefore be presented unaltered and without the risk of that flair's associated account being located.

Together, these precautions make it virtually impossible that any of the examples mentioned in the following chapters can be traced back to the post, comment, or account from where it originated. This is made possible because *archive.today* indexes webpages by their URL, not the content of that page. Therefore, even if an individual had access to the raw unaltered data, its parent webpage would still be unsearchable. This approach to data collection, analysis, and anonymisation was deemed to have negligible risk and given ethics clearance by the UTS Research Ethics Office (ETH20-5396).

1.6 Researcher positionality

Because this thesis is the result of deep immersion within incel communities, it may sound at times as if I am describing incel beliefs neutrally. It goes without saying that a subculture composed of sexually inexperienced young men who nonetheless claim to know what all women want in a sexual partner is based on nothing but anecdote, speculation, and predictive thinking. Incel beliefs are dangerous, and my description of them is motivated by a desire to contribute to the study of how extremists are socialised in online spaces and not because I endorse them in any way. Throughout this research, I intend to maintain a position of impartiality but not neutrality. Walking this fine line requires careful reflection to identify aspects of my own identity which could impact how I interpret, analyse, and discuss data taken from r/Braincels. This introspection was aided by a reflexivity tool developed by

Danielle Jacobson & Nida Mustafa (2019) to help researchers map aspects of their social identity which could influence their research practices.

First, I would like to outline my motivations for undertaking this research. I am American-born and completed my undergraduate degree in linguistics before immigrating to Australia in 2013. Like many Americans, the results of the 2016 election came as a shock, and subsequent research on the role of disinformation and social media manipulation (such as that published by Marwick & Lewis (2017)) inspired me to learn more about the language of extremism and how people are socialised to accept fringe worldviews. This research project began as an attempt to map extremism on Reddit at large, including incels and other misogynist groups, in addition to subreddits devoted to far right, white supremacist, antisemitic, and conspiracist ideologies. Over time, this research gradually came to focus on one community of extremists and the way Reddit's affordances and governance practices enabled it to spread its ideology. While this research does not map the full extent of extremism on Reddit as I had originally intended, my hope is that it nonetheless contributes to the literature by documenting how Reddit's passivity allowed r/Brincels to remain online for nearly two years and potentially radicalise up to 80,000 individual users.

Second, I must acknowledge the privileges that make this research safer for me than others. Incels have historically been extremely hostile to women and the LGBTQ community, and some incels such as Elliot Rodger also weave racial hierarchies into their belief system. As such, female, queer, and minority researchers might feel unsafe studying incel groups due to the large amount of hate speech directed at them and their community. As a cisgender heterosexual white man, very little incel vitriol is directed at those like me, thereby placing me in a position of privilege to safely observe and report on interactions within incel communities. I intend to use this privilege as best I can to advance academic understanding of this dangerous ideology while also protecting the dignity of the marginalised groups their hate speech targets, in recognition of the fact that neutrality in the face of extremism only benefits the oppressor. While the users of r/Brincels typically claim that their hate speech is merely a means of venting frustration (for reference, see [3.2](#)), I pledge to take any language targeting women or any other group seriously and recognise it for what it is—part of dangerous othering discourses which normalise and trivialise extreme hatred and even violence against incels' perceived oppressors.

Finally, because I am in a stable long-term relationship, any incel reading this might get the impression that I am incapable of understanding their pain or that I am punching down at them. Again, I endeavour to treat the users whose posts, comments, and account information were obtained in data collection as fairly and ethically as possible. This requires me to validate their experiences and analyse their words without judgement. In doing so, I have come to understand how individuals are

drawn to extremist groups because they are marginalised and searching for answers. Incels are in part a product of our patriarchal and hyper-sexualised culture, which socialises young men to believe that they must lose their virginity by a certain age to transcend boyhood and “become a man”. Incels want nothing more than to feel normal and accepted, and incel groups manipulate these anxieties about conformity and exclusion to indoctrinate vulnerable young men and induct them into communities, wherein platform affordances amplify extremist rhetorics which provide them a logic of explanation for their shame and emasculation. This is not to say incels are blameless, as future chapters will soon make clear how they prejudice and sow hatred against others, much in the same way they claim to be prejudged and hated. Personally, however, I can say that whatever sympathy I had for incels quickly evaporated when reading the atrocious and reprehensible rhetoric on r/Braincels. Nevertheless, I argue throughout this thesis that the online platforms which host incel groups are at least responsible for co-producing this dangerous ideology because they provide them the means to learn, teach, and spread their beliefs with impunity. For this reason, I believe that many of the users whose posts, comments, and pseudonyms I analyse in Chapters 3-5 would not have been radicalised were it not for Reddit, which through inaction allowed it to happen.

1.7 Thesis overview

The remainder of this thesis consists of five chapters. [Chapter 2](#) is a literature review. Chapters 3-5 provide the results of data analysis. Respectively, [Chapter 3](#) describes how the moderator documents allow r/Braincels to assume the social formation of a community, [Chapter 4](#) describes how the content generated by its users facilitates the development of a networked public, and [Chapter 5](#) describes the various strategies for pseudonymous self-presentation its users have developed using Reddit’s username and flair affordances. Finally, [Chapter 6](#) relates key findings to the literature to answer the research questions and concludes the thesis. This is followed by six appendices and the reference list.

Chapter 2: Literature review

This literature review is divided into three sections. [2.1](#) examines research on the Manosphere and the four main ideological factions which comprise it. [2.2](#) examines how Reddit's architecture, affordances, and governance practices allow extremist ideologies to flourish on its platform. Finally, [2.3](#) examines articles from gender studies researchers to determine how incels' unique construction of masculinity is associated with violence.

2.1 The Manosphere

The first section of this chapter pertains to the Manosphere, which is defined as an amorphous coalition of blogs, websites, and social media groups that is nominally concerned with men's issues and "brought together by a common language that orients them in opposition to the discourse and rhetoric of feminism" (Marwick & Caplan 2018). The men that comprise these communities typically hold essentialist views of gender roles and consider men and women to be homogenous, dichotomous groups diametrically opposed to each other (Krendel, McGlashan & Koller 2021). Although the oldest Manosphere communities primarily focused on fatherhood activism, recent years have seen its discourse shift from male advocacy to the amplification of male grievance and victimhood (Farrell et al. 2019; Gotell & Dutton 2016; Marwick & Caplan 2018). The Manosphere now claims that feminism has diminished men's place in society and advocates a return to the status quo ante (Ging 2017; Lin 2017; Marwick & Caplan 2018; Mountford 2018; Nagle 2017; Schmitz & Kazyak 2016; Van Valkenburgh 2018). As a result, the Manosphere is frequently associated with networked misogyny (Banet-Weiser & Miltner 2016; Bratich & Banet-Weiser 2019; Jane 2014; Marwick & Caplan 2018; Nicholas & Agius 2018). Such rhetoric has led some members to engage in online harassment campaigns like Gamergate, wider right-wing political movements such as the Alt Right, and even offline violence (Braithwaite 2016; Chess & Shaw 2015; Hoffman, Ware & Shapiro 2020; Krendel, McGlashan & Koller 2021). As a result, the Manosphere has the potential to radicalise lonely, aggrieved, or disenfranchised young men (Farrell et al. 2019; Krendel, McGlashan & Koller 2021).

The Manosphere's amorphous nature makes it difficult to characterise the range of ideologies it hosts. Most researchers agree that it consists of four distinct ideological factions—Men's Rights Activism (MRA), The Red Pill (TRP), Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), and incels (Ging 2017; Lin 2017; Mountford 2018; Nagle 2017; Schmitz & Kazyak 2016; Van Valkenburgh 2018), but some others also include smaller factions such traditional fundamentalist Christian conservatism, often abbreviated "TradCons" (Ging 2017; Lin 2017; Mountford 2018). Even though these factions emerged at different times and were founded for different reasons, they have significant ideological intersections and use common language to frame their beliefs. One such commonality is the red pill

metaphor, which originates from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, in which the protagonist Neo is given the choice between a red and blue pill. Choosing the red would reveal the hidden truths of reality, thereby changing his perception of the world and requiring him to fulfil his destiny as a saviour to mankind, while choosing the blue would allow him to remain in a comforting but false reality. In the context of the Manosphere, taking the red pill means to accept that male privilege is a myth and women have significant power over men. Like in *The Matrix*, the Manosphere claims that “taking the red pill” endows you with a new worldview which forever changes how you interpret events, a process which Alice Marwick & Rebecca Lewis (2017) compare to “the far-right equivalent of consciousness raising”. For these reasons, Jack Bratich and Sarah Banet-Weiser (2019) argue that the Manosphere factions should not be viewed as distinct units, but “interconnected nodes in a mediated network of misogynistic discourses and practices...[that] authorize and support one another”. As a result, not only do the Manosphere factions share a common user base, but there has also been “significant migration” over time from its older and milder communities to newer and more extreme ones, which Manoel Horta Ribeiro and colleagues (2020) characterise as a “radicalisation pathway”.

The remainder of this section on the Manosphere is divided into four sub-sections, each of which describes the history, beliefs, and discursive practices of a different faction. Respectively, these subsections relate to MRA ([2.1.1](#)), TRP ([2.1.2](#)), MGTOW ([2.1.3](#)), and incels ([2.1.4](#)).

2.1.1 Men’s Rights Activism (MRA)

MRA is the oldest ideological faction of the Manosphere. It has been included in several studies on the Manosphere itself (Ging 2017; Krendel 2020; Krendel, McGlashan & Koller 2021; Ribeiro et al. 2020), and this sub-section considers six more which centre on MRA specifically. Michael Messner (1998, 2016) documents the birth of the MRA as a splinter group from the feminist-allied Men’s Liberation movement. Alice Marwick and Robyn Caplan (2018) analyse how MRAs created and popularised the term “misandry”. Lise Gotell and Emily Dutton (2016) examine MRA discourses on sexual violence and rape. Rachel Schmitz and Emily Kazyak (2016) performed a content analysis of 12 prominent MRA websites, and Chelsea Starr (2017) performed a similar analysis on Reddit’s r/MensRights.

Despite its association with online networks, MRAs trace their lineage back to the Men’s Liberation movement of the 1960s. This progenitor to MRA was primarily inspired by social sciences and second-wave feminism (Messner 1998, 2016). Men’s Liberation acknowledged the existence of structural sexism and sought to advance the male cause without hurting the female. Activists used social advocacy and grassroots organising to directly lobby the state for policy change, with notable campaigns focusing on visitation rights, male-only conscription, and the societal expectation for men to suppress their emotions (Marwick & Caplan 2018). However, the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s ushered in a period of rapid social, political, and economic change, whose effects caused the Men’s

Liberation movement to splinter. Reaganomics and Thatcherism led to the dismantling of labour unions, women and ethnic minorities increasingly took on a more visible role in the work force, and feminism and multicultural activism emerged as major political forces (Marwick & Caplan 2018). Moreover, neoliberal rhetoric emphasising individualism, personal responsibility, and autonomy facilitated the spread of postfeminist sensibilities which dismissed critiques of gendered power structures (Bratich & Banet-Weiser 2019; Dignam & Rohlinger 2019; Gotell & Dutton 2016; Marwick & Caplan 2018; Van Valkenburgh 2018). Under these conditions, many men saw traditional masculinity as being in crisis (Marwick & Caplan 2018). As a result, the conservative wing of Men's Liberation split off to form MRA (Messner 1998, 2016). This schism was not caused by major differences in goals or tactics. Rather, it was reactionary to the diminished social status of straight white masculinity, making the newly established MRA movement equally defined by its anti-feminism as its advocacy for men's rights (Marwick & Caplan 2018).

Owing to their offline origins, MRAs were among the first to take up a presence online. Web 1.0 MRA websites primarily focused on father's rights, especially regarding child support and custody (Messner 2016). These websites also popularised the term "misandry", which helped further the MRA agenda by perpetuating the myth that men are equally persecuted as women (Marwick & Caplan 2018). The emergence of Web 2.0 then caused a major shift in the composition and discourse of MRA communities. Younger audiences increasingly favoured young men rather than fathers, and new participatory affordances allowed such users to exert greater influence over topics of discussion (Gotell & Dutton 2016). As a result, MRA discourse drifted from male advocacy to male grievance and victimhood over the perceived feminisation of society (Gotell & Dutton 2016; Schmitz & Kazyak 2016; Starr 2017). Rather than relying on social science as their predecessors had, MRAs support these claims with anecdotal evidence and cherry-picked or questionable studies, covering topics such as dating, domestic violence, divorce settlements, child support, and changing standards on rape and consent (Gotell & Dutton 2016; Massanari 2017; Messner 2016; Nagle 2017). In fact, this new focus on sexual politics now supersedes historical causes like fatherhood activism (Gotell & Dutton 2016).

Discourse analyses of modern MRA communities revealed that its members share a common language to deny gender inequality, frame men as victims, and attack feminism and its supporters (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016; Starr 2017). Moreover, Schmitz & Kazyak (2016) found that these communities have developed two distinct discursive strategies to promote men's entitlement to social power, which they term "Virtual Victims in Search of Equality" and "Cyber Lads in Search of Masculinity". The former is used by MRAs who believe themselves to be oppressed by feminism and have adopted social movement rhetoric to lobby the state for policy changes. The Cyber Lads, on the other hand, use aggression towards women to create a homosocial bonds and attempt to reclaim their

“stolen” masculinity by glorifying stereotypically masculine endeavours like weightlifting and casual sex.

MRA communities reached their peak from 2010—2013, since when their user base has remained stable or declined (Ribeiro et al. 2020). The most influential MRA forums still in operation are Reddit’s r/MensRights, founded in March 2008, and A Voice for Men, founded in September 2012.

2.1.2 The Red Pill (TRP)

The second Manosphere faction is TRP, and as the name suggests, the red pill metaphor is a central part of this group’s identity. While MRAs use this analogy to refer to their belief that men are persecuted by feminism, TRP applies it much more narrowly to focus on sexual relationships rather than sexual politics. Early Manosphere studies theorised TRP as a subgroup of MRA (Mountford 2018; Schmitz & Kazyak 2016), but more recent research recognises it to be a distinct ideological faction (Ging 2017; Krendel 2020; Krendel, McGlashan & Koller 2021; Ribeiro et al. 2020). This sub-section reviews all of the research cited above, as well as two more studies specifically dedicated to TRP belief system. JB Mountford (2018) conducted topic modelling on TRP blog Return of Kings, and Shawn Van Valkenburgh (2018) analysed a trove of documents central to Reddit’s r/TheRedPill. Although these studies were conducted on different platforms, their findings were consistent.

TRP belief system is intrinsically linked to the so-called pick-up artist (PUA) movement of the early-to-mid-2000s, which taught sexual strategy for attracting and seducing women. This movement reached peak popularity from 2006—2010 as a result of its depiction in the media, initially in Neil Strauss’ *The Game* and then in the VH1 reality show it inspired (Bratich & Banet-Weiser 2019; Ribeiro et al. 2020). The PUA worldview is predicated on the concept of “sexual market value”, which is a composition of one’s socially desirable physical and behavioural traits (Van Valkenburgh 2018). Relationships are formed when SMVs are compatible, so PUAs attempt to simulate the appearance and behaviour of an alpha male, whether by practising physical fitness, buying expensive clothes and accessories to display status, or using sexual manipulation techniques like “negging”, which involves subtly insulting or talking down to a woman as a demonstration of superiority (Bratich & Banet-Weiser 2019; Ging 2017; Van Valkenburgh 2018). This focus on conformity to idealised alpha masculinity can be considered an expression of hegemonic masculinity, and Shawn Van Valkenburgh (2018) theorises that the resulting ideology “resolves a contradiction between hegemonic masculinity’s prescriptive emotional walls and an inherent desire for connection by constructing women as exchangeable commodities”.

PUA communities fell out of favour by 2010 and were supplanted by TRP. Some Manosphere scholars distinguish between the two (Mountford 2018; Ribeiro et al. 2020), but their ideologies are mutually intelligible. I consider TRP a rebranding of the PUA movement, which attempts to expand its

seduction ideology to help men survive a feminised society. For instance, Reddit's TRP community contains the following mission statement: "The Red Pill: Discussion of sexual strategy in a culture increasingly lacking a positive identity for men" (r/TheRedPill 2019). In this way, TRP aims to create a form of masculinity that is immune to insidious feminist campaigns to dismantle traditional masculinity and harm men (Mountford 2018). TRP websites therefore provide their followers with support and resources to re-establish masculine hegemony through "sexual conquest, social dominance, and self-improvement using misogynistic philosophy, which delegitimises feminism's arguments through anecdotal rebuttals" (Mountford 2018).

To justify these claims and create a veneer of respectability and scientific rigour, TRP relies on anecdotal evidence, pseudoscience, and misinterpreted academic concepts, including evolutionary psychology (EP), neoclassical economics, and rational actor theory (Van Valkenburgh 2018). Already a somewhat marginalised science, TRP interprets EP to argue that gender roles are biologically predetermined, and that men and women are driven to enter relationships by the urge to reproduce. It then incorporates elements of neoliberalism into its ideology by stripping intimacy from sexual relationships and reducing women to an exchangeable commodity (Van Valkenburgh 2018). A framework of supply and demand casts women as the guardians of sex and men its buyers, who must exchange SMV for access to women's bodies in an imagined "sexual marketplace" (Mountford 2018; Van Valkenburgh 2018). Finally, TRP argues that because women have the sole power to determine the outcome of sexual relationships, as rational actors they only choose partners according to who best conforms to hegemonic ideals for embodied masculinity. TRP claims that this drive to acquire high-value partners—termed "hypergamy"—is so deeply ingrained in women that they will even readily abandon one partner for another to secure better financial resources for themselves or genetic resources for their children (Mountford 2018).

Although TRP shares MRA's beliefs about feminism, TRP is differentiated by its disinterest in activism and focus on sexual relationships. Rather than seeking to change the dynamics of the sexual marketplace, TRP teaches its followers to exploit it by using "applied EP" for the seduction and control of women (Van Valkenburgh 2018). In this way, TRP ideology is intended to help men reclaim power from women in the pursuit, formation, and preservation of sexual relationships. Despite this historical apoliticism, reporting from *The Daily Beast* revealed that r/TheRedPill was founded and moderated by former Republican New Hampshire State Representative Robert Fisher (Bacarisse 2017). Through his role as community opinion leader, Fisher influenced his subscribers to take political action in support of candidate Donald Trump by linking his public persona as a dealmaker to the community's ideals of neoliberal alpha masculinity and framing the election as an opportunity to push back against feminism

and put a “real man” in the White House (Dignam & Rohlinger 2019). Fisher has since resigned from government, but he still moderates r/TheRedPill.

PUA communities received the most traffic from 2006—2010, at which point they lost popularity and by 2017 had only negligible activity (Ribeiro et al. 2020). There are still some small PUA communities active on Reddit or proprietary websites. The most influential are r/seduction, r/PUA (now private), The Attraction (now renamed *MysteryMethod.com*), Men’s PUA Forum (*pick-up-artist-forum.com*), and RooshV, all of which were founded between 2005 and 2008. Following its decline, PUA rebranded itself as TRP. Fisher founded r/TheRedPill in October 2012, and within two years, it was the most popular Manosphere community on Reddit (Ribeiro et al. 2020). It still has significant membership to this day, although it was eventually surpassed in 2017 by the incel subreddit r/Braincels (Ribeiro et al. 2020). On 28 September 2018, it was placed in quarantine by Reddit site administrators due to its highly offensive content. Important TRP blogs still online include Return of Kings, The Red Pill Room, and Alpha Game, although all have been inactive since 2018.

2.1.3 Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW)

MGTOW is the third ideological faction of the Manosphere. It is included in several broad studies of the Manosphere (Farrell et al. 2019; Ging 2017; Krendel 2020; Krendel, McGlashan & Koller 2021; Ribeiro et al. 2020), and like TRP, Schmitz & Kazyak (2016) considered it a sub-category of MRA and included one MGTOW website in their data. This sub-section of the literature review also draws from two dedicated studies on MGTOW beliefs and discourses. Jie Jiang Lin (2017) was the first to publish on MGTOW, using data gathered from Reddit, YouTube, and a proprietary blog. Callum Jones and colleagues (2020) focused on the strategic use of misogynistic hate speech by MGTOW-allied Twitter accounts.

Both studies report that MGTOWs hold similar beliefs to the rest of the Manosphere regarding feminism, and like TRP, they focus on sexual relationships rather than sexual politics. However, while TRP prescribes applied EP to its followers, MGTOW questions whether men and women are compatible at all under the current “gynocentric establishment” and teaches their followers to “go their own way” by abandoning women and relationships altogether (Lin 2017). MGTOW rhetoric goes to great length to frame such radical separatism as common sense for men who have encountered discrimination. MGTOWs firmly believe in the greatness inherent in masculinity and make frequent allusions to the age of exploration and other stories of male accomplishment. In fact, one user quoted in Lin’s (2017) study claimed Christopher Columbus, James Cook, and Lewis & Clark as kindred spirits who went their own way to build the foundations of Western civilisation. Believing themselves to be alpha males that have been robbed of rightful status in a society they and their compatriots built, MGTOW groups are constructed as homosocial spaces where its members can help each other

actualise their masculinity through self-empowerment and individualism (Jones, Trott & Wright 2020; Lin 2017). Crucially, there is no prescribed set of actions in MGTOW as there is in TRP. Instead, once he has unlearned himself of feminism's corrupting influences, each man is free to reject the traditional gender role society foists upon him and live as he sees fit.

MGTOW's emphasis on self-sufficiency causes there to be no consistent model for what a man who has successfully gone his own way should look like. As a result, MGTOW ideology has a range of interpretations. Lin (2017) identifies four distinct "levels" to MGTOW ideology which speak to this range, which are predicated on the red pill metaphor. First, Lin defines the blue pill—those who reject the worldview articulated above. Blue-pillers accept society's comforting lies about gender equality and willingly participate in a "rigged" dating game. First becoming aware of how women control the apparatuses of power in society and relationships is called the purple pill (a mix of red and blue), or Level 1 MGTOW. Despite their newfound knowledge, purple-pillers still believe that relationships are worth the risk. The remaining levels all identify as red-pillers but differentiate themselves by the degree to which they avoid interactions with women. Level 2 MGTOW is the abandonment of long-term relationships in favour of short-term hook-ups. At Level 3, you abandon dating altogether but may still rely on pornography or visit sex workers for sexual gratification. Level 4 MGTOW is total self-removal from society, a final subversive act which is meant to prove their claim that the continued success of western civilisation depends on the perpetuation of male hegemony.

Because idealised MGTOW masculinity is so ill-defined, group members were found to strategically use hate speech to perform their acceptance of MGTOW ideology (Jones, Trott & Wright 2020). This was accomplished two ways. First, members made posts and comments disparaging women and feminism, which allowed them to effectively perform a rejection of women. Second, MGTOWs harassed out-group men with emasculating insults, homophobia, and transphobia, allowing them to also demonstrate their distance from feminised, "beta" masculinity (Jones, Trott & Wright 2020). Such harassment belies foundational claims of MGTOW ideology; although it purports to liberate followers from feminist oppression and help them construct a more enlightened form of masculinity, the widespread harassment of both women and out-group men reinforces the traits of toxic masculinity the group claims to oppose. Jones, Trott & Wright (2020) consider this sort of harassment, which is broadly aimed at a group without specifying a target or containing a specific call to action, to be "passive" in nature. Studies of MGTOW groups on both Twitter (Jones, Trott & Wright 2020) and Reddit (Farrell et al. 2019) found that discourse there is dominated by passive harassment, with the most prominent topics being antifeminism, victimhood to feminism, casual sexism, and emasculation of out-group men.

The earliest MGTOW community was created on Reddit in June 2011. It grew steadily and surpassed TRP as most popular Manosphere subreddit in 2017. This status was short-lived, however, as it was surpassed soon after by the incel subreddit r/Braincels. It then remained the second most popular Manosphere subreddit until r/Braincels was banned in late 2019, whence r/MGTOW regained its status until it too was banned in 2021 for promoting hate (Ribeiro et al. 2020; r/MGTOW 2021). There is also one influential MGTOW forum still in operation at *mgtow.com*. It was founded in July 2014, quickly gained subscribers, and was resultingly the most highly trafficked Manosphere forum from 2015—2017.

2.1.4 Involuntary Celibates (incels)

The final Manosphere faction is the subject of this thesis—incels. They have been included in several broad studies on the Manosphere (Farrell et al. 2019; Ging 2017; Krendel, McGlashan & Koller 2021; Ribeiro et al. 2020), and there are several more research articles which are specifically dedicated to the incel belief system. This sub-section of the literature review is based on five of those articles. Denise Donnelly and colleagues (2001) were the first to publish on this topic, providing a life course analysis of participants recruited from one of the earliest incel communities. Debbie Ging (2017) theorised modern incel identity as a unique construction of beta masculinity that emerged in reaction to widespread discourses on alpha masculinity. Jack Bratich and Sarah Banet-Weiser (2019) examined the relationship between PUA and incel beliefs. Sylvia Jaki and colleagues (2019) examined the linguistic practices used on *incels.me* to both forge collective in-group identity and construct major out-groups. Finally, Stephane Baele and colleagues (2019) used mixed qualitative and quantitative methodologies to publish a detailed overview of the incel worldview in the wake of the 2018 Toronto van attack, perpetrated by a self-professed incel. Furthermore, there is a great deal of emerging research on incels with narrower scope. Two of those studies are included here to supplement the work of the above authors. Sarah Daly and Albina Laskovtsov (2021) reviewed 80 suicide posts from Reddit's r/IncelGraveyard to determine how incel ideology was used to justify self-harm. Stefan Stijelja (2021) reviewed empirical evidence from published studies to construct a psychological profile of incels. The remaining publications on this topic are included in [2.3](#), which relates to incel masculinity and its relation to violence.

Despite only recently rising to notoriety, the term “involuntary celibacy” was first used in 1997 by an anonymous female university student in Canada. In a 2018 interview with The Guardian, “Alana” recounts how she was inspired to create the website Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project to share her frustrations trying to meet people and enter a romantic relationship (Kassam 2018). This text-only website functioned as a Web 1.0 blog, where Alana posted theories and articles about dating. An early study into the causes and psychological effects of involuntary celibacy was completed using

participants recruited in 1998 (Donnelly et al. 2001). This timing suggests that its participants could have been members of Alana's website, or at the very least the website to which they subscribed was contemporaneous to Alana's. This study found that early incel communities had both male and female members and were divided into roughly equal groups of virginal, single, and partnered celibates. Participants reported feeling "off time" with the culturally-reinforced normative sexual trajectory of dating, experimentation, and sex, which in turn made it more difficult to interact with prospective partners or establish intimacy (Donnelly et al. 2001). As a result of these frustrations, many reported mental health issues, including feelings of despair, depression, frustration, loss of self-confidence, and an overall sense that they will never catch up to their peers. Finally, the inclusion of older partnered incels revealed that as these frustrations mount, incels are more likely to view their celibacy as permanent. Despite this, Alana described her community as a "a friendly place" and "supportive"; "it definitely wasn't a bunch of guys blaming women for their problems" (Taylor 2018).

After some time, Alana met someone and entered a relationship, causing her to pass off ownership of her site. This in turn caused the small inclusive community she had built to splinter. Members who were motivated to improve their social skills coalesced around the website IncelSupport, while those who were angrier and more openly misogynistic gravitated to the competing LoveShy (Hoffman, Ware & Shapiro 2020). Discourse on LoveShy was far more pessimistic than on IncelSupport, with users typically questioning the degree to which incels can affect their sexual fate and debating whom to blame for their celibacy. This forum was also very lightly moderated, allowing such discourses to become increasingly hostile over time. Another influential incel forum from this era was PUAHate, which catered to men who believed their SMV was so low that PUA techniques were ineffectual. In fact, Jack Bratich and Sarah Banet-Weiser (2019) theorise that the shift from TRP/PUA to incels over the past decade "represents a decline in, or even a failure of, neoliberalism's ability to secure subjects within its political rationality...especially its promises of self-confidence." With the advent of Web 2.0, many members of these sites migrated to 4chan and Reddit. Incel groups on these platforms still maintain some similarities with early incel communities; they share feelings of being off time with their peers, in addition to shyness, negative body image, and social anxiety (Stijelja 2021). However, the demographics and rhetoric have changed drastically. Incel communities are now almost exclusively male, and rather than working to improve themselves, incel rhetoric functions to blame women for men's failures and insecurities (Jaki et al. 2019). Alana has since spoken out against how her vision of a supportive and inclusive community for romantically isolated men and women was appropriated by misogynists. "I feel like I did something important, for the good of the world – that then turned out to be a weapon as well" (Kassam 2018).

Across each platform, modern incel groups share a common worldview predicated on TRP teachings of SMV, the sexual marketplace, and hypergamy (Baele, Brace & Coan 2019). In incel terminology, the most attractive men are called “Chads”. This term has been in use since the 1990s as a pejorative to describe sexually successful white men and derives from its association with stereotypical alpha masculinity (Know Your Meme 2012). In the sexual marketplace, Chads use their superior SMV to access sex from any hypergamous woman eager to acquire a high-value partner (Baele, Brace & Coan 2019). Naturally, under free market principles, this restricts the supply of available women and correspondingly leads to frantic competition amongst the population of remaining “normies”, who have only moderate SMV. With so many suitors to choose from, women never seriously consider low-value men as prospective sexual partners, thereby marginalising them within the sexual marketplace and rendering them involuntarily celibate. As a result, incel masculinity is unique in that it is defined by its subordination to alpha masculinity (Ging 2017). Moreover, as noted by Baele, Brace & Coan (2019), the incel worldview is inherently extremist because of the way it divides men and women into rigidly differentiated social categories and uses SMV as a simplistic organising principle for those categories.

Despite these commonalities, there is still a great deal of ideological diversity in incel communities. Overall, they are divided into two competing factions, which are differentiated by adapting the red pill metaphor (Baele, Brace & Coan 2019; Bratich & Banet-Weiser 2019; Jaki et al. 2019). In incel terminology, the “red pill” refers to the unique insight incels claim to have about how the sexual marketplace marginalises low-value men. However, red-pillers believe that they can maintain a modicum of control over their sexual fate by working to improve their physical appearance or employing PUAs’ sexual manipulation techniques. The second faction is a more extreme version of the red pill called the “black pill”. Black-pillers agree with the red pill’s assessment of the sexual marketplace but consider SMV to be entirely determined by genetics, rather than an aggregate of physical and behavioural characteristics, which can respectively be altered or learnt. Black-pillers identify as such because they believe their inadequate genes render them “subhuman”, making self-improvement futile and involuntary celibacy immutable (Baele, Brace & Coan 2019). For these reasons, black pill discourse is characterised by its rampant defeatism and nihilism, and for some incels, these emotions are so persistent that they have died by suicide (Daly & Laskovtsov 2021).

Reddit has hosted several incel communities in its history. The largest are r/incels, founded in January 2014, and r/Braincels, founded in October 2017 (Ribeiro et al. 2020). The former was banned on 7 November 2017, when a member posted to an unrelated subreddit (r/legaladvice) pretending to be a woman and asking what sort of evidence police use to catch rapists (Solon 2017). While r/incels had always hosted a great deal of misogyny, this caused journalists to take notice, and the publicity

they brought finally caused administrators to act. By the time it was banned, r/incels had amassed more than 40,000 subscribers (Hauser 2017). Some of its deplatformed users left Reddit altogether. For example, Baele, Brace & Coan (2019) report that *incels.me* was registered 8 November 2017, the day after r/incels was banned. It is still online today under the new domain *incels.is*. Other users migrated to the smaller subreddit r/Braincels, which was allowed to remain online and grow its userbase for nearly two years before it too was banned on 30 September 2019 (Ribeiro et al. 2020). Besides *incels.me*, the second most influential incel forum is PUAHate. It was founded in September 2009 and was active until May 2014, when a frequent contributor (Elliot Rodger) committed a terror attack (Woolf 2014). PUAHate then went offline for three days before relaunching as SlutHate, indicating an attitudinal shift in blame from the PUAs who “failed” incels to women themselves (Bratich & Banet-Weiser 2019). It is now known as RedPillTalk (Ribeiro et al. 2020).

2.2 Reddit’s toxic technocultures

Reddit was founded in 2005 to serve as a message board and news aggregator, but it has since evolved into a social networking site with a complex participatory culture. As of June 2021, Amazon web traffic analysis ranked Reddit as the #12 trafficked site worldwide, the #8 English language site, and the #3 English language social networking site, trailing only Facebook and Twitter (Alexa Internet 2021). Reddit’s architecture divides the site into around 130,000 discrete forums called subreddits, each of which is dedicated to a different purpose (RedditInc 2021). Users can visit *reddit.com* on a web browser or download the Reddit mobile app to view a news feed of highly rated content generated on the platform that day. A user also has the option of creating an account, which can then be used to subscribe to subreddits and personalise the user’s news feed. New users to Reddit are automatically subscribed to the site’s most popular subreddits (called “the defaults”), but they are encouraged to customise their subscriptions by adding or removing subreddits according to their interests (Massanari 2015, p.70). Redditors can visit a subreddit directly by appending “/r/[name of subreddit]” to the Reddit URL or searching for the subreddit’s name on the mobile app. The decision to join a subreddit is typically made based on the information expounded in the subreddit’s sidebar, an integral part of subreddit infrastructure which often constitutes a visitor’s first interaction with an unfamiliar community. Sidebars are fully customisable, but they generally include that community’s mission statement, unique rules, and number of subscribers. Many subreddits also recommend series of related or recommended subreddits that members might use to diversify their subscriptions.

Reddit’s unique subreddit structure has long allowed it to maintain a wide range of communities that serve niche interests or provide safe spaces and support for marginalised peoples. However, there is also a darker side to Reddit, as extremists have learnt to use its platform and affordances to spread hateful ideologies and plan offline violence, such as the deadly 2017 Unite the

Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia (Lagorio-Chafkin 2018). Perhaps the most impactful study on Reddit to date was conducted by Adrienne Massanari (2017), who found that its userbase, affordances, and governance each contribute to the development of “toxic technocultures” on the site, which she defines as being related to but distinct from issue, networked, or affective publics in that they coalesce around a particular issue or event, but use tactics that “often rely heavily on implicit or explicit harassment of others”, such as those which advocate regressive views on gender and sexual identity, race, feminism, multiculturalism, or progressivism.

This section of the literature review is composed of three sub-sections, each of which goes into detail on one of the factors that enables the development of toxic technocultures on the Reddit platform. Respectively, [2.2.1](#) relates to Reddit’s userbase, [2.2.2](#) details key affordances offered by the site, and [2.2.3](#) examines Reddit’s decentralised governance structure.

[2.2.1 Userbase](#)

The first factor in Reddit’s facilitation of toxic technocultures is the composition of its userbase, which influences the sort of content and communities which thrive there. Reddit now claims to have more than 50 million unique daily users (RedditInc 2021). More than half of this userbase is in their 20s or 30s (Statista 2021a, 2021b). As an American website, these users are primarily concentrated in the United States, which accounts for 47% of Reddit’s desktop traffic (Statista 2022). This is followed by the United Kingdom (7%), Canada (7%), Australia (4%), and Germany (3%) (Statista 2022), numbers which may appear negligible at first, but considering the sheer size of Reddit, they actually represent millions of users. There is little data available on the ethnic or racial identity of Reddit users, but evidence suggests that it favours white users (Kendall 2011; Massanari 2015) or at the very least does not significantly diverge from the racial distribution of the general American population (Statista 2021c). As such, the archetypal Reddit user is a straight white cisgendered male (Brown et al. 2018; Milner 2013). However, it must be acknowledged that the Reddit userbase is not static. In fact, there is strong evidence to suggest that Reddit underwent significant political polarisation around the 2016 US presidential election, which was driven by the disproportionate influx of right-wing users (Waller & Anderson 2021).

One area dominated by straight white men is “geek culture”, which has allowed Reddit to develop a reputation as a hub for geek masculinity (Ging 2017; Massanari 2017). The dominance of geek masculinity on Reddit influences the sort of content that performs well there by skewing voting patterns and incentivising content that valorises this identity (Massanari 2017). This results in a “herding” effect in which users can be influenced to vote for content that the rest of the community favours, and those who do not see their interests or identity represented will abstain from voting or congregate elsewhere (Massanari 2017). For instance, research shows that women are equally as

likely to consume and vote on content as men on Reddit, but less likely to submit posts or comments (Brown et al. 2018). This suggests that Reddit has developed a culture of hostility against women, and indeed, antifeminist communities have historically thrived on Reddit because its demographics reinforce the ideals of geek masculinity (Massanari 2015, p.137–8).

2.2.2 Affordances

The second contributing factor to Reddit's toxic technocultures is the unique constellation of affordances it offers its users. Affordances are "the multidimensional relationship between the object or technology and the user, and how that relationship offers possible (or actual) outcomes" (Evans et al. 2017). As such, they can be theorised as mediating the relationship between a site's features and user behaviour (Davis & Chouinard 2016). While affordances do not necessarily determine the outcome of users' social practice online, the potentialities they embed within a site collectively shape and influence the meaning that is produced there due to the norms for expected behaviour that arise through the ways users account for the site's affordances (boyd 2010). In this way, Reddit affordances can be considered as providing material structure to the discourses on its platform.

There are three significant Reddit affordances that this research will focus on, which collectively contribute to Reddit's participatory culture. The first is Reddit's connective affordances. The Reddit site structure requires users to subscribe to multiple subreddits to compose a personalised scrollable interactive newsfeed. As a result, it is expected that the members of one subreddit will also subscribe to and participate in other subreddits as part of their Reddit experience. Once a user has joined a community, they can contribute to content creation there by submitting hyperlinks, images, or bodies of text related to the subreddit's purpose. Those who view each post are invited to vote on it with simple up and down votes and submit comments reacting to its content. Users can also respond to individual comments to form threads, and each comment there is subject to the same system of up and down votes. This act of discussing and debating shared media content allows users to network with each other and exchange ideas. In addition to inter-user networking, connectivity on Reddit is also enabled between subreddits by the various ways hyperlinks can be used on the platform. For instance, moderators are given the power to customise a subreddit's sidebar to direct users to likeminded or similarly themed subreddits. Individual users can also "cross-post" content from one subreddit to another or include hyperlinks in the body of their posts and comments. This connectivity between subreddits allows users to continually discover new communities and connect with other collectives of networked users there.

Next, Reddit's algorithm offers users a range of behaviours, including the ability to selectively amplify, suppress, or contest content according to how well group members believe it reflects their community's purpose and self-image. The Reddit algorithm works by comparing the age of a post or

comment with its net up and downvotes (Massanari 2015, p.52). When applied to posts, the Reddit algorithm can be used to create custom newsfeeds, which a user can sort in six ways—by hot (i.e., favoured by the algorithm), top (i.e., most upvotes, irrespective of the post's age), new, rising, controversial (i.e., attracting large numbers of both up and downvotes), and gilded (i.e., receiving an award from another user). While the exact contents of Reddit's algorithm remain unknown, evidence suggests its algorithm favours inflammatory content. As mentioned above, the Reddit algorithm considers the age of a post and its net up and downvotes when determining which content to elevate in a user's news feed. As such, it has long been known that the Reddit algorithm prefers new and highly upvoted content, which is naturally skewed towards large subreddits with the most subscribers (Massanari 2017). Beyond this, little is known about Reddit's proprietary algorithm, but there is emerging research into the effect it has on intra-community dynamics. One such investigation of the extreme pro-Trump group r/The_Donald found that the algorithm's configuration boosted comments that best reflected the subreddit's collective image of in-group identity, thereby limiting dissent (Gaudette et al. 2021). These comments primarily referenced key out-groups like Muslims and leftists, which the authors interpreted as indicating that the Reddit algorithm also has the power to facilitate othering discourses (Gaudette et al. 2021). A second study on the Reddit algorithm found that Reddit discussions can just as easily devolve into a "hotbed for contestation" which creates barriers to collective identity formation and group cohesion (Buyukozturk, Gaulden & Dowd-Arrow 2018). One possible explanation for this is the way some social media algorithms are designed to boost content which drives engagement, regardless of whether it is for positive or negative reasons. For instance, one study conducted on Twitter and Facebook found that out-group animosity was the strongest driver of engagement (Rathje, Van Bavel & van der Linden 2021). Another examined political advertisements placed on Facebook and Instagram by Russia's Internet Research Agency and found that clickthrough rates were positively correlated with inflammatory, obscene, or threatening language (Vargo & Hopp 2020). Finally, an investigation by the Washington Post reviewed documents related to Facebook's internal research on its algorithm, provided by whistle-blower Frances Haugen (Lima 2021). This revealed that Facebook weighed emoji reactions five times more heavily than likes and that this model favoured controversial content which garnered anger and support from users on both ends of the ideological spectrum (Merrill & Oremus 2021).

The final Reddit affordance relevant to this research is the varying degrees of anonymity it provides users. When Redditors sign up to use the platform, they are required to choose a unique username. New Reddit users typically undergo an acculturation process, which begins with "lurking"—the process of browsing, consuming content, and voting, but not interacting with other users, which allows new Redditors to first become more familiar platform vernacular and practices before they

decide to participate (Massanari 2015, p.68–9). At this stage, lurking Redditors can maintain total anonymity because without posting or commenting, they leave no digital footprint. Redditors first become visible to others when they submit posts and comments of their own. Although Reddit is technically an anonymous platform, its username features produce a culture of pseudonymity. For many, this allows them to express themselves freely with the expectation that whatever they say will not be tied to their offline identity (Massanari 2015, p.50–1). However, creating an account also creates a parallel profile which displays the account's age, post and comment history, and net karma score, which is calculated by summing the total up and down votes their submissions receive. Once a user leaves a post or comment, anyone can click on their username or append `"/user/[username]"` to the Reddit URL to navigate to their profile. Scholars such as Emily van der Nagel (2017) argue that such public-facing elements of a user's profile constitute their virtual identity, which then serves as a basis for interaction with others users. As a result, despite their reputation as an anonymous message board, Reddit profiles can be made equally as complex as those on sites that enforce a real name policy. Some users embrace the pseudonymity and become de facto opinion leaders by posting regularly to accumulate karma, which allows them to consistently appear as top-level commenters (Brown et al. 2016). Others recognise the richness of personal detail compiled in their profile and seek greater anonymity by creating alternate "throwaway" accounts to use when accessing or sharing sensitive content they do not want associated with their primary account (Massanari 2015, p.51). This is made possible because a single email address can be used to register multiple Reddit accounts.

Reddit's culture of pseudonymity is also supported by flair. Flair is an icon or short text-based message which a user can append to their username in order to communicate additional information about their identity as they participate (RedditHelp n.d.). Each subreddit has its own choice of flair, which is set up by the community's moderators. For example, sport-themed subreddits typically give their users the choice of different teams as flair, or political subreddits provide flairs which shows the user's state or country. This way, any time a flaired user participates in discussion, their post will specify the team they support or their location. In subreddits where the moderators cannot reasonably provide a multiple-choice list of flairs, users have the option of sending a direct message to the moderation team to create a custom flair. Regardless of how flair is composed, this feature allows users to vary their self-presentation according to their audience.

2.2.3 Governance

The final factor in Reddit's facilitation of toxic technocultures is its governance structure and practices, which have repeatedly enabled hate groups to spread their ideologies on its platform. Social networking sites often prefer the term "platform" because it implies neutrality. However, social media platforms are never neutral because they have already developed rules, affordances, and governance

structures to curate and privilege certain content (Gillett & Suzor 2022). As a result, these sites often need to navigate a tension between facilitating user expression and shielding themselves from liability for what those users say (Gillespie 2010). Reddit's ongoing struggle to resolve this tension is best seen in its policy documents, which have undergone significant changes in recent years.

Reddit's association with geek masculinity has caused the site to maintain a reputation for techno-libertarianism and free speech absolutism (Massanari 2017). In fact, early attempts by CEO Ellen Pao to ban revenge porn and communities dedicated to harassment led to extreme backlash from Reddit users, including a coordinated harassment campaign and the circulation of a petition calling for her resignation (Matias 2016). In July 2015, Pao resigned as CEO and was replaced by Reddit co-founder Steve Huffman, also known by his username u/spez. It was at this time that Reddit administrators first posted about content moderation on the site, maintaining their commitment to free speech in the process (Wickham & Öhman 2022). Administrators' statement was notably ambivalent on the topic of hate speech, with Huffman stating that while "it's ok to say 'I don't like this group of people', it's not ok to say, 'I'm going to kill this group of people'" (u/spez 2015). This policy was updated two years later to also include any content that "encourages, glorifies, incites, or calls for violence or physical harm against an individual or a group of people" (u/spez 2017). The most recent update came in 2020 and delivered Reddit's clearest commitment to removing hate speech on its platform to date (Wickham & Öhman 2022). This update expanded Reddit's content policy to disallow "communities and users that promote hate based on identity or vulnerability" and banned more than 200 subreddits upon its implementation (Trott, Beckett & Paech 2022).

Reddit's decentralised governance model relies on volunteer moderators to enforce these changing policies. Moderators contribute to subreddit management by setting community-specific rules for participation and monitoring the topic, content, and language of user submissions, both manually and with the help of automated filters that remove posts and comments containing select words and phrases (Juneja, Rama Subramanian & Mitra 2020). Moderators are also granted a series of other tools, including the power to tag posts with flair to promote searchability, grant flair to users, lock posts and comments to prevent replies, "sticky" posts and comments at the top of news feeds to increase visibility, and set the default sorting method for comment sections (RedditHelp n.d.). Due to the significant time commitment these responsibilities require, moderators are also typically active participants in the community they manage. Research shows this tends to foster closer relationships with the subreddit than with administrators, which caused moderators to govern more so according to personal or community-specific standards and ideologies, rather than the site-wide rules (Trott, Beckett & Paech 2022). In fact, one study found that when faced with the threat of sanction, the moderators of misogynistic subreddits resisted cultural change by configuring subreddit rules and

word filters to limit interactions with outsiders and exclude dissenting opinions (Gillett & Suzor 2022). As a result, the authors concluded that Reddit administrators had limited ability to affect social norms in problematic communities unless they had “the committed and supported participation of moderators who can undertake the extensive work of tackling the underlying identity and ideology that brings hateful communities together” (Gillett & Suzor 2022).

When Reddit chooses to sanction a community, its two main approaches are to quarantine or ban the offending subreddit. The former sanction was introduced in 2018 to impede but not prevent access to problematic communities which promote conspiracy theories or produce “highly offensive or upsetting” content that does not quite merit an outright ban (RedditHelp 2019). As Reddit administrator u/landoflobsters (2018) explains, “the purpose of quarantining a community is to prevent its content from being accidentally viewed by those who do not knowingly wish to do so, or viewed without appropriate context”. To these ends, anyone visiting a quarantined subreddit is redirected to a landing page which requires them to explicitly opt-in to viewing the content (see Figure 2). Furthermore, to protect Reddit’s advertisers from having their brands associated with toxic content, quarantined communities contain no ads and do not appear in Reddit searches or non-subscription-based feeds. To date, there have been three separate studies into Reddit’s quarantine practices, which collectively call the sanction’s efficacy into question. A case study of Reddit’s quarantine of r/TheRedPill and r/Braincels found that it successfully limited the spread of hateful material from those communities to the general Reddit platform, but it did not reduce the toxicity levels of users already subscribed there (Copland 2020). It also observed that the moderators of r/TheRedPill responded to quarantine by funnelling its most active users to an independently established forum where they could continue their misogynistic discourses without the threat of external observation. A second study on the quarantine of r/TheRedPill and r/The_Donald found that it caused new subscription rates to drop by 78.5% and 58% respectively, but existing users’ misogyny and racism was similarly unaffected (Chandrasekharan et al. 2022). The concurrence of these findings indicates that quarantine is effective in limiting recruitment, but only banning a toxic communities can impact the behaviour of already inducted members.

If quarantine is ineffectual and users continue to offend, the next step is often to ban that community. Despite Huffman’s protestations, research on Reddit’s 2015 bans of r/fatpeoplehate and r/coontown (initiated under Pao’s tenure as CEO) found that deplatforming works; although a significant number of users chose to leave the site altogether, those who stayed reduced their hate speech by up to 80%, and discourse in the other communities they joined was unaffected (Chandrasekharan et al. 2017). A similar study examined Twitter’s deplatforming of three right-wing influencers (Milo Yiannopoulos, Alex Jones, and Owen Benjamin) and found that this approach

significantly reduced conversations about them, as well as the overall toxicity of their followers (Jhaver et al. 2021). Not only do these studies demonstrate a stronger effect than quarantine, from an ethical perspective, only removing offensive communities from the platform entirely can preserve the dignity of the marginalised groups their hateful discourses target (Carlson & Cousineau 2020).

There are competing theories about why Reddit has been so slow to take decisive action against the hateful content it hosts on its platform. Hussam Habib and colleagues (2021) point to the disproportionate workload a small handful of volunteer moderators assume in taking responsibility for millions of posts and comments submitted each day, while simultaneously managing backlash from users whose content they remove. A second theory is proposed by Massanari (2017), who speculates that Reddit's advertising-based profit model discourages administrators from taking any action that could alienate users and impact the site's advertising revenue. This theory is supported by more recent research which shows that Reddit's decisions to sanction toxic communities was most strongly correlated with internal pressure from Reddit users and negative media attention (Habib & Nithyanand 2022). For instance, r/incels was banned when a member attempted to source information on how police gather evidence against rapists from a legal advice subreddit (see [2.1.4](#)), and r/MGTOW was quarantined on the same day news broke that an active member had been planning a terrorist attack (Pedroja 2021). Taken together, these examples suggest that despite the substantial improvements it has made to its content policy in recent years, Reddit's governance strategy is reactive rather than proactive.

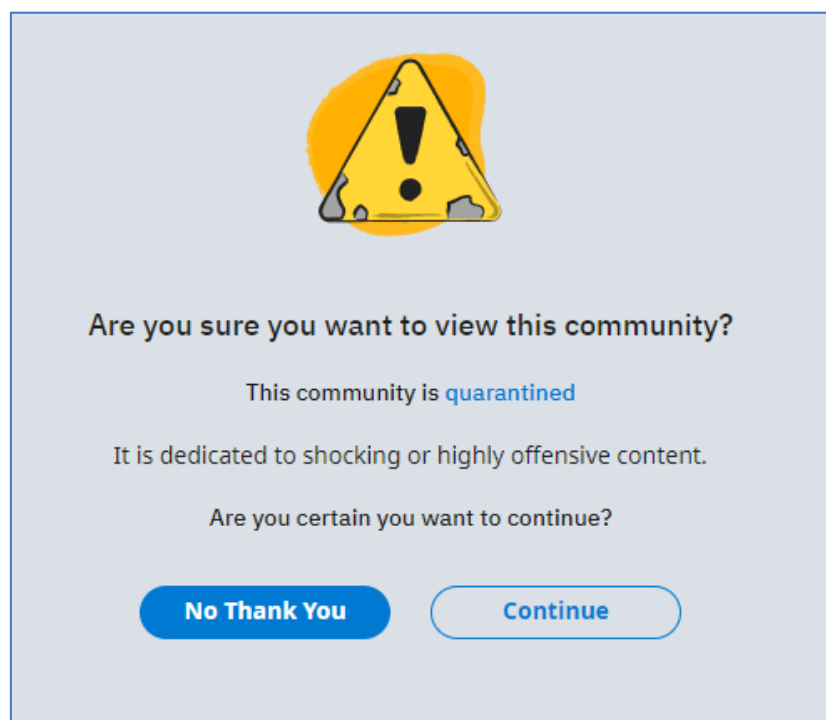


Figure 2: r/TheRedPill's quarantine landing page

2.3 Masculinity and violence

The final section of this literature review is composed of two sub-sections. Because incel identity is defined by its subordination to alpha masculinity, [2.3.1](#) first consults the literature on hegemonic masculinity and then summarises recent articles which examined incels from a perspective of masculinity. Next, [2.3.2](#) presents a comprehensive overview of the various manifestations of incel violence using a framework developed by Bruce Hoffman and colleagues (2020).

2.3.1 Hegemonic and incel masculinities

The research detailed in [2.1.4](#) revealed how incels have developed a unique belief system centred on beta masculinity, which is oriented in subordination to alpha masculinity. As Van Valkenburgh (2018) notes, discourses on alpha masculinity should be seen as an expression of hegemonic masculinity, a theory which emerged in the 1990s that led to a paradigm shift in the way gender was conceptualised. In her landmark work, Raewyn Connell (1995) defined hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice...which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (p.77). Hegemonic masculinity represents a culture’s most honoured way of being a man, requiring “all other men to position themselves in relation to it” (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). In this way, idealised masculinity is defined by its distance from the rejected (Connell 1995, p.40), which leads to an “active struggle for dominance” as competing constructions of masculinity vie for social ascendancy (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005).

Hegemonic ideals for masculinity are primarily determined by our cultural practices, and this social process exists simultaneously at international, national, and local levels. At each level, models of admired masculine conduct are produced and disseminated by social institutions, including the family, state, churches, schools, media, advertising, sport, societies, and clubs (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). However, these institutions often distort the realities of our social practices; rather than representing how men actually construct their identities, they reflect men’s “widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires” about masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). For instance, on a national or cultural level, the ways in which men’s bodies are represented in popular media constitute a primary mechanism for the formulation of hegemonic ideals. This is especially true for young men, who are exposed to exemplars of masculinity which claim that skilled bodily activity is crucial to embodying masculine ideals, including risk taking, performances of sporting prowess, and demonstrations of heterosexuality through access to women’s bodies (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Numerous studies have documented the existence of gender hierarchies shaped by hegemonic masculine ideals. In terms of physical features, Christopher Vito and colleagues (2018) write that the hegemonic male is typically tall, muscular, white, heterosexual, and cisgender. In terms of behaviour, Michael Kimmel (1996, p.18) writes that hegemony is frequently linked to the façade of the “self-made

man”, characterised by performances of strength, control, and independence, while Stephen Whitehead (2002) adds that the hegemonic male should be aggressive, tough, able, and competitive. In terms of emotions, Rachel Kalish and Michael Kimmel (2010) discuss societal expectations for men to suppress their emotions, while the work of psychologists Brian Cole and Terry Kupers revealed that masculinity stress and self-stigma negatively impact men’s willingness to seek mental health care (Cole & Davidson 2019; Cole & Ingram 2019; Kupers 2005).

Although hegemonic ideals are typically esteemed throughout society, the survival of gender hierarchies is dependent on them being difficult to obtain. As Raewyn Connell and James Messerschmidt (2005) explain, “hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it”. Nonetheless, many young men grow up with the expectation that they will be able to access its privileges (Connell 1992, Whitehead 2002, Kalish & Kimmel 2010). While society rewards those who conform to hegemonic masculine ideals, those who do not often feel their masculinity is threatened. This perceived loss of masculinity can provoke feelings of anxiety, shame, negative body image, disappointment, and emasculation (Kimmel 2009, p.55; Vandello et al. 2008; Vito, Admire & Hughes 2018). This complex constellation of emotions is paradigmatic of aggrieved entitlement, a concept developed by Rachel Kalish & Michael Kimmel (2010) to explain the gendered nature of violence, which they define as “a fusion of that humiliating loss of manhood and the moral obligation and entitlement to get it back”. In the context of hegemonic masculinity, aggrieved entitlement is a gendered emotion that arises when men who fail to conform to hegemonic ideals perceive that they have been robbed of a privileged status which is theirs by right (Kimmel 2013, p.18).

Research shows that some men who perceive a threat to their masculinity will feel compelled to prove their manhood to others (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005; Pyke 1996; Vandello et al. 2008; Vito, Admire & Hughes 2018). According to Joseph Vandello and colleagues (2008), such social proofs of masculinity are most effective under two conditions. First, they must be public. This is because masculinity is relative, with the ideal construction being defined by its distance from competing constructions (Connell 1995). The intended audience for such performances of masculinity is not women but other men to whom the performer wishes to demonstrate superiority. Second, social proofs must be exclusive—an impressive performance of stereotypical masculinity not easily achieved by others.

The literature identifies two major strategies that fit these criteria for social proof of masculinity. The first entails the repudiation of the spectre of failed masculinity through compulsive heterosexuality (Pascoe 2011). This is especially true for adolescents, an age at which young men are increasingly socialised by peer groups rather than the family (Kalish & Kimmel 2010). CJ Pascoe's

(2011) ground-breaking ethnography of adolescent masculinity detailed the numerous ways young men perform homosocial rejections of anything that could be perceived as feminine, weak, or homosexual. This was primarily manifest in what she terms “fag discourse”, which more than femininity, powerlessness, or childhood “required constant, vigilant, earnest repudiation” (Pascoe 2011, p.157). As such, the ability to engage in or demonstrate knowledge of heterosexual intercourse confirms a young man’s transcendence of childhood, conferring him with heightened social status while simultaneously subjugating women by objectifying their bodies as instruments for men’s validation. Conversely, virginity can reduce a man to nonexistence in the eyes of his peers and raises suspicion of homosexuality (Pascoe 2011, p.159).

The second strategy that fulfils the criteria for social proof of masculinity is the use of physical aggression or violence. This is effective because the culture of hegemonic masculinity socialises young men to believe they must be strong, tough, and never back down from threats (Kalish & Kimmel 2010). In fact, many acts of male aggression can be understood as “responses to anxiety about living up to standards of masculinity and the continual pressure to prove oneself” (Vandello et al. 2008). As a result, young men who use violence to deflect challenges to their masculinity should not be considered deviants, but “over-conformists to a particular normative construction of masculinity, a construction that defines violence as a legitimate response to a perceived humiliation” (Kalish & Kimmel 2010). For these reasons, criminologists and sociologists increasingly recognise the need to reclaim masculinity, pride, and power as motivation for random mass violence (Kalish & Kimmel 2010; Kimmel & Mahler 2003; Messerschmidt & Tomsen 2016; Murray 2014; Vito, Admire & Hughes 2018). In such cases, the attacker’s public performance of physical force simultaneously restores confidence in his precarious masculinity and enacts revenge on those who have hurt him (Kalish & Kimmel 2010). Furthermore, when masculinity threat is so great that it affects someone to the point of suicidal ideation, “framing one's suicide with violence and aggression may serve to make it appear a more potent act” (Kalish & Kimmel 2010).

Among the body of research into the incel belief system published since 2018 are a handful of articles that attempt to establish baseline emotional and psychological traits for men who experience masculinity threat and adopt incel ideology. Collectively, these articles allow a somewhat rudimentary profile of incel masculinity to be established. First, incel groups are now almost exclusively heterosexual and male (Cottee 2021). This is because incel ideology is predicated on the assumption that women can easily find sexual partners because they have the sole power to determine the outcome of sexual relationships (Kay 2021). Furthermore, because the incel worldview is centred squarely on physical appearance, many incels believe that being an incel—“inceldom”—is not so much an ideology as it is a permanent facet of their identity, akin to racial heritage or sexual orientation

(Cottee 2021). By accepting this fatalistic outlook, such incels essentially resign themselves to a state of arrested development, in which the heterosexual sex they believe they need to transcend adolescence feels forever out of reach (Sharkey 2022). As a result, incel masculinity is defined by its subordination to alpha masculinity and perceived dispossession of the entitlements of hegemonic masculinity.

2.3.2 The history of incel violence

Aggrieved entitlement to the privileges of hegemonic masculinity has led to numerous instances of self-identified incels committing acts of violence against random members of the public. In their survey of the historical intersections of incel ideology and violence, Bruce Hoffman and colleagues (2020) identified more than a dozen attacks between 2014 and 2021 linked to this extremist ideology. However, these attackers have used a tremendous variety of tactics, which complicates the process of understanding and responding to incel violence. In fact, the authors divide incel attacks into four categories: 1) incel-motivated terrorist attacks, 2) acts of random violence perpetrated by self-professed incels, 3) acts of targeted violence with mixed motives but some evidence of incel influence, and 4) attacks conferred with ex post facto incel status by modern incel communities. The final subsection of this chapter presents an overview of these categories, with some expansion on my part to account for supplementary details from journalists and additional incidences of incel violence that have occurred since the publication of Hoffman and colleagues' (2020) study. I also create a fifth category for individuals who appear to have been motivated by incel ideology but were ultimately unsuccessful in realising their attacks.

In detailing this history, I acknowledge the compelling argument that mass shooters should remain anonymous to deny them the fame and media recognition they seek (Lankford & Madfis 2018; Murray 2014). However, I have decided to include attackers' names for two reasons. First, the audience for this thesis is the academic community and I seek no media recognition in completing this research. Second, as the following overview of incel violence demonstrates, these attackers continue to reference and learn from each other, sometimes years after an attacker's death. For instance, in 2014, incel terrorist Elliot Rodger read the diary of 2009 proto-incel George Sodini when planning his Day of Retribution (SBCSO 2015, p.40–1), and in 2018, incel terrorist Alek Minassian told police he had conversed with both Rodger and 2015 incel-adjacent attacker Christopher Harper-Mercer online (Minassian 2018, p.105–12). This history is therefore intended to be a resource to researchers which can contextualise references made by a future incel attacker. A timeline of incel attackers is provided in Figure 3, while Figure 4 visualises failed incel attacks. Finally, Figure 5 plots all categories on a map. For an overview of this data, see [Appendix A](#).

Incel terrorism

The first category of incel violence is characterised by acts of mass violence which are directly and explicitly motivated by incel ideology. Because incels believe that they are primarily victimised by women, each of these acts was premeditated, committed in public, and targeted women to hold them proxy to the attacker's personal shortcomings and insecurities (Murray 2017b). To date, there have been four attackers that fit this modus operandi. Together, they have killed 19 and injured 36.

1. Elliot Rodger: 23 May 2014

Introduced in [1.1](#), Rodger is perhaps the best known incel attacker. The first incel communities were founded in the 1990s, but it was Rodger and the media attention his actions drew that have been primarily responsible for mainstreaming the ideology (Witt 2020).

Rodger's manifesto details the masculinity crisis which arose from his belief that he "needed a girl's love...to feel *worthy* as a male" (Rodger 2014, p.94, emphasis in original). Rather than accepting responsibility for his circumstances or reconsidering his narrow definition of masculinity, Rodger externalised blame onto women in the belief that they were attracted to the wrong type of man (Murray 2017a). Specifically, he believed that women preferred partners who could best embody hegemonic ideals for masculinity, which automatically disqualified him as a prospective sexual partner because of his short stature and biracial heritage (Vito, Admire & Hughes 2018). As a result, Rodger's most intense outbursts occurred when he saw non-white boys his age in romantic partnerships. For instance, Rodger seethed about seeing an "ugly black boy" and a "dark-skinned Mexican boy" in public with white girlfriends, which aggrieved him because he was "half white [himself]", which made him "deserve it more" (Rodger 2014, p.84–7). Convinced he would never acquire a girlfriend, Rodger began to have transcendent fantasies of becoming very powerful and punishing his enemies (Murray 2017b). Over time, these fantasies coalesced into what he called his "Day of Retribution", and the last page of his manifesto frames this attack as "my attempt to do everything, in my power, to destroy everything I cannot have" (Rodger 2014, p.137).

Modern incel communities continue to memorialise Rodger as a "patron saint" and use his manifesto to inspire, justify, and celebrate similar instances of ideological violence (Witt 2020). In these spaces, Rodger is transformed into a semiotic symbol that lives on as "an exemplar of legitimized, reclaimed incel masculinity through the use of highly sexualized and gendered violence" (Witt 2020). Some refer to him as "Saint Elliot" or the "Supreme Gentleman", and the date of his attack—23 May—is commemorated as "Saint Elliot's Day" (Witt 2020), which is celebrated by reading his manifesto or ordering his favourite drink and last meal, a Starbucks triple vanilla latte (Futrelle 2018).

2. Alek Minassian: 23 April 2018

Minassian is responsible for the 2018 Toronto van attack, also described in [1.1](#). Despite trying to incite the responding officer to use deadly force, Minassian was taken into custody alive, and details of his statements to police and psychologists are now publicly available as part of the court proceedings against him. In 2021, he was found guilty on all counts of first-degree murder and attempted murder and sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole (Carter 2022).

In his initial interview with police, Minassian shockingly claimed to have been online contacts with two incel attackers: Elliot Rodger and Christopher Harper-Mercer. He also told police that he envisioned his attack an opportunity to “overthrow the Chads...which would force the Stacys to...reproduce with the incels” (Minassian 2018, p.103). Following this, Minassian sat interviews with three separate teams of court-appointed psychologists, during which he admitted to lying to police and incorporating elements of Rodger’s and Harper-Mercer’s manifestoes into his story (*R. vs Minassian* 2021, para.157). Because he intended to die, Minassian’s Facebook post was carefully worded to frame his actions for the public. He told one psychologist that “the most important words in that post were ‘4chan’, ‘incel’, and ‘Elliot Rodger’...because 4chan gives you that identity...incel because it indicates that you are complaining about virginity and Elliot Rodger...I am basically using his name to boost my name” (para.176).

For this reason, Minassian’s crimes are difficult to categorise. His Facebook post and initial comments to police would typically qualify as incel terrorism, yet there is also substantial evidence to suggest his attack fits within a pattern of copycat killers who seek media infamy (Murray 2014). Despite his confession, I maintain that Minassian should be considered an incel terrorist. His answers to police demonstrated detailed knowledge of incel ideology, terminology, and attackers, at times even quoting specific language from Rodger’s manifesto. From this, it is apparent that Minassian has spent considerable time on incel websites. Minassian’s actions were also widely celebrated by incels. Journalists quoted various users of *incels.me* as saying “I really want it to be true that the guy was an incel lmao” (Yang 2018), “I hope this guy wrote a manifesto because he could be our next new saint” (Janik 2018), and “Spread that name, speak of his sacrifice for our cause, worship him for he gave his life for our future” (Collins & Zadrozny 2018). Regardless of whether Minassian’s incel beliefs were sincerely held, it is clear from this reception that his attack had the effect of advancing incel ideology.

3. Scott Beierle: 2 November 2018

Beierle targeted women when he shot up a yoga studio in Tallahassee, Florida, killing two and wounding four before dying by suicide. In his attack, Beierle specifically targeted women, whilst

electing to merely pistol whip the only man in attendance (Burlew 2018). Although he did not leave a manifesto or suicide note to clarify his intentions, law enforcement was quick to locate a series of YouTube videos in which he lamented his romantic rejections, expressed solidarity with incels, and praised the actions of Elliot Rodger (Zaveri, Jacobs & Mervosh 2018).

4. Unnamed minor: 24 February 2020

This unnamed 17-year-old boy murdered a woman and seriously injured two others with a machete at a Toronto massage parlour. Canadian law prohibits the media from identifying minors charged with crimes, so he remains unnamed for now. In May 2020, he was charged with first-degree murder with terrorist inspiration, marking the first time Canada that has applied its anti-terror laws to any attack besides one carried out in the name of Islamic extremism (Brean 2020).

Random incel violence

The second category of incel attackers is composed of individuals who identified as incels and were similarly motivated by sexual frustration. However, their actions were random, unplanned violent outbursts, rather than premeditated attacks directed at proxy victims or with the goal of furthering their ideology. To date there have been five such attacks, which have killed six and injured eight.

1. Sheldon Bentley: 31 July 2016

Bentley stomped a homeless man to death outside the Edmonton store where he worked as a security guard. In court proceedings for his murder charge, Bentley blamed his involuntary celibacy for his uncontrollable anger (Theobald 2018).

2. Emmanuel Aranda: 12 April 2019

Aranda went to the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota “looking for someone to kill” after failing in multiple attempts to pick up women (Hudson 2019). After failing to find a suitable target, he threw a five-year-old boy from the mall’s third-storey balcony. The boy suffered head trauma and multiple broken bones but survived (Thebault 2019).

3. Alex Stavropoulos: 3 June 2019

Stavropoulos stabbed a woman and injured her infant child in a car park in Sudbury, Ontario. After he was subdued by bystanders and apprehended, Stavropoulos told police that he identified as an incel and was angry with white women for not having sex with him. As a result, he was “out to murder a little white girl” (Pickard 2020).

4. Armando Hernandez: 20 May 2020

Hernandez used an assault rifle to shoot up a shopping centre in Glendale, Arizona, wounding three. After he was subdued by police, Hernandez told them that he targeted couples because he wanted to make them “feel the pain he feels on a daily basis” (Stern 2020). This bears striking resemblance to incel terrorism, but Hernandez’s attack did not entail the same amount of premeditation. Instead, Hernandez was triggered by a series of frustrations, including being turned away at a Panda Express and a movie theatre due to Covid-19 restrictions.

5. Jake Davison: 12 August 2021

Davison, of Plymouth, UK, killed his mother with a shotgun, then exited the home and shot a man and his three-year-old daughter as they walked by. Davison proceeded to the local park, killing two pedestrians and wounding two more before ultimately turning the gun on himself. Davison was active on incel communities on Reddit, including one formed to help incels quit the ideology, called r/IncelExit. In one post, he reported that the black pill caused him to see life as hopeless, writing “I personally don’t think once you live this life you can really ever change the damage done...I personally believe my scars and damage will follow me forever...I wish I never came across all this BS [it’s] just toxic negative bullshit...it also makes you feel like any self-improvement you do is never going to be enough” (Townsend 2021). Davison is noteworthy for being first gun attack in the UK in more than a decade and the first attack directly motivated by incel ideology to occur outside North America. However, there is no evidence to suggest that his actions were premeditated, and his post to r/IncelExit suggests he was more interested in leaving the ideology than advancing it. For these reasons, he is included here as an instance of random violence.

Incel-adjacent violence

The third category of incel attackers includes those who committed premeditated acts of targeted violence, but who are only partially inspired by incel ideology. This intersection with other forms of ideological extremism can be explained in part by the way the far right increasingly incorporates gender politics into its ideology (Corredor 2019; Dignam & Rohlinger 2019; Graff, Kapur & Walters 2019; Hawley 2018; Kelly 2017; Lyons 2017; Massanari & Chess 2018; Nicholas & Agius 2018; Ong 2020). It is also influenced by the way the Manosphere and the Alt Right share a common language to couch their beliefs in conspiratorial “red pill” thinking (Graff, Kapur & Walters 2019; Hawley 2018, p.83–4; Kelly 2017). In fact, research shows that acceptance of conspiracy theories is most strongly correlated with intuitive rather than analytical thinking, jump-to-conclusion bias, and distrust in conventional authority figures (Pytlik, Soll & Mehl 2020; Sutton & Douglas 2020). Collectively, these factors form the basis of a generalised conspiracy mindset (Frenken & Imhoff 2021), whose effect is

so strong that individuals who believe one conspiracy are more likely to believe in others, even if they contradict each other (Goertzel 1994). As a result, the attackers in this category provide evidence that incel beliefs sometimes only constitute a portion of an individual's worldview, and that they can be simultaneously held alongside beliefs about mass shooter worship, white supremacy, and QAnon. Together, these attackers are responsible for killing 38 and wounding 30.

1. Christopher Harper-Mercer: 1 October 2015

Harper-Mercer entered a classroom at the Oregon community college he attended and killed the assistant professor, eight of his classmates, and wounded eight more before dying by suicide to avoid apprehension (Associated Press 2015). Survivors later reported that Harper-Mercer targeted religious students, but the short six-page manifesto he gave a fellow student to deliver to police on his behalf suggests mixed motives beyond anti-religious bigotry. First, Harper-Mercer was aggrieved by the perception that he had been marginalised socially, economically, and romantically. This echoes incel grievances, and although he never explicitly aligned himself with this ideology, he alluded to it elsewhere online (Murray 2017b). Harper-Mercer was also motivated by racism towards Black men. Half-Black himself, Harper-Mercer was able to rationalise this cognitive dissonance because "my partial blackness didn't come from a man" (Harper-Mercer 2015, Section II, para.1). He then explicitly connects this to his grievances about romantic marginalisation by ranting that "good individuals like myself are alone, but wicked black men get the loot, like some sort of vaginal pirate" (Section I, para.6). To leave no doubt as to his inspiration, Harper-Mercer wrote that "Elliot Rodger was right when he said his thoughts on the black male. I fully agree with him" (Section II, para.1). Finally, in addition to Rodger, Harper-Mercer's manifesto exudes admiration for non-incel attackers Dylan Klebold, Eric Harris, Adam Lanza, Seung-Hui Cho, and Vester Flanagan (Section I, para.1). When writing his own manifesto, Harper-Mercer aligned himself with them: "Just like me those people were denied everything they deserved, everything they wanted. Though we may have been born bad, society left us no recourse, no way to be good" (Section I, para.2).

2. William Atchison; 7 December 2017

Atchison posed as a student to perpetrate a shooting at his former high school in rural New Mexico, killing two before dying by suicide. He had been active on multiple far-right message boards where he used the pseudonym Elliot Rodger (Hankes & Amend 2018). He was also a close online contact of 2016 Munich shooter David Sonboly (Hoffman, Ware & Shapiro 2020).

3. Nikolas Cruz; 14 February 2018

Cruz is responsible for the mass shooting perpetrated at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High in Parkland, Florida, killing 17 and wounding 17 more. While his motives remain unclear, he has a similar profile of marginalisation and disaffection as Harper-Mercer, with a long history of behavioural and mental health issues and a fascination with mass shooters (McLaughlin & Park 2018). Cruz also had a habit of making extremely racist, homophobic, antisemitic, and xenophobic comments online (Murphy 2018), and he carved swastikas into the magazines of the guns he used in his attack (Fisher 2018). Cruz is connected to incels by the comments he made online memorialising Elliot Rodger (Collins & Zadrozny 2018).

4. Brian Isaack Clyde; 17 June 2019

Clyde attempted a mass shooting at the federal courthouse in Dallas, Texas in an apparent “suicide by cop” (Tarrant & Emily 2019). He had been an active member on several far-right message boards, where he had consumed and shared incel content alongside content linked to Trump, Alex Jones, neo-Nazis, and QAnon (Solomon 2019).

5. Tobias Rathjen; 19 February 2020

Rathjen killed 9 and wounded 5 in a shooting spree in Hanau, Germany. Before beginning his spree, Rathjen published a manifesto online in an attempt to justify his actions. Despite explicitly identifying as an incel, his attack appears to have been primarily motivated by white supremacism’s “great replacement” theory (Ong 2020). As such, he selected the locations for his shooting to target Turkish and Kurdish migrants (Bostock 2020).

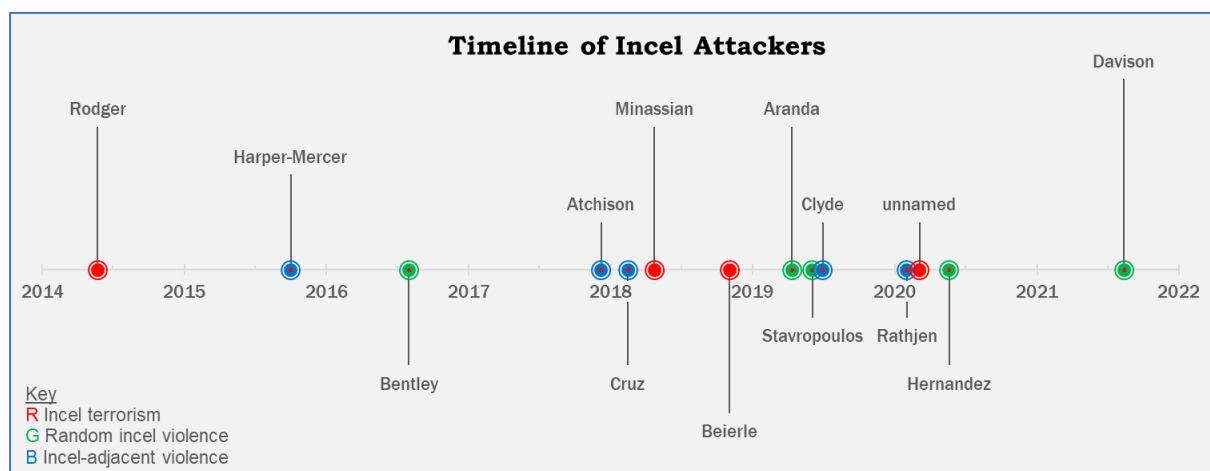


Figure 3: a timeline of incel attackers by classification (excludes proto-incels)

Ex post facto and proto-incels

The fourth category of incel attackers includes those who are not directly linked to incel ideology, but whose acts of violence are nonetheless honoured by some within the broad incel community. Those who targeted women are especially recognised and sometimes even conferred with ex post facto incel status. The most notable attackers to fit into this category are Dylan Klebold, Eric Harris, Seung-Hui Cho, Adam Lanza, Charles Carl Roberts IV, Patrick Crusius, Santino Legan, and Connor Betts (Bratich & Banet-Weiser 2019; Byerly 2020; Hoffman, Ware & Shapiro 2020). While most of these mass murderers are revered more so for their notoriety than their ideology, there are two that I argue should be considered proto-incels, whose acts of public premeditated violence similarly targeted women but preceded incels' rise to prominence by several years.

1. Marc Lépine: 6 December 1989

Lépine killed 14 and wounded 14 more at Montréal's École Polytechnique. He reportedly entered a cafeteria and separated the men from the women, dismissed the men, and announced to the women that he was "fighting feminism" before gunning them down (Sourour 1991). He then roamed the halls shooting randomly at other women before eventually killing himself. The suicide note found on his person confirmed that he targeted women he thought to be feminists due to a belief that feminism had ruined his life. While no part of this note mentioned virginity or celibacy, a study on *incels.me* found that the community there appreciated Lépine's actions enough to anoint him as one of their patron "saints" (Baele, Brace & Coan 2019).

2. George Sodini: 4 August 2009

Sodini employed nearly identical tactics as incel terrorist Scott Beierle by targeting women at an aerobics class, killing three and injuring nine before taking his own life (Hasch & Conte 2009). While he did not leave a suicide note to clarify his motivations, Sodini maintained a website where he diarised his prolonged celibacy and sexual frustration. Visitors to the now defunct *georgesodini.com* were greeted with an ominous message: "Why do this?? To young girls? I kept a running log that includes my thoughts and actions, after I saw this project was going to drag on" (Sodini 2009). The following diary entries reflect Sodini's attitude of entitlement to sex, grounded in the belief that successful masculinity required female companionship: "A man needs a woman for confidence. He gets a boost on the job, career, with other men, and everywhere else when he knows inside he has someone to spend the night with and who is also a friend" (Sodini 2009, Entry 5). Despite the obvious value he placed on sex, Sodini believed he was not capable of entering a relationship. In fact, on two occasions, he claims to have been rejected by "30 million women" (Entries 5 & 15). As a result, he experienced feelings of anger, inadequacy, and humiliation. After

he “chickened out” on his first attempt at carrying out a mass shooting (Entry 9), Sodini began experimenting with alcohol to embolden him (Entry 12) and composed a list of his failures to use as a motivational tool (Entry 11). Sodini carried “The List” with him everywhere so that he could reread or add to it at any time (Entry 15), and Murray (2017b) notes that this behaviour aligns with that of other attackers like the Columbine shooters who surround themselves with items that allow for the incessant replay of violent fantasy. By choosing to attack a fitness centre, Sodini targeted the beautiful, unattainable women that he fantasised over, striking out violently to hold them proxy for his feelings of failure, inadequacy, and humiliation (Murray 2017a). This motive bears striking similarity to those of incel terrorists, yet Sodini is only seldomly included as an incel attacker because he precedes incels’ rise to mainstream notoriety by several years.

Unrealised attacks

Finally, there are nine more individuals who were motivated by incel ideology and incited, planned, or made threats to commit a public attack against women. However, these individuals were ultimately unsuccessful in carrying out their plans and were arrested before they could be realised. (Here, the dates refer to each perpetrator’s arrest.) While many of these individuals threatened to become incel terrorists, it is important to acknowledge that there is little linguistic difference between realised and unrealised violent threats. In fact, one study found that unrealised threats tend to be more explicitly violent (Hurt & Grant 2019). Moreover, as the case of Alek Minassian demonstrates, some incel attackers exaggerate or overstate their motives and intentions to gain notoriety. As a result, it is often difficult to ascertain the sincerity of such violent threats. Rather than speculating on their intentions, I create a separate category of unrealised attackers.

1. Christopher Cleary, 19 January 2019

Like Minassian, Cleary posted his intentions on Facebook, writing that his sexual frustration had inspired him to be the next mass shooter: “All I wanted was to be loved, yet no one cares about me I’m 27 years old and I’ve never had a girlfriend before and I’m still a virgin, this is why I’m planning on shooting up a public place soon and being the next mass shooter [be]cause I’m ready to die and all the girls [that] turned me down is [sic] going to make it right by killing as many girls as I see” (Bever 2019). The date of this post coincided with feminist protest marches in the area.

2. Christopher Hasson: 15 February 2019

Hasson was apprehended in the process of stockpiling weapons for an attack he hoped would set off a race war (Owen 2020). He was a US Coast Guard member and was caught when an internal threat review found that he had been using his work computer to visit incel and MGTOW sites,

research militias, and compile a hitlist of prominent American Jews. Reddit administrators quarantined r/MGTOW on the same day Hasson's arrest was made public (Pedroja 2021).

3. Jean-Claude Rochefort: 5 December 2019

This 70-year-old Montréal blogger maintained several websites under various pseudonyms, where he preached "masculinism" and published material encouraging others to sexually assault women. He also memorialised Marc Lépine as an "incel lord" and celebrated the anniversary of his attack (Boshra 2019). Rochefort was arrested by Montréal police for inciting hatred against women.

4. Carl Bennington: 21 April 2020

Bennington, 33, was arrested on cyberstalking charges after a prolonged harassment campaign against two teenage girls who rejected his advances. According to the charges filed against him, Bennington was a frequent contributor to online incel groups (Department of Justice 2020).

5. Joseph Miner: 12 May 2020

Miner was caught in a sting operation whilst attempting to purchase untraceable weapons from an undercover federal agent for "boogaloo", an Alt Right term for racial holy war (Offenhartz 2020). On his social media accounts, Miner posted about forming a "well-trained incel hit squad" for the upcoming war, as well as pictures of himself performing the Nazi salute and extensive misogynistic, racist, and antisemitic comments.

6. Cole Carini: 3 June 2020

Carini was arrested after presenting himself at the hospital with extensive injuries to his hands and neck following a failed attempt to build pipe bombs. A scorched manifesto recovered from the scene outlined his desire to target "hot cheerleaders" and emulate Elliot Rodger, writing that "I will not be afraid of the consequences no matter what, I will be heroic, I will make a statement like Elliott [sic] Rodgers [sic]" (Brown 2020).

7. David Kaufman: 4 September 2020

Kaufman was arrested on stalking charges after a year-long campaign of rape and death threats against a former university classmate. Despite not speaking to the victim in years, Kaufman believed she and her partner had victimised him because they were attractive and conformed to the Chad and Stacy archetypes (Rawnsley & Hughes 2020). His messages also contained frequent references to Elliot Rodger, including pictures of Rodger's victims and quotes from his manifesto.

8. Malik Sanchez: 13 February 2021

Sanchez was arrested after he made a hoax bomb threat at a NYC restaurant. He was a prolific content creator for incel communities and recorded several videos of him harassing women on the street. For example, one video was titled “INCEL ARMY RISE UP” and depicted Sanchez stalking two women through Manhattan and yelling about his “incel rage” (Department of Justice 2021a).

9. Tres Genco: 21 July 2021

Genco was arrested after he was found to have surveilled a sorority at a local Ohio university and made plans to commit a mass shooting there. Charging documents show that he had been an active poster on incel forums and wrote a manifesto in which he stated that his desire to “slaughter [women]...out of out of hatred, jealousy and revenge” (Department of Justice 2021b).

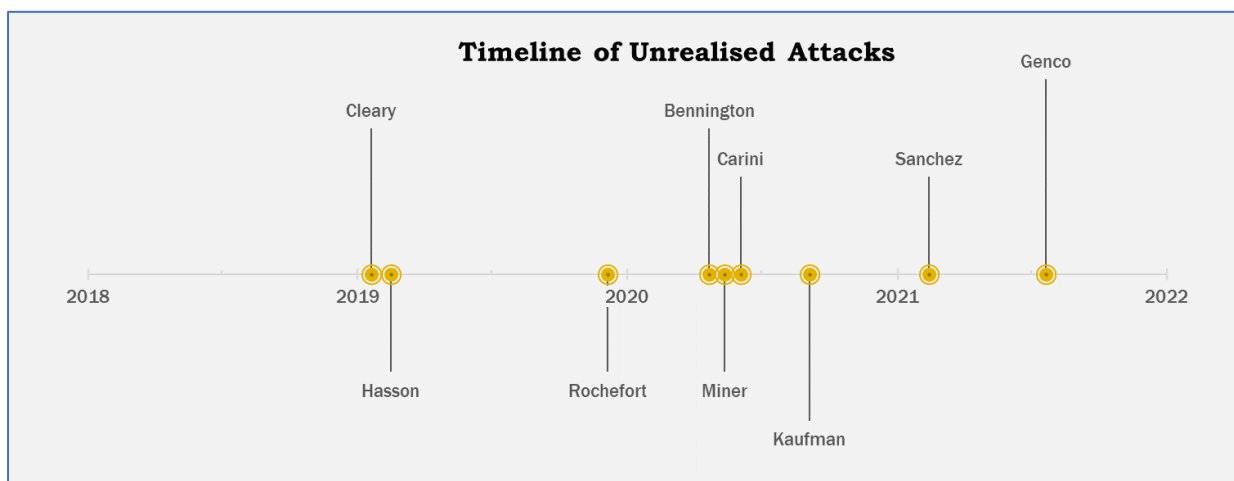


Figure 4: a timeline of unrealised attacks

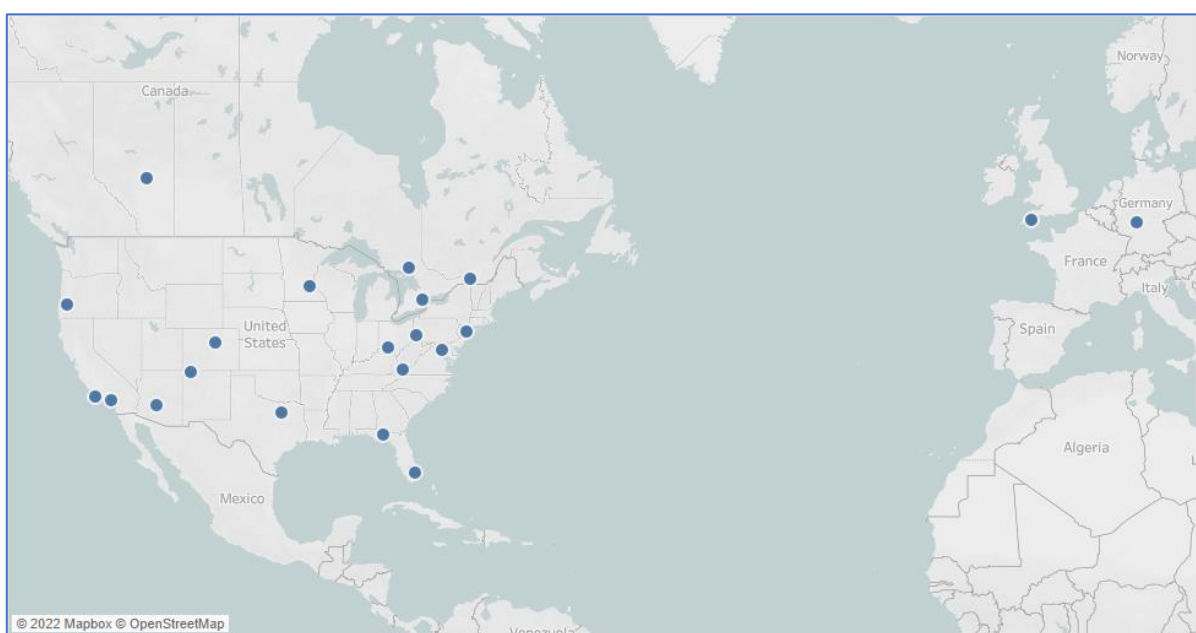


Figure 5: a map of incel attacks (all categories)

Content warning

The following chapters present the results of my analysis of r/Braincels, which contains detailed description of incel ideology and the language commonly used there to express those beliefs. This includes explicit mention of sexual assault, rape, and language intended to derogate historically marginalised communities—namely women, people of colour, Jews, and the LGBTQ community. Emma Jane (2016) writes that discussions of such “e-bile” which remove offensive language can have the unintended consequence of downplaying its severity and the extent of its use. For this reason, the content discussed in the following sections remains as true as possible to the original words of the authors, with only minor paraphrasing to preserve their anonymity for ethical reasons. In doing so, I recognise the inherent risk that reproducing e-bile can inadvertently amplify its content and thereby normalise dangerous worldviews (Phillips 2018). While the limited audience for this thesis certainly mitigates some of that risk, to avoid normalising incel hate speech, I endeavour to follow Whitney Phillips’ (2018) recommendations for reporting on extremism by “[treating] violent antagonisms as inherently contagious”. This includes minimising sensationalist language, providing detailed context for direct quotations, and highlighting the harm such e-bile does to the vulnerable groups it targets. By taking these precautions, I intend to demonstrate how the incels I quote in the following chapters share a common language to describe their attitudes and beliefs, which in turn reflects how the Reddit platform mediates the social learning process by allowing users to learn from and mirror each other’s language.

A note on terminology

There is a tremendous amount of subcultural terminology that the members of r/Braincels have developed to describe their belief system. To aid the comprehension and navigation of the reader, a glossary of incel terminology is available in [Appendix B](#). In addition, the incel worldview disqualifies women from membership, so these chapters use he/him/his pronouns when referring to specific members of the community, unless that user’s gender is known to be female. Finally, references to the names of specific subreddits and users follow Reddit naming conventions by using “r/” for subreddits and “u/” for users.

Chapter 3: r/Braincels as a community

The first chapter of this analysis of incel ideology on r/Braincels examines how the subreddit assumes the social formation of a community by providing its members with commonality of purpose and identity (Caliandro 2018). This analysis is based on the four documents obtained in data collection that were authored by the subreddit's founder and moderation team. The first three of these documents are the wiki of core concepts and terminology (Post 150), the page of frequently asked questions (Post 142), and the community sidebar (Post 126). The wiki is approximately 2300 words and composed of a glossary of incel terminology loosely grouped by theme, an annotated list of suggested or related subreddits, and a bank of filtered words whose inclusion in a user submission would result in that post or comment being blocked from publication. The wiki is inconsistently structured because it is a living document that moderators routinely update, so it is cited by line number. According to the *archive.today* capture, it was last updated on 20 January 2019 by a moderator I refer to pseudonymously as u/UB. The FAQs are approximately 1400 words and consist of a series of 17 questions and answers, the last of which provides a list of other subreddits which are/were controlled by incels or whose content the moderators endorse. Here, the *archive.today* capture shows the FAQ page was last saved 26 December 2018 by another moderator I name u/KM. The community sidebar lists the subreddit's mission statement and rules and then provides direct links to the wiki, FAQs, r/Braincels Discord channel, and a small series of related subreddits. Together, these documents define involuntary celibacy, explicate the incel worldview, and articulate the subreddit's purpose, which collectively function to inform a user's decision whether to identify as an incel and join r/Braincels. The final moderator document lists the community's founder and moderation team (Post 154), which was used to identify 38 posts they submitted to r/Braincels in an official capacity: 25 by the founder and 13 by various moderators. From this, it is possible to reconstruct a narrative of the subreddit's history.

This chapter on incel ideology at a community level considers all the above data in its analysis. Accordingly, it is divided into five sections. First, [3.1](#) examines how moderators define involuntary celibacy. Then, [3.2](#) discusses how moderators use that definition to construct the incel worldview by demarcating key in- and out-groups. Next, Reddit's participatory culture requires users to subscribe to multiple subreddits, so [3.3](#) examines the series of related subreddits sourced from the sidebar, wiki, and FAQs to map the footprint of r/Braincels users on Reddit. Once the community's parameters are established, [3.4](#) analyses posts submitted by the subreddit's founder and moderation team to detail its growth and development over its three years on Reddit. Finally, [3.5](#) analyses the subreddit rules and bank of filtered words to elucidate how the community's moderators exert influence over the composition of the community and the content that is created and shared there.

3.1 Defining involuntary celibacy

The moderators of r/Braincels define an involuntary celibate as “someone who, for various reasons (usually physical appearance), cannot enter into a sexual and/or romantic relationship even though they desire such a thing” (Wiki, Line 1). While this definition may appear benign at first glance, the moderators have a vested interest in downplaying the extremeness of incel ideology, both to maintain good standing with Reddit administrators and to avoid scaring off potential recruits. However, closer inspection of this definition, when properly contextualised with additional details from the wiki and FAQs, reveals that incel ideology as represented on r/Braincels is just as extreme as that profiled by other researchers, with it being principally characterised by a simultaneous entitlement to sex as an instrument to validate insecurities about their masculinity and the belief that some incels are fundamentally precluded from its access.

The first element of this definition is the root cause to which incels ascribe their celibacy. Notably, the moderators include some hedging here to allow an incel to assign blame to an alternative source, such as poor social skills or social anxiety. However, “usually” implies that the most common reason someone might claim incel identity is their physical appearance, and this is supported by the additional content of the subreddit’s wiki. Throughout this document, the moderators only mention social skills in passing when they include hyperlinks to a few communities devoted to sexual strategy towards the bottom of the page, and they are not mentioned at all in the FAQs. In contrast, the moderators offer a detailed list of physical features in the wiki which the community believes are preferred by women and therefore important determinants of an individual’s value as a sexual partner, including a muscular frame with big bones (Wiki, Line 21), a strong and protruding jawline (Line 22), high testosterone (Line 23), and a positive canthal tilt (Line 20), which occurs when the outer corner of the eye is higher than the inner corner. Incels might lack one or more of these traits, so when comparing their physicality to that of other men, they believe themselves to be inferior. The r/Braincels community has developed novel subcultural terminology to illustrate this sort of comparative masculinity. In the community vernacular, to demonstrate one’s superiority over another man is to “mog” him, a neologism derived from the acronym AMOG, which stands for “alpha male of group” (Wiki, Line 26). For instance, height is of crucial importance to most incels, with 6’0” generally being considered the minimum a woman would accept in a sexual partner. As such, a tall man can be described as “height-mogging” a short man, or conversely a short man can be “height-mogged” by a tall man.

The second element of the moderators’ definition is the cause-effect relationship they draw between incels’ physical inferiority and their inability to access sex. This claim is a product of incels’ extreme interpretation of the sexual marketplace, a concept which first emerged from TRP (see [2.1.2](#)). TRP believes that sex is a commodity women control and whose access is dependent on a man’s ability

to conform to hegemonic ideals for masculinity. The summation of a man's socially desirable traits is said to be his sexual market value (SMV), and it is with this metric that women determine which of their prospective sexual partners is most worthy. One key difference between TRP and incel interpretations of the sexual marketplace is that TRP teaches that SMV is flexible and can be increased in a variety of ways, including the use of PUA sexual manipulation techniques, displaying wealth or status, and honing one's physical appearance, whereas incels believe that physical appearance is paramount. In fact, the pre-eminence of physical attractiveness in determining SMV leads many members of r/Braincels to refer to the concept simply as lookism. Under the principles of lookism, women only choose the most attractive men as sexual partners, while the inferior men that are mogged by alpha males are rejected and marginalised. Just as in the above case, r/Braincels has developed novel language to describe this concept, referring to the maxim which guides a woman in determining her sexual partner as "alpha fucks, beta bux" (Wiki, Line 32). This phrase is composed of two propositions. In the first is the claim that women prefer the physical superiority of an alpha male, which allows this small percentage of men to monopolise the supply of sex in the sexual marketplace. The second refers to the fate of lesser so-called beta males, whose only value as a sexual partner is to act as a financial provider to women who no longer have the social or sexual capital to attract an alpha male. Opportunities for betas to access sex are therefore scant and highly competitive, but they still do exist.

The final element of the moderators' definition is the reference they make to the goal that unites incels—a desire to transcend their incel status and one day enter a "sexual and/or romantic relationship". In their wording here, the moderators are careful to distinguish between the physical act of sex and sex which contains an element of romance, implying that they are equally acceptable outcomes. However, in actual practice, incels are not interested in casual or emotionally detached sex. Instead, they believe in transformative power of sex, which is reflected in the language the members of r/Braincels use to talk about it, referring to sex as "ascension". In their definition of ascension, r/Braincels moderators state that "an incel who visits an escort, prostitute, or pays someone for sex is still considered an incel among the community...because to ascend, it is required for a woman to be genuinely and willingly interested in you as a person on a romantic or sexual level" (Wiki, Line 3). This passage makes it clear that incels' goal of ascension is not merely to have sex, because if it were, prostitution or similarly emotionally detached sex would be permitted. Rather, they desire sex because its access allows them to enact normative masculinity. A second passage about sex workers in the FAQs makes the transformative power incels ascribe to sex even more explicit:

"Incels (largely) don't want a sex object. They want to be wanted by a woman, sexually or romantically. They want validation. They want romance. They want a

relationship. They don't want to be alone. They want to feel normal and experience something most people can with ease." (FAQ6)

Together, the desired outcomes enumerated here reflect the community's collective anxieties about sex and relationships. Like the community of early incels profiled by Donnelly and colleagues (2001), the community of r/Braincels interprets their inability to access sex as an indication that they are off time with their peers. In this way, incels place enormous value on sex because they view its access as something which allows them to transcend their subordinated incel status and conform to societal expectations for normative masculinity.

In addition to confirming findings about incels being off time with a normative sexual trajectory, this study of how r/Braincels moderators articulate the definition of involuntary celibacy makes two findings which supplement academic understanding of incel identity. First, while early incel groups were found to contain approximately equal numbers of virginal, single, and partnered celibates (Donnelly et al. 2001), the literature frequently characterises modern incels as virgins only (Bratich & Banet-Weiser 2019; Jaki et al. 2019; Stijelja 2021). The definition of involuntary celibacy analysed here shows that this is not necessarily true, as it only refers to the present inability to access sex rather than total sexual inexperience. The second finding of this section relates to how the community constructs sex as ascension. This language reflects a common attitude of entitlement to sex in r/Braincels because it is seen as an instrument whose access allows those who are off time with the normative sexual trajectory to literally transcend their incel status and achieve conformity. This finding comports with CJ Pascoe's (2011) ethnography of adolescent masculinity, which found that young men practise compulsive heterosexuality as a social proof of masculinity. Ascension therefore represents a repudiation of the spectre of failed masculinity, and, conversely, failure to ascend implies that an incel's body is a site of failed masculinity.

3.2 Constructing the incel worldview

The definition of involuntary celibacy provided by the community's moderators contains three core criteria that can be used to determine who qualifies for incel status: perceived physical inferiority, the resulting inability to access sex, and the goal of ascension. Any man who meets these criteria could justifiably claim incel identity and be granted in-group membership. However, the community on r/Braincels is far from homogenous. The moderators' definition is quite broad, making no mention of virginity (only the present inability to access sex) and allowing incels to identify as such for reasons other than physical appearance. As a result, there is a surprising amount of diversity in r/Braincels—in terms of its members' sexual experience, the reason they identify as an incel, and their overall outlook on the attainability of ascension. These differentiating factors cause two major ideological subdivisions to arise within the r/Braincels community. This section begins by describing those two

subdivisions. It then examines how the moderators regard the purpose of their community relative to the competing factions it hosts. Finally, this section examines how moderators construct key out-groups within the incel worldview. For a visualisation of the incel worldview, see Figure 6.

The first ideological subdivision on r/Braincels emerges from disagreements over the mutability of SMV, which produces two competing interpretations of incel ideology that coexist on r/Braincels. Like the other factions of the Manosphere, incels adapt the red pill metaphor to describe this subdivision. The first faction is called the red pill, which the moderators define as being based upon the belief that “a person's personality, actions and status are the most important factors in attracting women” (Wiki, Line 70). This includes any exceptional cases of incels who are celibate for reasons other than physical appearance, such as mentalcels who claim incel identity due to mental illness or non-neurotypicality (Wiki, Line 60), as well as any incels who maintain that they have an internal locus of control over their sexual fate and accordingly work to increase their SMV and corresponding chances of ascension. The most common techniques red-pillers use to increase their SMV are PUA sexual manipulation tactics and looksmaxing, which is an umbrella term for the various strategies a man might use to make himself more attractive, like weightlifting, getting a trendy haircut, or buying expensive clothes and accessories (Wiki, Line 28).

The second pill philosophy on r/Braincels is a more severe version of the red pill called the black pill. The moderators define the black pill as an ideology predicated on the belief that “a person's face, height, race and frame/body structure are the most important factors in attracting women” (Wiki, Line 71). The black pill therefore constitutes a more absolutist interpretation of the sexual marketplace than the red pill, which moderators believe an incel gradually comes to accept due to the experience of “being a long-time incel” (Wiki, Line 7). In other words, black-pillers have experienced such prolonged celibacy that they have come to reject the red pill's premise that personality, actions, or social status has anything to do with SMV and instead assert that it is entirely determined by their genes and the value women ascribe to those genes. In this way, the locus of control over black-pillers' sexual fate is said to be external, so any effort to increase their SMV would be futile. The colour of the black pill therefore represents the rampant defeatism and nihilism of its adherents.

The difference in attitude between red and black pill philosophies regarding the attainability of ascension has an important implication, which I term the Black Pill Conundrum. Red- and black-pillers share the view that access to women's bodies can validate their masculinity and allow them to literally transcend their subordinated incel status, yet only red-pillers believe that they have a reasonable chance of obtaining that validation. On the other hand, black pill ideology is essentially an ideological dead end with no way for black-pillers to access sex. In this way, black pill beliefs are predicated on an irreconcilable conflict between entitlement to sex as a means of validating

insecurities about their masculinity and feeling fundamentally disqualified from its access. This central tension embedded within black pill philosophy suggests that its irreconcilability will cause those who adopt it to experience persistent feelings of masculinity crisis from the perception that they will never be able to become a man the only way they know how. One illustrative example of the Black Pill Conundrum's psychological effects can be seen in the writing of incel attacker Jake Davison, who wrote in one post to the community r/IncelExit that despite his best efforts to quit the ideology, the black pill "makes you feel like any self-improvement you do is never going to be enough" and that "my scars and damage will follow me forever" (Townsend 2021). For some, these feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness are so inescapable that they have attempted to die by suicide (Daly & Laskovtsov 2021), but as the above case demonstrates, it is also possible for black-pillers to respond violently, which reflects aggrieved entitlement and the need to enact revenge on others to compensate for the pain they have experienced (Kalish & Kimmel 2010).

The second ideological subdivision in r/Braincels is based on the degree to which an incel conforms to idealised incel masculinity. Lines 64-67 of the community wiki describe three distinct levels to incel masculinity, respectively called truecel, volcel, and fakecel. Truecel identity is determined by an incel's purity, which can be claimed if an incel is so physically repulsive that he approaches zero on the attractiveness rating scale or totally romantically inexperienced, such as never having kissed, hugged, or held hands with a woman. In other words, a truecel's masculinity is so irredeemable and his romantic prospects so bleak that he does not necessarily choose incel identity but in a sense has it foisted upon him. On the other hand, a volcel is someone who voluntarily abstains from interacting with women, perhaps for ideological reasons or resolute hatred for women. Finally, a fakecel is foil to truecel identity in that it is defined as someone who attempts to claim incel identity but is denied it and rejected by the community for having average looks, prospective romantic partners, or some other reason to inspire hope for ascension.

Together, the two ideological subdivisions within r/Braincels create a multitude of intersecting incel identities. To accommodate such ideological diversity, the moderators carefully avoid articulating the subreddit's purpose. In fact, they tend to speak more clearly about what the community is not than what it is. For example, the subreddit's mission statement is clearly visible at the top of the sidebar, where the moderators describe the community as being intended to provide a "thought-provoking atmosphere for incel culture" and a "fresh, creative environment for involuntary celibates to hang out and partake in fulfilling conversation". This ill-defined vision of their community's purpose has two key functions. First, it avoids preferencing any ideological subdivision over the others, allowing them to coexist. Indeed, the moderators go to great effort to remain neutral on all matters that might divide the community; they deny being a support group for incels (FAQ14), which would

require them to take a firm stance on what kind of support incels might require, and in response to questions of whether incels work to better their circumstances (FAQ8) or have given up on dating (FAQ9), they stress that each incel is different and his beliefs personal. The second function of the community's vague mission statement is counter common media characterisations of incels as a hate group. However, when this question is addressed more directly in the FAQs, the moderators are unconvincing. Rather than denying that incels hate women, the moderators admit that "the majority [do] very loosely" and then attempt to downplay this startling admission by characterising it as "barely even hate, not like you'd see from a Klansman to a black person" (FAQ15). Perhaps even more alarmingly, the moderators make further efforts to rationalise the misogyny of its members by claiming that any hate speech in their community is hyperbolic and merely a means for venting frustration, or by making false equivalences with "radical Feminazis who stereotype men and hold bitterness against them" (FAQ15). Finally, in response to the well-documented history of incel violence (see [2.3.2](#)), the moderators state the following: "Incels have no common goal and are much too disorganised to be considered a hate group...a few insane outliers may exist and appear on the news once they commit an act of terror, but they've all worked alone with no encouragement or aid from the community" (FAQ15).

Consistent with the use of the red pill metaphor to describe its key in-groups, out-groups on r/Braincels are designated with the blue pill. In *The Matrix*, the blue pill was the choice given to the protagonist which would allow him to remain in his comforting but false reality. For this reason, blue-pillers include anyone who does not meet the three incel criteria, remains unaware of incel ideology, or who rejects it and willingly participates in the sexual marketplace. Unsurprisingly, the r/Braincels community has created a large amount of subcultural terminology to describe the rigidly differentiated social categories into which they divide blue pill men and women. Due to its basis in sexual economics theory, this is accomplished by applying SMV as an organising principle, which distributes men and women along a bell curve according to their physical attractiveness on a scale of 1—10. The most attractive men (rated >8/10) are deemed "Chads" (Wiki, Line 8), a term derived from the association of the name with stereotypical masculinity (Know Your Meme 2012). Those who are almost as attractive as Chad (6.5—7.99/10) are called "Brad" or "Chad-lite" (Wiki, Line 9). The market of available blue pill women closely mirrors this pattern. The most attractive women are called "Stacy" (Wiki, Line 14) and her slightly less attractive counterpart "Becky" (Line 15). However, most men and women have only moderate SMV (<6.5/10), and because this places them at the centre of the bell curve, they are called "normies" (Wiki, Line 4).

When applied to these hierarchical social categories, the incel interpretation of the sexual marketplace creates a complex system of social climbing and sexual scarcity. This is because the incel

worldview incorporates TRP's concept of hypergamy, in which women only choose sexual partners whose SMV who can elevate their social status or ensure them access to better genetic or financial resources (Baele, Brace & Coan 2019). In this worldview, Chads have maximal SMV, allowing them to have sex with both Stacys (to whom they have equivalent SMV) and Beckys (who wish to elevate their social status by having sex with a higher-ranking partner). This pattern of social climbing is then repeated with lower castes of blue pill men and women. Brads have sex with low-ranking Beckys and high-ranking female normies, while the large population of male normies is left to compete for the small number of low-ranking women who remain. Naturally, this imbalance between the large number of male normies competing for sex and the small number of women who can supply it leads to a sort of sexual scarcity, which causes a large percentage of the male population to be unable to access sex, despite having moderate SMV.

The final social category in the incel worldview is therefore incels themselves, whose physical inferiority is so extreme that they have no sexual capital to offer women in exchange for access to their bodies. As a result, incels believe that they are prejudicially marginalised within the sexual marketplace, often without ever having a legitimate opportunity to compete for sex. One would expect that the least attractive women on the bell curve would experience a similar fate, but incels deny that any such "femcels" are legitimate. In fact, incels believe that the rules of sexual marketplace make female incels a logical impossibility. The moderators explain:

"Femcels acknowledge the fact that they could easily get sexual attention if they desired, but they can't hold down a partner that wants them for anything more than one-night stand or a [friends with benefits] situation. They could probably also get in a shitty relationship with a nobody loser (like an incel) or another low-value male, but they obviously don't want that as the relationship might not be stable or it's not the type of relationship they want." (FAQ7)

Essentially, to an incel, any woman who is celibate makes the voluntary choice to avoid sexual attention, fundamentally disqualifying her from identifying as an involuntary celibate.

In all, this examination of how the moderators construct in- and out-groups within the incel worldview confirms the findings of previous researchers who described incel ideology as being predicated on an amalgamation of concepts borrowed from TRP—namely the sexual marketplace, SMV, and hypergamy—which are used to divide men and women into Chads, Stacys, normies, and incels (Baele, Brace & Coan 2019; Jaki et al. 2019). This analysis also confirms that there are ideological barriers to women's membership in incel communities (Cottee 2021) and that their members are divided into red and black pill factions (Baele, Brace & Coan 2019; Bratich & Banet-Weiser 2019; Jaki et al. 2019). However, this section also identifies two significant areas in which incel ideology as represented on r/Braincels differs from how it is described in the literature.

First, this section recognises that there is a central irreconcilable conflict embedded within black pill philosophy, which I term the Black Pill Conundrum. Both pill factions on r/Braincels share an attitude of entitlement to sex, but only red-pillers believe that they have the power to influence their SMV and make ascension a realistic possibility. On the other hand, the black pill is essentially a form of genetic determinism, so its adherents accept a worldview in which their SMV is immutable and ascension is permanently out of reach. The second finding in this section is that in addition to subdividing itself according to preferred pill philosophy, r/Braincels subdivides itself between truecels, volcels, and fakecels. While pill philosophies are determined by a user's beliefs regarding the mutability of SMV, the truecel-volcel dynamic is based on the degree to which an incel believes he conforms to idealised incel masculinity, which is essentially an inversion of hegemonic ideals. For instance, an incel might consider his construction of masculinity to be pure if he is extremely physically repulsive or totally romantic inexperienced, such as never having kissed or held hands with a woman. This second ideological subdivision allows for the creation of hierarchies of incel masculinity, within which only the most unattractive, embittered, and irredeemable incels are recognised as exemplars of pure incel masculinity. On the other hand, a volcel is someone who voluntarily abstains from relationships with women, which parallels MGTOW ideology described in [2.1.3](#).

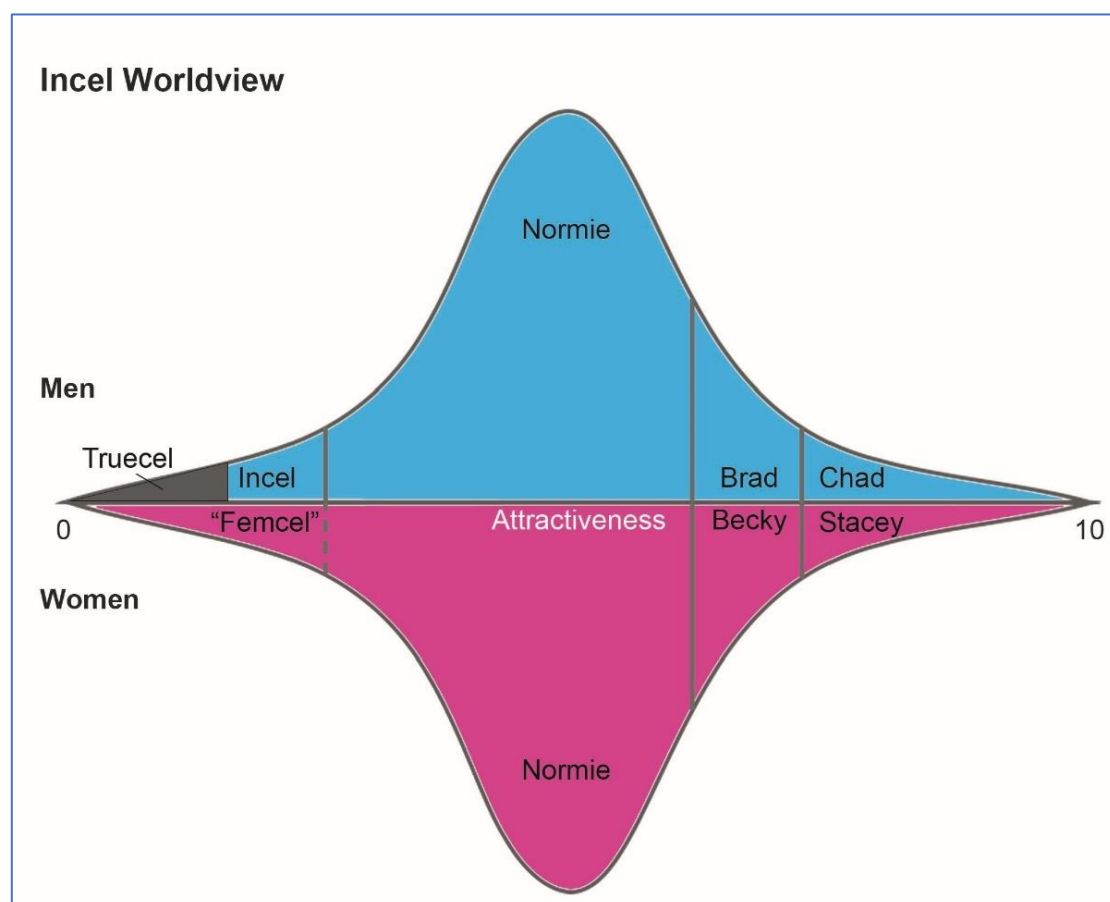


Figure 6: a diagram of the incel worldview
Femcels are placed in scare quotes because incels typically deny their existence.

3.3 Mapping Reddit's incelosphere

The Reddit algorithm is designed to compile a scrollable newsfeed of highly upvoted posts a user's subscriptions. Although Chapter 5 later provides evidence that some users create specialised accounts for participation in r/Braincels, it is expected that per Reddit's site design and participatory culture, most of its subscribers also consume content from and participate in other communities. However, this research emphasises researcher safety by using archival data, making it difficult to study the behaviour or track the movement of individual users. Moreover, for ethical reasons this thesis prefers to focus on the community dynamics that amplify incel discourses rather than singling out individual users. This section therefore uses the series of subreddits recommended by the community's moderation team as a proxy to gain insight into incels' participatory habits outside r/Braincels. In doing so, these findings provide evidence of how the membership of r/Braincels potentially impacts the composition of other subreddits. It also identifies key problem areas where potential recruits may unwittingly interact with incels and be exposed to incel content.

Perhaps to compensate for the subreddit's poorly articulated purpose, the moderators of r/Braincels provide their subscribers a range of hyperlinks throughout the moderator documents to 86 subreddits which members could use to diversify their subscriptions—48 in the FAQs, 30 in the wiki, 5 in the sidebar, and 3 which appear in more than one location. In each of these documents, the subreddits are annotated and grouped thematically. Of these 86 communities, the moderators recommend that users consider subscribing to 82 of them because their content could benefit incels or is related to incel ideology in some way, while the remaining four are designated as out-groups incels should avoid. During my analysis, I visited each community to check whether it was still active on Reddit, the nature of its content, and how it was related to incel ideology. This section presents the results of that analysis to map the footprint of r/Braincels users on Reddit, beginning with the recommended subreddits and then providing a brief overview of r/Braincels' designated out-groups. For a categorical breakdown, see Table 2. For a visualisation of this data, see Figure 7. For a more detailed overview, including the names of each subreddit, where the hyperlink appeared, its status on Reddit, and the date it was sanctioned (where applicable), see [Appendix C](#).

Table 2: r/Braincels recommended subreddits

<i>n</i> =82	Category	Number
Explicitly incel affiliated	1. Historical	16
	2. Niche	29
	3. Legitimation	8
Public	4. General support	10
	5. Looksmxing	7
	6. Sexual strategy	6
	7. Legitimation	6

The series of 82 recommended subreddits can be divided into seven different categories according to the reasons the moderators publicly endorsed them. First, Categories 1-3 are explicitly related to incel ideology, and they account for approximately two-thirds (n=53) of the data sample. Category 1 consists of 16 historical incel communities, all of which had been banned prior to the date that the moderator documents were last saved. Category 2 contains 29 niche subreddits, which were either aimed at a specific sub-group of incel masculinity or produced content that is/was meant to be consumed alongside that of more general incel subreddits like r/Braincels. For example, there were communities founded specifically to cater to short incels (r/Manletcels, r/Shortcels), incels with mental health problems (r/Mindcels), and specific national or ethnic groups (r/IncelItalia, r/Balkanceli, r/Ricecels, r/Melanincels). This category also includes subreddits that were founded by incels for producing media (r/IncelPodcast), matchmaking (r/IncelDate, r/OgreDate), and emotional support (r/RejectionSupport, r/IncelAdvice, r/Sadcels). One of the most interesting subreddits in this category is r/IncelsWithoutHate, which was created to counter common characterisations of incels as a hate group, but whose existence implies that hate speech is welcome in other incel communities. While all these niche communities were still active on Reddit at the time the moderators recommended them, nine have since been banned and four have gone private to protect themselves from outside scrutiny. This includes r/IncelsWithoutHate, which was ironically banned for promoting hate speech in March 2021. The remaining 16 niche subreddits have been abandoned; that is, they were unable to attract enough traffic and fell into disuse, with some not having received a submission in more than two years. Finally, Category 3 consists of eight communities which are/were sponsored by incels to legitimate their ideology. Specifically, six of the eight were founded to disseminate anecdotal evidence or a pseudoscientific rationalisation for the incel worldview by sharing incel selfies or cherry-picked studies and news articles about dating, while the final two were created to increase public awareness of incel ideology by fielding questions from curious outsiders. These eight subreddits were all active at the time they were recommended, but two have since been banned, four have been abandoned, one has gone private. Just one (r/BlackPillScience) is still active and unrestricted on Reddit.

The remaining 29 communities which comprise Categories 4-7 are public subreddits. In other words, they are large, widely trafficked, and have limited intersection with incel ideology. Like the incel-affiliated subreddits described above, these communities can be categorised according to the content that they produce. First, Category 4 includes ten subreddits that the moderators recommend because they provide general support or advice that incels might find useful. These communities cover a range of topics, including conversation skills, dating advice, motivational content, mental health, confidence building, and self-improvement. Category 5 includes seven subreddits which produce similar content but focus more so on physical appearance, such as weight loss, physical fitness,

fashion, grooming, hair, and skin care. Again, these communities are not affiliated with incel ideology in any way but are recommended nonetheless because the red pill faction of r/Braincels might receive valuable advice or feedback there for the purposes of looksmaxing.

Categories 6 and 7 have more significant but still incomplete intersection with incel ideology, which suggests that incels likely account for a considerable amount of these subreddits' subscribers, but the majority are still non-incels. These subreddits therefore carry the most significant risk that non-incels will be exposed to anecdotes of lookism and genetic determinism while participating there. Category 6 consists of six subreddits which are devoted to sexual strategy, the majority of which are closely aligned with TRP. Only one of these (r/seduction) explicitly disavows incels and sets rules designed to limit incel content. Category 7 is comprised of six public communities that are recommended because their content legitimates incel ideology in some way. Five of these were founded to provide their audience attractiveness ratings on a scale of 1-10, while the final subreddit is devoted to discussing evolutionary psychology, one of the foundational elements of sexual economics theory. Even though these subreddits are not controlled by incels or affiliated with their ideology, they nonetheless have the collective function of providing anecdotal support for incel beliefs about lookism and the importance of physical attractiveness in determining the outcome of sexual relationships. For instance, one of these communities is called r/EqualAttraction, which exists to rate the attractiveness of user selfies and then suggest a member of the opposite sex with the same rating. Even though this community does not support the incel worldview, its content lends credibility to the incel belief that sexual relationships are primarily formed based on physical attractiveness. A second subreddit which performs a similar function is r/TrueRateMe, which purports to be a more scientific and "brutally honest" version of its larger competitor r/RateMe. Despite having a rule which disallows incel language in posts or comments, this community still contains several dog whistles to incel ideology. It provides its users a detailed guide on how to objectively rate someone's sexual attractiveness, including rating criteria and extensive examples. A person's overall rating in this subreddit is analogous to SMV, and indeed, many of the criteria in the r/TrueRateMe ratings guide echo the physical features described by r/Braincels moderators, such as jaw shape and eye angle. Moreover, one of the examples for a very unattractive male (rated 2/10) is a picture taken from a popular incel meme of Blackops2cel, one of their patron "saints" (see Figure 15 in [5.2](#)).

Just as the moderators recommended a series of subreddits to which incels ought to consider subscribing, they also warn their users to avoid certain communities, albeit on a much smaller scale. Specifically, the moderators designate four subreddits as out-groups. First, there is r/IncelTears, a sort of watchdog community which exists to monitor (and often ridicule) the content posted in incel subreddits. Despite the actions of its users, r/IncelTears does make the effort to reach out to incels by

hosting weekly Q&A threads, but the frequent conflict between the two communities means that most incels are hesitant to accept any advice offered there. In fact, the moderators go on a lengthy diatribe about their grievances with r/IncelTears in the wiki:

“They are filled with platitudes and repeated generic advice, invalidate the idea that looks/height/race/gender play an important role in one's dating/sexual success, will dogpile you if you say something controversial, are not very appreciative of self-identified incels, and are a huge circlejerk composed of mentally ill trannies, feminist landwhale thots, people that spend all their time obsessing over virgin losers on the internet, and armchair psychologists that think therapy is the answer to everything.” (Wiki, Line 88)

The second designated out-group is r/TheBluePill, which serves a similar watchdog purpose as r/IncelTears, except that it monitors r/TheRedPill. Third is r/ForeverAlone, a subreddit which on the surface appears to have a similar purpose to r/Braincels. The moderators admit that it is “somewhat like incels,” but insist that are separated by “a lack of belief in the black pill, a disregard for casual sex, and that the community welcomes women” (Wiki, Line 6). The final out-group is r/TruFemcels. As elucidated in [3.2](#), the incel worldview excludes women from membership, so in the words of the moderators, not even this community has any femcels, but “just a bunch of confused women using the term ‘incel’ incorrectly...most of them belong on r/ForeverAlone” (Wiki, Line 5).

In all, the range of subreddits discussed throughout the moderator documents creates a detailed image of Reddit’s incelosphere by providing insight into the habits of r/Braincels users outside the community. The 82 subreddits the moderators endorse have varying degrees of intersection with incel ideology, so it is likely that the proportion of the subscribers there who identify as an incel similarly varies. Still, the findings of this section indicate that Reddit’s connective affordances engender the formation of complex collectives of users whose networks are not confined by the subreddit structure. Moreover, several of the public subreddits that moderators recommend present considerable risk to the general Reddit population because they exist to foster discussions about sexual relationships and how to objectively rate someone’s sexual attractiveness. As a result, the content produced in these communities has the potential to legitimise incel beliefs, and participation by incels there risks exposing unwitting users to their anecdotes about lookism, hypergamy, and genetic determinism.



Figure 7: a sunburst chart of r/Braincels' recommended subreddits
 From inside out: 1) Affiliation, 2) Purpose, 3) Status on Reddit (excludes designated out-groups)

3.4 A history of r/Braincels on Reddit

The data that forms the basis of this section was obtained from 38 posts which were identified using Post 154, which lists the subreddit's founder and members of the moderation team. Of these posts, 25 were made by the community's founder and the remaining 13 were made by various users posting in their official capacity as moderator. Collectively, these posts allow a great deal of the subreddit's history to be reconstructed, including the reason it was founded, the actions and attitudes of its moderation team, and the community's relationship with site administrators. In all, this history reveals how turnover in the community's moderation team caused the subreddit to undergo a significant amount of ideological drift to cater to increasingly extreme audiences. A timeline of key dates in

r/Braincels history is provided in Figure 8, while Figure 9 presents an overview of key moderators' tenure.

r/Braincels was founded on 21 Oct 2017 by a user who I refer to pseudonymously as u/AA. At this time, r/Braincels was just one of many incel communities hosted on Reddit, the largest of which was r/incels. For this reason, r/Braincels was initially founded to produce niche content that could be consumed alongside that of larger and more general incel communities. Specifically, u/AA intended r/Braincels to be a discussion forum for high-brow or academic topics, hence the portmanteau of "brain" and "incels". For instance, u/AA allowed users to repost "intellectual" threads from r/incels and even devoted one of his earliest posts to the 2017 Catalan independence referendum (Post 2). When r/incels was banned on 7 November 2017, u/AA openly courted its former members by making a post welcoming newcomers from "a certain subreddit that was deleted...with open arms" (Post 3). Within just a few hours, however, u/AA was forced to make a second post noting the "drop in quality of this sub[reddit]", as users from r/incels joined en masse and posted large amounts of low-quality inflammatory content, faster than he as the lone full-time moderator could manage (Post 4). As a result, u/AA invited users to help him maintain his vision for the subreddit by policing others' behaviour, especially those who had come from another community to antagonise members or "incels of the lookist variety" (i.e., black-pillers) who had been reposting "the same 2-3 *borderline illegal* threads" from r/incels (Post 9, emphasis in original).

Reddit's policy when a new subreddit is created or an existing one repurposed to replicate a banned subreddit has long been to ban that community for "ban evasion" (RedditHelp 2020). With the influx of new subscribers from r/incels, u/AA was having a great deal of difficulty maintaining control over public discourse on r/Braincels, causing its users to fear that they too would soon be banned. To keep the subreddit "friendly, creative, and stimulating", u/AA sought a second full-time moderator (Post 5). When his first choice abused his privileges and was stripped of his duties within an hour for aggressively banning users who disagreed with him (Posts 10 & 11), u/AA decided to take a drastically different approach by appointing a woman who had been an active participant in the community from the beginning. Although there is no post retrieved in data collection confirming the exact date when she was appointed, posts which refer to her as a moderator suggest that this took place no later than 2 January 2018. This user, who I refer to pseudonymously as u/BG, was instrumental in helping r/Braincels maintain good standing with the site administrators in the critical few months after r/incels was banned by helping stabilise the moderation team and ensure more of its content was manually moderated. As one of her future colleagues would later attest, "You may not see it, but she did a lot for this sub...it would have been banned a long time ago without her" (Post 60). However, u/BG's presence on r/Braincels also created tension with its members, who shared the

belief that women were fundamentally precluded from claiming incel identity and that her mere presence therefore infringed upon their homosocial space. One user went so far as to compare her role as moderator to “Hitler being made leader of a Jewish community” (Post 41, 81 upvotes, 53% upvoted). Perhaps to ease this tension, a third full-time moderator, here referred to as u/IQ, was appointed on 26 February 2018. Because u/AA was a self-identified red-pillar and u/BG a woman, this user celebrated his appointment in a public pronouncement where he wrote that it was “good to say there is finally real incel representation on the moderation team” (Post 16).

Within eight weeks of u/IQ’s appointment to the moderation team, the r/Braincels founder would experience a serious mental health crisis, setting off a chain of events that would ultimately allow u/IQ to complete his takeover of the subreddit. On 14 April 2018, u/AA submitted Post 23, in which he reported difficulty with his mental health treatment, and eight days later he posted a suicidal poem titled “Cyclic Misery” (Post 25). Later that evening, u/AA announced that he had decided to step down as moderator, leaving u/BG and u/IQ to share the moderation duties equally (Post 26). The very next day, on 23 April 2018, incel terrorist Alek Minassian committed his van attack in Toronto, and the subreddit u/AA had founded was resultingly featured in a number of high-profile news articles (e.g., Collins & Zadrozny 2018). Perhaps as a result of this journalistic attention, u/AA’s mental health worsened over the next week, culminating in a 48-hour period from 27-29 April 2018 in which he made six posts that reported how he had stopped taking his antidepressants (Post 33), that he believed himself to be schizophrenic (Post 30), and that he feared the users of r/IncelTears were “being coached by the FBI” in psychological warfare and collaborating with Reddit administrators to harass incels and convince him to die by suicide (Post 34). After a pause of about 18 hours, u/AA made a follow-up post retracting his claims and blaming his outburst on a “partially dormant psychosis that gets triggered when I have a mood episode” (Post 35). He then went silent for three weeks before posting a suicide note to r/Braincels on 20 May 2018, in which he blamed America for his death because “American culture views people like me as garbage and has no intention of improving our lives” (Post 40). His Reddit account has since been deleted.

Following the apparent suicide of its founder, u/BG and u/IQ were able to maintain an uneasy status quo as co-moderators for about four months, when on 28 September 2018 the community was unexpectedly quarantined by Reddit site administrators due to the “high degree of misogyny present” (Post 49). One might expect the r/Braincels community to respond to this news with trepidation, as if it were the first step in their community being banned. However, the quarantine was largely celebrated on r/Braincels in the belief that it would further insulate them from the normies of Reddit by making their subreddit harder to access (Posts 54, 56-58). However, there were a minority of users who interpreted the subreddit’s quarantine through a frame of their victimhood complex. To

illustrate, one user created a post which compared Reddit quarantine to the Holocaust (Post 50; see Figure 10), where the top commenter maintained this comparison by referring to the yellow content warning label applied to quarantined subreddits (visible at the top of the sidebar in Figure 1 in [1.3](#)) as their own version of the Nazi's yellow star.

About a month later, on 21 October 2018, u/BG unexpectedly stepped down as moderator after entering a relationship, which she believed made it difficult for her to moderate a community of incels in good faith (Post 60). This left u/IQ as the sole full-time moderator, and within a day, he appointed an entirely new moderation team, thereby consolidating power and completing his takeover of the subreddit. (Among these appointments were u/UB and u/KM, whom the *archive.today* snapshot respectively captured as having most recently edited the wiki and FAQs.) In just over a year, the community had undergone a startling transformation from a niche academically inclined discussion group for incels to a virtual clone of its more extreme predecessor r/incels. Despite this, r/Braincels was allowed to remain on Reddit for nearly another year beyond this point, before ultimately being banned on 30 September 2019.

One additional feature of quarantine on Reddit is that it hides a subreddit's subscriber count, which is intended to slow the growth of a quarantined subreddit by making it difficult for visitors to ascertain its popularity. However, the moderators were able to easily circumvent this limitation by making public posts about their subscriber count and regularly updating that number within the text of the sidebar. For instance, Post 52 was made by u/BG the day after r/Braincels was quarantined to claim that the community had just reached the 40,000-subscriber milestone, and the final post obtained in data collection (made the day before r/Braincels was banned) shows a figure of just over 80,000 subscribers (Post 182), which would have made it approximately twice as large as its predecessor r/incels. While it is difficult to trust self-reported numbers from the moderation team, even a fraction of this figure is alarming and demonstrates how quickly and easily extremist subreddits can grow when left unchecked.

This section's reconstruction of the history of r/Braincels provides evidence that subreddits can experience ideological drift over time. When it was founded, r/Braincels was intended to be a moderate forum where incels could partake in intellectual discussion. Because it was founded before r/incels was deplatformed, the Reddit site administrators evidently did not consider r/Braincels to be a ban evasion subreddit and allowed it to stay online. Even when it experienced an influx of new subscribers from r/incels, no sanctions were applied because it was actively moderated by an ideologically balanced team consisting of a self-identified red-pill (u/AA) and a woman (u/BG), both of whom bore no relation to the more extreme black-pill-dominated r/incels. However, this change in the subreddit's composition was soon reflected in u/IQ's appointment to the moderation team, which

he characterised as “finally [bringing] real incel representation” to the moderation team (Post 16). This attitude demonstrates the ideological tension that existed between the red and black pill factions of r/Braincels due to black-pillers’ belief that their interpretation of the sexual marketplace is more legitimate. The apparent suicide of u/AA in April 2018 allowed the black pill faction of r/Braincels to expand its role on the moderation team, and it is evident that Reddit site administrators were aware of this ideological drift because they applied a quarantine to the subreddit in late September 2018. However, when u/BG resigned just weeks later, this left the subreddit under the sole power of u/IQ, who quickly appointed new moderation team, thereby completing the black pill takeover of the subreddit within just one year of its founding. Previous writings on incel ideology have portrayed it as a static set of beliefs generally held within a given community, but by taking a broader perspective which considers r/Braincels’ entire lifespan, it is evident that ideological drift within a community is possible, and in this specific case, it entailed a significant shift to accommodate users who favoured more extreme forms of incel ideology. This case study also demonstrates how effective platform governance requires site administrators to routinely check in with problematic communities to ensure that they continue to follow site-wide rules.

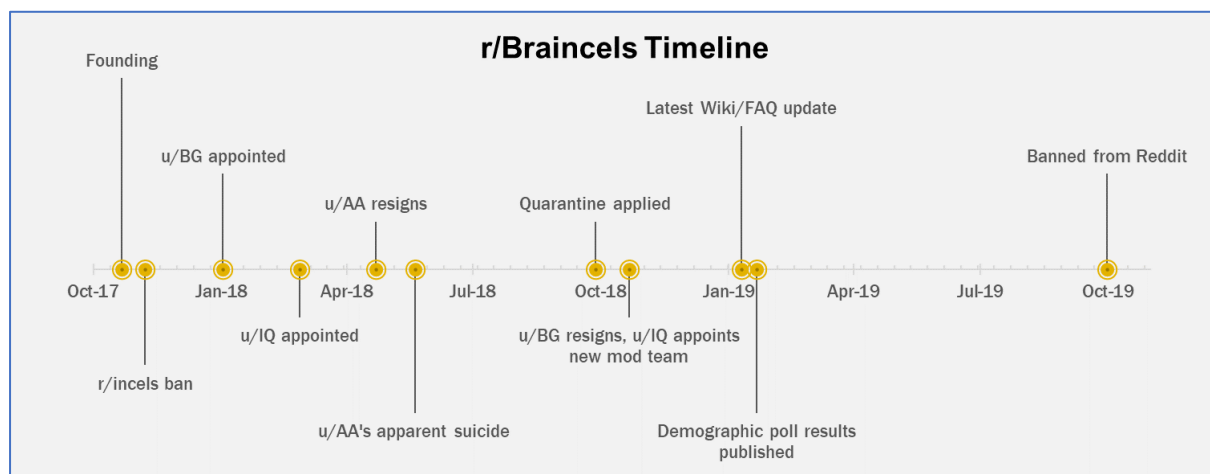


Figure 8: a timeline of key dates in r/Braincels history

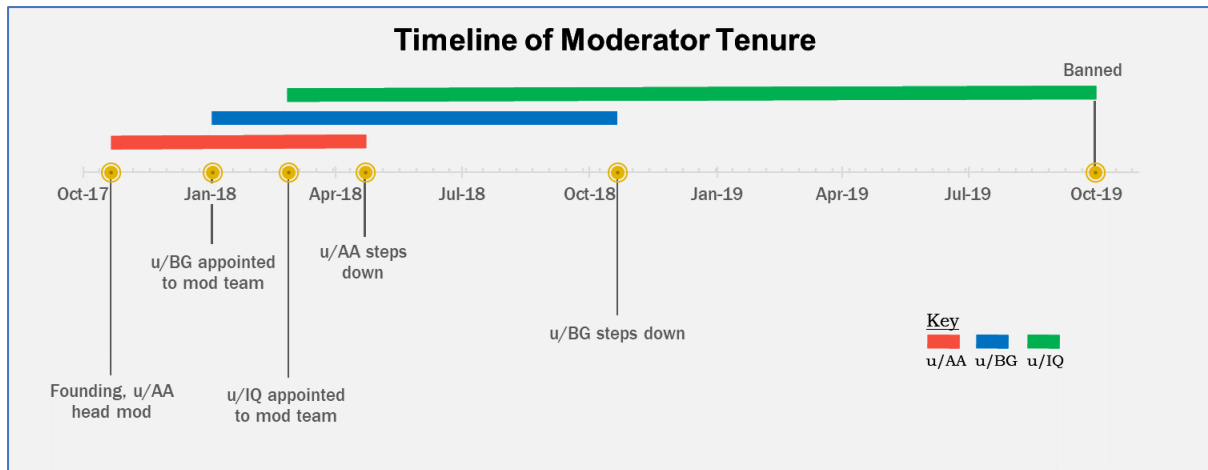


Figure 9: a timeline of key moderators' tenure on r/Braincels



Figure 10: an incel meme comparing Reddit quarantine to the Holocaust (Post 50)

3.5 Moderator influence over public discourse

On Reddit, a community's moderators play an important role in curating the content that is created and consumed in the subreddit they manage. This is due to the moderation and governance norms of Reddit, which respectively allow moderators to set rules for participation and require them to maintain regular oversight of the topic, content, and language of user submissions. Moderators can also pin posts to the top of the community's homepage to increase their visibility. Some of the community's moderators are also active participants in the subreddit, and their username is specially highlighted in green on any posts or comments they submit so that the public will recognise their authority. However, the moderation tool which gives moderators the most power to influence public discourse is the ability to filter posts or comments containing specific words or phrases. The final

section of this chapter presents an overview of how r/Braincels moderators influenced public discourse in their community. It begins by presenting an overview of the subreddit's world filters, contained within the community wiki. This is followed by a short discussion of the subreddit's unique rules, which are visible on the sidebar. In doing so, it is important to remember that this data was sourced from living documents composed by a moderation team that grew and changed over the course of the subreddit's history (see [3.4](#)). As such, the following discussion of moderators' collective approach to content moderation and regulating group membership similarly reflects the ideological drift elucidated above.

The bank of filtered words and phrases is located in the last line of the community's wiki. Like the rest of the wiki, the bank is a living document which the moderators update periodically. At the time it was captured by *archive.today*, the bank contained 168 unique words and phrases whose inclusion in a post or comment would result in it being automatically barred from publication. Six of these terms were duplicated (i.e., entered twice), and there were several more which shared language with another filtered term (e.g, kill/kill a woman, raped/brutally raped). The co-occurrence of these duplicate and overlapping terms suggests that the bank was compiled over time as the need arose rather than all at once. Overall, the filters are set to fulfill dual purposes of limiting content which could reflect poorly on the community and insulating incels from harassment or derogation by outsiders. More specifically, I divide the 168 words and phrases into three categories according to the reason why the moderators saw fit to include them. The following paragraphs present a brief overview of those categories, with examples included throughout. For a complete list of the community's filtered words, see [Appendix E](#).

Category 1 is the largest group of filtered terms (n=113, 67.9%). It consists of words and phrases which refer to acts of physical or sexual violence. Some of these terms are very general, such as 17 that refer to death or killing. There is also a handful of terms that refer to more specific acts of violence; 12 refer to various terms for beating or punching, 5 relate to cutting or stabbing, and there are also individual references to burning, bombing, and strangulation. All the above examples are gender-neutral, but there are many more filtered terms that are specific to violence against women. For example, this category includes 18 variations on the word "rape", including several which modify the spelling with symbols or accent marks, such that an incel might use to avoid detection from the automatic filters (e.g., r@pe, rapê, r-a-p-i-s-t). Still more words in this category refer to other acts of gendered violence like genital mutilation ("female circumcision"), molestation ("molest", "defile her"), and sexual slavery ("sold like cattle", "slave girls"). Perhaps the most shocking inclusion in this category is "prime age", which refers to young, underage, or virginal women. The remainder of violent terms in Category 1 refer to politicised acts of violence. In other words, they describe acts could be directed

at the public, be performed for a political reason, or contain dehumanising language historically associated with the subordination of marginalised peoples. For instance, the bank contains ten different terms for mass shootings and six more about using a van as a weapon, in a clear reference to the tactics used by incel terrorist Alek Minassian. This also includes dehumanising acts of violence like gassing, lynching, and stoning, which respectively were used in the Holocaust and in extrajudicial killings of people of colour, women, and homosexuals. Finally, there are several terms that refer to acts of killing that are done for political reasons or to further an ideology, such as “eliminate”, “execute”, and “genocide”.

Category 2 of filtered words and phrases is much smaller (n=36, 21.4%). It is composed of terms that an outsider might use to derogate an incel. This includes insults such as “virgin loser” or phrases which draw attention to the causes for an incel’s celibacy, like “this is why you’re a virgin” and “no wonder you are incel”. An outsider might also be able to humiliate an incel by alluding to their own sexual success with comments containing phrases like “my girlfriend”, “with a girl”, or “I’m fucking”. However, the most common theme for terms in this category is suicide. In all, 20 of the 36 terms here could be used to encourage someone to commit self-harm. Illustrative examples include “die incel”, “do the rope”, “livestream it”, “jump off a bridge”, and “slit your wrists”.

Finally, Baele, Brace & Coan (2019) report that in unmoderated incel communities such as *incels.me*, some incel attackers are memorialised as “patron saints”. Category 3 (n=18, 10.7%) is a small group of terms that refer to such incel saints and their actions. This might be in the form of specific names like “Elliot Rodger” or “Minassian”, titles for a revered attacker such as “supreme gentleman” or “St. Lepine”, or general phrases of approval that could be applied to future instances of incel violence, like “the hero we need”.

In addition to setting filters which monitor users’ language, moderators can exert influence over the content that is produced and consumed in their community by setting rules for participation. These rules are visible on the community’s sidebar, and like the other documents authored by moderators, they can be updated or changed at any time. For most of the community’s history, there were nine rules for participation, but an additional three were added sometime in May 2019, following u/IQ’s rise to head moderator. Overall, these rules have a variety of purposes; the original nine were intended to regulate the type of content posted in r/Braincels and insulate the community from outside harassment, while the final three set additional standards for in-group membership.

The first purpose that the r/Braincels rules serve is to forbid certain types of content from being posted in the community. Specifically, the moderators write five rules (Rules 1, 4, 6, 8, and 9) which respectively disallow Q&A threads, “low quality racebait”, incel selfies, photos of attractive men and women, and posts about r/IncelTears (although this final rule does not apply on Saturdays, when

rules are loosened to encourage members to save their best memes for the day with the highest traffic). Collectively, these rules ensure that the subreddit maintains a general purpose and that incels who want to post pictures of themselves or someone else are directed to one of the numerous recommended subreddits devoted to analysing and rating the attractiveness of men and women.

The second purpose of the subreddit rules is to insulate the community from outsiders who might insult or derogate incels. The remaining four of the original nine rules (Rules 2, 3, 5, and 7) were directed at outsiders to warn that anyone caught visiting from another community to manipulate voting, make posts generalising the community, virgin shame, or engage in any other kind of inflammatory behaviour would be banned and their post or comment deleted.

Finally, Rules 10-12 were added in 2019 following the takeover of the community's moderation team by u/IQ and his team of black-pillers (see [3.4](#)). These rules were written to fulfil a third purpose, which is to restrict group membership according to the ideological divide between the red and black pill factions of r/Braincels. Respectively, these rules ban teenagers, "failed normies", and femcels from joining and participating in the community.

On its face, the rules and word filters set by moderators appear to sufficiently fulfil their duty to site administrators. However, the overlapping and co-occurring terms contained within the bank of filtered words highlight how moderation practices on r/Braincels were more so reactive to the behaviour of its users than proactive. The myriad variations on the word "rape", for example, shows evidence of an ongoing game of cat and mouse between r/Braincels moderators and the community's users, who have learnt to adapt to and circumvent moderation practices instead of changing their behaviour. It is also worth remembering that a significant portion of both the subreddit's rules and words filters were composed to protect its subscribers from potentially embarrassing interactions with outsiders, rather than to protect the dignity of the marginalised groups incel rhetoric typically targets. For this reason, the question remains whether moderators' reactive moderation style was effectual in limiting toxicity on its platform, or simply the bare minimum required to avoid sanction. The following chapter examines the posts and comments submitted by public (i.e., non-moderator) members of r/Braincels to discuss and debate the various aspects of incel identity. Throughout this chapter, the reader is encouraged to remember that by virtue of their publication, these user submissions have already been assessed and approved according to the subreddit's moderation principles.

Chapter 4: r/Braincels as a networked public

The second chapter of this analysis of r/Braincels examines how the posts and comments submitted by its subscribers create the social formation of a networked public. Despite their physical distance, the disparate users who subscribe to r/Braincels can be considered a networked public because of the imagined collective that emerges through their interactions over shared media content (boyd 2010; Caliandro 2018). In the sidebar, the moderators state that the purpose of the subreddit is to be neither a hate group nor a support group, but “a fresh, creative environment for involuntary celibates to hang out and partake in fulfilling conversation”. This social formation therefore emerges when r/Braincels members submit posts and comments which discuss, debate, and contest the various aspects of incel identity outlined by the moderators, as well as contemporaneous offline events.

This chapter consists of five sections which analyse user-generated content on r/Braincels, as well as how its networked users interact in the comment section of those posts. First, [4.1](#) draws its data from Post 151, which was published by a member of the moderation team in January 2019 to announce the results of a survey they had conducted to gain more insight into the demographics of the subreddit’s most active users. As such, this section provides a brief overview of the age, location, and ethnicity of r/Braincels’ most active members. Next, there were 141 posts obtained in data collection that were submitted by general (i.e., non-moderator) members of the r/Braincels public. These 141 posts were submitted by 126 unique users, wherein the moderators set the comment section to be sorted by top (i.e., receiving the highest net score of up and down votes) by default. Because the community’s moderators consider the subreddit to have a broad purpose, there are a wide range of topics that user submissions might address. Critical discourse analysis was applied to the content of each of these posts and their top-level comments to determine which elements of incel identity were subject to debate on r/Braincels and what sort of comment section replies were consistently elevated to a position of visibility by the Reddit algorithm. This analysis revealed that there are four major spheres of public discourse on r/Braincels. Three of these correspond with the core elements of incel identity contained within the moderators’ definition. Accordingly, [4.2](#) relates to public discourses on physical inferiority, [4.3](#) relates to public discourses on celibacy, and [4.4](#) relates to public discourses on the goal of ascension. This is followed by [4.5](#), which discusses the fourth significant sphere of public discourse on r/Braincels, which is the major offline events occurring in its lifespan, namely the 2018 American midterm elections and several occurrences of incel violence.

4.1 The demographic composition of r/Braincels

The data which forms the basis of this section was taken from Post 151 (137 upvotes, 94% upvoted), which was published on 21 January 2019, a time when moderators report that the subreddit had just

eclipsed 50,000 subscribers. (It is not possible to verify this claim because Reddit quarantine hides a subreddit's subscriber count.) This milestone inspired the moderation team to conduct a survey to learn more about the demographics of its core users. Because the Manosphere is frequently associated with the Alt Right and white supremacy (Graff, Kapur & Walters 2019; Kelly 2017; Lyons 2017), incels are often presumed to be white. For this reason, the moderators' primary purpose in undertaking this poll seems to have been to disprove this notion. This is evident from the way the moderators first sampled user interest in having their demographics measured by creating a short one-question survey titled "Should r/Braincels make a race poll?". According to the screenshot included in the body of Post 151, this initial poll was completed by 121 unique users and received 91% support. Considering this evidence of "popular demand" for more comprehensive sampling, the moderators created a new poll nine days later via Google Forms, whose visibility was increased by pinning it to the top of the community's homepage. The poll was left open for two days, during which any visitor to r/Braincels could have viewed the poll and completed it. After the poll was closed, summary statistics were published in the body of Post 151, as well as a read-only Google Sheet containing the underlying raw data.

In all, the r/Braincels demographic poll consisted of three questions. In addition to ethnicity, this survey also included questions about respondents' age and geographic location. Notably, there was no question about the gender identity of respondents or romantic experience because as the moderator who published the results (u/KM) reasoned, "women obviously can't be incel" and "outside of escortcels, you obviously aren't an incel if you've had a date" (Post 151). There was also no question related to respondents' sexual orientation. Collectively, these significant omissions reflect the biases contained within the incel worldview described in [3.2](#), especially in terms of how it presumes relationships to be heteronormative, denies women membership, and constructs ascension as the transcendence of inceldom.

The data provided in Post 151 shows that the poll was completed by 1,267 unique users. Although this sample size is quite small, moderators report that the number of daily users at that time was only around 15,000. When this is taken into consideration, the sample size is sufficient to describe the community's most active members within a 4% margin of error and a 99% confidence level. However, these results also demonstrate that a large proportion of r/Braincels membership is composed of casual or inactive users, about which this poll can make no findings. Furthermore, in making the poll public, it raises the possibility that results could be manipulated by outsiders. The remainder of this section provides an overview of the survey results by question and then briefly discusses their significance. Together, the findings presented here supplement the literature by

providing a rough profile of who subscribes to and actively participates in an incel community. Exact numbers are provided in Tables 3-5. For a visualisation of the demographic data, see [Appendix D](#).

Question 1 in the survey asks users their geographical location. Respondents indicated that about half of r/Braincels' most active users live in North America, a third live in Europe, and the remaining sixth is distributed (in descending order) through Asia, Oceania, South America, and Africa. This geographical distribution largely conforms to the general Reddit population, as the United States accounts for 47% of Reddit's desktop traffic (Statista 2022). This finding is expected because there is no element of incel ideology that is specific to one geographic location.

Table 3: geographic distribution of r/Braincels users

n=1267	Number	Percent
North America	632	49.9%
Europe	406	32.0%
Asia	82	6.5%
Oceania	71	5.6%
South America	59	4.7%
Africa	17	1.3%

Question 2 relates to the age of respondents. Here, the moderators who wrote the survey provided seven options whose age divisions roughly aligned with the normative adolescent trajectory of completing high school, attending university, and graduating and entering the workforce. Results showed that the largest age group on r/Braincels by far is university aged (17-21, 40%). The second-largest age division is recent university graduates (ages 22-25, about 30%). Those in their late twenties (ages 26-29) and high schoolers (under 17) each account for about 10% of the community's total population, while those in their 30s (7.5%) and over 40 (2.5%) account for the final 10%. This is the first area in which differences emerge between the most active users of r/Braincels and the general Reddit population. Overall, just under 80% of survey respondents have graduated high school but are still under 30. Comparing this figure with the general Reddit population is complicated by the poor quality of data available on Reddit's age distribution. At present, the available data either does not use the same age divisions as the r/Braincels poll or focuses too narrowly on how age is distributed on the Reddit mobile app or among American users only. Still, best estimates suggest that about 20% of Reddit users are aged 10-19 and as much as 35% are over 30 (Statista 2021a, 2021b). From this, it is apparent that r/Braincels' proportion of under-18 and over-30 users is significantly smaller than that of the general Reddit population. This concentration of the r/Braincels userbase in the university or recent graduate age ranges aligns with research on both early and modern incel groups being off time with their peers and the normative sexual trajectory that begins at adolescence (Donnelly et al. 2001; Stijelja 2021). This finding also supports Grace Sharkey's (2022) characterisation of incels as being in a state of arrested development between boyhood and manhood. The best explanation for the absence

of under-18 incels lies with the findings of [3.4](#), which detailed the subreddit’s ideological drift towards the black pill, which is predicated on the belief that one can only claim incel identity following a period of prolonged celibacy (Wiki, Line 7). In fact, the demographic poll was conducted shortly after u/IQ assumed the role of head moderator and consolidated control of the subreddit. His new moderation team is responsible for writing the 2019 rules update (see [3.5](#)), one of which specifically barred teenagers from membership. Similarly, the limited presence of over-30 incels on r/Braincels can be ascribed to survivorship bias in the composition of the community, as those who eventually access sex and ascend would no longer be considered incels and have little reason to remain active participants.

Table 4: age of r/Braincels users

n=1267	Number	Percent
17-21	497	39.2%
22-25	361	28.5%
26-29	148	11.7%
Under 17	128	10.1%
30-35	68	5.4%
Over 40	34	2.7%
36-40	27	2.1%
No answer	4	0.3%

Question 3 relates to the racial or ethnic identity of r/Braincels users. Just over half of respondents identified as white, while the remainder identified as a racial or ethnic minority. Choices for minority incels in the poll included Black, East Asian, South Asian, Middle Eastern, Latino, two types of mixed race, and Jewish/other. Overall, minority respondents were distributed fairly equally amongst these sub-categories, with each accounting for between 5 and 10%. (The two types of mixed race combine to 5.2%.) Again, these results diverge from the general Reddit population, but in this case to much greater degree than it does with age. Although there is little authoritative data available on the ethnic or racial identity of Reddit users, existing research indicates that its structure, culture, and affordances favour white users (Kendall 2011; Massanari 2015). On the other hand, r/Braincels is divided into roughly equal white and non-white groups. Again, this discrepancy can be explained by the popularity of the black pill on r/Braincels, which claims race to be one of the most significant genetic components that can limit an incel’s SMV. This component of incel ideology creates an environment that is conducive to ethnic minority membership and participation in r/Braincels because it provides a logic of explanation for their celibacy that is entirely based on external factors.

Table 5: ethnicity of r/Braincels users

n=1267	Number	Percent
White	694	54.8%
South-Asian	125	9.9%
East-Asian	92	7.3%
Black	81	6.4%
Latino	72	5.7%
Jewish/Other	70	5.5%
Middle Eastern	67	5.3%
Mixed Asian/White	35	2.8%
Mixed Black/White	31	2.4%

4.2 Discourses on physical inferiority—It’s all about race

The first aspect of the moderators’ definition of involuntary celibacy pertains to the reason an incel believes he is unable to access sex. Reasons for red-pillers may be physical features, social skills, or a mix of both, while black-pillers assign all blame to genetic factors. Throughout the wiki and FAQs, the moderators provide detailed description of physical features that are widely held to be important determinants of SMV, including but not limited to facial symmetry, jaw shape, the angle of the eyes, race, and height. On r/Braincels, it is common for users to make posts in which they complain about one or more of these physical attributes having limited their desirability as a sexual partner. For instance, one of the most common features for users to complain about is their height. Post 156 is simply titled “Daily reminder”, and its body contains just one sentence, which read “the shorter you are as a man, the more toxic masculinity you show according to [women]”. A second user was more melodramatic and wrote that his father effectively “rapes me every day” because he was only 5’5” and “chose to reproduce” with a short woman (Post 157). As a result, the poster was only 5’4”, which made high school “a pretty shitty experience”.

Even when the title or content of a post does not explicitly address the poster’s physical inferiority, the Reddit algorithm can elevate comment section replies which redirect discussion towards that subject. This dynamic can be seen at play in Post 83, which consists of a screenshot taken from the subreddit r/ladyboners, which exists so members can post and discuss pictures of attractive men. This screenshot showed the comment section of a post there, where its users (presumably women) were talking about an actor’s cheekbones. For this reason, the r/Braincels member titled his post “Even r/ladyboners agree with the black pill”, with the implication being that the women in that screenshot placed a high value on cheekbones in determining SMV (154 upvotes, 98% upvoted). While the original poster likely intended his post to insult women by depicting them as hypocritical for denying the incel worldview yet confirming it with their actions, users in the comment section elevated replies which redirected discussion to the importance of bone structure in SMV. The top-voted

comment simply read “BONES determine your life” (102 upvotes, emphasis in original). Another top-level comment read “millimetres make male models...just 5mm of cheekbone can literally change a man's life” (35 upvotes). A third commenter posted a hyperlink to a picture of reality star and former basketball player Kris Humphries with the commentary that he would look like “a caveman incel if he had just a bit less bone...bone is EVERYTHING” (24 upvotes, emphasis in original). Each of these highly upvoted comments accomplished two things. First, they affirm the importance of bone structure in determining a man’s SMV. Then by extension, they emphasise how a man’s deficiencies in that regard can effectively disqualify him from consideration when a woman chooses a sexual partner. In this way, the r/Braincels public interprets their various physical inferiorities—whether it be bone structure, height, or anything else—as tantamount to pre-emptive rejection, even if they never actually approach a woman romantically. This attitude echoes the writing of incel terrorist Elliot Rodger and proto-incel George Sodini, the latter of which claimed to have been rejected by “30 million women” in his lifetime (Sodini 2009, Entries 5 & 15).

This attitude is not surprising given how the moderators talk about physical inferiority throughout the community wiki (see [3.1](#)). However, there is one topic where public opinion clearly and significantly diverges from the standards set by the community’s moderators—race. The moderators do not totally gloss over race; they mention it in their definition of the black pill as an example of a genetic component of SMV (Wiki, Line 71) and again when they list terminology for Chads of various races (Lines 10-12). Chad is presumed to be white, but other ethnicities are depicted as equally capable of achieving peak masculinity and given special names, like Tyrone (a Black Chad), Chadpreet (South Asian), Chang (East Asian), and Chaddam (Middle Eastern). Of course, there is also corresponding terminology for ethnic incels; an incel who believes that he is prejudged due to his race might identify as a blackcel, currycel, ricecel, or bombcel (Wiki, Lines 53-56). Although this terminology contains offensive racial stereotypes, it is interesting that the moderators do not explicitly portray race as an inherently limiting factor in the sexual marketplace. Rather, it is equally as possible an ethnic minority to end up a Chad as an incel.

In comparison, per the findings of [4.1](#), approximately half of r/Braincels’ most active users identify as an ethnic or racial minority, and for these users, race has a much more prominent role in determining SMV than it does for the moderators. Data collection yielded a significant number of posts and comments in which users express the belief that whiteness is inherently more valued by society, and as such, women prefer sexual partners with this more valuable genetic trait, thereby marginalising ethnic incels in the sexual marketplace. To illustrate, Post 169 was one of the most popular retrieved in data collection (233 upvotes, 95% upvoted). It consisted of a screenshot from Facebook about an Indian engineering student who wanted to study in America to find a white wife. The top-voted

comment on this post bluntly stated that “curries are straight up delusional...they are literally bottom of the totem pole when it comes to dating and they just don't get it” (142 upvotes). A second user replied to this comment, writing “lol seriously, I have a 5'6” curry friend who always does up his hair, wears expensive sunglasses, and walks around like a Chad...what an idiot” (79 upvotes). A third user in the comment chain interpreted this as “proof that confidence, personality, work ethic, and financial success are not at all relevant to sexual attraction” (68 upvotes).

A second example of a post which expresses this sentiment about racial determinism was written from the opposite perspective, by an Indian incel. His post was titled “Cumskincels = fakecels”, and in the body of the post, he expresses righteous anger at other members of r/Braincels who complained about their physical appearance despite being white. After recounting an experience in which he was rejected by a woman who only wanted to date white men, the author concludes that “if you're a cumskin, you're an absolute failure if you're still an incel” (12 upvotes, 72% upvoted). The comment section reply ranked highest by the Reddit algorithm stated emphatically that “whites can NEVER be incel...the funniest shit ever is when the tall whites on this sub act whiny as if women don't like them, but all the ACTUAL incels are silent” (10 upvotes, emphasis in original). Like many other concepts in incel ideology, this belief that minorities are inherently disadvantaged in the sexual marketplace can be distilled into subcultural terminology. As one commenter on Post 93 puts it, “women are all white supremacists” (17 upvotes), so if a minority incel wants to enter a sexual relationship with a woman, the solution is simple—he should “just be white”, or JBW for short. This sardonic advice that minority incels offer each other echoes the biological determinism of the black pill, and therefore many of the users who post JBW memes or comments also express bitter pessimism about their prospects of ascension and resignation to their incel status.

This emphasis that the r/Braincels public places on race demonstrates how the Reddit algorithm can elevate commentary which contests the moderators' concerted neutrality about which physical features weigh most heavily in determining SMV. This is significant because in doing so, the r/Braincels public reproduces the racial hierarchies of Elliot Rodger's ideology, in which he claims to “deserve” access to white women's bodies more than Black or Latino men because he was “half white myself” (Rodger 2014, p.84). Rodger's commentary on racial hierarchies also influenced the worldviews of other incel attackers, such as Christopher Harper-Mercer, who idolised Rodger and wrote that he was “right when he said his thoughts on the black male” (Section II, para.1), and Alex Stavropoulos, who was angry that he could not access white women's bodies and therefore went “out to murder a little white girl” in a carpark knife attack (Pickard 2020).

4.3 Discourses on celibacy—Whom to blame?

The second aspect of the moderators' definition of involuntary celibacy pertains to the result that incels believe physical inferiority has on a man—the inability to access sex. One of the most prominent themes of discussion and debate for the r/Braincels public is identifying whom to blame for their celibacy. Although community members are often divided along ideological lines, with black-pillers typically taking a harder stance than red-pillers, the community is in general agreement that both women and superior males (i.e., Chads) are primarily responsible. The logic of explanation for this claim rests on the principles of the sexual marketplace. According to the incel interpretation of sexual economics theory, women are the guardians of sex and men its buyers, who must use their SMV to demonstrate their worth as a sexual partner. In this worldview, sex is a commodity that women control, making them an easy target onto whom incels can externalise blame for their circumstances. Furthermore, incels' transactional view of sex causes them to see it as a zero-sum game in which the sexual success of another man not only represents a missed opportunity for an incel, but also restricts the supply of available women. The r/Braincels public therefore collectively identifies women and superior out-group men as their primary oppressors because they respectively control incels' access to sex and increase its scarcity. The most significant way that the r/Braincels public responds to these perceived oppressors is through passive harassment.

Although both men and women are identified as incels' oppressors, it is typically women that bear the brunt of incel harassment. Because passive harassment does not specify a target, most harassment of women on r/Braincels is done in the form of stereotyping. This stereotyping often takes on a pattern of circular logic, beginning when one user makes a broad claim about women, perhaps that they are sadistic or prefer partners who abuse them. This claim that "all women are like this" (AWALT) is inevitably met by a counterexample that "not all women are like this" (NAWALT). The public then typically responds with hostility and attempts to invalidate the counterpoint. After some debate, the users conclude that because "enough women are like this" (EWALT), the counterexample should be disregarded, and the public should hold the stereotype to be true. This technique is used repeatedly throughout the comment section of posts and is so ubiquitous that the moderators even provide explanations for these acronyms in the wiki (Lines 34-37).

In addition to stereotyping, the passive harassment of women can be accomplished by using misogynistic hate speech, including a wide range of slurs and other subcultural terminology that the community has developed. The most common pieces of pejorative community vernacular are "femoid", "hole", "female", and "roastie". The first term is meant to dehumanise women; it derives from the acronym FHO, which stands for "female humanoid organism", and it can be further contracted to "foid" for added effect. The second is intended to have a similar effect by referring to women by their sex organs. One illustrative comment using this slur was left on Post 118 and read

“[women] know their only value is just to be a hole” (129 upvotes). Another word that has developed a similar usage is “female”. Although this word is clearly not a slur, it is typically used on r/Braincels as a noun rather than an adjective, essentially stripping women of their personhood and referring to them by their biological characteristics. This follows a linguistic pattern in which typically neutral adjectives can take on pejorative meanings when transformed to a noun (e.g., compare “gay” vs. “the gays”, “illegal” vs. “illegals”) (Palmer, Robinson & Phillips 2017). Two posts which illustrate this usage on r/Braincels are respectively titled “For females, bigger is always better” (Post 42) and “How could a sane guy feel bad when something bad happens to a female?” (Post 155). The final slur is a reference to a meme popularised on r/incels based on the pseudoscientific belief that sex with multiple partners causes a woman’s labia to lengthen and resemble slices of roast beef. Together, the use of such gendered hate speech allows an r/Braincels user to perform a rejection of women and thereby demonstrate his adoption of incel identity to an audience of his peers. Moreover, when that user performatively harasses women using one of the community’s neologisms, it has the added effect of demonstrating he has successfully gained subcultural knowledge.

In terms of their content, some of the most common stereotypes about women circulated on r/Braincels are that they are malevolent, entitled, promiscuous, and simple-minded. For example, Post 173 contained the lone video obtained in data collection, which reposted a tweet from an MGTOW-linked Twitter account in which an Asian middle school student fought back against his bully. Because the bully was a girl, the r/Braincels public celebrated this video as an example of a “based ricecel giving a foid a taste of equality” (49 upvotes, 95% upvoted), with the implication being that true gender equality would allow men to freely use violence against women. Highly-upvoted replies in the comment section interpreted the bully’s behaviour as evidence that she felt entitled to bully her classmate in the belief that boys were prohibited by social norms from fighting back against girls. Another post which stereotyped women as promiscuous was extremely well received by the public, despite being low effort. Post 85 was titled “Your average TwoXChromosomes poster”, in reference to a subreddit which is aimed at women and was controversially included as a default subreddit for new users in 2014, as Reddit worked to improve their reputation as a platform hostile to women (Massanari 2017). This post contained a meme caricature of a woman drooling over birth control and wearing a dog collar that reads “cum slut” (399 upvotes, 94% upvoted, see Figure 11). The top-voted comment drove this point home, stating that “isn’t it interesting how all forums for women are always about sex, dick, cum, drugs and other degenerate garbage” (241 upvotes). Finally, regarding intelligence, it is common for users of r/Braincels to portray women as childish or only capable of simple emotions, such as lust or greed. Two posts which illustrate this respectively referred to women

as a “meme gender” (Post 71, 33 upvotes) or “non-player characters” who can only follow their sexual urges and are incapable of complex thought (Post 69, 16 upvotes, 82% upvoted).

Although this sort of harassment is typically passive in nature, there is one notable exception of a woman who was frequently and directly attacked with misogynistic hate speech—the female moderator u/BG. For instance, there were four separate posts captured in data collection which were made following u/BG’s appointment to question her position (Posts 10-13). Multiple commenters in these posts theorised that she had bought her position by sending nude photos to u/AA. One of these posts was even authored by u/IQ before he ascended to the moderation team, in which he labelled u/BG an “enemy of the community” and stated that while he didn’t care about her gender, he did have a problem with “the fact that she is an obese woman who sent lude [sic] pictures to men and still received positive comments (proving hypergamy), yet she still says she’s incel” (Post 11, 1 upvote, 52% upvoted). To be clear, there is no evidence whatsoever to indicate any of this is true, but this nevertheless became a theme of any post about or by her. When u/BG tried to defend herself in the comment section of such posts, her comments often drew a crowd of incels to insult her and tell her she was fat, autistic, and generally unwelcome. It was also commonplace for users to call on her to resign (Post 37) or minimise her role in the subreddit’s history (Post 153). When u/BG ultimately announced her resignation as moderator in Post 60, it drew an astounding 824 comments, nearly 300 more than any other post obtained in data collection. Although one moderator made the effort to keep discussion civil by using his privileges to sticky a comment at the top of the comment section thanking her for her service and emphasising the good that she had done for the community, he was drowned out by hundreds of commenters who reacted with rapturous joy and celebration. The top-ranked comment on Post 60 read that this was “proof that women can never be incels” (709 upvotes), and another user responded to this comment by saying that “even 300-pound autistic landwhales can get a boyfriend” (376 upvotes). This outpouring of joy over her departure was not limited to the comment section either. One user took it upon himself to make a new, celebratory post with a meme of Pepe the Frog wearing a crown. It was titled “In light of recent events, I’d just like to say ALL WOMEN ARE WHORES” (Post 75, 389 upvotes, 96% upvoted, emphasis in original).

The common practice of passively harassing women (and actively harassing u/BG) on r/Braincels highlights just how far modern incel communities have drifted from their historical predecessors. Incel groups were first formed to provide practical and emotional support to those struggling with romantic isolation, and some like Alana’s Involuntary Celibacy Project were even founded by a woman and welcomed women as members. As described in [3.1](#), the members of r/Braincels share a desire to “ascend” and enter a romantic relationship. However, the way in which this community’s users perform incel identity for their peers by relentlessly attacking the very people

whose bodies they hope to access demonstrates how incel ideology is no more so defined by its hateful discourses against women than it is by relationship deficits. This is the key distinction that exists between r/Braincels and similarly themed subreddits like r/ForeverAlone. While both may be populated by sexually inexperienced young men, it is only in the former that incentivises the performative harassment of women.



Figure 11: an incel meme stereotyping female Redditors (Post 85)

Women were the most common target of passive harassment on r/Braincels, but the incel interpretation of the sexual marketplace also lays blame at the feet of sexually successful men with whom incels imagine themselves to be in competition. However, the way incels construct other men as physically superior makes such passive harassment of out-group men somewhat more complex than their banal harassment of women. In fact, even though posting pictures of attractive men and women is disallowed per Rule 8 (see [3.5](#)), the r/Braincels public still manages to verbally discuss and analyse the features of attractive men so they might position their incel masculinity relative and subordinate to theirs. For example, Post 139 was made to recount a user's experience of encountering an attractive man, whom he labelled an "11/10 Chad". This user went into tremendous detail, describing him as "legit 6'5" with a huge frame, dressed to the nines in a long wool coat, a jawline so sharp you cut diamonds with it, literally zero fat on his face, blond hair and hunter eyes" (117 upvotes, 96% upvoted). (Hunter eyes refer to the squinting eyes of a predator, thought to be a feature of high-value men.) His purpose in sharing these thoughts was because he interpreted this chance encounter as a "brutal daily reminder of how subhuman I am". Commenters in this thread contributed to

discussion by providing anecdotes of similar experiences, such as one user who wrote about his 6'2" co-worker who had "a chiselled jaw and broad shoulders" and lamented how he was "not even the same species" (20 upvotes).

Incels' physical inferiority to Chad necessitates that the r/Braincels public find novel ways to harass their perceived competitors. Because they cannot attack their appearance as they would when harassing women, this is accomplished by attacking out-group males' intelligence and relationships with women. According to the incel interpretation of the sexual marketplace, any man who enters a sexual relationship willingly submits himself to female power. For this reason, slurs directed at out-group males attempt to emasculate or feminise them. Examples of slurs to this effect include "faggot", "numale", "white knight", "soy boy", "betabux", and "cuck". Incels may also respond by stressing their own intellectual superiority for having awareness of the sexual marketplace. In this way, it is not uncommon for incels to characterise normies who continue to compete for sex as "incels in denial", who are equally unsuccessful romantically but have not yet realised that the pursuit of sex is a lost cause. These strategies allow those who use them to frame their male competitors as capitulating to feminism and themselves as psychologically superior for refusing to do so.

The r/Braincels public responds to this sense of victimhood to women and out-group men in several ways. Some group members assert that access to sex is not a mere desire but a fundamental human right, and celibacy is therefore tantamount to being deprived of food or water. One example of this attitude can be seen in Post 20, which was submitted by the subreddit's founder u/AA. This post consisted of a link to a four-year-old article from Psychology Today about the long-term psychological effects of lack of affection. The author of this article, a professor at Arizona State University, carefully presented and contextualised the findings of his study and even explicitly stated that it was not specific to romantic relationships and its results were not sufficient to establish causation. These details did not matter to the public, however, as the top-voted comment interpreted the article as "a really simple and powerful economic argument for incel rights...as the long-term health effects of not having a girlfriend become more apparent, we can now see that subsidising girlfriends for the relatively small incel population is much cheaper for society in the long run than doing nothing and putting unnecessary strain on the physical and mental health systems" (21 upvotes). A response to this comment pointing out that the study was not specific to romantic relationships was rejected by the public and received net three downvotes. Still other members of r/Braincels were observed to compare their unwanted celibacy to the plight of historically marginalised communities such as the LGBTQ community. Surprisingly, data collection yielded two separate memes that had each edited a pride banner to include incels. Post 149 identified them as groups that were "all struggling for recognition, equality, acceptance, and human rights" (140 upvotes,

91% upvoted, see Figure 12). As the highest ranked comment to this post makes clear, however, this was not a message of solidarity, but an effort to create a false equivalence between involuntary celibacy and the historic repression and marginalisation of the LGBTQ community. It reads, “don't include us with those faggots...unlike them we have real problems” (99 upvotes). Finally, there is also evidence that r/Braincels users have coordinated harassment campaigns against designated out-groups, such as r/IncelsWithoutHate and r/TrueFemcels (Farrell et al. 2019).

In conclusion, this section makes two significant findings regarding the discursive practices of r/Braincels users. The first major discursive practice is the passive harassment of women, which plays a central role in community dynamics. Such harassment of women was common in MGTOW communities because it allowed members to perform a rejection of women and thereby demonstrate that they have gone their own way by forgoing romantic relationships (Jones, Trott & Wright 2020). Unlike MGTOW, incels want to enter romantic relationships, but they adopt incel identity in the belief that some sort of physical inferiority has prevented them from doing so. Passive harassment therefore plays a nearly identical role for Reddit's incel communities because by making misogynistic posts and comments, r/Braincels users were able to perform credible incel identity for their peers by demonstrating that they neither have, nor wish to have a relationship with a woman. There were many forms that the performative passive harassment of women took on r/Braincels, the most common of which included expressions of hostility to feminism and women in general, the use of gendered slurs, and stereotyping women as malevolent, entitled, promiscuous, and simpleminded.

This section also identifies a second major discursive practice of r/Braincels members, which is the passive harassment of out-group men. Per the findings in [3.2](#), incels use SMV to divide out-group men into Chads, Brads, and normies. Because these groups are inherently more valuable sexual partners than incels, the users of r/Braincels cannot attack their appearance as they would when harassing women. To the contrary, r/Braincels members stress their physical inferiority to out-group men, and because SMV is based on socially desirable physical and behavioural characteristics, this practice orients their incel masculinity in subordination to hegemonic masculinity. Instead, the r/Braincels public harasses out-group men with emasculating or homophobic insults, attacks their intelligence for remaining unaware of hypergamy and the machinations of the sexual marketplace, and criticises their relationships with women as a capitulation to female power. In this way, incels attempt to rationalise their romantic failures by stressing their intellectual superiority to Chads for recognising the reality of the sexual marketplace and forgoing romantic relationships.

These findings are significant because together, they demonstrate that even though moderators set filters to remove violent language, it is easily possible for r/Braincels users to produce hateful othering discourses which target the two main scapegoats in the incel worldview. The history

of incel violence presented in [2.3.2](#) contained numerous instances of aggrieved men who sought out proxy victims for the perfect unattainable women they fantasised over (Murray 2017a, 2017b). Elliot Rodger and Tres Genco targeted sororities. George Sodini and Scott Beierle conducted mass shootings at fitness centres to target women. Cole Carini's pipe bombs were intended for "hot cheerleaders" (Brown 2020). Carl Bennington harassed and stalked two teenage girls more than 10 years his junior. David Kaufman's victims were chosen because they conformed to the Chad and Stacy archetypes. Armando Hernandez targeted couples because he wanted them to "feel the pain he feels on a daily basis" (Stern 2020). Christopher Cleary announced on Facebook that he was going to "make it right by killing as many girls as I see" (Bever 2019). This is not to say that the users quoted in this section pose credible risk for committing similar acts of random or planned violence. In fact, there is an equally long history of incels who have committed self-harm or even died by suicide because of the masculinity crisis they experienced (Daly & Laskovtsov 2021). Nonetheless, it is clear from the examples discussed in this section that the Reddit algorithm can elevate othering discourses. The literature indicates that this pattern of incel attackers who lashed out violently at targets specified by those discourses did so because they adopted a worldview in which gendered violence becomes a legitimate response to restore confidence in their precarious sense of masculinity (Kalish & Kimmel 2010; Witt 2020). Even though no one ever directly encourages or advocates violence, by failing to control hateful discourses in their community, the r/Braincels moderators allow for the possibility that their users will similarly come to believe that it is possible to reclaim masculinity through gendered violence.



Figure 12: an incel meme comparing celibacy to persecution (Post 149)

4.4 Discourses on ascension—Why even bother?

The final aspect of the moderators' definition of involuntary celibacy pertains to the prospect of ascension, and it is this element of incel identity that creates significant division within the r/Braincels public. Overall, the members of r/Braincels divide themselves into two factions according to the amount of hope that they have about the prospect of ascension, with red-pillers believing that they have an internal locus of control over their sexual fate and black-pillers believing that the locus is external. In actual practice, the division between red and black pills is not merely a matter of differing philosophy. Rather, there is a great deal of tension between the two pill philosophies as their respective adherents compete for ideological control of the subreddit. As a result, the Reddit algorithm frequently elevates comments that contest the ideology of other users. This repeated contestation of other incels' ideology produces a third major discursive practice of the community: the active harassment of fellow incels and assertion of ideological supremacy of one incel over another.

This dynamic of intra-community harassment takes place wherever the various pill philosophies hosted by r/Braincels come into conflict. The first front on which this occurs is the division between the red pill and the blue pill, with red-pillers looking down on blue-pillers for living in denial of the sexual marketplace. Blue-pillers are rare on r/Braincels, so most red-on-blue harassment is passive and directed at designated out-groups such as r/IncelTears. However, there is some evidence of blue-pillers subscribing to and participating in r/Braincels, especially early in the subreddit's history when it was still intended to be a place for intellectual discussion. Perhaps the most dramatic example of red-on-blue harassment can be seen in u/AA's suicide post, where the top commenter identified himself a therapist and offered help to anyone in the comment section similarly suffering from emotional distress. His comment was widely upvoted (745 upvotes), but because he admitted to being active in anti-incel subreddits, the users who replied to his comment did so with derision, with one going so far as to say, "you are the reason I will never see a therapist...I would rather die than speak to one when most of you are the same trash who mock us" (45 upvotes). Several other users expressed their belief that he was incapable of understanding the distress incels experience and that his presence was unwelcome. In this instance, the division between blue and red pills was directly contested in the comment section, but there are additional examples of posts in which users report similar conflict taking place offline. Post 82 was made by a self-identified red-pillar who recounted his difficulty describing his ideology to his family (16 upvotes, 94% upvoted). This user identified as an incel because he was short and overweight, yet to his frustration, his family responded by encouraging him to change his online habits to learn better social skills and reassuring him that people progress at different rates. This poster considered his parents' advice "blue pill garbage", and the most highly upvoted replies were largely supportive of this pronouncement and encouraged him to reject their

advice and remain true to his red pill convictions. One black-pill commenter evidently did not feel this was sufficient though and chimed in to say that “it wouldn't surprise me a bit if this guy was a normie or even Chad-lite mentalcel” (1 upvote).

While the above user was clearly in the minority, with most voters supporting the red-pill, his comment demonstrates how the second front on which intra-community harassment occurs is the division between red and black pills. In such cases, black-pillers tend to look down on red-pillers for naïvely believing that they have any ability to influence their SMV or corresponding chances of ascension. For instance, the above commenter contested the original poster's ideology because he claimed incel identity based on his height and weight, but the latter could be easily mitigated through looksmaxing. For this reason, the black-pill did not feel that the red-pill was unattractive enough to justifiably claim incel identity. There are numerous other posts obtained in data collection that contain similar instances of incels arguing over whose personal circumstances are bleakest. For instance, Post 81 consists of a screenshot from an external community (r/unpopularopinions) which the poster thought contained a “potent blackpill” about how short men are discounted as prospective partners on dating apps. Even though this post was well-received (242 upvotes, 97% upvoted), several comment section replies were elevated by the Reddit algorithm because they rejected the premise of the post as insufficiently pessimistic. In fact, the top-ranked comment directly contradicts the original poster, asserting that “this isn't black pill at all! It's red at best...an actual black pill would be to say that anyone under 6'2” is almost guaranteed to be subhuman, betabuxxed, cheated on, and ridiculed...you will never be truly respected or loved” (136 upvotes).

Users' practice of contesting the ideology of fellow community members produces an internal hierarchy of belief, in which some users (typically black-pillers) claim ideological supremacy over other factions within the community. In r/Braincels terminology, an incel who best conforms to idealised incel masculinity is called a truecel. First outlined in [3.2](#), the definition of a truecel varies from user to user, but examples captured in data collection suggest that users claim this identity if they can demonstrate ideological purity through the endurance of prolonged suffering, extreme physical repulsiveness, total romantic inexperience (such as never having kissed, held hands, or hugged a woman, abbreviated KHHV for kiss-less, hug-less, hand-holdless virgin), having no social contact with women (in addition to romantic contact), or resolute hatred for women. On the other hand, those who do not meet these fluid criteria can be stigmatised as either volcels or fakecels.

This sort of intra-community harassment almost exclusively originates from self-styled truecels, where it functions to allow those users to elevate their social standing amongst the community by performing a rejection of impure incel ideology. This dynamic can sometimes result in a sort of race to the bottom, as the public competes amongst itself to demonstrate who has the most

grievable incel masculinity. One illustrative example of this phenomenon can be seen in Post 137, which was made by a user who recounted a recent experience in which he attempted to intimidate a group of girls at his high school. This post was generally well-received (10 upvotes, 73% upvoted), but there were still some in the comment section who denied the poster incel identity on account of his age. One commenter bluntly stated that he had stopped reading when it had become clear that the poster was in high school (7 upvotes) and another expressed a similar sentiment, writing “highschoolcels out!” (3 upvotes). Both comments make it clear that the users who wrote them believe that a truecel is determined by the duration of an incel’s celibacy, and as such, high schoolers are too young and inexperienced to justifiably claim incel identity. Post 173 similarly demonstrates that there are some forms of incel masculinity that are more esteemed by the public, albeit in a more extreme fashion. This post was written by an incel who was angry with his “vapid roastie mother” for making him go to therapy. In retaliation, he had begun to smear semen on the walls of his bedroom in the hope that it would prevent his mother from entering. The most highly upvoted response to this post stated that “You are the only true incel here. Everyone else is just an average-looking volcel compared to you. You are the fullest irredeemable incel, and even if you were good looking, there would be no hope for you. Everyone, admire this man!” (28 upvotes).

Such performances of ideological purity can be helpful for an incel to increase social standing amongst other incels, but truecel identity has an important implication for incels’ mental health. The simultaneously held beliefs that a man needs sex to have his masculinity validated and that blackpillers are disqualified from its access creates a central irreconcilable conflict, which I term the Black Pill Conundrum (also introduced in [3.2](#)). The moderators do not prescribe any solution to this conundrum and instead assert that r/Braincels is meant to be a safe place for incels to vent their frustrations and most toxic thoughts, not a support group. As a result, the users of r/Braincels have developed a range of responses to the persistent feelings of masculinity crisis, inadequacy, and hopelessness caused by the Black Pill Conundrum. Some advocate for incels to develop “copes” to alleviate the emotional pain of their celibacy. There is a wide range of forms these copes might take, from healthier ones like going to the gym or taking up a hobby to less healthy ones like becoming a so-called NEETcel who withdraws from society and refuses to work or study. However, those who identify as truecels tend to reject copes because they are seen as a distraction from the realities of their condition. In fact, the r/Braincels public shows tremendous disdain towards any form of self-help, especially therapy. One example of this attitude can be seen in the reaction the therapist received in u/AA’s suicide post, while another more low-brow example is evident in Post 165, in which a user associated mental health treatment with conspiracies about insidious Jews. This post consisted of a happy merchant meme and was titled “Yes, goy, take the antidepressants. They will fix your

mental issues” (7 upvotes, 64% upvoted, see Figure 13). Such users who are not interested in mental health treatment or copes sometimes instead try to radicalise red- and blue-pillers by exposing them to anecdotes of genetic determinism, which they term “spreading the black pill”. Despite being an ideological dead end, such users still consider black pill ideology to be enlightening and far preferable to living in delusion, with one user describing the black pill as “like a bucket of ice water on a hot day—a shock, but still incredibly refreshing, because after a lifetime of comforting lies, nothing is more liberating than being told: EAT SHIT BOYO, IT'S FUCKING OVER” (Post 110, 324 upvotes, 97% upvoted, emphasis in original).

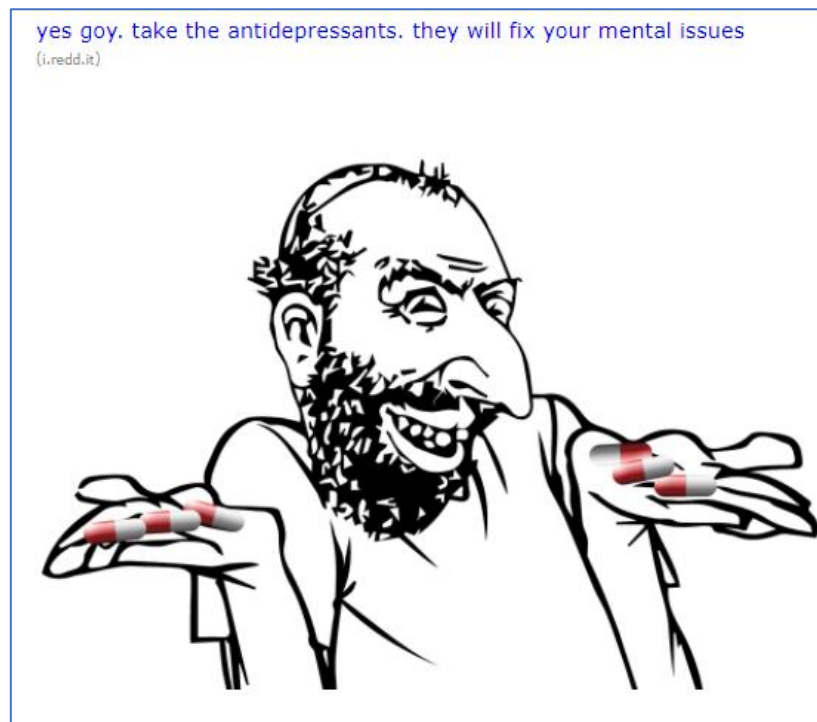


Figure 13: an incel meme mocking mental health care (Post 165)

These responses to the Black Pill Conundrum share the central theme of nihilism and defeatism. In fact, many black-pillers share the belief that even if they did ascend, it would not matter because the damage has already been done. One post illustrating this attitude is titled “even if you ascend”, and its body reads: “You will not be special for her, you will be just another one. She has already had all the beautiful experiences with a lot of other guys, so it will not mean a lot for her. First hug, first kiss, first time, she will not care as much as you do” (Post 136, 126 upvotes, 92% upvoted). Because such users feel that the window for them to conform to a normative sexual trajectory has already closed, it is common for black-pillers to openly talk about giving up hope and allowing themselves to sink into despair. To be expected, there is a considerable amount of community vernacular to represent this feeling, including “lay down and rot” (LDAR), “just fucking laugh” (JFL), “it’s over”, and “the only cope is the rope”. As the last example illustrates, such expressions of despair often devolve into explicit talk of suicide. One illustrative example can be seen in Post 94, in which a

user describes making a fake female Tinder account to confirm his preconceived beliefs about hypergamy and the sexual marketplace. After receiving more than 100 matches in the first hour, this user wrote that “the rope is looking more tempting everyday” (205 upvotes, 94% upvoted, see Figure 14). When group members do die by suicide, the act is sometimes even glorified, as was the case in Post 46, which listed, honoured, and martyred those suspected of dying by suicide, including the subreddit’s founder (79 upvotes, 94% upvoted).

Such talk of self-harm is the most common form of violent speech on r/Braincels, but there is still an extreme minority of users, representing only a handful examples captured in data collection, who advocate for more radical measures to be taken to help incels access sex. For example, Post 162 is a lengthy Marxist critique of the sexual economy which called for women’s sexuality to be seized and redistributed to the various classes of the sexual marketplace (24 upvotes, 77% upvoted). Meanwhile, a commenter on Post 20 simply advocated for the government to issue girlfriends to incels (21 upvotes). Although the passive nature of harassment on r/Braincels means that explicit calls to action and support for violence are extremely rare, it is not clear whether this is purposeful or merely a reflection of good moderation practices. Nevertheless, the instances that do appear are chilling. Perhaps the most explicit example came in Post 168, which was simply titled “I hate foids”. The body of the post elaborated in gruesome detail:

“I hate them physically and mentally. I simply can't stand them. They're so pathetic, so weak. Their body disgusts me. The fact that men are much stronger than foids is a great feeling though. Women are weak losers. Opening their vaginas like whores. Sucking Chad's cock is all they dream about. I just want to punch their vaginas until they bleed. Seeing them suffer is a fantastic feeling. I want to shove my cock into a Stacy's ass, make her scream in agony. Hearing a Stacy's scream is music to my ears. They deserve to suffer. We need to rise up as brothers and take down both the Stacys and the Chads. They don't deserve to stay happy, they deserve to suffer, like us. We can make it happen.”

Unfortunately, the *archive.today* snapshot of this post was taken only six minutes after it was posted, when it had not yet received any upvotes or comments, making it impossible to say how the public would have reacted to this violent sentiment.

To conclude, this section identifies a third discursive practice of r/Braincels members, which is the active harassment of fellow incels and contestation of their ideology. Such conflict arose wherever the various pill ideologies hosted on r/Braincels came into contact, with red-pillers harassing blue-pillers for living in denial of the sexual marketplace and black-pillers harassing red-pillers for naïvely believing they can influence their chances of ascension. Unlike the two forms of passive harassment described in the previous section of this chapter, this discursive practice entails the direct contestation of others’ ideology and assertion of ideological supremacy of one incel over another. Typically, such claims of ideological purity are made on the basis that another user is too attractive,

has prior romantic experience, or is too young to have experienced the requisite amount of suffering to justifiably claim incel identity. Because such harassment is almost always done by truecels to contest the ideology of more moderate incels, this creates a mechanism for users to progress in their beliefs towards the black pill by requiring them to constantly defend or reconsider elements of their worldview. Furthermore, there are very few examples of explicit calls to violence captured in the data, with most users discussing self-harm instead. However, the suicide of r/Braincels members is also an undesirable outcome, and much in the same way that [4.3](#) demonstrated how constant passive harassment can reinforce attitudes about reclaiming masculinity through gendered violence, it must be questioned whether letting members vent suicidal ideation can be therapeutic or if it merely reinforces the attitude that life is not worth living as an adult virgin.



Figure 14: an incel meme reporting suicidal ideation (Post 94)

4.5 Discourses on key offline events—Politics and incel attackers

In addition to the various elements of incel identity, public discourse on r/Braincels addressed relevant current events that took place during the subreddit's lifetime. The subreddit was active for nearly two years, from 21 October 2017 to 30 September 2019. The events most relevant to the r/Braincels public in that timespan were the 2018 American midterm elections and nine separate instances of incel violence (see [2.3.2](#) or [Appendix A](#)). The final section of this chapter examines how the r/Braincels

public responded to these events. It begins by describing user submissions that discussed American politics. It then describes public discourse as it relates to four of the nine incidences of incel violence that occurred in its lifespan.

The literature review revealed that the Manosphere and its factions have historically aligned themselves with right-wing conservatism, and the language and tactics used there are closely related to the Alt Right (Corredor 2019; Dignam & Rohlinger 2019; Graff, Kapur & Walters 2019; Hawley 2018; Kelly 2017; Lyons 2017; Massanari & Chess 2018; Nicholas & Agius 2018; Ong 2020). In line with these findings, there are several elements of the incel belief system that intersect with policy positions commonly associated with the far right. The most significant intersection can be seen in the way that the r/Braincels displays broad opposition to anything that could conceivably be associated with feminism. As elucidated in previous sections, the incel worldview typically considers feminism to be one of their primary oppressors because they believe women have wielded it to seize power in both society and sexual relationships. One illustrative example of this attitude can be seen in a comment one user left on Post 51 that connected feminism to overall societal decline, stating that “female liberation and the death of masculinity have caused the values and standards that once held society together to die, and without them the West decays” (18 upvotes). As a result, the subreddit widely supports political policies that aim to halt feminist progress. The r/Braincels public is also firmly against abortion, but not for same reasons as the religious right. Rather, incels believe abortion supports hypergamy by allowing women to have frequent sex with multiple partners without the risk of falling pregnant. Another major area in which incel ideology intersects with the far right is their views on race. Even though nearly half of the subreddit’s most active members identifies as an ethnic or racial minority, white supremacy is embedded into the incel worldview and public discourse consistently places enormous value on whiteness as a key determinant of SMV (see [4.2](#)). Finally, many members of the community are free speech absolutists, which is hardly surprising considering Reddit’s reputation as a hub for techno-libertarianism (Massanari 2017). The members of r/Braincels regularly exercise their free speech, as evidenced in their harassment of women, out-group men, and rival subreddits, not to mention countless instances of casual racism, homophobia, and antisemitism.

Despite these significant intersections with right-wing politics, the r/Braincels public is largely absorbed with their own victimhood and showed little engagement with conventional politics. This is largely because virtually the entire community is either red-pilled and focused on the pursuit of ascension or black-pilled and engrossed by apathy and nihilism. Perhaps the best quote to illustrate this attitude was left in response to Post 8 on the topic of climate change: “I don’t know, man, I just want a girlfriend” (5 upvotes). Nevertheless, when the topic of politics did come up on r/Braincels, users’ ideology appeared to mediate how they interpreted offline events, sometimes with surprising

results. For instance, Post 123 was made to celebrate Texas Senator Ted Cruz's victory over Beto O'Rourke in a tightly contested election as example of an "infinitely more qualified incel [holding] off Chad to retain [his] Senate seat!" (99 upvotes, 78% upvoted). In this instance, the public sided with the right-wing candidate, but Post 65 shows that the public also sides with left-wing causes when it aligns with their worldview. This post was made in late 2018, just two weeks before the US midterm elections, at a time when a caravan of Central American migrants was rapidly approaching America's southern border. This migrant caravan had become a frequent topic for both Donald Trump and right-wing media (Scott 2018), yet the poster expressed solidarity with the caravan and migrants in general because he believed that like incels, they were unwanted by society. Surprisingly, this interpretation was widely accepted, and at the time it was captured by *archive.today*, the post had received 44 upvotes and been upvoted 90% of the time. Together, these posts demonstrate that the uniquely nihilist aspects of the incel worldview cause incels to have much less political engagement than the other factions of the Manosphere, but when it does occur, incels' engagement in politics is not always guided by rightist convictions as one might presume but mediated by their worldview.

Besides the midterm election, the other major series of offline events to occur within the data collection window were nine instances of incel violence. According to the classification system in [2.3.2](#), two of these are considered incel terrorism, three are acts of random violence, two are incel-adjacent violence, and the final two are unrealised attacks. Data collection retrieved posts which discussed four of these nine attacks, consisting of both instances of incel terrorism (Alek Minassian and Scott Beierle), the most high-profile instance of incel-adjacent violence (Nikolas Cruz), and one thwarted attack (Christopher Cleary). Overall, the community's opinion leaders—namely its founder and the moderation team—worked hard to distance themselves and their subreddit from these individuals' actions and to ensure that the public did not express support for them. To demonstrate, Post 92 was the second most highly upvoted post obtained in data collection. It was made by u/AA the day after Nikolas Cruz's attack in Parkland, Florida, warning the public that anyone expressing support for him or his actions would be banned from the community (1734 upvotes, 98% upvoted). There were also two moderator-authored posts that contained similar messages; Post 92 was written in the wake of Scott Beierle's attack on a Tallahassee, Florida yoga studio, and Post 152 was made following Christopher Cleary's arrest for making public threats to commit a mass shooting. Both posts explicitly disavow the perpetrators and deny that their subreddit has any affiliation with them. To illustrate, the former relates that:

"This subreddit, their moderation team, and the vast majority of its userbase reject and do not condone any acts or incitements of violence which may come from any self-identified incel...furthermore, there is no evidence that any disturbed individual that may be associated with real-life crimes even visited this place and/or was caused to act on what he saw here, or any place in the incelosphere for that

matter...r/Braincels strictly abides by Reddit rules that forbid glorification, incitement, or creation of violent content.” (Post 92, 209 upvotes, 87% upvoted)

On its surface, this quote appears to be an appropriate response from the moderation team. It denies that the attacker was a member of the community and reassures Reddit administrators that the moderation team will continue to enforce site-wide rules regarding incitement of violence, but what is interesting is that it also seemingly admits that there is a minority of users within the community who might express support for incel attackers.

Although there were no explicit statements of support for incel attackers captured in data collection, there was still a significant number of comments which attempted to rationalise their actions or deflect blame from their subreddit, which collectively suggests that the attitude is more prevalent than the moderators let on. The first data set which belies moderators’ disavowals of incel attackers is composed of comments which rationalise their actions. Specifically, the users who left these comments attempted to downplay the connections between their ideology and violence by suggesting that every online community has its share of extremists, and when considering the mental and emotional distress that incels typically experience, it is surprising that there are not more incel attackers. There were multiple posts and comments which articulated this point, but the best example was authored the day after Scott Beierle’s attack, and it was so well-received by the public that the moderators used their privileges to pin the post at the top of the subreddit’s homepage to increase its visibility.

“Years of isolation are not good for the human mind as we are a social animal that reproduces in pairs and thus have immensely powerful instincts related to such things. The unbearable torment that can come from leaving such instincts unsatisfied for your whole life can very easily cause your mental state to rot and decay to the point that you decide to take vengeance against the world that left you to rot in despair, thus bringing you to the point of murderousness. But again, we do not see many cases of this at all which is quite interesting as you would expect a group comprised of thousands of individual men that experience that very mental decay and tormenting mental, emotional, and even spiritual pain on a daily basis to have many more people that break and murder people.” (Post 106, 271 upvotes, 95% upvoted)

Not only does this quote downplay Beierle’s actions, but it also illustrates how the public’s response is intrinsically intertwined with members’ victimhood complex. In this regard, each post related to an incel attacker contained multiple comments which expressed grievances with the media for how they characterise incels and fear that their community would soon be banned. For instance, Post 98 was made to pre-empt a potential ban and encourage r/Braincels users to migrate to the Marxism-Rodgerism board on 8chan, which evidently circumvented filters set to remove comments containing Elliot Rodger’s name because it was contained within a URL. A second user was more hyperbolic in suggesting that the FBI would compile a watchlist of virgins which could make “everyone here

effectively become a modern-day Hitler-era German Jew” (Post 99, 58 upvotes, 86% upvoted). Ironically, many of these commenters also expressed anger at media commentary that stereotyped incels as extremist or violent. One such comment was left on Post 103, which reads “even though not all Muslims are terrorists, not all black people are criminals, not all Mexicans are illegals...EVERY INCEL IS A RACIST DISGUSTING MISOGYNIST ASSHOLE THAT NEEDS TO BE SENT TO A CONCENTRATION CAMP TO GET TORTURED AND EXECUTED” (223 upvotes, emphasis in original).

Next, there were several techniques that the r/Braincels public developed to deflect blame from their community for producing content which aligned with attackers’ motives. First, commenters often worked together to analyse the appearance of incel attackers or research their private lives to find some piece of information that could be used to deny them incel identity. Users were quick to point out that Nikolas Cruz had some dating experience, with the top-voted comment on Post 158 stating “no, he had a girlfriend, and he was expelled the year before for fighting with his ex's new boyfriend...he was not an incel” (59 upvotes). A similar technique was used with Christopher Cleary, and in the case of Scott Beierle, one commenter lamented how he had “a normie face and could’ve been Chad-lite had he lost some weight” (Post 95, 16 upvotes). A second strategy for deflecting blame was to draw false equivalences with other forms of violence. To illustrate, Post 96 was titled “in response to the normie fags who will invade this subreddit thanks to the latest incel mass shooting, I present a list of 19 women who have murdered their children” (158 upvotes, 89% upvoted). Another user attempted to diminish the number of casualties from incel attacks by submitting a comment on Post 92 that used fabricated numbers to compare incel violence to Islamic extremism: “This puts the all-time kill count for incels at what? 18 including Elliot Rodger? That's literally fucking nothing...450 Americans die each year just from falling out of bed...and how many people have Muslim extremists killed last year alone? around 84,000 according to Google” (91 upvotes). Still one more commenter on the same post preferred to draw false parallels with abortion, commenting “how many defenceless foetuses have roastie scum murdered? About ONE MILLION A YEAR, in the US alone...women are mass murderers” (55 upvotes, emphasis in original). Finally, to pre-empt any comments that might arise which express understanding for these attackers, a third strategy was deployed, in which commenters blamed the anti-incel subreddit r/IncelTears for coordinating a “false flag” campaign to leave violent comments on r/Braincels in an effort to get the subreddit banned (Posts 27, 48, 50, 70). Although each of these users employed a different technique, their comments worked to distract the audience with whataboutisms and diminish the role that incel ideology played in each attack.

To conclude, the numerous posts and comments submitted by r/Braincels users in the wake of four incel-affiliated attacks belies moderators’ claims that the community does not support or endorse the use of ideological violence. Rather than recognising the senselessness of attacks directed

at innocent proxy victims, the r/Braincels public interpreted incel attacks as a threat to their in-group identity first and foremost. Rather than working to ensure that similar ideological violence did not occur again, the r/Braincels public was preoccupied with deflecting blame from their community through whataboutisms, false flag conspiracies, or moving the goalposts by questioning an attacker's incel credentials. While it may well be true that the attackers discussed in this section were not members of r/Braincels or radicalised there, users who expressed empathy for their pain only served to legitimise their actions. Moreover, commentary which attempted to deflect blame from the community appears to have fed users' victimhood complex, which only adds to their grievances by creating a narrative that incel groups are unfairly blamed for the actions of lone wolf attackers.

Chapter 5: The self-presentation of r/Braincels users

The final aspect of my analysis of r/Braincels examines how its users employ Reddit's username and flair affordances to construct and perform their incel identity for an audience of their peers. Reddit is nominally an anonymous social media site, but r/Braincels users nonetheless wield these affordances to construct complex pseudonymous online identities centred on their involuntary celibacy. Specifically, these affordances are the username that users choose when first signing up to the Reddit platform and the text-based flair that they append to that username. Norms for flair usage on Reddit are subreddit specific, with some communities providing their users a list of choices and others requiring them to liaise with the moderators to create one. Flair usage on r/Braincels works in the latter fashion, as FAQ2 directs users to message the moderation team to compose a custom flair.

There are three ways that r/Braincels subscribers can employ Reddit's username and flair affordances. First, Reddit allows users to maintain multiple accounts with a single email address, so it is possible to create specialised throwaway accounts for participating in r/Braincels by composing a username with recognisable incel terminology. On the other hand, some users might prefer to subscribe to both incel and non-incel subreddits on the same account. For them, it would be preferable to choose a generic username and then append a flair which would only reveal their incel identity only when participating in a community with a like-minded audience. Third, these affordances can be combined to create a more detailed profile which provides information about that user's incel identity in both the username and flair.

To study incel pseudonymity on r/Braincels, a random sample of username and flair data was compiled from comments elevated to a position of visibility by the Reddit algorithm on the 179 user-submitted posts obtained in data collection. To avoid preferencing any era in the subreddit's history, my archive of posts was sorted alphabetically, and then the username and flair data of top-level comments was scraped until the sample size reached 1500. This random sample was then refined by removing duplicates, reducing the sample size to 767. The data was refined further by removing accounts without recognisable incel terminology. The final sample size was 177, which were then alphabetised by username and assigned a unique User ID. Within this sample, 81 incel pseudonyms only used a username, 65 paired a generic username with an incel flair, and 31 contained incel terminology in both their username and flair (see Table 6 below). Thematic analysis was then applied to this bank of incel pseudonyms to identify major strategies for incel self-presentation on r/Braincels. After identifying these themes, the data was coded, allowing their frequency within the random sample to be determined. They were not coded for a dominant theme but did allow for code co-occurrence. The codebook is provided below in Table 7.

Thematic analysis of this random sample revealed that there were five key strategies r/Braincels members employed to construct and perform their incel identity for their peers, as well as one meta strategy. Each of these is discussed in a separate section of this chapter. Respectively, these sections describe how users craft pseudonymous profiles which provide their reason for claiming incel identity (5.1), demonstrate awareness of subcultural norms (5.2), communicate their personal ideology (5.3), indicate how they respond to their celibacy (5.4), and perform a rejection of women through passive harassment (5.5). Furthermore, these strategies can be combined to create multifaceted pseudonyms which contain information about more than one aspect of that user's incel identity (5.6). Each of these sections provides examples of usernames and flairs that illustrate that strategy, cited by User ID. For ethical reasons, usernames are paraphrased slightly to protect their associated accounts from being located. However, flairs do not appear in a user's profile and are therefore unsearchable. For this reason, they are presented unaltered. For a numerical breakdown of this data set by code, see Table 8 below. For a breakdown by subcode, see Table 9, located at the end of 5.5. To view the entirety of this random data sample sorted by User ID, see [Appendix F](#).

Table 6: the composition of incel pseudonyms

n=177	Number	Percent
Incel username only	81	45.8%
Incel flair only	65	36.7%
Both incel username & flair	31	17.5%
Total incel usernames	112	63.3%
Total incel flairs	96	54.2%

Table 7: incel pseudonym codebook

Theme	Code	Subcodes
Reason for claiming incel identity	Reason	Appearance, size, ethnicity, neurotypicality, virginity, genetics
Awareness of subcultural norms	Awareness	Neologism, in-group reference
Personal ideology	Ideology	Black pill, truecel, volcel, red pill, blue pill, fakecel
Response to celibacy	Response	Despair, suicide, cope
Performative rejection of women	Misogyny	Hostility, stereotyping

Table 8: incel pseudonyms by code

Totals exceed 100% due to co-occurrence in multifaceted pseudonyms

n=177	Number	Percent
Reason	67	37.9%
Awareness	63	35.6%
Ideology	39	22.0%
Response	37	20.9%
Misogyny	17	9.6%

5.1 Reason for claiming incel identity

The most common technique (n=67, 37.9%) for incel self-presentation on r/Braincels was for users to choose a username or append a flair which includes their reason for identifying as an incel and joining the community. There is a tremendous range of features to which an incel might assign blame for his celibacy, so these reasons are divided into six subcodes: appearance, neurotypicality, genetics, ethnicity, size, and virginity. These findings are significant because while the literature speaks clearly on the fact that incels believe women discriminate against them due to their low SMV, (Baele, Brace & Coan 2019; Jaki et al. 2019), it gives no indication of which features incels believe cause this discrimination. Previous chapters provided lists of commonly cited physical features (3.1) and highlighted public sentiment on the importance of race in SMV (4.2), but the examples of incel pseudonyms here provide the most detailed testimonials of how incels' masculinity crisis originates.

First, the principles of lookism claim that an individual's SMV is primarily determined by physical appearance, and as such there are numerous examples of pseudonymous identities which refer to that user's poor appearance, such as User 136, who created the username u/MoggedByEveryone, and User 27, who appended the flair "1.5/10 subhuman circus freak" to his generic username. The red pill faction of r/Braincels, however, allows for factors other than physical appearance to be considered in calculating SMV, most notably social skills and neurotypicality. To illustrate, User 77 chose a generic username but appended the flair "Spergcel" in reference to Asperger's syndrome, and Users 4, 5, and 6 made similar references to autism in their usernames. On the other hand, the black pill teaches that SMV is biologically predetermined, so some black-pillers might be inspired to choose usernames or flairs which refer to genetics rather than physical features. For instance, User 1 was known by the username u/35-year-oldgenetictrash. Furthermore, as detailed in 4.1, approximately half of r/Braincels identifies as a racial or ethnic minority, and for these incels, race plays a much more prominent factor in why they identify as such. There were numerous pseudonyms that referred to race, including User 166, who chose the username u/Tryhardcurrycel, and User 75, who appended the flair "Slav subhuman" to his generic username. Another commonly cited genetic factor is size or height. Examples of incels who blame their celibacy on their short stature include Users 133 and 150, who respectively composed the usernames u/minioncel and u/Shortcel, as well as User 19, who created the flair "0/10 turbo-manlet wristcel" to communicate that he identified as an incel due to a combination of his short stature (manlet) and thin wrists (wristcel). Regardless of the pill philosophy to which a user subscribes, incels are united by their inability to access sex. For this reason, there are also a handful of members who made their virginity a prominent aspect of their online identity. For instance, User 143 created the flair "40-year-old HKV" to not only publicise his virginity, but also his total lack of experience with women, which extended to never having hugged or kissed a woman.

5.2 Awareness of subcultural norms

The second most common technique (n=63, 35.6%) for incel self-presentation on r/Braincels was for users to create an account which demonstrates their awareness of subcultural norms, such as by using in-group vernacular or referring to community dynamics. For this reason, incel pseudonyms which apply this technique can be viewed as encapsulating Reddit's acculturation process, which consists of "lurking" in a community to learn subcultural vernacular and observe how its networked users interact before deciding to participate (Massanari 2015, p.68–9). As such, the following pseudonyms are composed to signal to other users in the subreddit that they have successfully completed the lurking process and gained the necessary subcultural capital to be considered inducted members.

The first major strategy to demonstrate awareness of r/Braincels' subcultural norms was to create a neologism with the word "incel" or the "-cel" suffix, or by making references to the community's shared history or popular memes. For instance, Users 112 and 123 composed the usernames u/incelery and u/Lenincel, which both make a simple pun with a word unrelated to incel ideology, while Users 40 and 31 appended the flairs "based youtubecel" and "Dartmouthcel" to refer to a platform where one is active and the university another attends. While the two flair examples successfully communicate some aspect of that user's identity other than his ideology, the majority of incel neologisms do not. In fact, it typically suffices to merely demonstrate awareness of how incel terminology is composed by appending -cel to some other word. This can sometimes result in surprising incel neologisms, such as the usernames u/Guccicel (User 98) and u/Paleozoicel (User 143).

There were also many accounts whose usernames or flairs were composed in such a way to make an in-group reference to the community's patron saints, shared history, or vernacular developed there. For instance, User 158 referenced Boston Marathon bomber Tamerlan Tsarnaev, who is not an incel, but seems to have been conferred with ex post facto incel status by the owner of this account. Four more pseudonyms referred to the community's most popular saint, BlackOps2Cel (see Figure 15 below). This meme derives from a picture of a young man wearing a Call of Duty: Black Ops 2 t-shirt that went viral on 4chan in 2014, who has since become a sort of mascot for the broad incel community (Know Your Meme 2018). BlackOps2Cel is so popular on r/Braincels that he is included in the subreddit's banner image (see Figure 1, located in [1.3](#)) and the most highly upvoted post obtained in data collection was an announcement that a new picture of him was found on 4chan (Post 87). Users 13, 148, and 152 in the random sample each composed a username that was a slight variation on the name "St. BlackOps2Cel", while User 78 had a generic username but appended the flair "St. Blackops2cel delivers us". Other pseudonyms demonstrated their knowledge of the subreddit's history by mentioning affiliated communities, the moderation team, or incel vernacular developed on r/Braincels. To illustrate, User 26 created a username that identified himself as a former member of r/incels. Users 63 and 136 composed flairs that voiced their opposition to the moderation team at that

time. User 25 appended the flair “*redacted* get a job” in reference to a popular *bête noire* on r/Braincels, the head moderator of r/IncelTears. Finally, User 147 chose the name u/roastie_haiku in reference to a popular insult for women developed by incels on Reddit.



Figure 15: a picture of BlackOps2Cel, a popular incel saint

5.3 Personal ideology

Third, due to the ideological diversity present on r/Braincels, a significant number of its users (n=39, 22.0%) constructed their online identities to specify their personal ideology. There are several ways to subdivide an incel community, and the random sample of username and flair data included examples of each of these subdivisions, although at very different rates. Overall, the random sample found that black pill and truecel pseudonyms were elevated to a position of visibility much more frequently than accounts associated with any other ideological subdivision. This is significant for two reasons. First, it further reinforces the findings of [3.4](#), which reported on the subreddit’s ideological drift towards the black pill. Second, it exemplifies how the study of self-presentation can measure the degree to which a user is immersed within a given subculture (Caliandro 2018). In this case, users who adopted more extreme forms of incel ideology created specialised accounts for participating in r/Braincels much more frequently than moderate or casual users.

The first way to subdivide an incel community is by pill ideology. In this regard, the incel pseudonyms created for use in r/Braincels overwhelmingly preferred the black pill over the red, with black pill pseudonyms accounting for nearly half of all accounts coded as referencing a user’s ideology.

For instance, User 165 chose the name u/TruthInBlackPill, and examples of black pill flairs include “blackpill enthusiast” (User 42), “Prophet of the Blackpill” (User 13), and “The black pill is the seed for awakening the Black Flame” (User 21). Red pill pseudonyms were much rarer; only four accounts in the random sample can be classified as such. User 128 had the name u/looksmax, which borrows a red pill term for strategies to boost SMV, and Users 1, 130, and 138 can be classified as red-pillers because their usernames refer to the rejection of the blue pill. Meanwhile, the only pseudonym to mention the red pill by name was u/CuckedRedPill (User 15), but this was coded as a black pill account because it applies the insult “cucked”, which is normally reserved for out-group men believed to have capitulated to feminism. This implies that the owner of this account was not a red-piller, but merely referenced it to derogate its adherents, in line with the pattern of intra-community harassment first described in [4.4](#).

The second way to subdivide an incel community is the degree to which they conform to idealised incel masculinity. This includes truecels who claim to be ideologically ‘pure’, volcels who voluntarily abstain from relationships with women, and fakecels who claim to be incel but are rejected by the community and denied incel status. Of this ideological subdivision, truecel pseudonyms were most common. Examples include the usernames u/Supremeincel (User 157) and u/Oldcel (User 141) and the flairs “the truest of cels” (User 81) and “Supreme Commander of Incelistan” (User 80). In comparison, there were only a few volcel pseudonyms in the data sample, and the examples that did appear were nearly all constructed by pairing a flair with a generic username, which has the effect of allowing that user to also participate in communities other than r/Braincels without the need to switch accounts. One illustrative example of this technique can be seen in the account information of User 86, who maintained a generic username but appended the flair “Volcel ally” so that the members of r/Braincels would recognise his support for the community despite also participating elsewhere. There were no users in the data who self-identified as fakecel, although the decision was made to classify User 29 as such because he identified himself with the flair “16yo Forever Alone”, which would have caused r/Braincels users to deny him incel identity due to community standards barring teenagers from group membership (see Rule 10 in [3.5](#)). This finding suggests that fakecel identity is not something that anyone willingly claims but is used derogatively to contest others’ ideology and disqualify them from community membership.

Finally, out-groups on r/Braincels are designated by the blue pill, and there were only three incel pseudonyms in the random sample that were coded as such. Users 69 and 167 chose a username or flair that indicated they were normies with moderate SMV, while User 39 appended the flair “Ascended Autistcel”, suggesting that he had previously identified as an incel due to his autism but had recently been able to access sex and transcend his incel status. This paucity of blue pill users in

the random sample is expected due to the hostility that r/Braincels users have shown to outsiders throughout its history.

5.4 Response to celibacy

The fourth-most common technique (n=37, 20.9%) for incel self-presentation was for users to construct pseudonyms which relate how they respond to their celibacy. In the study of public discourses on ascension (see [4.4](#)), users who still held hope at the prospect of accessing sex were shown to have developed coping mechanisms for self-improvement or to alleviate the emotional burden of their celibacy, while those struggling to reconcile the Black Pill Conundrum frequently fell into despair and even spoke openly of suicide. As a result, the responses included in this category largely correlate with their associated user's preferred pill ideology, with the most extreme responses providing further testimonials of the Black Pill Conundrum's damaging psychological effects.

First, there were a handful of incel pseudonyms in the random sample that referred to a cope of some kind. The most common was physical exercise, as Users 30, 50, 51, and 61 each referred to themselves as a "gymcel". There were also individual references to drug use (Users 34 and 88), music and gaming (User 67), and deliberate self-harm (User 18). Far more common, however, were pseudonyms that referred to that user's total despondency over their prolonged celibacy. Examples of such pseudonyms can be seen in User 163's username u/Throwmeaway and User 20's flair "I keep screaming but god doesn't answer". In addition, there are numerous memes and phrases that black-pillers have developed to express this sentiment which appear in incel pseudonyms, including LDAR (Users 49 and 153), JFL (User 121), and "it's over" (Users 57, 58, 118, 119, and 163). References to suicide were also commonplace, examples of which include the username u/killpill (User 122) and the flairs "Cope on A Rope" (User 116) and "use code 'cel' for 5% off rope" (User 83).

5.5 Performative rejection of women

The final strategy (n=17, 9.6%) for incel self-presentation involved the passive harassment of women. Such harassment was found to be one of the most important discursive practices on r/Braincels because it allowed users to perform credible incel identity by demonstrating they neither have, nor wish to have a relationship with a woman (see [4.3](#)). This harassment typically took the form of expressions of hostility towards women in general and feminism specifically, as well as the use of stereotypes. Unsurprisingly, these themes are reflected in the pseudonyms that users created for participation in r/Braincels, demonstrating that the discursive practices described in Chapter 4 are not only expressed through posts and comments, but can also emerge through users' self-presentation.

The most common subcode for pseudonyms in this category was expressions of hostility towards women or those who advocate for them. For example, Users 23 and 95 were known by the

usernames u/feminismmustdie and u/Getbackinthekitchen, while Users 3 and 65 created the custom flairs “misogynist” and “If you're a female I hate you”. There was also a handful of pseudonyms that contained offensive stereotypes about women, such as User 175, who created the username u/WomenAreAllThots, and User 89, who appended the flair “Women are psychopaths”.

Table 9: incel pseudonyms by subcode
Totals may exceed 100% due to subcode co-occurrence

Code	Subcode	Number	Percent
Reason (67)	Appearance	32	47.8%
	Size	12	17.9%
	Ethnicity	12	17.9%
	Neurotypicality	10	14.9%
	Virginity	7	10.4%
	Genetics	6	9.0%
Awareness (63)	Neologism	50	79.4%
	In-group reference	14	22.2%
Ideology (39)	Black pill	17	43.6%
	Truecel	9	23.1%
	Volcel	6	15.4%
	Red pill	4	10.2%
	Blue pill	3	7.7%
	Fakecel	1	2.6%
Response (37)	Despair	19	51.4%
	Suicide	9	24.3%
	Cope	9	24.3%
Misogyny (17)	Hostility	14	82.4%
	Stereotyping	3	17.6%

5.6 Multifaceted pseudonyms

The final section in this chapter details the considerable number of users (n=35, 19.8%) who combined more than one of the above themes to construct a multifaceted pseudonym that communicates more than one aspect of their incel identity (for a numerical breakdown of these combinations, see Table 9). In all, 30 users combined two themes in their username and flair, and 5 users combined three themes. These findings emphasise two points: the intersectionality of the five codes described in this chapter and the complexity of identity play that Reddit’s username and flair affordances support.

The most common strategy for creating multifaceted pseudonyms was to combine a username or flair demonstrating awareness of subcultural norms with some other code. Overall, 22 of the 35 multifaceted pseudonyms were constructed in this fashion. Of these, eight accounts combined awareness with their reason for claiming incel identity. For example, User 114 combined the username u/incellethual with the flair “5’3” ugly goblin”. When such users combine these strategies for self-presentation, it allows them to demonstrate that they belong in r/Braincels by

conveying both the reason they joined the community and their successful completion of the lurking acculturation process. This utility of awareness pseudonyms to legitimise a user's membership in r/Braincels also caused it to be combined with ideology on six occasions. One illustrative example can be seen in the account information of User 130, who combined the username u/memecel with the flair "Hey at least I ain't drinking soy!". This username merely makes a neologism with the -cel suffix, signalling to others that it is a dedicated account for participation in r/Braincels, but without giving much other information about how its owner constructs his incel masculinity. The flair is then included to strengthen the pseudonym by confirming that he is not a "soy boy", a common insult amongst the Alt Right to emasculate outsiders in the pseudoscientific belief that phytoestrogens in soy products lead to decreased testosterone in men (Gambert & Linné 2018). Because such insults most commonly target blue-pill men (see [4.3](#)), this flair is coded as red pill by virtue of its rejection of the weakness and effeminacy characteristic of the blue pill. One more code with which awareness was frequently paired was response. For instance, User 20 composed the username u/EdgarAllanCope to make a pun based on subcultural vernacular incels use to describe hobbies they use to alleviate the emotional burden of celibacy. As described in [4.4](#), truecels tend to reject copes as a distraction from the realities of their condition, so to make it clear that this username was meant to be interpreted as a pun only (and not endorsing copes), the user appended the flair "I keep screaming but god doesn't answer", which explicitly communicated that he could not cope with his celibacy and was consumed with despair.

There was also a significant number of pseudonyms which combined two or more codes from a constellation of three closely related strategies: reason, ideology, and response. The random data sample contained eight instances of pseudonyms which combined reason and ideology, seven combining reason and response, and five combining ideology and response. An example of the first combination can be seen in User 10, whose account consisted of the username u/BlackpilledChad and the flair "Slavcel". This pairing relates how even though the user was attractive enough to consider himself a Chad, his Slavic heritage limited his SMV and caused him to accept the black pill, which preaches genetic determinism and the value of whiteness in the sexual marketplace. A pseudonym which exemplifies the second combination can be seen in the account information of User 51, who composed a generic username but included the flair "Gymcel, Currycel, Framecel, Baldingcel", which expresses how its owner identified as an incel due to his race, hair loss, and slight frame, yet he coped with this through exercise. Finally, an example of the third combination can be seen in User 100, which consists of the username u/HangedIncel and the flair "Void of Light pill". In this case, the flair refers to the user's black pill ideology while the username shows the despair and suicidal ideation caused by his nihilist outlook. Overall, these combinations demonstrate the intersectional nature of incel

identity, in which there is a direct correlation between the flaw an incel perceives in his masculinity, his preferred pill ideology, and how he responds to his celibacy.

Also noteworthy were five accounts which paired one theme with a misogynistic username or flair, thereby performing a rejection of women and establishing credible incel identity. Perhaps the best illustration of this technique belongs to User 8, whose account consisted of the username u/Blackpillnormie and the flair “I h8 lying hypocritical whores”. A black-pilled normie would refer to someone who is more attractive than your typical incel, but who still agrees with their nihilist worldview. To demonstrate that he belongs in the community and is participating in good faith, this user appended a flair which performs a rejection of women, despite possibly being attractive enough to access their bodies.

Finally, the five accounts which combined three codes demonstrate the amount of detail about users’ incel masculinity that Reddit’s username and flair affordances can convey. For instance, User 17 combined the username u/Cursedcel with the lengthy flair “20yo KHHV Mulattocel NotSoFatcel Roping at 30 if still no gf”. The username here simply makes an incel neologism, but the flair first cites three separate reasons this user had for claiming incel identity (total romantic inexperience, mixed racial heritage, and body type) before communicating how he responded to his celibacy by deciding to die by suicide if he is unable to ascend by a certain age.

Table 10: combinations contained in multifaceted pseudonyms
Pseudonyms containing three codes are broken into triplicate pairs (e.g., XYZ → XY, YZ, XZ)

Code 1	Code 2	Number
Reason	Awareness	8
Reason	Ideology	8
Reason	Response	7
Awareness	Ideology	6
Awareness	Response	6
Ideology	Response	5
Reason	Misogyny	2
Awareness	Misogyny	2
Ideology	Misogyny	1

Chapter 6: Discussion

The final chapter of this thesis applies the findings from Chapters 3-5 to the literature to respond to the two research questions listed in [1.2](#). Accordingly, the first two sections of this chapter correspond with those research questions. First, [6.1](#) orients incel ideology within the existing network of online male supremacist ideologies which comprise the Manosphere. Then, [6.2](#) considers how individual members of r/Braincels employ Reddit's connective and participatory affordances to amplify rhetorics of male victimhood, grievance, and entitlement. This is followed by [6.3](#), which concludes the thesis by reflecting on the limitations of this research and making recommendations for future researchers.

6.1 Orientation of incel ideology within the Manosphere

The extreme incel discourses detailed in Chapter 4, when coupled with the sheer amount of in-group vernacular, suggest that any potential recruit could easily be scared off or confused by content generated in r/Braincels. As a result, it is theorised that most members join incel groups because they are first exposed to related concepts and terminology when participating elsewhere in the Manosphere. In fact, the Manosphere's factions contain several ideological intersections and typically share platforms with one another. Manoel Horta Ribeiro and colleagues (2020) characterise this intersectionality as a "radicalisation pathway" and found that there has been a significant migration of users along this pathway from its older and relatively milder communities such as MRA to the newer and more extreme ones like incels and MGTOW. The first section of chapter maps that pathway in response to RQ1, which asks how incel ideology as represented on Reddit's r/Braincels originates from the Manosphere's existing network of antifeminist ideologies. I then theorise the origins of incel ideology as represented on r/Braincels, visualised in Figure 16 below. In doing so, this section explicates how users can be primed to understand the incel worldview through exposure to similar ideologies which present related concepts in more moderate terms.

On its surface, each of the Manosphere factions detailed in [2.1](#) appears to have its own distinct system of belief. However, there are some common themes that bind the factions into a cohesive network and allow users to easily move between them. Specifically, the belief system articulated by each Manosphere faction is based in or reactionary to neoliberalism, its users show evidence of engagement with hegemonic masculinity, and their discourses are characterised by participation in networked misogyny. When taking these ideological, identical, and discursive commonalities into consideration, the Manosphere factions are not an unorganised collective of antifeminist communities, but as Bratich & Banet-Weiser (2019) argue, a series of "interconnected nodes in a mediated network of misogynistic discourses and practices". Such intersectionality explains why Ribeiro and colleagues (2020) found evidence that some users participated in multiple Manosphere

communities simultaneously and even migrated from one faction to another as their respective popularities waxed and waned.

The first node in this network—MRA—was the dominant Manosphere community from the early days of Web 2.0 to 2013, when it was superseded by TRP. This second node is an extension of MRA's Cyber Lad discourse (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016), which was influenced by the PUA movement to spin off from MRA to form a new ideology focused on sexual relationships rather than sexual politics. TRP was also the first faction to articulate a belief in the sexual marketplace, and it became the dominant Manosphere ideology from 2014—2017, at which point it experienced a steep decline and had only minimal activity by 2018. Although they were both founded years earlier, MGTOW and incels rose to prominence at this time to fill the void left by the decline of TRP, with incel groups becoming the dominant Manosphere faction from 2017—2019. Both ideologies are based on a rejection of the sexual marketplace, although for different reasons. MGTOW abandons the sexual marketplace because they view any relationship as a capitulation of female power, while incels want to participate there but feel that their physical inferiorities marginalise them and prevent them from doing so. Incels especially show a clear and direct lineage from TRP by incorporating concepts like hypergamy, SMV, and looksmxing into their belief system. However, the incel worldview also expands on TRP teachings by dividing the sexual marketplace into rigid social categories and adding the black pill subdivision. Even though incels and MGTOW diverge at this point, the volcel faction within r/Braincels, which has superior SMV to incels but voluntarily chooses to remain celibate, is paradigmatic of Level 4 MGTOW, therefore bridging the divide between the two groups and allowing users to plausibly claim membership in both communities. In fact, as shown in [5.3](#), there is evidence of volcel participation in r/Braincels, sometimes under the guise of an incel “ally” (User 86). Together, these intersections form the radicalisation pathway described by Ribeiro and colleagues (2020) by allowing for simultaneous membership and easy movement between Manosphere communities. As a result, there is considerable risk that the users who join, consume content from, and participate in Manosphere communities will progress along this pathway and become radicalised.

This research also makes several findings which describe new features of incel ideology that have developed on the Reddit platform. First, while the existence of red and black pill factions has been known for some time (Baele, Brace & Coan 2019; Bratich & Banet-Weiser 2019; Jaki et al. 2019), Chapter [3.2](#) makes the additional observation that there is a central tension embedded within black pill philosophy, which I term the Black Pill Conundrum. This tension arises from incels' simultaneous entitlement to sex as a means to alleviate masculinity crisis and the belief that incels with low SMV are fundamentally precluded from its access. All other Manosphere factions prescribe their followers a philosophy or set of actions to better oneself; MRAs use activism, TRP uses looksmxing and applied

EP, and MGTOW claims to help men actualise their masculinity. Only black-pilled incel ideology fails to offer any directive to its adherents, effectively making it an ideological dead end. Chapter [4.4](#) detailed a range of responses that incels have developed to the Black Pill Conundrum. Some attempt to indoctrinate other users with anecdotes of genetic determinism, which they term “spreading the black pill”. Others allow themselves to sink into nihilism and despair and sometimes even choose to die by suicide (Daly & Laskovtsov 2021). Finally, Chapter [2.3.2](#) revealed that there is a long history of incels whose aggrieved entitlement to women’s bodies will cause them to lash out violently at their perceived oppressors and enact revenge for their shame and emasculation. Next, this research documents how a second ideological subdivision has arisen on r/Braincels between truecels and volcels, from which a model for idealised incel masculinity has emerged (see [3.2](#)). Truecel identity is best characterised as an inversion of hegemonic ideals, with those who are most physically repulsive or romantically inexperienced being conferred with heightened social status within the community. The final way this research supplements the literature on incels is in describing their political beliefs (see [4.5](#)). The members of r/Braincels typically demonstrated attitudes which are consistent with the Alt Right and right-wing extremism, such as in the way white supremacy is woven into the belief system, frequent instances of conspiracism and casual antisemitism, and vehement opposition to feminism or feminist causes like abortion rights. Nonetheless, some r/Braincels users were counterintuitively shown to be largely politically disengaged and even side with left-wing candidates or causes at times. The most likely explanation for this again lies with the Black Pill Conundrum, whose irreconcilability can cause adherents to succumb to nihilism and defeatism.

Collectively, these novel features of incel ideology endemic to the Reddit platform suggest that incels’ trajectory has changed somewhat in recent years. First, historical incel communities welcomed a diverse range of opinions and voices, but the case of r/Braincels demonstrates a clear shift towards favouring the black pill, as black-pilled users have captured moderation power and then used this privileged position to authorise both passive and active harassment. The black pill’s rise to prominence suggests that an increasing number of incels will experience the persistent feelings of masculinity crisis, inadequacy, and hopelessness associated with the Black Pill Conundrum, causing them to become more disengaged—both politically and regarding their own physical and mental wellbeing. Because there is no prescribed solution, incels’ response to the Black Pill Conundrum varies. While indoctrinating other users and incels’ self-harm are both undesirable outcomes, it is the final response of using violence to reclaim masculinity that is the clearest and most direct threat to public safety. Even though there were very few instances of violent threats observed on r/Braincels, this was likely due to a pattern in moderation practices in which moderators of toxic communities set rules and

filters to comply with Reddit's site-wide rules but make no attempt to meaningfully change the culture of their community (Gillett & Suzor 2022).

The majority of incel attacks (10 of the 14, from Atchison to the unnamed massage parlour attacker) occurred between late 2017 and early 2020, a timeframe that coincides with incels' period of peak popularity within the Manosphere. It would be natural to expect that the deplatforming of r/Braincels and other incel communities would lead to a drop-off in incel violence, but there have also been several unrealised attacks occurring since 2020, which points instead to an improving ability to recognise and respond to threats of incel violence, rather than incels fading into obscurity. In fact, research on Reddit sanctions shows that members of banned subreddits tend to be dispersed in multiple directions, with the most active users migrating to external sites rather than change their behaviour (Copland 2020). More casual users, on the other hand, tend to stay on the platform and join similar communities (Chandrasekharan et al. 2017). While the remaining Manosphere communities on Reddit have steadily declined in popularity, ideological convergence on the Far Right increasingly incorporates gender ideology into their world view (Corredor 2019; Ong 2020). I believe that r/Braincels' deplatforming will mirror this divide; the angrier, more extreme, and less engaged users will join platforms like *incels.me* to continue their misogynistic discourses unabated, while more moderate users will join other groups on Reddit whose ideologies are compatible with the incel worldview, such as those devoted to antisemitic conspiracies or white supremacy. As a result, the threat of incel violence remains legitimate, but the process of responding to it is complicated by deplatforming of high profile incel communities and the subsequent dispersal of its users.

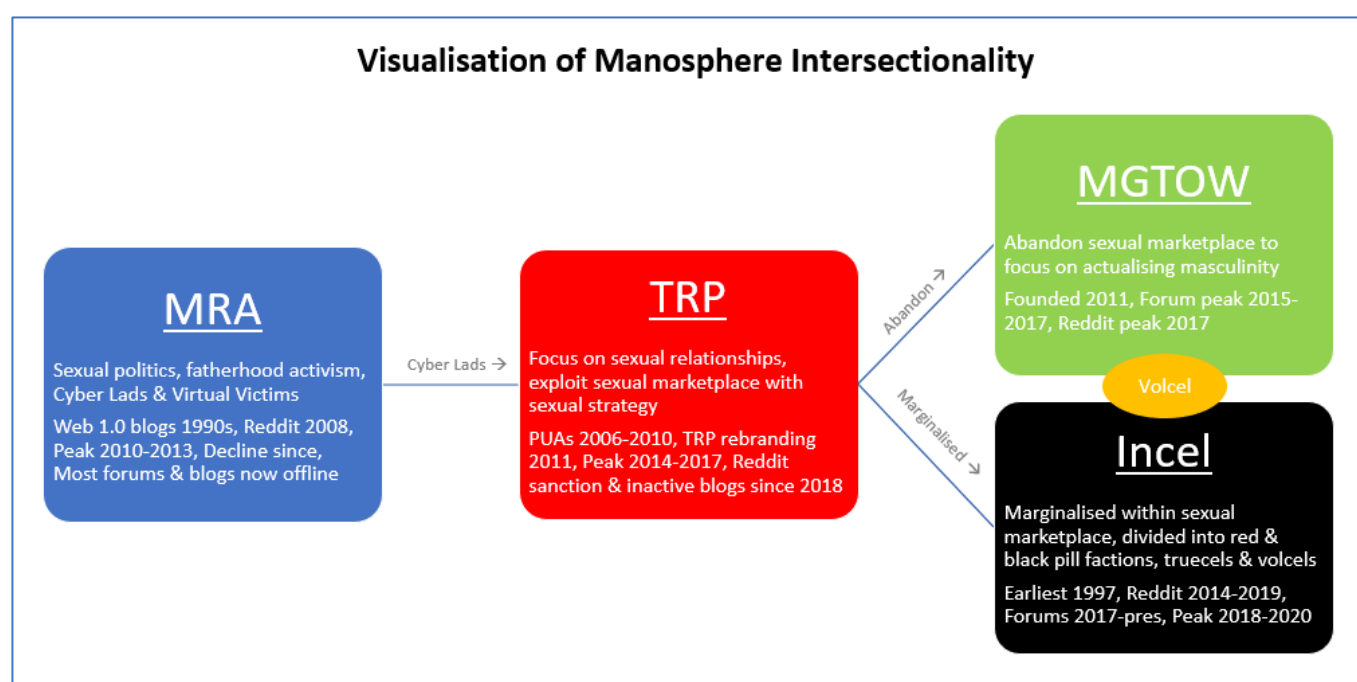


Figure 16: a visualisation of the theorised intersectionality between Manosphere factions

6.2 Incel use of Reddit affordances

The second section of this chapter responds to RQ2, which asks how the members of r/Braincels use Reddit's affordances to amplify rhetorics of male victimhood, grievance, and entitlement. In answering this question, I consider a range of Reddit affordances and how they shape on the content that is produced, consumed, and elevated to a position of visibility within the community.

First, Reddit's connective affordances allow Redditors to easily network with other users. This can occur within the context of a specific subreddit when a mediated association of strangers convenes in the comment section of posts to discuss, debate, and vote on their content. Not only did this networking facilitate multiple levels of incel discourse, but it also led to the networked harassment of the subreddit's female moderator u/BG, whose posts and comments attracted relentless invective from users who believed that women were disqualified from claiming incel identity and her presence was therefore unwelcome. Reddit's connective affordances also extend to networking between subreddits, as the site's participatory culture and subreddit structure encourages users to maintain simultaneous membership in multiple communities. To account for this, the moderators of r/Braincels recommended a series of more than 80 subreddits that its subscribers could use to diversify their Reddit experience. Although the chosen methodology for this research does not make it possible to quantify the portion of each subreddit's membership that incels accounted for, this series of recommended subreddits and their varying intersections with incel ideology can be used as a proxy to map incels' footprint on Reddit. This interconnected network allowed r/Braincels to have a broad impact which may have impacted the composition, content, and discourse of other communities on Reddit. For instance, among the network of recommended subreddits was a series of 29 public communities with varying degrees of intersection with incel ideology. These subreddits are especially problematic because they pose the risk that unsuspecting users will interact with incels while participating there and be exposed to their terminology and anecdotes of lookism and genetic determinism. In all, incels' use of Reddit's connective affordances demonstrates that the site can easily engender the formation of complex collectives of users whose interconnectivity is not bound by the subreddit structure. As a result, even though the radicalisation pathway described in [6.1](#) is most easily visualised linearly, these findings show that the path towards incel ideology is amorphous and can contain myriad entry points.

In addition to Reddit's connective affordances, the members of r/Braincels used the Reddit algorithm to selectively amplify content which reflected in-group identity or sowed discord by contesting other users' expressions of incel ideology. It has long been known that the Reddit algorithm works by comparing the age of a post or comment with its net up and downvotes (Massanari 2015, p.52), but because its exact contents are proprietary, there is little definitive information about its configuration beyond these general terms. Nonetheless, there are still valuable insights to be made

from studying the effect that the Reddit algorithm has on community-wide dynamics. For instance, Reddit's algorithm has been demonstrated to create a herding effect in which a subreddit's users upvote content that reflects in-group identity (Massanari 2017), allowing them to selectively elevate othering discourses and suppress dissenting points of view (Gaudette et al. 2021). On r/Braincels, in-group identity is defined by moderators as being characterised by physical inferiority, a resulting inability to access sex, and the shared goal of ascension (see [3.1](#)). As a result, an examination of public discourses on the topic of celibacy found that the community amplified content that reflected that identity and targeted those who did not with hate speech (see [4.3](#)). This was first reflected in the passive harassment of women, which involved users expressing aggrieved entitlement to women's bodies and blaming them for their romantic failures and insecurities. Such harassment took on a key role in community dynamics because it allowed members to perform a rejection of women and thereby establish credible incel identity. The users of r/Braincels also amplified content which passively harassed out-group men. This second discursive practice was drastically different from the first due to the way incels orient their masculinity in subordination to hegemonic ideals by stressing their genetic inferiority to Chad and their resulting marginalisation within a culture of hegemonic masculinity. The consistency with which the algorithm amplified content targeting these key out-groups is indicative of Reddit's herding effect, as those who see their beliefs or identity reflected in such discourses will be motivated to vote and participate, while those who do not will abstain and consume content elsewhere (Massanari 2017). This also reflects how platform affordances have caused the way individuals construct their incel identity to evolve. Despite their shared desire to access to women's bodies and "ascend" to a normative sexual trajectory, these discourses show that incel identity is now more so defined by the use of othering discourses which demonstrate the user's rejection of women and distance from "alpha" masculinity rather than it is by romantic deficits.

Research also shows that social media algorithms are designed to promote user engagement above all, which means that they can amplify inflammatory or obscene content which provokes a strong reaction in the reader, regardless of whether that reaction is for positive or negative reasons (Merrill & Oremus 2021; Rathje, Van Bavel & van der Linden 2021; Vargo & Hopp 2020). On Reddit, this means that in the same way the algorithm can elevate content which best reflects in-group identity, comment sections can just as easily devolve into a hotbed for contestation that detracts from collective identity formation by sowing division within the community (Buyukozturk, Gaulden & Dowd-Arrow 2018). The analysis of public sentiment on ascension in [4.4](#) revealed a third discursive practice on r/Braincels, which consists of users participating in the active harassment of fellow community members to contest their ideology and assert ideological supremacy. This pattern of ideological contestation resulted from the two major subdivisions within the r/Braincels community—the red and

black pill divide, based on a given user's opinion on the mutability of SMV, and the truecel-volcel divide, which is determined by how well a user conforms to idealised incel masculinity, which is essentially an inversion of hegemonic ideals. When a user's ideology was contested according to these subdivisions, the harassment almost always originated from more extreme users like black-pillers and truecels and targeted incels with more moderate beliefs. By consistently elevating claims of ideological supremacy, the Reddit algorithm reinforces extremism by rewarding the poster with upvotes and karma. Moreover, I believe that this discursive practice could be a mechanism through which newly inducted users progress in their ideology because it consistently challenges their beliefs, suggests more extreme alternatives, and forces them to repeatedly defend or reconsider elements of their worldview. This pattern of intra-group harassment also played a role in the subreddit's ideological drift towards favouring the black pill, as pressure from hard-line incels who denied women membership in the community led to turnover in the moderation team, eventually culminating in the takeover of the subreddit by black-pillers (see [3.4](#)). The concept of ideological supremacy is explicitly linked to these changes in the subreddit's leadership, as the newly appointed black-pillared moderator u/IQ celebrated his promotion as finally bringing "real incel representation on the moderation team" (Post 16).

The last Reddit affordance this research considered was the ability of users to construct complex pseudonymous "throwaway" profiles. Chapter 5 obtained a random sample of username and flair data from users whose comments were elevated to position of visibility by the Reddit algorithm. Thematic analysis of this sample revealed five key strategies for self-presentation on r/Braincels, which collectively reinforce the discursive practices described above. To illustrate, the first can be seen in the account information of those who used stereotypes or hate speech against women as part of their strategy for incel self-presentation (see [5.5](#)). Although this was the least frequently occurring theme in the data sample, there are several examples of multifaceted pseudonyms in [5.6](#) that demonstrate the how performative misogyny can be used strategically to legitimate a user's membership in the community. For example, User 8 in the random sample composed a username which identified himself as an outsider (normie), but his inclusion of a misogynistic flair performed a rejection of women and thereby communicated to his audience that he was participating in the community in good faith. (The pseudonyms demonstrating knowledge of subcultural norms in [5.2](#) were found to have a similar legitimising effect.) The second discursive practice of passively harassing out-group men can similarly be seen in the account information of users whose pseudonyms communicated their reason for claiming incel identity (see [5.1](#)). There were many different reasons provided, but each of them constructed the account owner's incel masculinity in subordination to hegemonic ideals. Finally, the practice of r/Braincels members to actively harass their fellow incels

was dependent on ideological subdivisions within the community, all of which were represented in pseudonyms that revealed a user's personal brand of ideology (see [5.3](#)). Although these pseudonyms did not explicitly direct hate speech at other incels, users' ideology was shown to correlate with how they responded to their celibacy, allowing those who expressed severe emotional distress or defeatist attitudes (see [5.4](#)) to nonetheless assert claims of ideological purity. Not only do the findings of Chapter 5 demonstrate how users' discursive practices are not limited to posts and comments, it also provides evidence of users' deep immersion within the r/Braincels subculture and the complexity of identity play that Reddit's pseudonymising affordances support.

Finally, it must be mentioned that these dangerous discourses persisted on r/Braincels because the moderators were also active members of the community. Research on Reddit moderation has shown that the site's decentralised governance structure tends to foster closer relationships between moderators and their community rather than with administrators, which causes subreddits to be governed according to community-specific standards and ideologies instead of site-wide rules (Trott, Beckett & Paech 2022). In fact, one study found that the moderators of misogynistic subreddits tended to resist cultural change by limiting users' interactions with outsiders (Gillett & Suzor 2022). The discussion of r/Braincels rules and word filters in [3.5](#) supports these findings, as the r/Braincels moderation team composed rules to protect its members from potential derogation by outsiders and set standards for group membership which reflected the community's ideological subdivisions. The automated word filters were similarly ineffectual, as evidenced by its numerous duplicated and overlapping terms, suggesting that the word bank was compiled over time in reaction to users' seemingly endless ability to adapt their language and create new subcultural vernacular to circumvent filters. For instance, one of the most alarming posts obtained in data collection was Post 98, which invited users to leave the community in favour of the Marxism-Rodgerism board on 8chan (now known as 8kun), which would have had the effect of funnelling users who were worried about being deplatformed towards a site which is moderated to much lower standards and associated with far greater degrees of extremism and explicit hate speech than Reddit, 4chan, or any other Manosphere platform (Rieger et al. 2021). This post was allowed to be published because Elliot Rodger's name was contained within the 8chan URL and was therefore not recognised as a filtered term.

The proliferation of misogyny on r/Braincels despite clear rules and a substantial bank of filtered words suggests that Reddit's moderation norms and practices are ineffective, or at the very least they can be easily undermined if the moderation team does not consistently and earnestly apply them. This is not mere speculation, as there was substantial evidence to suggest that the community's moderators harboured their own misogynistic attitudes and supported the use of hate speech against their perceived oppressors. For example, in the subreddit's FAQ page, the moderators outright admit

that “there’s certainly some sexism” in their community, but they dismiss it as “barely even hate” (FAQ15). Moreover, u/IQ is quoted as labelling his predecessor u/BG an “enemy of the community” and peddling conspiracies that she bought her appointment by trading nude pictures (Post 11). From this, the degree of misogyny endorsed by the subreddit’s moderation team would have been apparent to anyone who bothered to look.

Collectively, incels’ use of Reddit’s connective, algorithmic, and pseudonymising affordances demonstrates how the platform’s features can be easily co-opted to promote extreme ideologies and stoke inter-group conflict. As a result, the specific brand of incel ideology present on r/Braincels can be considered as being co-produced by the Reddit platform in that its affordances allow users to network with and learn from each other, give incel discourses material structure, and facilitate the construction of pseudonymous incel identities. As a result, even though Reddit’s incel communities bear some resemblance to those on competing sites like *incels.me*, the way incel ideology is expressed through discourse on r/Braincels is distinct because it is derived from the unique constellation of Reddit’s userbase, site structure, and affordances.

6.3 Limitations and future research

To conclude, the final section of this chapter reflects on this research’s limitations and makes recommendations to future researchers on how incels and Reddit’s enablement of extremism can continue to be studied. First, perhaps the greatest limitation of the present research is the way data was collected. By sourcing r/Braincels content from *archive.today* to protect researcher safety, there is natural selection bias in data collection because the internet archive is designed to save copies of posts that are most liable to be deleted, such as those which contain extreme language or hate speech. For this reason, the collection of incel posts on *archive.today* is likely skewed towards extreme content, while more benign posts would have little reason to be archived. As a result, it is possible to say that a certain attitude was present at a given time on r/Braincels, but it remains unclear just how commonly held that attitude was. Wherever possible, I use upvote data as a proxy for public sentiment, but this is complicated by variations in the age of posts when they were captured by *archive.today*, as well as the subreddit’s substantial growth and ideological drift over its lifespan, which makes comparing upvote data between posts and comments tenuous at best. Researchers are encouraged to apply quantitative methods to Reddit data to determine the extent of its problem with extremism. Because Reddit’s willingness to sanction problematic communities is most closely correlated with internal pressure from the Reddit userbase and negative media attention (Habib & Nithyanand 2022), such research could be used to pressure Reddit administrators to be more proactive in sanctioning extremism by providing empirical evidence of subreddits which grow increasingly toxic over time.

A second limitation of this research is that it was completed using data taken from r/Braincels only, which means that it can only make findings regarding how its users participate and interact with each other in that subreddit only. The findings of [3.3](#) demonstrate that such users are likely to have diverse habits outside of r/Braincels, but without scraping individual users' post and comment histories, it is not possible to say what route they took to join r/Braincels. In [6.1](#), I theorise that individuals join incel communities because they first gain knowledge of its beliefs and terminology by participating elsewhere in the Manosphere, but future research could reify these findings by gathering data about the online habits of individual members of extremist groups like r/Braincels to determine where they were first exposed to extremist content, how they progressed in their beliefs and language, and how long it took for them to begin participating after initially subscribing. In doing so, researchers can quantitatively map networked extremism on Reddit by tracking the spread and movement of users between interrelated subreddits.

Next, this thesis focuses on the digital framework for incel radicalisation, which provides insight into how platforms enable their communities to grow and spread their extremist ideologies. While this is useful in describing the role platforms have in co-producing extremism, the significant question remains of how long-time incels could be deradicalised. Future researchers should gather life course histories of incels who successfully exited the ideology to develop a framework for incel deradicalisation. Moreover, such research would be strengthened by incorporating insights from gender studies scholars, as it is now clear that in addition to the digital framework that facilitates extremism of all kinds on Reddit, incel radicalisation is equally a product of masculinity crisis that arises from young men's anxieties about conforming to a culture of hegemonic masculinity. Incel ideology as we know it today arose in reaction to years of discourses on alpha and beta masculinity (Ging 2017). Already, there are emerging claims of men who identify as a new category of masculinity called sigma males (Yalcinkaya 2022), which shows that discourses on "types" of masculinities are here to stay and could even cause the way masculinity is constructed and contested in the Manosphere to continue to evolve. By continuing to study incels from a perspective of masculinity, researchers can ensure that equal attention is given to the cultural practices that support our culture of hegemonic masculinity and give rise to the masculinity crisis that aggrieves young men and causes them to search for answers to explain their perceived disenfranchisement.

From a digital perspective, this same question can be asked of the platforms which host or have hosted incel communities. The findings of this research show that the members of r/Braincels were able to deploy Reddit affordances to express, teach, and learn the incel worldview, and that Reddit quarantine was ineffective in mitigating this process without the enthusiastic participation of the community's moderators. Even though Reddit has now banned the largest incel subreddits, its

affordances, questionably effective sanctions, and its decentralised governance structure maintain ideal conditions for new toxic technocultures to emerge on its platform. As a result, future researchers should investigate how these factors can be altered to prevent toxic subreddit cultures from developing in the first place.

Appendices

A. Overview of incel attackers

Shading indicates that the attack occurred during lifespan of r/Braincells. Among those cases, an asterisk (*) indicates that it was discussed on r/Braincells, captured in data collection, and included in [4.5](#). Solid dot points (●) indicate attackers who died by suicide following their attack, while an empty dot point (○) represents a failed attempt. Those who died by suicide are not included as a victim under the 'Killed' variable. Dates are written in the day-month-year format.

Attacker	Category	Age	Date	Location	Killed	Injured
● Marc Lépine	Proto-incel	25	6/12/89	Montréal, QC	14	14
● George Sodini	Proto-incel	48	4/08/09	Collier Township, PA	3	9
● Elliot Rodger	Incel terrorist	22	23/05/14	Isla Vista, CA	6	14
● Christopher Harper-Mercer	Incel-adjacent violence	26	1/10/15	Roseburg, OR	9	8
Sheldon Bentley	Random incel violence	36	31/07/16	Edmonton, AB	1	0
● William Atchison	Incel-adjacent violence	21	7/12/17	Aztec, NM	2	0
Nikolas Cruz*	Incel-adjacent violence	19	14/02/18	Parkland, FL	17	17
○ Alek Minassian*	Incel terrorist	25	23/04/18	Toronto, ON	10	16
● Scott Beierle*	Incel terrorist	40	2/11/18	Tallahassee, FL	2	4
Christopher Cleary*	Unrealised attack	27	19/01/19	Denver, CO		
Christopher Hasson	Unrealised attack	50	15/02/19	Silver Spring, MD		
Emmanuel Aranda	Random incel violence	24	12/04/19	Bloomington, MN	0	1
Alex Stavropoulos	Random incel violence	25	3/06/19	Sudbury, ON	0	2
● Brian Isaack Clyde	Incel-adjacent violence	22	17/06/19	Dallas, TX	0	0
Jean-Claude Rochefort	Unrealised attack	70	5/12/19	Montréal, QC		
Tobias Rathjen	Incel-adjacent violence	43	19/02/20	Hanau, Germany	10	5
Unnamed minor	Incel terrorist	17	24/02/20	Toronto, ON	1	2
Carl Bennington	Unrealised attack	33	21/04/20	Covina, CA		

Joseph Miner	Unrealised attack	29	12/05/20	New York, NY		
Armando Hernandez	Random incel violence	20	20/05/20	Glendale, AZ	0	3
Cole Carini	Unrealised attack	23	3/06/20	Richlands, VA		
David Kaufman	Unrealised attack		4/09/20	New York, NY		
Malik Sanchez	Unrealised attack	19	13/02/21	New York, NY		
Tres Genco	Unrealised attack	21	21/07/21	Hillsboro, OH		
● Jake Davison	Random incel violence	22	12/08/21	Plymouth, UK	5	2
Total					80	97
<i>Less proto-incels</i>					<i>63</i>	<i>74</i>

B. Glossary of incel terminology

Term	Definition
AWALT	all women are like this, first proposition of incel stereotyping
alpha fucks, beta bucks	phrase used to represent the incel worldview, in which alpha males monopolise the 'supply' of women while beta males only act as financial providers
ascension	to transcend incel status by accessing sex
Becky	a woman with moderate-high SMV, more attractive than a normie but less attractive than Stacy
black pill	the belief that only genetic factors such as height and race determine SMV, also called lookism
blackcel	a Black incel
blue pill	designates those who reject the incel worldview and willingly participate in the sexual marketplace
bombcel	a Middle Eastern Chad
Brad	a man with moderate-high SMV, more attractive than a normie but less attractive than Chad, also called Chad-lite
Chad	a man with the highest possible SMV, an alpha male
Chaddam	a Middle Eastern Chad
Chad-lite	a man with high SMV, but who is less attractive than Chad, also called Brad
Chadpreet	a South Asian Chad
Chang	an East Asian Chad
cope	a strategy an incel uses to distract himself from the emotional pain of his celibacy
curry/currycel	a South Asian incel
EWALT	enough women are like this, the final proposition of incel stereotyping
fakecel	someone who claims incel identity but is rejected by the community for being too attractive or successful with women
female	a common insult for women on r/Braincels, used as a noun to refer to women by their biology rather than as people
femcel	a female incel; most incels deny their existence
femoid/foid	a common insult for women on r/Braincels, a contraction of 'female humanoid organism'
gymcel	an incel who copes with his celibacy through exercise
HKV	a variation on KHHV, standing for hug-less, kiss-less virgin
hole	a common insult for women on r/Braincels which refers to them by their sex organs
hypergamy	the belief that women choose sexual partners to ensure themselves the best genetic or financial resources
incel	involuntary celibate, defined by moderators as "someone who, for various reasons (usually physical appearance), cannot enter into a sexual and/or romantic relationship even though they desire such a thing"
inceldom	the general state of being an incel
it's over	a phrase black-pillers use to express nihilism and lack of hope over the prospect of ascension
JBW	just be white, a phrase which represents the racial hierarchies embedded in the incel worldview
JFL	just fucking laugh, a phrase black-pillers use to express nihilism and lack of hope over the prospect of ascension

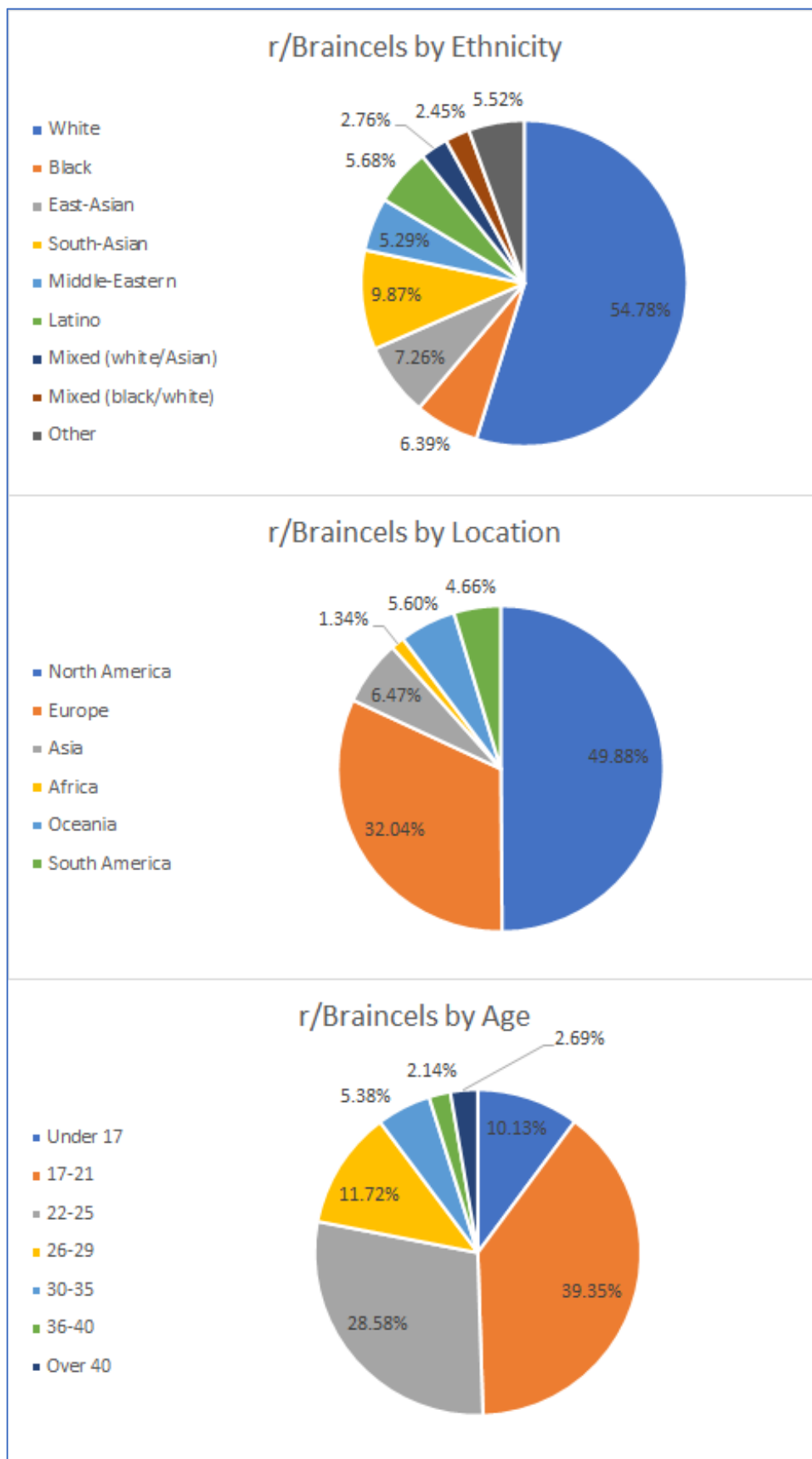
KHHV	Kiss-less, hand-holdless, hug-less virgin, a phrase used to emphasise a truecel's lack of romantic experience
LDAR	lay down and rot, a phrase black-pillers use to express nihilism and lack of hope over the prospect of ascension
lookism	the belief that only physical appearance determines SMV
looksmxing	techniques to increase SMV, such as weightlifting or following the latest fashion trends
manlet	a short man
mentalcel	an incel that cannot access sex due to social anxiety, depression, or non-neurotypicality
mog	to demonstrate one's physical superiority to someone, typically used as a verb
normie	a man or woman with only moderate SMV, comprising most of the sexual marketplace
NAWALT	not all women are like this, the second proposition to incel stereotyping
NEETcel	an incel who copes with his celibacy by withdrawing from society, derived from the acronym NEET, which stands for "not in employment, education, or training"
red pill	the belief that SMV is composed of both physical and behavioural characteristics
ricecel	an East Asian Chad
roastie	a common insult for women on r/Braincels, derived from a meme that alleges that multiple sexual partners cause a woman's labia to lengthen and resemble slices of roast beef
SMV	sexual market value; a composite of a man or woman's socially and sexually desirable traits
sexual marketplace	the interplay of men and women who exchange SMV for access to sex
Stacy	a woman with the highest possible SMV
the rope	a phrase black-pillers use to express suicidal thoughts
truecel	a 'pure' incel; this term is typically self-endowed and used to assert ideological superiority over other incels
Tyrone	a Black Chad
volcel	someone who is voluntarily celibate and chooses not to have relationships with women

C. Related subreddits

Subreddit	Location	Affiliation	Classification	Status	Date
AmlUgly	wiki	Public	Legitimisation	Active	
askanincel	sidebar	Incel	Legitimisation	Banned	9/01/20
Balkanceli	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Abandoned	
becomeaman	wiki	Public	Sexual strategy	Active	
BlackPillCentral	FAQ	Incel	Historical	Banned	30/09/19
BlackpilledNormies	FAQ	Incel	Historical	Banned	6/11/18
BlackpillMe	FAQ	Incel	Legitimisation	Abandoned	
BlackpillReality	FAQ	Incel	Legitimisation	Abandoned	
BlackPillScience	wiki, FAQ, sidebar	Incel	Legitimisation	Active	
BlackpillTruth	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Abandoned	
CasualConversation	wiki	Public	General support	Active	
Celouts	FAQ	Incel	Historical	Banned	17/10/19
confidence	wiki	Public	General support	Active	
dating_advice	wiki	Public	General support	Active	
DecidingToBeBetter	wiki	Public	General support	Active	
depression	sidebar	Public	General support	Active	
EqualAttraction	wiki	Public	Legitimisation	Active	
Ethnic_cels	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Banned	29/06/20
evopsych	sidebar	Public	Legitimisation	Active	
Fitness	wiki	Public	Looksmxing	Active	
ForeverAlone	wiki	Public	Designated out-group	Active	
ForeverUnwanted	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Abandoned	
getdisciplined	wiki	Public	General support	Active	
Gymcels	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Banned	17/06/21
Healcel	wiki	Incel	Niche	Abandoned	
Incel	FAQ	Incel	Historical	Banned	24/04/17
IncelAbode	FAQ	Incel	Historical	Banned	21/10/16
IncelAdvice	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Private	
IncelDate	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Abandoned	
IncelDense	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Banned	6/02/20
IncelDiaries	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Abandoned	
IncelGraveyard	FAQ	Incel	Historical	Banned	17/06/19
Incelistan	FAQ	Incel	Historical	Banned	30/09/19
IncelLookmatch	FAQ	Incel	Legitimisation	Abandoned	
IncelPodcast	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Private	
Incels	FAQ	Incel	Historical	Banned	7/11/17
Incels4Life	FAQ	Incel	Historical	Banned	10/10/18
IncelSelfies	wiki, FAQ	Incel	Legitimisation	Banned	10/10/19
IncelsWithoutHate	FAQ, sidebar	Incel	Niche	Banned	11/03/21
Inceltalia	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Abandoned	
IncelTears	wiki	Public	Designated out-group	Private	
IncelUtopia	FAQ	Incel	Historical	Banned	11/10/18
IncelWatch	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Private	
keto	wiki	Public	Looksmxing	Active	
Life_Fuel	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Abandoned	

LooksTheories	FAQ	Incel	Legitimisation	Abandoned	
loseit	wiki	Public	Looksmxing	Active	
LowInhibGame	wiki	Public	Sexual strategy	Private	
malefashionadvice	wiki	Public	Looksmxing	Active	
MaleForeverAlone	FAQ	Incel	Historical	Banned	29/06/18
malegrooming	wiki	Public	Looksmxing	Active	
malehairadvice	wiki	Public	Looksmxing	Active	
Manletcels	FAQ	Incel	Historical	Banned	11/10/18
Melanincels	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Banned	29/06/20
MenForeverAlone	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Banned	23/11/20
Mindcels	FAQ	Incel	Historical	Banned	4/10/18
OgreDate	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Abandoned	
PeopleThatDontExist	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Abandoned	
PurplePillDebate	wiki	Public	Sexual strategy	Active	
RateMe	wiki	Public	Legitimisation	Active	
RejectionSupport	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Abandoned	
Ricecels	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Abandoned	
Sadcels	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Banned	29/06/20
seduction	wiki	Public	Sexual strategy	Active	
Selfies	wiki	Public	Legitimisation	Active	
selfimprovement	wiki	Public	General support	Active	
Shortcels	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Banned	24/03/20
SkincareAddiction	wiki	Public	Looksmxing	Active	
SocialAnxiety	sidebar	Public	General support	Active	
socialskills	wiki	Public	General support	Active	
StAliaHarkonnen	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Banned	29/06/20
SubHumanoids	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Private	
SuicideWatch	sidebar	Public	General support	Active	
the_Braincelhalla	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Abandoned	
TheBluePill	wiki	Public	Designated out-group	Active	
TheIncelPill	FAQ	Incel	Historical	Banned	17/06/19
TheRedPill	wiki	Public	Sexual strategy	Active	
trpgame	wiki	Public	Sexual strategy	Active	
Trucelfies	wiki	Incel	Legitimisation	Private	
Truecels	FAQ	Incel	Historical	Banned	27/10/17
Truecels2	FAQ	Incel	Historical	Banned	17/08/16
TrueCope	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Abandoned	
truerateme	wiki	Public	Legitimisation	Active	
TruFemcels	wiki	Incel	Designated out-group	Banned	14/01/21
VirginSpace	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Abandoned	
VirginsUncensored	FAQ	Incel	Niche	Abandoned	

D. Demographic data



E. Moderator-filtered words

Filtered word/phrase	Reason for inclusion	Notes
acid attack	Violence/misogyny	
acid on her face	Violence/misogyny	
acid thrown on	Violence/misogyny	
acidfaced	Violence/misogyny	
acidfacing	Violence/misogyny	
Alek	Reference to incel saint	Alek Minassian
bash her face in	Violence/misogyny	
bash his head in	Violence/misogyny	
beat	Violence/misogyny	
beat their face	Violence/misogyny	
beat to a pull	Violence/misogyny	typo (pull = pulp)
beating	Violence/misogyny	
beats her	Violence/misogyny	
blowing them up	Violence/misogyny	
brutally raped	Violence/misogyny	
burn alive	Violence/misogyny	duplicated
burned	Violence/misogyny	
chloroform	Violence/misogyny	
Cho	Reference to incel saint	Seung-Hui Cho
choke them	Violence/misogyny	
chokes to death	Violence/misogyny	
circumcised	Violence/misogyny	
could suffer	Violence/misogyny	
ctb	Derogation by outsiders	catch the bus
cut them	Violence/misogyny	
dead bodies	Violence/misogyny	
death	Violence/misogyny	
defile her	Violence/misogyny	
die incel	Derogation by outsiders	
die slut	Violence/misogyny	
dies	Violence/misogyny	
do a livestream	Derogation by outsiders	
do the rope	Derogation by outsiders	
drugging women	Violence/misogyny	
E.R.	Reference to incel saint	Elliot Rodger
eliminate	Violence/misogyny	
eliminated	Violence/misogyny	
Elliot	Reference to incel saint	Elliot Rodger
ER	Reference to incel saint	Elliot Rodger
executed	Violence/misogyny	duplicated
exit bag	Violence/misogyny	
exit kit	Violence/misogyny	duplicated
female circumcision	Violence/misogyny	
gang raped	Violence/misogyny	
gas chamber	Violence/misogyny	
gas them	Violence/misogyny	

genocide	Violence/misogyny	
get run over	Violence/misogyny	
get vanned	Violence/misogyny	
glock	Violence/misogyny	
go rope	Derogation by outsiders	
guillotine	Violence/misogyny	
hang yourself	Derogation by outsiders	
hit by a truck	Violence/misogyny	
homicide fuel	Violence/misogyny	
hope you die	Violence/misogyny	
hope you get cancer	Violence/misogyny	
I am banging	Derogation by outsiders	
I hope she	Violence/misogyny	
I hope they die	Violence/misogyny	
I killed	Violence/misogyny	
I'm banging	Derogation by outsiders	
I'm fucking	Derogation by outsiders	
ISIS	Violence/misogyny	
jump off a bridge	Derogation by outsiders	
jump off a building	Derogation by outsiders	
just rope	Derogation by outsiders	
kidnap	Violence/misogyny	
kill	Violence/misogyny	
kill a woman	Violence/misogyny	
kill them	Violence/misogyny	
kill urself	Derogation by outsiders	
killed	Violence/misogyny	
killer	Violence/misogyny	
killers	Violence/misogyny	
killing	Violence/misogyny	
killing spree	Violence/misogyny	
kys	Derogation by outsiders	kill yourself
lashes	Violence/misogyny	
lashing	Violence/misogyny	
livestream it	Derogation by outsiders	
lynch	Violence/misogyny	
lynch them	Violence/misogyny	
manifesto	Reference to incel saint	
Marc Lepine	Reference to incel saint	
mass killing	Violence/misogyny	
mass shooting	Violence/misogyny	
mass suicide	Derogation by outsiders	
Minassian	Reference to incel saint	Alek Minassian
molest	Violence/misogyny	
Morocco	Violence/misogyny	site of 2018 acid attack
most of us	Derogation by outsiders	
most of you	Derogation by outsiders	
mutilate	Violence/misogyny	
my gf	Derogation by outsiders	
my girlfriend	Derogation by outsiders	

my life goal	Violence/misogyny	
my van	Violence/misogyny	
my wife	Derogation by outsiders	
neck yourself	Derogation by outsiders	
need to be g4ssed	Violence/misogyny	
need to be gassed	Violence/misogyny	
need to be put down	Violence/misogyny	
need to be shot	Violence/misogyny	
need to die	Violence/misogyny	duplicate
no wonder you are incel	Derogation by outsiders	
no wonder you can't get laid	Derogation by outsiders	
no wonder you're incel	Derogation by outsiders	
off yourself	Derogation by outsiders	
okay with the rapes	Violence/misogyny	
pathetic virgin	Derogation by outsiders	
play in traffic	Derogation by outsiders	
prime age	Violence/misogyny	
punch her face	Violence/misogyny	
punch them	Violence/misogyny	
r@pe	Violence/misogyny	
rampage	Violence/misogyny	
rape	Violence/misogyny	
rapê	Violence/misogyny	
räpe	Violence/misogyny	
rape should be legal	Violence/misogyny	
rape them	Violence/misogyny	
raped	Violence/misogyny	
rapefuel	Violence/misogyny	
raping	Violence/misogyny	
raping women	Violence/misogyny	
rapist	Violence/misogyny	
r-a-p-i-s-t	Violence/misogyny	
<i>Redacted</i>	Derogation by outsiders	username of r/IncelTears head moderator
Rodger	Reference to incel saint	Elliot Rodger
rope yourself	Derogation by outsiders	
rape	Violence/misogyny	
Saint Cruz	Reference to incel saint	Nikolas Cruz
Saint Lepine	Reference to incel saint	Marc Lépine
Saint Ramirez	Reference to incel saint	Richard Ramirez
shooter	Violence/misogyny	
shootings	Violence/misogyny	
shotgun	Violence/misogyny	duplicate
should be executed	Violence/misogyny	
should commit suicide	Derogation by outsiders	
should die	Violence/misogyny	duplicate
slave girls	Violence/misogyny	
slit their throats	Violence/misogyny	
slit your throat	Derogation by outsiders	
slit your wrists	Derogation by outsiders	

smack his head	Violence/misogyny	
sold as cattle	Violence/misogyny	
split her skull open	Violence/misogyny	
St. Cruz	Reference to incel saint	Nikolas Cruz
St. Lepine	Reference to incel saint	Marc Lépine
St. Ramirez	Reference to incel saint	Richard Ramirez
stab	Violence/misogyny	
stab you	Violence/misogyny	
stabbed	Violence/misogyny	
stoning	Violence/misogyny	
strangle you	Violence/misogyny	
supreme gentleman	Reference to incel saint	how Elliot Rodger characterised himself
the hero we need	Reference to incel saint	
this is why you're a virgin	Derogation by outsiders	
throw acid	Violence/misogyny	
Toronto	Reference to incel saint	site of Minassian's van attack
urge to rape	Violence/misogyny	
van rental	Violence/misogyny	
vanfuel	Violence/misogyny	
virgin loser	Derogation by outsiders	
wife beaters	Violence/misogyny	
with a girl	Derogation by outsiders	
you deserve rape	Violence/misogyny	

F. Incel pseudonyms

The following table presents the entirety of the random sample of incel pseudonyms analysed in Chapter 5. Codes are assigned using the codebook in Table 6, located in [Chapter 5](#). Spaces are inserted into usernames to improve legibility. For ethical reasons, usernames which do not contain recognisable incel terminology are redacted completely and labelled “generic”, while those that have research value are paraphrased slightly to protect that user’s anonymity.

ID	Username	Code(s)	Subcode(s)	Flair	Code(s)	Subcode(s)
1	35-year-old genetic trash	Reason	Genetics	Born again Incel	Ideology	Red pill
2	41-year-old Chad with ASPD	Reason	Appearance, Neurotypicality			
3	Abu Incel al-Australi	Awareness	Neologism	If you're a female I hate you	Misogyny	Hostility
4	Alexander the autistic	Reason	Neurotypicality			
5	Aspy incel	Reason	Neurotypicality			
6	AutisticCel	Reason	Neurotypicality			
7	Biological trash	Reason	Genetics			
8	Black pill normie	Ideology	Black pill	I h8 lying hypocritical whores	Misogyny	Hostility
9	Black pill volcel	Ideology	Black pill, Volcel			
10	Blackpilled Chad	Ideology	Black pill	Slavcel	Reason	Ethnicity
11	Blackpilled normie	Ideology	Black pill			
12	Chad’s leftovers	Reason	Appearance			
13	ChadOps2Cel	Awareness	In-group reference	Prophet of the Blackpill KHHV	Reason, Ideology	Virginity, Black pill
14	Crackcel	Awareness	Neologism			
15	Cucked red pill	Ideology	Black pill			
16	Currycel	Reason	Ethnicity			
17	Cursedcel	Awareness	Neologism	20yo KHHV Mulattocel NotSoFatcel Roping at 30 if still no gf	Reason, Response	Virginity, Ethnicity, Appearance, Suicide
18	Cuttercel	Response	Cope			
19	Dankcel	Awareness	Neologism	0/10 turbo-manlet wristcel	Reason	Appearance, Size

20	Edgar Allan Cope	Awareness	Neologism	I keep screaming but god doesn't answer	Response	Despair
21	Evilcel	Awareness	Neologism	The black pill is the seed for awakening the Black Flame	Ideology	Black pill
22	Fatasscel	Reason	Appearance	6'5" / Late bloomer / Lifemaxxing in progress	Reason, Response	Size, Cope, Appearance
23	Feminism must die	Misogyny	Hostility			
24	Feminism must die 2 Electric Boogaloo	Misogyny	Hostility			
25	Foreigncel	Awareness	Neologism	redacted get a job	Awareness	In-group reference
26	Former r/incels redditor	Awareness	In-group reference	It never even began	Reason	Appearance
27	Generic			1.5/10 subhuman circus freak	Reason	Appearance
28	Generic			1300 reasons why	Reason	Appearance
29	Generic			16yo Forever Alone	Ideology	Fakecel
30	Generic			2.5/10 Gymcelled Truecel	Reason, Ideology, Response	Appearance, Cope, Truecel
31	Generic			21, Dartmouthcel	Awareness	Neologism
32	Generic			2d girls are more human	Misogyny	Stereotyping
33	Generic			2-in-1 ShampooCel	Awareness	Neologism
34	Generic			5'5 Failed Normie Drug Addict	Reason, Response	Size, Cope
35	Generic			6'2" blackcel	Reason	Size, Ethnicity
36	Generic			78 IQ autistic manlet framecel	Reason	Neurotypicality, Size
37	Generic			unappealing	Reason	Appearance
38	Generic			Aryancel	Reason	Ethnicity
39	Generic			Ascended Autistcel	Reason, Ideology	Neurotypicality, Blue pill
40	Generic			based youtubecel	Awareness	Neologism
41	Generic			Blackpill Dealer	Ideology	Black pill

42	Generic			blackpill enthusiast	Ideology	Black pill
43	Generic			blackpilled 7/10	Ideology	Black pill
44	Generic			Bring back the Patriarchy in full force	Misogyny	Hostility
45	Generic			CEO of Blackpill Pharmaceuticals	Ideology	Black pill
46	Generic			Chadcel	Reason	Appearance
47	Generic			Cope Rope	Response	Suicide
48	Generic			Definitely 'like that'	Ideology	Truecel
49	Generic			Eternal Ldar	Response	Despair
50	Generic			gymcel	Response	Cope
51	Generic			Gymcel, Currycel, Framcel, Baldingcel	Reason, Response	Appearance, Ethnicity, Size, Cope
52	Generic			Hezbollahcel	Awareness	Neologism
53	Generic			I'm making my Macrame Rope.	Response	Suicide
54	Generic			Incel Commander	Ideology	Truecel
55	Generic			Incelistan	Awareness	Neologism
56	Generic			Incels.me Mod	Awareness	In-group reference
57	Generic			It never began for ItsOvercels	Response	Despair
58	Generic			it's over	Response	Despair
59	Generic			Libertariancel	Awareness	Neologism
60	Generic			Living life to the emptiest	Response	Despair
61	Generic			lonely gymcel	Response	Cope
62	Generic			lurkcel	Awareness	Neologism
63	Generic			MAKE BRAINCELS GREAT AGAIN	Awareness	In-group reference
64	Generic			malnourishcel	Reason	Size
65	Generic			misogynist	Misogyny	Hostility
66	Generic			Mr Betabux	Reason	Appearance

67	Generic			musiccel dota2cel	Response	Cope
68	Generic			nihilistcel, hopeless	Awareness, Response	Neologism, Despair
69	Generic			Normie scum	Ideology	Blue pill
70	Generic			Ozzie Modcel	Awareness	In-group reference, Neologism
71	Generic			Result of the wrong genetic combination	Reason	Genetics
72	Generic			Rocky Dennis Mogs Me	Reason	Appearance
73	Generic			Sardaukarcel	Awareness	Neologism
74	Generic			shortcel / gumcel / aspercel	Reason	Size, Appearance, Neurotypicality
75	Generic			Slav subhuman	Reason	Ethnicity
76	Generic			soycel	Awareness	Neologism
77	Generic			Spergcel, blackpill addict	Reason, Ideology	Neurotypicality, Black pill
78	Generic			St. Blackops2cel delivers us	Awareness	In-group reference
79	Generic			Suffer the Children	Response	Despair
80	Generic			Supreme Commander of Incelistan	Ideology	Truecel
81	Generic			The truest of cels	Ideology	Truecel
82	Generic			Undocumented Sex = No Vagina Is Illegal	Misogyny	Hostility
83	Generic			use code "cel" for 5% off rope	Response	Suicide
84	Generic			Volcel	Ideology	Volcel
85	Generic			Volcel	Ideology	Volcel
86	Generic			volcel ally	Ideology	Volcel
87	Generic			Volcel bro	Ideology	Volcel
88	Generic			Weed	Response	Cope

89	Generic			Women are psychopaths	Misogyny	Stereotyping
90	Generic			Wristcel with toddler frame	Reason	Size
91	Generic			ຂ້ອຍເປັນຄົນຂີ້ຮ້າຍ Translation: I'm a terrible person (Lao)	Reason	Ethnicity
92	Genetic failure	Reason	Genetics			
93	Genetic waste	Reason	Genetics	idiot	Reason	Neurotypicality
94	Geniuscel	Awareness	Neologism			
95	Get back in the kitchen	Misogyny	Hostility			
96	God is a Chad	Awareness	In-group reference			
97	Gomorrahcel	Awareness	Neologism			
98	Guccicel	Awareness	Neologism			
99	Hairlosscel	Reason	Appearance			
100	Hanged incel	Response	Suicide	Void of Light pill	Ideology	Black pill
101	I wish I were a Chad	Reason	Appearance			
102	I'm not gay stop asking	Reason	Virginity	lonely currycel	Reason	Ethnicity
103	Incel by day	Awareness	Neologism			
104	Incel Conspiracy	Awareness	Neologism			
105	Incel credentials	Awareness	Neologism			
106	Incel going my own way	Awareness	Neologism			
107	Incel man 5k	Awareness	Neologism			
108	Incel rage boner	Awareness	Neologism			
109	Incel4561	Awareness	Neologism			
110	Incel619	Awareness	Neologism			
111	Incelebrate Good Times C'mon	Awareness	Neologism			
112	Incelery	Awareness	Neologism	Rejected by all 3.5 billion women	Ideology	Truecel
113	Incelicious	Awareness	Neologism			
114	Incellectual	Awareness	Neologism	5'3" ugly goblin	Reason	Size, Appearance
115	Incellular	Awareness	Neologism			
116	Insylvester	Awareness	Neologism	Cope On A Rope	Response	Suicide
117	Ironiccel	Awareness	Neologism			

118	It's over	Response	Despair			
119	It's over boyo	Response	Despair			
120	JBW is real	Reason	Ethnicity			
121	JustF'ingLaughcel	Response	Despair			
122	Kill pill	Response	Suicide			
123	Lenincel	Awareness	Neologism			
124	Lesbcel suicide	Awareness, Response	Neologism, Suicide			
125	Lesbocel	Awareness	Neologism			
126	Literal slime	Reason	Appearance			
127	Lol @ feminism	Misogyny	Hostility			
128	Looksmax	Ideology	Red pill			
129	Megamentalcel	Reason	Neurotypicality	My Life Is Rotten	Response	Despair
130	memecel	Awareness	Neologism	Hey at least I ain't drinking soy!	Ideology	Red pill
131	MetalGearSolidcel	Awareness	Neologism			
132	MikePenceDaIncel	Awareness	Neologism			
133	Minioncel	Reason	Size			
134	Misanthropecel	Awareness	Neologism			
135	MogCels	Reason	Appearance			
136	Mogged by everyone	Reason	Appearance	r/braincels mods suck dick	Awareness	In-group reference
137	NeanderCel	Reason	Appearance			
138	No cucks allowed	Ideology	Red pill			
139	Normie Chad-lite	Reason	Appearance	BBWs deserve everything	Misogyny	Hostility
140	Normiecel	Reason	Appearance			
141	Oldcel	Awareness, Ideology	Neologism, Truecel			
142	Ostensible virgin	Reason	Virginity			
143	Paleozoicel	Awareness	Neologism	40-year-old HKV	Reason, Ideology	Virginity, Truecel
144	Permavirgin	Reason	Virginity			
145	Positive canthal tilts	Reason	Appearance			

146	ReSpEcT wOmEn	Misogyny	Hostility	Respecting Women	Misogyny	Hostility
147	Roastie haiku	Awareness, Misogyny	In-group reference, Hostility			
148	SaintBlackOps2cel	Awareness	In-group reference			
149	SanFrancel	Awareness	Neologism			
150	Shortcel	Reason	Size			
151	Somethingcel	Awareness	Neologism			
152	StBlackOps2cel	Awareness	In-group reference			
153	Stop coping just LDAR	Response	Despair	sub subhuman	Reason	Appearance
154	Sub 8 is incel	Reason	Appearance			
155	Subhuman slime	Reason	Appearance			
156	Subhuman voice	Reason	Genetics			
157	Supreme incel	Ideology	Truecel	Sad Incel Hours	Response	Despair
158	Tamerlan Tsarnaev	Awareness	In-group reference			
159	The beginning of ending	Response	Despair			
160	The end is nigh	Response	Despair			
161	The hardest truth	Ideology	Black pill			
162	The one true pill	Ideology	Black pill	jUsT liFe bRo	Response	Despair
163	Throw me away	Response	Despair	It's over fam	Response	Despair
164	Truly a dirtball	Reason	Appearance			
165	Truth in black pill	Ideology	Black pill			
166	Try hard currycel	Reason	Ethnicity			
167	Upper tier normie	Ideology	Blue pill			
168	Vcel	Awareness	Neologism			
169	Virgin Pokemon player	Reason	Virginity			
170	Viva incelistan	Awareness	Neologism	Suicidal ogrecel	Reason, Response	Appearance, Suicide
171	Volcel2	Ideology	Volcel			

172	We the incels	Awareness	In-group reference			
173	Westcoastcel	Awareness	Neologism			
174	Why not lay down and rot	Response	Despair	take a shower your attitude stinks	Ideology	Black pill
175	Women are all thots	Misogyny	Stereotyping			
176	Women must die	Misogyny	Hostility	Useless Waste of Human Flesh	Reason	Appearance
177	Young male virgin	Reason	Virginity			

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