



In(cel)doctrination: How technologically facilitated misogyny moves violence off screens and on to streets

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores how technological affordances of the digital space, facilitate the anti-feminist discourses which characterise the digital community *Incel* (Involuntarily Celibates). The data in this article are drawn from a variety of sources, including video ethnography and an analysis of long-form interviews drawn from a year-long documentary project, to examine the experience of young men in Incel communities, and the process of indoctrination into misogynistic extremism. Results reveal that contrary to the ‘lone wolf’ narrative that surrounds Incels, there is a sophisticated community that contributes to a 5-step pattern of behaviour, converting the lonely, into the angry and potentially violent. A rich toxic cultural tapestry, the Internet echo-chamber and the celebration of Incel mass murderers (Incelebrities), create a continuous loop that transforms digital hate speech into physical violence. These patterns of indoctrination can, and should, be monitored, and intercepted for the purposes of personal and public safety.

Keywords

Anti-feminist, digital misogyny, Incel, indoctrination, toxic masculinity, violence

On the 23rd April 2018, Alek Minassian, a 25-year-old software programmer rented a white van in the North End of Toronto, Canada. Shortly after 1:00 pm that day, he used the van to jump the curb and drive at high speed down the sidewalk, seemingly to target

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female pedestrians. In doing so, he injured 16 and killed 10 people – 8 of whom were women. Prior to the van attack, Minassian took to Facebook and posted the following message:

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

The *Incel Rebellion* refers to young men carrying out acts of revenge as retribution for a lack of romantic success. The *Involuntarily Celibate (Incel)* community comprised individuals who feel rejected by women – and arguably society more generally – and turn to the Internet to voice their anger, and often, desire for revenge. Typically, they express violent fantasies to be perpetrated against *Chads and Stacys* (popular men and women). Although most members of the community will not become violent, the term going *ER*, is common within Incel discourses, referring to, and at times outright deifying, Elliot Rodger, a reported Incel who carried out a shooting rampage Isla Vista, California before taking his own life in 2014.

In September 2019, Toronto Police released an interview with Minassian. Throughout the interview, the accused speaks of Elliot Rodger as an inspiration. He also refers to his online interactions with Rodger prior to the Isla Vista massacre in 2014, during which time Rodger reportedly confided in Minassian about his planned attack. Minassian further explains that this event made him feel proud and ‘radicalised’, and revealed to him that it was time to ‘take action’ rather than ‘fester’ in his ‘own sadness’ (National Post, 2019). Minassian further discusses his progressive involvement in the Incel community, and his engagement on Reddit and more laterally, the anti-censorship platform, 4chan.

This article examines these online interactions, and similarly, the progressive experience of indoctrination of individuals who become members of Incel groups. While previous scholars have conducted broader studies on the Incel phenomenon, employing a ‘birds-eye’ view (Baele et al., 2019: 6) or macro analysis of larger neo-liberal social structures (Bratich and Banet-Weiser, 2019; Ging, 2017), this study takes a decidedly micro approach through long-form qualitative interviews. Here, rather than observing Incel or toxic masculinity as an increasingly widespread phenomenon, which then can lead to individual acts of violence, I take an inverse approach. I begin small, examining the personal experience of individuals in order to better understand the common patterns and processes shared across digital Incel indoctrination. This is to better understand how this group recruits and grows from the ground up.

In taking a qualitative approach, I do not wish to perpetuate the normative so-called ‘lone wolf’ narrative surrounding Incels, and the terrain of alt-right more generally, which individualises violence (CBC, 2019). Rather, I am arguing that experiences with indoctrination, and subsequent attacks perpetrated by Incels, reveal a clear pattern of behaviour. Thus, I push back against the assumption that these are one-off male victims, or rare evil individuals. Instead, by mapping the dominant trends in the Incel rhetoric and indoctrination process, I argue that these trends demonstrate a rich and highly advanced community with a sophisticated process of indoctrination. This is consistent with other forms of digital extremist indoctrination, which continuously echo a narrow and

obsessive lens through which the world is presented and understood (Baele et al., 2019). Furthermore, failing to acknowledge this sophisticated process, which radicalises supposedly injured men, precludes possibilities for intervention at the expense of personal and public safety.

This article suggests that there is a clear 5-step pattern that should be monitored and intercepted. First, I outline characteristics of those susceptible to indoctrination and then, how Incel ideologies transform loneliness into anger, with an overtly misogynistic focus. This processes seductively offers the abolition of individual responsibility (T. Frymorgen, personal communication, 25 November 2019) and rather situates the cause of their unhappiness on mainstream society, which has permitted the upwards mobility of women at the expense of men like them. In the next section, I examine the rich toxic tapestry that forms the culture of Incel, employing humour, video content and fan art as a means to normalise extreme anti-feminism and mass violence. I then discuss the echo-chamber that involves consuming large dosages of such ideologies helping to solidify Incel beliefs. Finally, I argue that through the deification of mass murderers, there is cyclical nature to the violence, which is encouraged, documented, shared, celebrated and encouraged again – enabling continuous loops of violence.

The data in this article are drawn from a variety of sources, including a documentary project I proposed and developed with a national television network. Collaboration with the network and producers enabled a large support system to ensure both my safety, and the safeguarding of participants. Producers were in contact with close to 50 individuals. Participants, who went on to the long-form interview and filming stage, were assessed through the television network's duty of care procedures to ensure the mental capacity and well-being of those involved in the project. The documentary explores the manner in which the repetitive nature and technological affordances of the digital space feed the assemblage of toxic masculinity and anti-feminist discourses. The following article describes a study using video ethnography and the analysis of long-form interviews conducted during filming. Along with analysis of content posted on Incel platforms.

The oppressed class of men: MRAs and tech-toxic origins

The *Men's Rights Movement* or *Men's Rights Activism* (MRA) evolved as a response to the *Women's Liberation Movement* in the 1960s and early 1970s on college and university campuses. It sought to highlight the impact of patriarchal society on men's emotional lives and relationships. According to Messner (1998), from the very beginning of the 'Male Liberation Movement', discourses walked a fine line between acknowledging problems associated with sexism, and the consequent need for feminism, while also giving equal importance to the toll of narrow patriarchal masculinity and sex role expectations on men. By the mid 1970s, these two ideologies split apart, with pro-feminist men's groups to one side, and a group that argued against the feminist claim that patriarchal society benefitted men more than women (Messner, 1998).

As the latter faction of the group gain momentum, the original focus on men's feelings or hurt feelings remained dominant in MRA discourses. Allan (2016) has argued that MRAs employ affective statements such as 'I feel' (p. 36) as a form of anger and violence due to a perceived loss of entitled masculinity. However, the subjective nature of 'I

feel' renders it immune from denial. In this way '... affect is deployed as proof enough. The turn to affect is, like the phallus itself, a declaration of unearned power and dominance' (Allan, 2016: 37). Furthermore, although this movement claimed to support all men, it was anti-intersectional by nature. Messner has suggested that MRA discourses quickly began to centre around Whiteness and fears that White male privilege was challenged, and indeed undermined, by gains of others made by civil rights and women's movements (Messner, 1998).

More recent MRAs have advocated to have men recognised as an oppressed class, and in doing so, often target feminists as men's oppressors (Pry and Valiente, 2013); A rhetoric, which moved online in the form of blog posts in the early 2000s. The Manosphere, which refers to an online interconnected web of men's rights activist groups (Banet-Weiser, 2018) that promote heteronormative, sexist, misogynistic and at times, racist beliefs (Ging, 2017), became formalised during the course of the Otties. Here, 20th-century MRA tropes of oppression and anger underpin the principles of this digital web. Within the umbrella of the Manosphere, exists a series of MRA groupings (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Ging, 2017; Jane, 2016; Massanari, 2015; Nagle, 2017; O'Neill, 2018) including father's rights groups, who respond to higher rates of domestic abuse or homicide committed against women by victim blaming (Behre, 2014); *Pick Up Artists*, a community in which men cultivate skills and techniques to attract women (O'Neill, 2018); *Men Going Their Own Way*, which advocates that marriage and cohabitation with women is 'unsafe' for men (Pry and Valiente, 2013); and Incels.

Involuntarily Celibates or Incels was started in the late 1990s by a Canadian university student known as Alana, as a relationship support group for isolated individuals (Kassam, 2018). Though the foundational mandates of the Incel group – to offer understanding and community for the lonely and romantically frustrated – still hold true, the group has since morphed into a men's rights group with a particularly hostile edge. Here, young men, who feel rejected by women and mainstream society, take to the Internet to voice their anger and often, desires for revenge. Typically, they employ dark edgy humour, sexual fantasy and on many forums, deify those who have committed acts of violence in the name of Incel. Although it is difficult to identify a concrete figure regarding the number of Incel world-wide members, the agreed conservative estimate, based on the initial Reddit thread, is 40,000 people. In a recent survey carried out by members of the community on i.imgur.com, 36% of the 667 respondents were 18–21 years of age, while 27.9% were aged 22–25. Of the 669 participants, who responded to a question of location, 42.8% were from Europe, while 38% were from North America. No respondents were female.

Incels tend to conform to 'geek masculinity' (Massanari, 2015), which promotes an entrenched involvement with 'niche, often unpopular interests', and simultaneously, cultivates a troubled relationship with race and gender. Geek masculinity promotes interests in computing and technology, and perpetuates stereotypes that these interests are predominately male and White. Furthermore, fantasies of geeks gaining power, through Silicon Valley for example, almost always reinforce White male archetypes (Ging, 2017). Simultaneously, geek masculinity, like many groups within the MRA umbrella, tends to purport that they 'feel' (Allan, 2016) marginalised and oppressed. As these so-called geeks tend to view themselves as outsiders, they are often unable to acknowledge their

own privilege (Massanari, 2015). Jane (2016, 2018) has suggested that these groups tend to employ libertarian argument of free speech to advocate their right to say and do whatever they like, regardless of consequences and (often negative) impact on others. These discourses often critique what they view to be ‘over-the-top “political incorrectness” with regard to misogyny, sexual objectification, and racism; as well as a type of recreational nastiness/sadism’ (Jane, 2018: 666). Through these means, Incels and the alt-right not only often cross over by way of shared platforms and interests but also in their dominant libertarian world view.

Incels, in particular, wish to assert their dominance over women. As Alek Minassian stated in his interview tape with National Post (2019), ‘We want to overthrow the Chads [popular men], which would force the Stacys [popular women] to procreate with the Incels’. Jack Bratich and Sarah Banet-Weiser (2019) have positioned the evolution of Incel within a wider arc of neo-liberal practice, in that they seek to defend and ‘restore patriarchal order’ by way of a war on women who refuse heteronormative reproduction roles (Bratich and Banet-Weiser, 2019).

In analysing Incel and the Manosphere more broadly, scholars have focused attention on specific platforms such as Reddit (Massanari, 2015) and 4chan (Nagle, 2017). Furthermore, Ging et al. (2019) has examined Urban Dictionary to highlight how extreme misogyny and anti-feminisms have become normalised within everyday vernacular contexts, and the manner in which new aggrieved and aggressive forms of masculinity are enabled and amplified by social media (Ging, 2017). A process, which Olivia Young (2019) breaks down into the following three stages: (1) the connective ease of social media platforms to enable the formation of a community conducive to radicalization, (2) the reinforcement of violent rhetoric, and the rise of a martyrdom discourse actively praising past offenders on social media and (3) the strengthening of connections through social media, between Incels and other ideologically far-right groups, such as White supremacists.

The stakes of the Incel phenomenon are high. Díaz and Valji (2019) have argued that there is a clear connection between misogyny and physically violent extremism. Digital misogyny acts as a gateway or early warning of actualised violence. By way of the ‘Black Pill’ ideology discussed later in this article, there is a nihilistic element to the community that encourages both self-harm and cathartic acts of violence against women (Baele et al., 2019). I would argue that Incel violence should be classified alongside other forms of violent misogyny, such as honour killings and sexual violence, issues that the World Health Organization (2017) has positioned as a major public health problem impacting 35% of women world-wide. As such, similar community embedded programming – such as signposted mental health services, monitoring programs and workshops in schools and community centres – to prevent such violence is essential. Previous work on Incels has focused on macro analysis of technologically facilitated platforms and broader social structures, which enable toxic masculinity as a digital phenomenon. By contrast, this study takes a decidedly micro approach in order to better understand the individual Intel member, the personal process of indoctrination, and further, to suggest the development of supports and interventions for those at risk of becoming misogynistic extremists.

Research design: documentary methodology

The data were drawn from a year-long documentary project commissioned by a national television network. The project sought to expand understanding of the process of indoctrination into the Incel community. The research adopted a discovery-oriented qualitative design, with three main types of data informing the project: (1) observation of video footage of individuals in their personal environment, (2) in-depth long-form video interviews and (3) analysis of online content. The interviews employed narrative inquiry to draw out stories, narratives or descriptions of a series of events (Pinnegar and Daynes, 2007). Analysis of online content included content posted to key Incel platforms to contextualise the participants' stories.

As I was working with a television network, I had the benefit of working with a producer, Tomasz Frymorgen, who led the recruitment and interviewing of participants. Not only was he an excellent researcher, but he is – rather importantly – young and male. This was a great advantage to the project, as participants were likely much more amenable to conversing with him than they were to have been to a female academic. In addition, the network hired a digital forensic specialist, David Benford, to oversee safety precautions for both myself and the production team.

Participants were recruited by producers at the television network, through online groups such as *Incel.me*, *Incel.net*. Once contact was made, a snowball approach was employed where participants made call-outs online to others in the community. These call-outs were on their own forums and employed typical Incel vocab. An example of this was when documentary producers were specifically seeking UK-based members of the community that is looking for 'Fish and Chip-cells' (T. Frymorgen, personal communication, 25 November 2019). Close to 50 individuals communicated with producers. Although not all disclosed their demographics, those who did, revealed a grouping that is male and under the age of 40. Most participants were in their late-teens to late 20s. Some participants identified as racially diverse, often suggesting that their race contributed to their lack of success with romantic relationships.

Participants, who went onto the long-form interview and filming stage, were assessed through the networks' duty of care procedures in order to ensure the mental capacity and well-being of those involved in the project. Those who were willing and able to take part in filming and long-form interviews, signed a release for the public broadcast and dissemination of interview and film content, after which, filming took place in their local area in locations they might frequent such as parks, restaurants and even a Karaoke bar. Participant observation through video capture was augmented by more formal interviews, which were transcribed for subsequent analysis. For this publication, names and identifying information such as place and physical features have been altered throughout. In some cases, quotes made have been attributed to two different names to aid with anonymity.

Finally, the most frequently cross-referenced Internet sites were identified and were subsequently categorised using thematic qualitative analysis (Lindlof and Taylor, 2010). Data used in this article do not include the deep web but rather, easily accessible Internet sites such as *Incel.me*, *Incel.net*, *Lookism*, *Looksmax* and the so-called gender inclusive and non-violent Facebook group, *Incelistan*. This allowed for the identification of

rhetorical and ideological tropes, in order to investigate or contextualise the participants' stories.

Trustworthiness in narrative research has traditionally focused on verisimilitude or the appearance of truth (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990), that is, achieving a sense of resonance or congruence with the audience who may have experienced similar situations (Ollerenshaw and Creswell, 2002). An additional suggested criterion is the *utility* of the narrative in terms of assisting with comprehension of an experience and enhancing future problem-solving of a group (Loh, 2013). In this respect, forms of trustworthiness include prolonged engagement, triangulation through comparisons between the different data sources and with the literature, peer validation (or audience validation) and member checking (or checking through follow-up discussions with producers; Loh, 2013).

Results

The susceptible

Tim sat at his desk in his studio flat in West London. Tim likes video games and walks in parks, and struggles with loneliness. His tall, thin frame is arched over his laptop as he scrolled through comments on a Facebook group. The group was Incelistan, a self-proclaimed gender inclusive Incel community for 'soft-cells' or non-violent Incels. Tim likes Incelistan because it less violent and distinct from the terms 'the darker' forums. He describes it as a place of belonging as he jokingly brushes aside comments which might be perceived as offensive or hateful. He seemingly filters these comments out and instead focuses on 'community'. He explains,

... a lot of it's also like community, they don't have enough community and they're missing that community. There is talk about rejection ... Although it seems to be less romantic rejection. More based upon social rejection such as typically they might have been more of the outcast or they'll share story about how maybe they were paired up with someone for a school project and the person they were paired up with was visibly disappointed when they heard who their partner was going to be.

This sense of seeking community or belonging is a key feature within Incel discourses. Many comments and conversations on Incelistan reveal a fundamental struggle with loneliness and outline an inability to fit in or interact in social settings. These experiences are shared on platforms and commonalities and understandings are noted. This is consistent with findings of a survey carried out by members of the community on i.imgur.com. When asked to select factors preventing one's ability to find a partner, 74.2% of respondents selected 'Self-confidence and anxiety, coming only second to appearance at 86%'.

Similarly, Tim's claim is that the root of the issue is not so much romantic rejection but rather, social rejection. There are frequent discussions on such forums that reflect an inability to engage in that which is 'popular', or with whom they perceive to be socially successful. In this way, Incel communities fill a void, and as such, become a welcoming support network.

Members of this community also speak about filling the social void they experience with gaming and pornography, which enable them to shut off further from social interaction. Multiple participants in this project described themselves as spending large amounts

of time consuming video games, or as having an outright addiction to gaming. At times, this addiction is blamed as a further source of their isolation. Frank explains how his ‘addiction to gaming’ and pornography, spiralled into higher levels of anxiety and lowered self-esteem:

[I] Played World of Warcraft for 12 years, got addicted to that and before that I was playing PlayStation . . . So yeah, that’s why I ended up the way I am and not pursue my passions, ignoring my passions, and that’s why . . . that causes anxiety

[Then,] I was dealing with being single by . . . well for years I watched porn, like I started at a very young age, so it had a bad impact on my mind like . . . and I did get sucked into that hole. Yeah, I think I went down the rabbit hole big-time, and it just got worse and worse over the years. And that also stopped me getting relationships, that stopped me pursuing relationships, because I was less confident about myself, I was less confident in myself. Yeah, I think so, like porn addiction would be big time an Incel thing.

Those interviewed in this project, often indicated they struggled with low self-esteem and feelings of isolation and loneliness. Some had turned to gaming, pornography or both, to ease these struggles prior to finding the Incel community. These topics then became an additional point of connection within the Incel community, where discussions, jokes and fan art centred around these common interests could be mutually enjoyed. Frank believes that the high dosage of games and pornography he consumes negatively impact his day to day functioning. However, it is likely that these hindrances to daily life are in fact, the point. These addictions can function as protective measures for Incels, which excuse the individual from having to attempt to interact with society and the potential rejection following such attempts. As Tim explains, ‘I was addicted to video games and entertainment, and I just closed myself off from the world because I didn’t like how I looked’.

Low self-esteem is often focused around issues of physical appearance by members of the Incel community. *Lookism*, a term used widely in the Incel community, implies that one is discriminated against based on appearance. Many Incels will suggest that women’s prejudices towards men’s appearance sit at the root cause of their unhappiness and isolation. Here, attractiveness is not viewed as a cultural construct contrived by corporate culture and patriarchal structures, but rather a biological imperative. Incels will often employ evolutionary biology and speak of traditional reproductive roles (Bratich and Banet-Weiser, 2019) in these arguments. Through these means, Incels both by way of ideology and also shared platforms and interest, often cross over with the alt-right. On some forums in fact, they are one in the same, exchanging racist and sexist beliefs and anger towards a perceived loss of ‘biological destiny’ (Allan, 2016: 36) and the sex and love which they are entitled.

Across the majority of the Manosphere, there is an underlying understanding that men have a right to sex with women, and that women gain power from manipulating and withholding sex from men (Jane, 2018). In the case of Incel, the reasoning for this power imbalance is based upon assertions that women have shallow ‘lookist’ belief systems. Specific terms such as *Lookism* make up the communal lexicon, which distinguish Incel

members from other Manosphere and alt-right groupings, and in turn, further bonds this subset community together.

Below Cian further use another common term, *mentalcel* to identify himself as in Incel struggling with his mental health:

A Mentalcel is someone who has mental health problems: that they're dealing with social anxiety, they're dealing with inferiority complexes, they're dealing with insecurities about themselves, how they look, bigger here, or they don't like the way the face looks, like me I had my nose broken so I didn't like the way that looked, and acne problems. Most Incels [I] think would have a troubled background, a troubled past, a troubled history with their childhood and childhood issues.

Here, Cian lays out a profile of an Incel consistent with others interviewed in this project. That is, they are generally young men, who struggle with loneliness and social anxiety. They are often struggle with insecurities based on their physical appearance. Some commented on having a difficult childhood, and most have been victims of bullying. Many involved in this project discussed challenges with mental health which arguably was further aggravated symptoms by toxic online practices. Parent, Gobble and Rochlen examined the association between social media, toxic masculinity and depression among over 400 men and found that online toxic masculinity heightened depression, lowered self-esteem and led to poor mental health among men (Parent et al., 2019). The blaming of lookism can additionally alleviate pressures to deal with potential psycho-social factors at play, such as social anxiety, which is often discussed in the community. Lookism, in particular, is a helpful term in that it absolves the individual of responsibility (T. Frymorgen, personal communication, 25 November 2019). From this perspective, rejection is based on something entirely out of one's control and thus, engagement with the real world quickly becomes a pointless exercise. Through these means, the community both offers companionship for vulnerable young men and additionally an abolition of personal and social responsibility, which for many is both seductive and addictive.

The toxic tapestry of Incel culture and the echo-chamber

In August 2019, a YouTube video entitled 'Egg White Alek Minassian Live' is posted by Eggman (aka Egg White) as a 'live' version of the music video he dedicated to the assailant a year earlier. Eggman opens the video by explaining it is a reprise of what he describes as a big hit single, which he is performing one last time for the community. He sits on a floral sofa wearing a red bandana and a goatee. He clutches his fist to mime a microphone and shouts,

Runnin' through these hoes like I'm Alek Minassian
 Hoppin' in the whip and I'm motherfuckin' crashin' it
 Up over the curb like I'm Alek Minassian
 Hoes suck my dick while I run over pedestrians

Creativity and art-making practices are actively encouraged in the community to spread Incel rhetoric. Incel art often employs self-deprecating comedy focused on virginity, gaming culture and general nerdism, marking themselves as other and sexually undesirable. Some forms of expression also encompass sexist memes or gifts, while others employ aggressively violent humour and play out fantasies involving rape, incest and acts of violence. Although the act of carrying out the violence is rare, many in the community seem very happy to cheer on and celebrate those who have committed mass killings through music videos, memes and fan art.

The comment thread along the side of Eggman's post is mixed. Some express disgust, or mockingly suggest he might have a heart attack while performing due to his weight. Others, however, celebrate and praise the rap, appearing to know the song well. One viewer even suggests Eggman should perform 'Alek Minassian' at Woodstock, presumably because he views the song to be such a classic within the Incel cannon; others, praise his Black Pill rhetoric.

The concept of the 'pills' sits at the root of Incel ideology. The MRA metaphor is drawn from the film, *The Matrix* (1999) in which the protagonist must choose between swallowing a Blue Pill, and continuing to live a life of blissful ignorance and illusion, or a Red Pill, bringing him awareness of life's true cruelty. In the context of MRA more broadly, the Red Pill philosophy awakens men to the process of feminist brainwashing, a concept that unifies all MRA communities (Ging, 2017). Within Incel ideology, the Red Pill refers to an understanding that women are hypocrites and lookist. With this information in hand, men can work to improve their appearance through self-improvement strategies such as fitness and plastic surgery to in order to dominate sexually. Incels then employ the term, Black Pill to refer to a doomed existence and a state of despair. In this formulation, women will always be egocentric and cruel. As a result of this hopelessness, Black Pill ideologies at times encourage violence, and at times, suicide.

Black Pill ideologies enable new forms of toxic masculine identities, which are further normalised through various forms of Incel discourse, ways of life, and even, merchandise. A quick Google search will find a plethora of Black Pill merchandise, ranging from T-shirts to tote bags, plastered with humour and pseudo inspirational quotes such as: 'I used to care. Now I take a Pill for that'. Through clear identification with Black Pill ideologies, extreme misogyny has become normalised within the rich toxic tapestry of Incel culture. When asked about this, Frank explained the following:

Yeah, definitely men are feeling demonized and belittled. And you can get into that mindset where it's negative, and you think all women are hateful, and they're all feminists, but they're not, not all women are that way.

. . . Like they [Feminists] say all men are rapists, but that's not true at all. That's ridiculous, that's like the toxic femininity. There's toxic feminism, and that is harmful definitely, that is harmful to society. Yeah, because feminism has seeped into culture and that's toxic feminism.

Frank outlines a typical Incel articulation of anti-feminism, which interprets feminism as a 'destructive' and toxic propaganda, that has 'seeped' into and influences mainstream culture. Massanari (2015) has examined the ways in which MRA platforms can

perpetuate certain problematic aspects of geek masculinity, and function as a fertile breeding ground for anti-feminist and misogynistic content. Likewise, Incel discourses employ 'geek masculinities', which simultaneously celebrate the collective and isolationism through demonstrations of their wit and cleverness (Massanari, 2015). They also voice frustrations around, as Frank suggests, the demonization and belittlement of 'smart' men at the expense of women's upwards mobility in society. Incels often position feminism as key source of their unhappiness. Grover and Mark (2019) have tracked discourses among MRAs and found that their actions functioned similarly to the warning behaviours of other extremists in online contexts.

This toxic tapestry transitions individuals from those that are lonely, to those that are angry, and this anger is directed at mainstream society, which has enabled the upwards mobility of women at the expense of men. From this standpoint, Incel culture employs the logic that the mainstream feminist discourses are lies, and in fact, it is men who are oppressed, not women (T. Frymorgen, personal communication, 25 November 2019). This clear target for venting anger and aggression, appears to be intoxicating for many members who spend large amounts of time on these platforms. Here, the role Internet technologies in building and maintaining Incel communities is paramount. The large dosage of content populated on, and perpetuated by the Internet helps to solidified anti-feminist beliefs to a dangerous degree.

Cian lives in New York City and describes himself as a 'TKV', a touchless, kissless, virgin. He struggles with acne, which he feels impacts his self-confidence. He states he has never felt comfortable approaching women, and exercises as a way improve his chances at obtaining a girlfriend. Although he does not advocate violence, he is familiar with forums that encourage heightened levels of indoctrination, and explains his process of increasing engagement with the community:

Sitting in your room reading Incel forums and going down that negative . . . just deeper down that hole, deeper and deeper down the hole, being more and more negative, getting caught up in that. It's hard to escape that mindset, that negative mindset, it takes a lot of conscious effort, it takes a lot of reprogramming . . . I went down that lonely path, and had no friends, had no relationships, so I got to a point where I was suicidal and had nothing to lose.

Similarly, Tim notes that, as most individuals on the forums are either lonely or depressed, 'eventually you've just constructed your own echo-chamber around you, just built out of pain and depression, and aren't sure how to get out anymore'.

Both Cian and Tim entered the Incel community seeking support, belonging, and above all, friends and relationships. However, many Incel platforms, to greater or lesser degrees, advocate violence and abuse. Debbie Ging has suggested that social media plays a key role in fuelling and amplifying aggressive forms of masculinity (Ging, 2017), which Young (2019) suggests has been enabled by the connective ease of social media platforms which links and bonds radicalization. The repetition inherent within social media usage helps to solidify Black Pill ideologies, which functions as discursive system exerting ideological, psychological and material power (Ging et al., 2019).

Farrell et al. (2019) have employed feminist language critiques to observe patterns of language across online hate groups and argue that these lexicons slowly evolve to become

increasingly violent in nature. The gradual escalation in the abusive nature of these terms helps to feed, and systemically normalise, blame and anger towards women, which in turn feeds increasing patterns of hostile misogynistic content. Baele et al. (2019) have further examined the role of the Internet in this echo-chamber effect in that individuals in the community are presented with a very narrow lexicon. This restricted narrative and use of language produces a limited world view, which produces a one-sided and obsessive experience of social reality and perception of everyday situations (Baele et al., 2019). Through these means, Incel forums become echo-chambers of misogynistic rhetoric, which actively advocate extreme levels of violence against women and society more generally.

The dosage of the echo-chamber combined with the seemingly innocuous nature of the Incel culture makes for a sophisticated process of indoctrination. This content at such high dosages, can as Cian suggests, take ‘a lot of reprogramming’ to actively step away. Ultimately, they prove to be ‘really dangerous’ for both the individual and public safety. Tim similarly articulates that as the community actively discourages engagement with individuals outside of the community, he is ‘not sure how to get out anymore’. From this place, the Incel ‘echo-chamber’ can effectively transfer the sentiments outlined by Tim: ‘pain’ and ‘depression’ into ‘anger’ and ‘violence’.

Incelebrities and crystallising violence

Catfishman waited in his car for his date to arrive at a McDonald’s restaurant while scrolling through his dating app on his phone. Catfishman has not been anonymised in this article, as he is a public figure within the Incel community by way of his videos. He is heavyset and wears a blue ski mask across the lower half of his face. Catfishman takes his name from the act of catfishing, a practice that he interprets as luring women on dating apps using an image of a male model. He arranges to meet women for a date, and attends the encounter wearing a mask. He then shouts accusations of lookism when inevitably, women find they have been invited under false pretences and try to exit the situation. To the best of our knowledge, Catfishman was the only participant in the project who actualised the violence he spouted on screen in an offline and physical context. On this day, thankfully, his date did not turn up at McDonald’s.

However, the encounters he posts online reveal that should a woman have turned up that day, she would have been subjected to verbally abusive and threatening behaviour. Catfishman films these encounters and posts them online under racist and sexist titles such ‘Ms. Ching Chong’ and ‘Fat Mexican Roastie’, a roastie being a derogatory Incel term referring to the genitals of a sexually active female. At times, he shows women intimate images they sent to him prior to the date through dating apps, and ridicules them. He then chases after the woman as they try and exit the situation shouting insults such as, ‘you’re fat’ or ‘you’re ugly’.

There appears to be very little reflection on the irony around attacking women’s attractiveness, while simultaneously accusing them of lookism. Rather, many of the comments of Catfishman’s posts position the videos as ‘funny’ or jokes, situating his actions as harmless ‘banter’. Scott, who identifies himself as non-violent, comments on Black Pill humour:

it is just jokes, it is just banter . . . but then you start to look closer at it, and it is a very odd execution of jokes and of satire, if that is what they're trying to do. Whenever they will make a joke – it's just kind of a reinforcement that we are right and normies wrong, type of mindset . . . And if they latch onto it and they start to perpetuate it, then it is a very slippery slope to acts of violence.

Scott posits humour as a tool within the indoctrination process or what he describes as a 'slippery slope'. This process where individuals 'latch onto' the Black Pill 'world-view' entrenches a set of fixed false beliefs. Although, Scott believes no one on the sites he frequents has actually committed acts of violence, the pervasive nature of the banter encourages a celebration of Elliot Rodger, which Scott finds to be 'disturbing'.

The act of either recording either acts of abuse – as Catfishman does – or messages to followers prior to committing violence, is an established trope in the Incel community. The trend was started by Elliot Rodger in 2014 prior to the Isla Vista massacre, where he explained his plans to open fire on a sorority. Through video, Catfishman's acts of abuse do not just exist within the Incel echo-chamber. Rather, they exist on a loop that moves acts of misogyny off screens, on to streets, and – by way of his videos – back onto Incel platforms again. Thus, there is a cyclical nature to the violence, which is encouraged, performed, documented, shared and celebrated again in a continuous loop. In discussing intimate partner violence, Lenore Walker (1989) seminally described a cycle that involved the following four stages: tension building, threats and violent incidents, reconciliation in which the abuser apologises and minimises, and finally, a calm or honeymoon phase until the tension builds again. The violence cycle in the case of Incel contains both similarities and differences. The building tension of an Incel member is expressed as anger and fuelled by others. The violent threats are not shared with the intended victims, but are shared with others in the community who encourage the violence. Once the violence has occurred, it is celebrated as a legitimate means of expressing the tension and anger the individual experiences.

When asked why he felt he was compelled to lure and verbally assault women, Catfishman explained that he was 'getting back at these females for rejecting me as a person and for being so shallow', and further that these act relieved stress and anger. After days spent with Catfishman, he never expressed a sense of empathy. Nor did he seem to grasp the illogical nature of fighting 'shallow' attitudes, through verbal harassment based around physical appearance. However, after prolonged questioning, it became clear that the digital gratification he received in the community for his videos was also of great influence. When speaking of his catfishing videos, he explains that they make him feel powerful, 'you know, kind of like a hero like a legend, like untouchable for doing these catfish videos'. Technological affordances can enable and amplify individual Incel members, building a form of Incelebrity. '[A] lot of the Incels, basically they usually call me a hero, a legend, they keep on saying you're doing god's work, so they're pretty well received, a lot of Incels like it'. Many Incels involved in this project were aware of embedded Incel hierarchies and at times, would place themselves within it. Some comments on Catfishman's videos even go as far as to equate him with Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian, who infamously carried out mass murders in the name of Incel.

Díaz and Valji (2019) have outlined the correlation between anti-feminism in the digital space, and the actualization of physical violence. They warn that such discourses online should be treated as warning signs of future acts of violence. Similar to forms of religious extremism, Black Pill communities celebrate past mass murderers, who have become martyrs in the name of Incel. In the name of a ‘common violent patriarchy, replacing the honour killings based on family (the more traditional patriarchal order) with ones based on ego-based individual reputation’ (Bratich and Banet-Weiser, 2019: 5025). It is by way of this hierarchy that playing out acts of violence and abuse is encouraged. In this way, the acts of violence and the subsequent celebration of those who commit them, create a cyclical effect. For instance, Catfishman was inspired by Elliot Rodger:

Elliot Rodger, what basically inspired me, after hearing who ER was, I related towards him in a way. He struggled also, and there was a time when I struggled and got rejected so many times. I understood who he was as an individual . . . In a way, I admired him and looked up to him because how he was struggling on the dating scene . . . the girls he killed probably did deserve it, cos they seem probably shallow and stuck up.

Alek Minassian was similarly inspired Rodger, with whom he had made contact with online. He explained that he had discussed his frustrations with other Incels online, first making contact with Rodger on Reddit, before migrating to 4chan. Minassian has said that he also communicated with Chris Harper-Mercer (National Post, 2019), who killed nine people and injured eight in Oregon in 2015, as retribution for his sexual frustration and despair. The connection with these two assailants demonstrates the influential nature of the Incel community in enforcing these pathologies, which then become crystallised into violence.

Minassian, who went on to be charged with 10 counts of first-degree murder and 16 counts of attempted murder, explained in his interview with police, that he carried out the attack as an act of revenge against a society which permits virgins like himself, to be sexually rejected by women. Notably he states, ‘I was thinking that I would inspire future masses to join me in my uprising’ (National Post, 2019). By way of this thinking, Incel Black Pill ideology not only enables Incelebrities like Catfishman, but also extremist martyrdom. Minassian and Rodger and others are deified by way of Incel culture, which actively encourages lonely men to follow their example.

‘Like a moth to a flame’: conclusion

In April 2018, Toronto Police held a press conference regarding the van attack. The spokesperson stood and explained calmly and certainly: ‘There would appear to be no national security threat to this particular incident’ (CBC, 2019), and situated the massacre as a one-off isolated attack. Through reports such as these, the terrain of alt-right violence often gets personalised. The assumption that these are individual men – often considered to be male victims. However, interviews conducted in this project suggest otherwise.

The data collected in this project reveals a clear pattern of behaviour and a recognisable shared experience. This is a pattern of indoctrination operates in five steps:

1. First, individuals susceptible to indoctrination begin to actively seek companionship to deal with their loneliness. The characteristics of a susceptible individual include males in their late teens to late 20s; who present with an inability to 'fit in' or interact in social settings; may have issues with mental health; and may have difficult family backgrounds.
2. Incel ideologies transform loneliness into anger with an overtly misogynistic focus. Through concepts such as lookism, the Incel indoctrination process offers a seductive abolition of individual responsibility for the plight in which individuals 'feel' (Allan, 2016) oppressed and cast off as outsiders.
3. Incel then offers a rich toxic tapestry culture, which fills a void for young men and further, normalises these ideologies. It encourages creative licence, and employs art-making, video content creation and dark or edgy humour. The culture utilises core terminology such as Chads and Stacys to exemplify those with social and sexual power, whom they seek to deride and destroy.
4. The digital sphere amplifies these concepts. Dangerous misogynistic ideologies are solidified by the Internet's echo-chamber effect, where high dosages of violent, anti-feminist content that are consumed regularly become established as a fixed belief.
5. Through the deification and martyrdom of mass killers, a continuous loop is created, which promotes future acts of violence. There is cyclical nature to the violence, which is encouraged, documented, shared, celebrated and encouraged again.

At his desk in West London, Tim continued to scroll through the Incelistan page. While doing so, he articulated the process of indoctrination:

Incels would be missing community, especially the forever alone, they call them *forever alone* Is that don't have any friends either, or social circles, like I was. They would have no community. So they're seeking a community. So they would find a community with other Incels and they would . . . they would gravitate towards that, and like a moth to the flame they would be drawn to that. And then they read all of these things, these negative things, and then it just self-perpetuates, like they're all saying these negative things and they're all caught up in that negativity. It just gets worse and worse and worse. So it's not healthy. It's not a good thing.

As Tim's statement indicates, the Incel community offers a supportive environment for lonely individuals. His comments are linked to the need for belonging, which of course is the foundation of the Incel movement. 'Like a moth to a flame', as Tim suggests, the community is particularly inviting to those who struggle with loneliness and inability to fit in or interact in social settings. However, most men interviewed in this project also indicated that they struggle with insecurities based on their physical appearance, and many involved discussed issues with low self-esteem and at times, mental health, symptoms of which may have been further aggravated by toxic online practices. Through concepts such as lookism, the Incel indoctrination process offers a seductive abolition of responsibility (T. Frymorgen, personal communication, 25 November 2019) on the part of the individual and instead places blame on others. This anger is aimed at mainstream society, which has

facilitated the upwards mobility of women at the expense of men, and seeks to abdicate women from what are viewed by Incel to be normative reproductive roles (Bratich and Banet-Weiser, 2019). These beliefs among others, have cross-overs with the alt-right, which similarly depends on heavily Internet's echo-chamber effect in that individuals in the community are presented with a restricted narrative. Use of language produces a limited world view, which produces a one-sided and obsessive experience of social reality and perception of everyday situations (Baele et al., 2019).

The Incel community in particular, then engages creative endeavours such as fan art, and comedy help to normalise violent ideologies within the rich toxic tapestry of Incel culture. This toxic tapestry aids in the evolution of loneliness to anger. There seems to be almost an addictive quality to participation in the community, which both offers companionship and a virtual vessel in which to place one's frustration. The large dosage of violent misogynistic content helps to solidify these anti-feminist beliefs. As these beliefs become normalised, the leap between online and actualised offline violence can be seen as a natural progression and in fact, intrinsically linked. Similar to forms of digital extremism, Black Pill ideologies deify and continue to process and share content that perpetuates and celebrates mass violence in the name of misogyny.

Traditionally, the terrain of Incel-related violence has been personalised. However, the experiences of young men involved in this project highlight a process of indoctrination. Here, a clear pattern of behaviour can be observed. Incel indoctrination preys upon susceptible and vulnerable parties, transitioning the lonely and isolated into the angry and dangerous; and using rich toxic culture and the affordances of digital echo-chamber to normalise and solidify the rhetoric. Finally, similar to intimate partner violence (Walker, 1989), Incel violence is cyclical. However, the violent threats are not shared with the intended victims, but rather, the community who in turn, encourage the violence. Once the violence has occurred, it is celebrated as a legitimate means of expressing the tension and anger the individual experiences. Anti-feminism is progressed into the actualization of physical violence through the celebration of mass murderers and a loop of violence, which moves acts of violent misogyny off screens on to streets and by way of, video back onto screens again. A process that both crystallises and ultimately fuels future acts of violence.

These trends demonstrate that there are clear patterns of behaviour in the process of anti-feminist indoctrination. In noting this, I am not advocating for censorship or regulation of the digital space, but rather classification. Some have vehemently argued against such classification, as police might use their power to regulate those who have not committed violence (Reem and Ahmad, 2020). However, I am arguing that Incel violence should be classified in the same way as other forms of violent misogyny and extremism. From this understanding, similar community embedded programming – such as sign-posted mental health services, monitoring programmes and workshops in schools and community centres – to prevent such violence can be implemented. The Incel community is rich and highly advanced. The sooner we collectively acknowledge that Incel related violence are not one-off events but rather, products of a sophisticated process of indoctrination, the sooner we can intercept future 'moths to flames' and support susceptible young men accordingly.

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