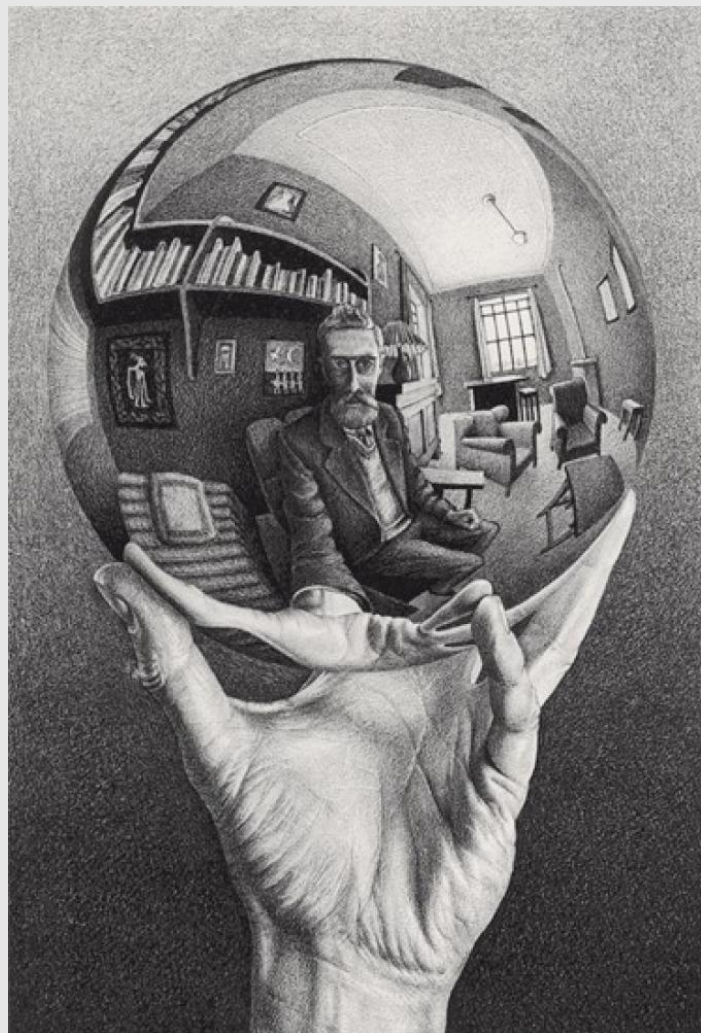


Investigating an Incel community online

# BEHIND THEIR SCREENS



*M.C. Escher, litho, January 1935.*

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*Caroline*

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## **Abstract**

*Incels (involuntary celibates) constitute an online gathering of misogynistic men. The members all relate to the group's ethos through their inability to find a sexual and romantic partner. Since 2014, at least four of their members have committed deadly attacks against women after leaving a note linking their actions to the Incels group. The purpose of this thesis was to gather primary sources on the Incels to uncover – at least partly – their community dynamic. To gather this primary knowledge, I used the method of digital ethnography – non-participatory observation of one of their online forums. This method enabled me to observe, analyze and summarize content on the forum.*

*This thesis uncovered that on the forum, users' conversations could be classified into twelve major categories, which were themselves representative of four larger dimensions: social, theoretical, counter-narrative and random. This thesis found that, unlike what was expected, the forum was primarily a social platform, filled with memes, questions to get to know each other and the sharing of links. Only secondary to this was the forum also a place to theorize their hate towards women, and discuss their "Incel" nature and specificity. The counter-narrative dimension gathered the opinions contradicting the usual Incel discourse. Content found in this category was quickly policed by other members and this strict policing of content suggests that this category enables the community to define its boundaries.*

*This thesis uncovered what was discussed on a forum animated by hate towards women, as well as who those referred to as Incels were.*

*On the basis of these findings, this thesis raised two important questions. First, it questioned the potential of Incels' violent radicalization online, without any offline interactions. Second – and this is linked to the first point – this thesis supports the claim van Buuren and Sciarone made in May 2018, suggesting that Incel attacks should be considered as terrorist acts based on gender.*

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## Chapter I: Introducing Incels

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### 1.1. Introduction to the research

The abbreviation “Incels” stands for **in**voluntary **cel**ibates. This online group gathers men who share, to varying degrees, a hatred of women, whom they blame for their own involuntary celibacy. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) whose stated aim is to monitor hate groups and expose their activities, defined Incels as being “part of the online male supremacist ecosystem”<sup>1</sup>. In the last few years, male supremacy has been featured on the agenda of research groups like the SPLC because of the ways in which these groups consistently denigrate and dehumanize women, often including the advocating of physical, psychological and sexual violence against them.<sup>2</sup> The notion of male supremacy can take different forms and this thesis will study one of its newest expressions in the form of Incels.

Since 2014, the Incel subculture has garnered media attention. That year, Elliot Rodger published several video manifestos explaining and justifying his disgust for women before shooting female students in his University of Isla Vista, and subsequently killing himself.<sup>3</sup> In October 2015, Chris Harper-Meyer killed nine people in his campus of Umpqua Community College before taking his own life. Just before committing his deadly act, Harper-Meyer wrote a manifesto praising Elliot Rodger. He was known for leaving messages on online forums stating that he was involuntarily love- and sex-deprived.<sup>4</sup> The attention received by the group culminated in April 2018 when Alex Minassian drove into a crowd with his van with the clear intention of hitting as many women as possible, soon after posting a Facebook message connecting his actions to the Incel movement and Elliot Rodger.<sup>5</sup> More recently, in early November 2018, Scott Beierle opened fire in a yoga studio and killed two women, injuring five others. This man, identifying as an Incel, had a history of posting misogynistic videos in which

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Janik, “‘I Laugh at the Death of Normies’: How Incels Are Celebrating the Toronto Mass Killing”, *Southern Poverty Law Center*, 24 April 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/04/24/i-laugh-death-normies-how-incels-are-celebrating-toronto-mass-killing>.

<sup>2</sup> Janik.

<sup>3</sup> Céline Schoen, ‘Qui Est Elliot Rodger, Le Tueur de Santa Barbara?’, *L’Express*, 26 May 2014, [https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/amerique-nord/qui-est-elliott-rodger-le-tueur-de-santa-barbara\\_1546492.html](https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/amerique-nord/qui-est-elliott-rodger-le-tueur-de-santa-barbara_1546492.html).

<sup>4</sup> Jia Tolentino, ‘The Rage of the Incels’, *The New Yorker*, 15 May 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-rage-of-the-incels>.

<sup>5</sup> Mike Wright and Mark Molloy, ‘The Dark “Incel” Internet Subculture Praised on the Facebook Page of the Toronto van Attack Suspect’, *Telegraph*, 25 April 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/04/25/dark-incel-internet-subculture-praised-facebook-page-toronto/>.

he especially targeted women and minorities. Online, he had expressed his disgust for women and sympathy towards Elliot Rodger, urging Incels to fight back.<sup>6</sup>

These four men are depicted as heroes, martyrs and patron saints inside the Incel community.<sup>7</sup> So far, 21 women and 6 men have fallen victim to attacks carried out in the name of Incels.

This research first stemmed from an observation: while reports about the Incel community started appearing in various kinds of media after four of their self-proclaimed members committed deadly attacks, no one in the media really seemed to know who they were and what issues this group was concerned with. It was as if the group had emerged from nowhere in 2014 (see in annex: fig. 1 & fig. 2). And it was as if each of these attacks against women were to be explained solely by the lone perpetrator's misogynistic nature and lack of intelligence. This is interesting as, for an Internet-based group only, as many as four Incel members have managed to conduct "successful" attacks – mainly against women – in the past five years. It is the above-mentioned observations that led me to investigate the Incel movement, with the aim of better understanding the group and the environment from which it grew – the Internet.

## **1.2. History of the Problem**

Throughout history, there have always been misogynists. Groupings of men or single individuals hating or discriminating women to different degrees is probably as old as the world itself. These groups and individuals have manifested themselves in various shapes and sizes.

In the past decades, we have tragically experienced this hate against women several times. A tragic – and still relevant – example is the Montreal massacre in December 1989. Marc Lépine, an engineering student at the Polytechnic school of Montreal, isolated and shot 14 of his female classmates before killing himself because, according to his suicide note: "If I decided to kill myself today it is for political reasons. [...] It has been seven years that life brings me no more joy because of feminists. [Women] are so opportunistic and superficial that not only do they want to conserve women's privileges but they also want to monopolize those of men".<sup>8</sup> Such blatant misogyny created much debate about school shootings and how to prevent students

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<sup>6</sup> Mihir Zaveri, Julia Jacobs, and Sarah Mervosh, 'Gunman in Yoga Studio Shooting Recorded Misogynistic Videos and Faced Battery Charges', *The New York Times*, 3 November 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/03/us/yoga-studio-shooting-florida.html>.

<sup>7</sup> SPLC, 'Weekend Read: For Incels, It's Not about Sex. It's about Women.', *Southern Poverty Law Center*, 4 May 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Lucile Bellan and Thomas Messias, 'Polytechnique, Le Massacre Qui Fascine Encore Ceux Qui Ont La Haine Des Femmes', *Slate*, 6 December 2017, <http://www.slate.fr/story/154529/polytechnique-tuerie-masculiniste>.



from carrying guns to class. Marc Lépine, although he did not identify clearly as an Incel because the term did not exist at the time, is also a figure often cited on Incel forums as a hero/martyr, and the movie “Polytechnique”<sup>9</sup>, documenting the events, is often cited in the Incel community as a “must-see”.<sup>10</sup>

Marc Lépine is not the only man to have carried out attacks against women. Many others have, for the simple fact that they hated women for various reasons. All of these women were victims of femicide, the misogynist killing of women by men.<sup>11</sup>

As seen briefly in the introduction, it is the Isla Vista killings of 2014, the Toronto van attack of April 2018 and the Tallahassee shooting of November 2018 that shed light on the Incel movement. Each of these attacks were committed by lone male attackers whose common characteristic was to share the Incel ideology. Before every attack, its authors left manifestos, Facebook messages or videos to explain their actions and therefore link themselves to a greater movement.

The Incels target and spread hate towards women<sup>12</sup> because “Incels blame women for their involuntary celibacy”.<sup>13</sup> According to them, women are the root causes for their celibacy and absence of sexual and romantic intimacy because, as Elliot Rodger puts it, “they [women] are the main instigators of sex. They control which men get it and which men don’t”.

Behind this hate towards women lies a structured philosophy – which Incels coined as “the Blackpill”<sup>14</sup> – backed up by pseudo-scientific evidence and academic work on evolution and gender. The Blackpill is supposed to demonstrate the shallow and egoistical behavior displayed by women when looking for a romantic partner. Incels believe women despise them because of their physical appearance and/or lack of social status and/or lack of money, this being the reason they deny them access to sex.<sup>15</sup>

The Blackpill is a theorization of why women should be hated or, at the very least, despised. Since Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian’s acts, the term “Incels” and its derivatives<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Denis Villeneuve, *Polytechnique*, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Bellan and Messias, ‘Polytechnique, Le Massacre Qui Fascine Encore Ceux Qui Ont La Haine Des Femmes’.

<sup>11</sup> Jill Radford and Diana E.H. Russel, *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing*, Open University Press, 1992.

<sup>12</sup> Those who are virgin, meet their beauty standards and submissive are relatively spared in their comments.

<sup>13</sup> Jelle van Buuren and Jessica Sciarone, ‘Make War, Not Love?’, *Leiden Safety and Security Blog*, 14 May 2018.

<sup>14</sup> The Blackpill is a reference to the movie “The Matrix”. When Neo is given the choice between choosing the Blue Pill (living in a painless world of lies, or in Incel terms, the choice “normies” make in their everyday lives) or the Red Pill (living in a painful world that is at least true and which you will fight for, which is what the Men’s Right Activists (MRA) believe).

<sup>15</sup> blickpall, ‘[Blackpill] Evolutionary Psychology and Mate Selection in the Age of Tinder’, 29 April 2018, <https://incels.me/threads/evolutionary-psychology-and-mate-selection-in-the-age-of-tinder.39777/>.

<sup>16</sup> There are different categories of Incels, depending on why one is an involuntarily celibate in the first place. E.g. **volcels**: voluntarily celibates, often because of religious or ideological reasons; **braincels**: involuntarily celibate

gained online and offline popularity<sup>17</sup> (fig. 1 & fig. 2), and more and more men claim to be Incels<sup>18</sup>, adhering to the group's logic and ethos.

So, to sum up, what has changed? Misogynists are not new. On the other hand, the Internet is. It adds a new dimension to fringe communities and interactions between people in general. The Internet acts both as an evolution and a revolution.

The Incels constitute a new phenomenon, probably afforded by the anonymity of the Internet and the great variety of opinions one can encounter there.<sup>19</sup> The Incel community as it exists now has been created online, probably first via the subreddit /r/Incels – its exact founding moment is unknown – and continues to exist online, via forums such as Incels.is, Lookism, 4chan and others. To our knowledge, there are no real-life gatherings of Incels as a group. Nonetheless, so far, four men identifying as Incels have committed deadly attacks. Analyzing the “Internet factor”, in the case of Incels, is of the utmost importance, as a movement born online has brought several individuals to act upon its philosophy. In this thesis, the goal will be to approach and make sense of the Incel community in its online environment.

### **1.3. Statement of the Problem**

Many newspapers have dedicated lengthy articles and even documentaries to the Incel phenomenon. Journalists have speculated on their dangerousness<sup>20</sup>, their goals and the type of population represented in this group. Other less official sources such as YouTube and Twitter celebrities, subreddits (e.g.: r/IncelsTears) and users of social platforms have started interacting with or investigating the Incel phenomenon with their own means. Some “Incels” have even accepted to be featured on YouTube channels or in Vice documentaries to gain visibility and foster “normies” understanding of their group, seeking acceptance and legitimization of their cause.

Yet, so far, academic research is lagging behind. This is partly explained by the multitude of online movements that have grown in the past decade. Easily accessible, these fast-growing communities manage to become sizeable movements online. Prior research has dug around this topic, approaching Men's Right Activists (MRAs) and their Red Pill, Men

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because of their brains; **heightcels**: involuntarily celibates because of their short height; **ricecels**: involuntarily celibates because they are Asian; **currycels**: involuntarily celibates because they are Indians, etc.

<sup>17</sup> See annexes– fig. 1 & fig. 2.

<sup>18</sup> See the case of Nathan Larsson, an American running for congress who openly admitted and defended being part of the Incels : [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/nathan-larson-congressional-candidate-pedophile\\_us\\_5b10916de4b0d5e89e1e4824?guccounter=1](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/nathan-larson-congressional-candidate-pedophile_us_5b10916de4b0d5e89e1e4824?guccounter=1).

<sup>19</sup> Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics : Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*, Oxford University Press, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Frédéric Joignot, ‘Le Misogyne, Cet Autre Terroriste’, *Le Monde*, 12 May 2018, [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/05/12/le-misogyne-cet-autre-terroriste\\_5297985\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/05/12/le-misogyne-cet-autre-terroriste_5297985_3232.html).

Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), and other online subcultures via forums such as 4chan, Reddit and others. On the other hand, the Incel forum Incels.me and other Incel-based subreddits (e.g: r/Incels and r/braincels) have scarcely been researched.

As already mentioned above, the Internet plays an important role in this thesis as it is clear that it has had a profound impact, both in terms of scale and dynamics, within the movement. (A chapter will be dedicated to this factor.)

Accordingly, the purpose of this thesis is to address a gap in the literature by investigating the basic dynamics of the forum Incels.me, in order to have a better grasp of this emerging online movement.

#### **1.4. Research Question and Approach**

By analyzing the last 20 posts of the 50 most active users of the online forum '[Incels.me](https://incels.me)'<sup>21</sup>, this thesis aims to formulate an empirically based answer to a question that is fundamental to the greater discussion about who the Incels are. My primary goal is to gain a broader understanding of an under-researched group.

The research question of this thesis is the following:

*What are the central topics discussed by Incels on the forum Incels.me?*

This first question is descriptive, but once the top 12 topics were determined, I was able to reflect on them with a “how” question: “How to understand these top 12 topics in light of their online context”. From there, I had the opportunity to observe the very diverse environment an Incel forum can be, despite my – and journalists’ – certainty that the Incels were part of a mono-phenomenon, talking only of their hate towards women.

The analysis of their central topics helped me understand what life was like inside a radical community, what were the Incels’ dynamics, and allowed me to open new doors in the understanding of how radical online communities function.

This study was originally conducted on the online forum Incels.me. I gathered and took screenshots of all the necessary data before the website was taken down in mid-October 2018, for unknown reasons (either a proxy attack or a server problem, according to the moderators of the forum). A back-up forum, Incels.is, has since been activated. It is a copy of the original one (previous threads, posts and comments included). But since not all members of the original forum had taken note of the back-up page name, the new forum has considerably less activity.

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<sup>21</sup> This is the data I already have from the online forum, and that can be found very easily.

It is not excluded that the original forum will be put back online but as of now, I will base myself on the information I collected from Incels.me. The forum is one of the online platforms which gather men identifying as Incels. Before Incels.me, it was r/incels – a Reddit community – that was their most famous and populated platform, gathering more than 40.000 members. The Reddit community was taken down by Reddit administrators in November 2017, because the community was violating their policies regarding content. Other Incel communities exist on 4chan, Lookism and on the dark net, but I will limit myself to the information found on the forum Incels.me.

Furthermore, I will limit myself to the last 20 posts of the 50 most active users and to their pinned ‘Blackpill’ threads. Finally, I investigated the forum mainly between September and November 2018.

This thesis is academically relevant because – and this will be exposed in detail in the chapter “Literature Review” – to date, no academic research has been released about the Incel movement. In addition, it will add insight into the growing body of knowledge concerning fringe groups online, particularly fringe groups concerned with the defense of men’s rights and the manosphere in general.

This study is of societal relevance because, as exposed above, there are clear potential security issues linked with the Incel movement, especially for women, but perhaps also for Incels themselves. Indeed, earlier this year, the media channel Vice released a documentary in which they allegedly managed to interview a man identifying as an Incel, and he reported having friends who had committed or tried to commit suicide.<sup>22</sup> It is not uncommon in radical groups to have members displaying suicidal behavior or being in depressed states and, as seen in the results of my content analysis, this group is no different in this regard. The practice of LDAR (Lay Down And Rot) is often spoken of by active Incel users on the forum, and is sometimes depicted as a goal, seen as the only viable solution for Incels in a ‘bluepilled’ society.

These stories illustrate the potential risk of the Incel movement. They are my basis for affirming that it is worthwhile to further study this group.

## **1.5. Conclusion**

In this first introductory part, the goal of my thesis was clearly laid out: to approach and gain knowledge on the Incel community through the analysis of their central topics of conversation.

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<sup>22</sup> Elle Reeve, ‘This Is What the Life of an Incel Looks Like’, *Vice News* (HBO, 5 July 2018), [https://video.vice.com/en\\_us/video/this-is-what-the-life-of-an-incel-looks-like/5b61f33ebe4077619b7bcfd2](https://video.vice.com/en_us/video/this-is-what-the-life-of-an-incel-looks-like/5b61f33ebe4077619b7bcfd2).

I structured my thesis accordingly in order to achieve this goal. Here is what the reader can expect in the following chapters:

In the second chapter, I will broadly summarize what academics know about the men's rights movement at large, what are its origins and its different branches. Then, going from what is known to what is speculated, I will address the birth of the Incel movement and relate what is currently being said about the Incels in the media. This chapter serves as a basis for understanding the movement and will lay a solid foundation for my study, while also proving that more primary sources are needed on this topic.

As mentioned in the introduction, an interesting facet of the Incels movement is that it exists solely online. The movement was born online (see Chapter II), it has ties with other online male subgroups and the four self-proclaimed Incels who committed attacks left online statements linking their attacks with the Incels. Chapter III will thus tackle some general characteristics of the Internet, what it enabled, what are its constraints and what has been researched on radical groups online. This chapter will situate the community within its environment.

In Chapter IV, the reader will find useful information about the methods used during this research and the justification behind them, as well as the scope and limitations of this research.

Chapter V and Chapter VI will present this thesis's findings and results. The fifth chapter will first enumerate the twelve categories of topics of conversation found on the forum and explain what each category represents, and why was it classified as such. The sixth chapter will then attempt to make sense of these raw findings by drawing four dimensions from the twelve categories.

Finally, Chapter VII will conclude this thesis, gather its findings and link them to our initial questions. In this concluding chapter, armed with what this thesis uncovered, I will raise questions about radical online communities, in order to hopefully inspire other researchers to use this thesis's findings to push our understanding of the Incels and the implications of radical online communities further.

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## 2. Chapter II: Incels – What is it all about?

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### 2.1. Introduction

This chapter aims at gaining a better understanding of Incels as a movement, by situating them in the general literature. Incels have often been depicted as being a part of what is broadly referred to as the ‘manosphere’, which Ging defines as this loose confederacy of interest groups centered around men’s rights.<sup>23</sup> The first section of this chapter will tackle the Incels’ ties with the manosphere, to analyze the nature of their place within it and put their movement into perspective. Then, the second section will go back to the origins of the Incel movement in order to contextualize its emergence. By doing this, it will be possible to accurately describe exactly who are the Incels targeted in this study.

But before tackling the above-mentioned questions, and in order to introduce this chapter in general, I will begin by approaching the notion of “aggrieved entitlement” defined by sociologist Michael Kimmel. Kimmel states that, since the 1980s, there has been a growing movement of angry males in America, predominantly whites, with ties to right and extreme-right movements, and which grew alongside the first men’s rights groups. During this time, as recorded by Kimmel in his book *Angry White Men*, the critique of the traditional male role “morphed into a celebration of all things masculine and a near infatuation with the traditional masculine role itself.”<sup>24</sup> The problem was no longer oppressive gender roles: “The problem was, in a word, women — or more accurately, women’s equality, women’s empowerment, and feminism.”<sup>25</sup> From this observation, he presents the notion of “aggrieved entitlement” which, according to him, dominates the thinking of this particular segment of American white males. He takes the example of school shootings in the US, almost universally committed by young white males who went on to commit suicide afterwards. Kimmel describes these shooters as “a group of boys, deeply aggrieved by a system that they may feel is cruel or demeaning. (...) What transforms the aggrieved into mass murders is a sense of entitlement, a sense of using violence against others, making others hurt as you, yourself, might hurt”.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Debbie Ging, ‘Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere’, *Men and Masculinities* 20, no. 10 (2017): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X17706401>.

<sup>24</sup> J. Oliver Conroy, “‘Angry White Men’: The Sociologist Who Studied Trump’s Base before Trump”, *The Guardian*, 27 February 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/27/michael-kimmel-masculinity-far-right-angry-white-men>.

<sup>25</sup> SPLC, ‘Male Supremacy’, *Southern Poverty Law Center*, 2017, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/male-supremacy>.

<sup>26</sup> Rachel Kalish and Michael Kimmel, ‘Suicide by Mass Murder: Masculinity, Aggrieved Entitlement, and Rampage School Shootings’, *Health Sociology Review* 19, no. 4 (2010): 454.

Kimmel also refers to the anger of the Men's Right Activists and other far-right partisans as a part of this culture of aggrieved entitlement. Citing the attack committed by Elliot Rodger in his University of Santa Barbara as a precipitating variable, he explores the ways in which race, class, and gender can intersect among white men to produce a unique framework of masculinity, one rooted in entitlement and control. According to him, there is a sense, among America's angry white men, that the ideal of masculinity is gradually slipping away. With the ideal of masculinity slipping away and the feeling of shame and/or humiliation which might accompany it, violence grows. "Because I feel small, I will make you feel smaller".<sup>27</sup> This is what he calls "aggrieved entitlement". If one feels entitled and does not get what one expects, that is a recipe for humiliation.

In the following sections, in order to give context and meaning to our observations, it will be paramount to keep in mind this concept of aggrieved entitlement, and the potential humiliation following societal changes. Indeed, these phenomena may have significantly affected some men at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and may remain relevant to this day.

## **2.2. Related movements**

To situate Incels in what has been coined the "manosphere"<sup>28</sup>, it is worthy to note that Incels are not the first group of men to criticize conventional understanding of masculinity and to have their own "non-feminist" approach to how society should function<sup>29</sup> or which norms of behavior should or should not be emphasized. The current men's movement at large is a conglomeration of different groups, each with slightly different ideological positions.<sup>30</sup>

### *2.2.1. History of the manosphere*

The male's liberation movement at large began in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when men began to use the battle for worker's rights as a way of examining their own lives as men in a capitalist society.<sup>31</sup> At the time, workers' rights were often synonymous with men's rights. The movement slowly evolved, was inspired by the first and second-wave feminist movements, and became the male's liberation movement, solely protecting men's rights and well-being, which

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<sup>27</sup> Zak Foste, 'Review: Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era', *Journal of College Student Development* 55, no. 6 (n.d.): 4.

<sup>28</sup> Ging, 'Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere'.

<sup>29</sup> Ging, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Ging, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Wikipédia, 'Men's Liberation Movement', *Wikipédia*, n.d.

were understood in light of stereotypical conceptions of masculinity. In 1970, Jack Sawyer published an article in which he discussed the negative effects of stereotypes of male sex roles.

“Male liberation seeks to aid in destroying the sex role stereotypes that regard “being a man” and “being a woman” as statuses that must be achieved through proper behaviour... If men cannot play freely, neither can they freely cry, be gentle, nor show weakness – because these are “feminine”, not “masculine”. But a fuller concept of humanity recognizes that all men and women are potentially both strong and weak, both active and passive and that these human characteristics are not the province of one sex.”<sup>32</sup>

As such, the male’s liberation movement was feminist at first since it acknowledged that sexism had also been a problem for women, and that feminism was a necessary movement to address inequalities between genders.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, from the beginning, members of the men’s liberation movement had conflicting views on the importance of the “costs of masculinity”, and on which gender its burden fell harder. And although the men’s liberation movement was initially united, it soon split into pro and anti-feminist factions, due largely to disagreements over the claim that male privilege negatively affects women.<sup>34</sup> Messner argues that the overly antifeminist men’s rights movements emanating from this split then began to claim that the burden, or the “cost of masculinity” fell harder on men, and even that the patriarchy benefited women at men’s expense.<sup>35</sup>

### 2.2.2. *The manosphere*

It is from this antifeminist branch of the men’s liberation movement that arose the Men’s Rights Activists (MRAs), as well as one of their recently famous sub-branches: Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW).<sup>36</sup> Schmitz and Kazyak wrote that “as a form of backlash against feminism and the movement towards gender equity, MRAs seek to establish resources for men to utilize in maintaining their elevated position in society in relation to women and other social

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<sup>32</sup> Jack Sawyer, *On Male Liberation* (Know, 1970).

<sup>33</sup> SPLC, ‘Male Supremacy’.

<sup>34</sup> M.A. Messner, ‘Forks in the Road of Men’s Gender Politics: Men’s Rights vs Feminist Allies.’, *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 5 (2016): 6–20.

<sup>35</sup> Michael A. Messner, ‘The Limits of “the Male Sex Role” - An Analysis of the Men’s Liberation and Men’s Right Movement Discourse’, *Gender & Society* 12, no. 3 (June 1998): 256.

<sup>36</sup> ‘MGTOW’, in *Wikipedia*, 29 September 2018, <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/MGTOW>.



minorities”.<sup>37</sup> MGTOW, on the other hand, despise women because they believe that the cost-benefit of marriages and relationships are not worth it and therefore have sworn off a life with sex and with women.<sup>38</sup>

Both the MRAs and the MGTOW adhere to the idea of The Red Pill (TRP), which is the underlying ‘philosophy’ of their movement, similarly to the Incels’ Blackpill.<sup>39</sup> It is the pseudoscientific justification behind their disgust for women, and the basis for their belief that the rights of men should be protected and, in some cases, further promoted.<sup>40</sup> TRP of MRAs as well as the Blackpill of Incels owe their names to the movie ‘The Matrix’, specifically to a scene in which Morpheus offers the protagonist, Neo, the option of either taking the red pill to see the real world as it truly is, or the blue pill, to continue living in a world of lies. Adrienne Massanari, in her book exploring the dynamics on the online platform “Reddit”, outlined that TRP uses research on evolutionary psychology to suggest that men are lacking role models and that women have been fooled into thinking that what they want is equality. TRP implies that women secretly wish to be dominated and that feminism is hurting the “natural order”.<sup>41</sup>

It is important to consider the Red Pill when studying Incels because the Incel movement was born out of the manosphere, before detaching itself from it and creating its own movement. Some elements about the Incel philosophy that will be tackled later in this paper will seem oddly similar to the claims of the MRAs and MGTOW, yet the groups are quite distinct from each other.

### 2.2.3. *The manosphere and the Web*

Schmitz and Kazyak explained that these groupings (of men) fighting for men’s rights and providing support for men in their pursuit of social legitimacy and power are found predominantly online, which enables them to connect easily with each other and with other

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<sup>37</sup> Rachel M. Schmitz and Emily Kazyak, ‘Masculinities in Cyberspace: An Analysis of Portrayals of Manhood in Men’s Rights Activist Websites’, *Soc. Sci.* 5, no. 2 (2016): 1, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci5020018>.

<sup>38</sup> ‘The Sexodus – Part 1 : The Men Giving Up On Women And Checking Out Of Society’, *MGTOW.Com* (blog), n.d., <https://www.mgtow.com/the-sexodus-part-1-the-men-giving-up-on-women-and-checking-out-of-society/>.

<sup>39</sup> Ging, ‘Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere’, 1.

<sup>40</sup> Cassie Jaye, ‘The Red Pill’, Documentary (New York, 2016).

<sup>41</sup> Adrienne L. Massanari, *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play - Learning from Reddit*, Peter Lang, vol. 75, Digital Formations (Steve Jones, 2015), 137.

potential adherents.<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, Massanari<sup>43</sup> and Milner<sup>44</sup> both analyzed the social website “Reddit” and how its structure and culture enabled the medium to become a hub of antifeminist activism.<sup>45</sup> Massanari reflects on how this kind of platform displays a problematic aspect of geek masculinity and how Reddit provides a fertile ground for these kinds of toxic spaces to emerge. She finds that it is partly the increasing connectedness of the Internet and its social platforms that enabled toxic technocultures to expand.<sup>46</sup> Massanari highlights how this platform is reflective of larger dimensions of geek culture, and insists that an exploration of this culture and its complicated relationship with masculinity is a necessity. De facto, Reddit was no exception in the emergence of antifeminist movements. Massanari studied the strong antifeminist communities present there. She reported that some of the Reddit communities relevant to her study – /r/Incels, /r/MensRights, /r/TheRedPill – each gathered several tens of thousands of subscribers and were often the first meeting-point for these groups – before being banned one after the other from the platform, between November 2017 and August 2018, as they did not respect Reddit’s policies regarding content. These communities blame women, and particularly feminists, for a number of issues: in particular, many MRAs and Incels view feminism as the movement that creates an environment in which an overwhelming number of men are falsely accused of rape.<sup>47</sup> This is why in these communities, even discussions on important topics (such as rape, harassment or domestic violence) are discussed with sarcasm, and statements such as “How can it be worse to be raped when an Incel has never even been kissed?”<sup>48</sup>

These communities have flourished on Reddit for several reasons, according to Massanari. First, the platform and its population tend to reinforce geek masculinity. Michael Salter wrote that western culture has long conflated masculinity with technology, giving rise to processes whereby men and boys gain a disproportionate amount of technological power.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Schmitz and Kazyak, ‘Masculinities in Cyberspace: An Analysis of Portrayals of Manhood in Men’s Rights Activist Websites’, 1.

<sup>43</sup> Adrienne Massanari, ‘#Gamergate and The Fapping: How Reddit’s Algorithm, Governance, and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures’, *New Media & Society* 19, no. 3 (2017): 329–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10711774/1711774/6114461444841851656008807>.

<sup>44</sup> Ryan M. Milner, ‘Hacking the Social: Internet Memes, Identity Antagonism, and the Logic of Lulz’, *The Fibreculture Journal*, 2013, 62–92.

<sup>45</sup> Massanari, ‘#Gamergate and The Fapping: How Reddit’s Algorithm, Governance, and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures’, 329.

<sup>46</sup> Massanari, 341.

<sup>47</sup> Massanari, *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play - Learning from Reddit*, 75:136–37.

<sup>48</sup> Mainländer, ‘(Experiment) What Do You Think Is More Traumatizing and Harmful to Mental Health on Average?’, Forum, *Incels.Me* (blog), 1 October 2018, <https://incels.me/threads/what-do-you-think-is-more-traumatizing-and-harmful-to-mental-health-on-average.78798/>.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Salter, ‘From Geek Masculinity to Gamergate: The Technological Rationality of Online Abuse’, *Crime Media Culture* 14, no. 12 (2018): 248, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659017690893>.

About two decades before Salter, Sherry Turkle had already reached the same conclusion, stating that technical expertise had long been intertwined with hegemonic masculinity, and that technical professions had hence been socially constructed as pertaining to masculine attributes.<sup>50</sup> A computer programmer is usually coded as male, and an incompetent user as female. Therefore, in spaces dedicated to geek culture – i.e. Reddit, for instance –, geek masculinity privileges the white, able-bodied, young, straight cisgender male over the woman of color, the homosexual older man, or the disabled trans woman, for instance. Gray found that these privileges manifest themselves in the form of exclusion and insults, within a “cultural map of assumed whiteness”.<sup>51</sup> Individuals who are not male, white or cisgender are still active in geek culture, but they are marginalized, relegated to its fringes, and often silenced. This becomes obvious when the nature of a woman’s role in a video-game is observed, as analyzed by Charles.<sup>52</sup> Violent comments or threats targeting these marginalized individuals are common, reinforcing the feedback loop in which they are increasingly made to feel unwelcome in geek culture and are essentially silenced, which further marginalizes certain voices within these communities.<sup>53</sup>

Secondly, for a long time, Reddit’s administrators were extremely unwilling to intervene when it came to content moderation, in the name of free speech – a concept at the very core of the platform. This allowed these communities to grow.

Thirdly, Reddit and similar forums open to people’s interactions mainly reflect Internet and Western culture as a whole and, as such, we find on Reddit the same – if not aggravated – social struggles present in the real world.<sup>54</sup> Cherie Todd adds that these communities tend to venture out and comment in other non-sexist areas of the Internet, which enables their misogynistic views to become a part of the larger online culture.<sup>55</sup>

Milner, on the other hand, while noting that forums like Reddit do favor irony and critique, often at the expense of core identity categories such as race and gender, also argues that these kinds of discussions could be productive for public discourse. Indeed, such websites

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<sup>50</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen - Identity in the Age of the Internet* (Simon & Schuster, 1995), 56.

<sup>51</sup> Kishonna L. Gray, ‘Intersecting Oppressions and Online Communities - Examining the Experiences of Women of Color in Xbox Live’, *Information, Communication & Society* 15, no. 3 (2012): 413, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2011.642401>.

<sup>52</sup> Christopher Charles, ‘Keeping Quiet: Investigating the Maintenance and Policing of Male-Dominated Gaming Space’ (Master’s Thesis, University of Central Florida, 2016).

<sup>53</sup> Massanari, *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play - Learning from Reddit*, 75:128–29.

<sup>54</sup> Wenhong Chen and Barry Wellman, ‘Chapter 22: Minding the Cyber-Gap: The Internet and Social Inequality’, in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Inequalities* (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005), 523–45.

<sup>55</sup> Cherie Todd, ‘Commentary: GamerGate and Resistance to the Diversification of Gaming Culture’, *Women’s Studies Journal* 29, no. 1 (August 2015): 64–67.

enable “vibrant, agonistic discussion instead of disenfranchising antagonism”.<sup>56</sup> However, this is exactly the position which Massanari aims at countering, as she believes that previous scholars and journalists such as Milner have often exaggerated the democratic potential and minimized the contradictions that these platforms embody.<sup>57</sup>

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) included the MRAs’ subreddit (/r/MensRights) in their 2012 Intelligence report about misogynistic spaces online. They report that the ‘manosphere’ at large is populated by hundreds of websites, blogs and forums dedicated to “savaging” feminists in particular, and women in general. They investigated and listed a dozen of these platforms, and found that although some feature attempts at civility and at backing up arguments with facts, they are almost all “thick with misogynistic attacks that can be astounding for the guttural hatred they express”.<sup>58</sup> The report also lays out the set of claims made against women in these groups, supporting their depiction of them as violent liars and manipulators of men. Some suggest that women attack men, even sexually, just as much as men attack women. Others claim that vast numbers of reported rapes of women, as much as half or even more, are fabrications by women designed to destroy men they do not like, or to gain the upper hand in contested custody cases.<sup>59</sup>

## **2.3. The origins of Incels**

### *2.3.1. The concept of ‘involuntary celibacy’*

The term “involuntary celibacy” is in itself not new. Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, research has paid attention to both the phenomena of involuntary and voluntary celibacy amongst men and women and the social, cultural and economic causes behind them.<sup>60</sup> The research in such studies focused on celibacy defined as an absence of sex. In that sense, married people that had not had intercourse over a significant amount of time were also considered celibates.<sup>61</sup> At the time, authors busied themselves with attempts to understand why, although some celibate individuals had chosen this lifestyle for personal reasons, this was not always the case. Indeed, some would have liked to have sex, but lacked a willing sexual partner: “For them,

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<sup>56</sup> Milner, ‘Hacking the Social: Internet Memes, Identity Antagonism, and the Logic of Lulz’, 62.

<sup>57</sup> Massanari, *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play - Learning from Reddit*, 75:1.

<sup>58</sup> SPLC, ‘Intelligence Report: The Patriot Movement Explodes - Misogyny: The Sites’ (Southern Poverty Law Center, 1 March 2012), <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2012/misogyny-sites>.

<sup>59</sup> SPLC, ‘Intelligence Report: The Patriot Movement Explodes - Men’s Rights Movement Spreads False Claims about Women’ (Southern Poverty Law Center, 1 March 2012), <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2012/men%E2%80%99s-rights-movement-spreads-false-claims-about-women>.

<sup>60</sup> E. Abbott, *A History of Celibacy*, Scribner (New York, 2000).

<sup>61</sup> Denise Donnelly et al., ‘Involuntary Celibacy: A Life Course Analysis’, *Journal of Sex Research* 38, no. 2 (11 January 2010): 159, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224490109552083>.

celibacy is not a choice”.<sup>62</sup> It was then noted that since involuntary celibacy was a relatively new area of inquiry within the field of sex research, few studies had dealt with its full dimensions, causes and consequences. From this observation, authors have attempted to define and understand the transitions and trajectories by which the involuntary celibacy of some individuals developed and was maintained.<sup>63</sup>

### 2.3.2. *The concept of “Incel”*

The term ‘Incel’ was originally coined in the early 1990s by a female statistics undergraduate at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, known only by the name “Alana”.<sup>64</sup> Alana decided to establish an online forum to talk about the difficulties she faced with finding an intimate relationship.<sup>65</sup> She said in 2016 that she was first trying to “create a movement that was open to anybody and everybody”.<sup>66</sup> Although the forum’s initial goal was to help both ‘late bloomer’ men and women, the former soon began to dominate in numbers.<sup>67</sup> These men as well as many others then morphed into the Incel phenomenon we know today, “a much darker online subculture consisting mainly of frustrated young men who have struggled to form sexual relationships and come together to blame women and society for their rejection”.<sup>68</sup> These men share their experiences on various forums, and their discussions are often drenched in misogyny. Progressively, the importance of physical appearance was emphasized, with the claim that that only men with good looks (so-called ‘Chads’) are able to have intimate relationships with beautiful women (so-called ‘Stacys’).<sup>69</sup>

## 2.4. Who are the Incels today?

### 2.4.1. *Incels according to ‘normies’*

As briefly mentioned *supra*, Incels see themselves as sexually deprived not because of any lack of drive, ambition or hygiene, but because external forces – biology, feminism, society at large

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<sup>62</sup> Donnelly et al., 159.

<sup>63</sup> Donnelly et al., 159.

<sup>64</sup> Wright and Molloy, ‘The Dark “Incel” Internet Subculture Praised on the Facebook Page of the Toronto van Attack Suspect’.

<sup>65</sup> van Buuren and Sciarone, ‘Make War, Not Love?’

<sup>66</sup> Peter Baker, ‘The Woman Who Accidentally Started the Incel Movement’, *Elle*, 1 March 2016, <https://www.elle.com/culture/news/a34512/woman-who-started-incel-movement/>.

<sup>67</sup> van Buuren and Sciarone, ‘Make War, Not Love?’

<sup>68</sup> Wright and Molloy, ‘The Dark “Incel” Internet Subculture Praised on the Facebook Page of the Toronto van Attack Suspect’.

<sup>69</sup> van Buuren and Sciarone, ‘Make War, Not Love?’

– are stacked against them.<sup>70</sup> Incels blame women specifically for their involuntary celibacy because according to them, women form the basis of their sexual deprivation. As van Buuren and Sciarone note, in the words of Elliot Rodger: “they [women] are the main instigators of sex. They control which men get it and which men don’t.”<sup>71</sup> In the same line of thought, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) also finds that the Incels’ mindset revolves not so much around sex as it does around women. The SPLC notes that many make the mistake of taking Incels by their word when they claim that their group is driven by the inability to find a sexual partner, when in reality, it is not just about sex, it is about women withholding it. The hatred these men feel stems — crucially — not from their belief that they are entitled to sex, but from their belief that women are required to give it to them. And when women do not, Incels may weaponize their hate.<sup>72</sup>

One of the patron-saints of the Incel movement is Elliot Rodger. Rodger killed six of his female classmates in 2014 to “punish all females for the crime of depriving [him] of sex.” Moments before the event, he posted a 123-page manifesto explaining his actions, in which he stated that he was entitled to women’s attention and sexual relationships.<sup>73</sup> He considered other men as inferior to him and wrote in his manifesto that “the mere sight of them enjoying their happy lives was an insult to me, because I deserve it more than them.” Van Buuren and Sciarone argue that since the men who are a part of this subculture have a high sense of entitlement (as sociologist Michael Kimmel argued), view society as skewed and believe they are entitled to women, their attention and acceptance, these attacks against women could be classified as gender-based terrorism.

When Alek Minassian wrote “All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!” on his Facebook page before attacking women in a crowd with his van, he declared his connection to the Incel movement. Incels now clearly perceive both Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian as heroes. It is not uncommon amongst Incel communities to see avatars representing either Rodger or Minassian, sometimes with a religious connotation, i.e. holding a cross or dressed in priest’s clothing.<sup>74</sup> Mike Wending explains that the Incels have given a name to the philosophy underlying their movement: the Blackpill. Arising from the belief that women are the

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<sup>70</sup> Mike Wending, ‘Alleged Toronto van Attacker Highlights Toxic Links between Incels and the Alt-Right’, *Vice News*, 1 May 2018, [https://news.vice.com/en\\_ca/article/mbxzvx/alleged-toronto-van-attacker-highlights-toxic-links-between-incels-and-the-alt-right](https://news.vice.com/en_ca/article/mbxzvx/alleged-toronto-van-attacker-highlights-toxic-links-between-incels-and-the-alt-right).

<sup>71</sup> van Buuren and Sciarone, ‘Make War, Not Love?’

<sup>72</sup> SPLC, ‘Weekend Read: For Incels, It’s Not about Sex. It’s about Women.’

<sup>73</sup> van Buuren and Sciarone, ‘Make War, Not Love?’

<sup>74</sup> SPLC, ‘Weekend Read: For Incels, It’s Not about Sex. It’s about Women.’

withholders of sex, the Blackpill is the idea that the whole game of sex and attraction is rigged from birth. It goes something like this:

- a) looks are genetically determined;
- b) looks are the primary (or only) determinant of sexual success, therefore:
- c) if one was not born with the right genes (which is the situation in which Incels claim to find themselves), one cannot ever aspire to an intimate relationship with a woman.<sup>75</sup>

Journalist and blogger David Futrelle has also been following the Incels and other related movements. His blog “wehuntedthemammoth.com” is dedicated to tracking the culture of misogyny online. He describes the Incel movement as “the preferred moniker of a number of mostly young men united by a shared bitterness over their inability to persuade women to sleep with them”.<sup>76</sup> According to him, they allow this fact to define their entire lives and devote much of their time online lashing out at the women who do not want them, as well as picking over the supposed flaws in their own appearances, which they believe to render them forever unlovable. In the same vein as Michael Kimmel’s analysis, he outlines that “when you combine this sort of anger and self-pity, you often get violence”.<sup>77</sup> According to Futrelle, most Incels are too devoted to their own dysfunction, too committed to stewing in their own hate and too addicted to self-pity to even consider leaving the movement. As an example, he notes how some Incels reacted following the news of the Minassian attack: many rejoiced, justified it and advocated for future ones. In these scenarios, Futrelle notes that Incels still cast themselves as victims because “women and society have rejected them into loneliness and depression”.<sup>78</sup>

From all this, it is safe to assume that the involuntary celibates studied at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are not the same as ‘our’ involuntary celibates identifying as *Incels*, and studied in this thesis. First, because the involuntary celibates interviewed in such studies are lone individuals, and the researchers never seem to mention any kind of support group they might be a part of, or the existence of any particular philosophy behind their involuntary celibacy. Then, because the Incels are exclusively male. Indeed, being male is a prerequisite to enter the Incels “club”, as Incels believe that women will always have an easier access to sex. We can already observe that the Incels we will focus on represent a particular case within the wide variety of involuntary celibates around the world.

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<sup>75</sup> Wending, ‘Alleged Toronto van Attacker Highlights Toxic Links between Incels and the Alt-Right’.

<sup>76</sup> David Futrelle, ‘Can the Radicalization of “Incels” Be Stopped?’, *The Globe and Mail*, 27 April 2018, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-can-the-radicalization-of-incels-be-stopped/>.

<sup>77</sup> Futrelle.

<sup>78</sup> Futrelle.

#### 2.4.2. *A way out?*

Mike Wending outlines how easy it is for young men to fall into the “rabbit holes” of Incel message boards, when reading about familiar experiences of dating failure and sexual inexperience. But once they become regular members and begin to poste regularly on the forum, they soon find themselves vigorously policed by more established members. Incels wallow in their own *inceldom*, but the goal is rarely to break out of it (because, again, the accepted collective doctrine claims it’s a genetic, pre-determined condition). Indeed, if an Incel actually manages to have sex with a woman, he will be branded as a “fakecel.” Wending concludes by warning readers of the radicalizing power of these extreme forums. The Toronto suspect was not the first to apparently be influenced by this toxic online environment, and he will not be the last.<sup>79</sup> Sadly he was right, as at the beginning of November, a man committed another Incel-branded attack in Tallahassee. David Futrelle highlights the importance of preventing Incels to recruit more members as “Incels aren’t born: they’re made”. Some men already feel lonely, bitter and perhaps even misogynistic on their own, but the Incel platforms can further radicalize them, offering a justification for their feelings as well as building a sense of belonging to a group. According to him, there is a need for collective action to take their platforms down, as he sees this as the only way to effectively undermine the group’s growth.<sup>80</sup>

#### 2.4.3. *Incels and the alt-right*

Wending finds a significant overlap between the Incel subculture and the alt-right.<sup>81</sup> He gives several examples to back-up his claim. First, their language: Incels use the same mix of detached irony and sincere anger and throw around the same kinds of insults (i.e. cuck, normie...) as alt-right sympathizers usually do. Second, instead of The Red Pill which some alt-righters often refer to, Incels are fond of the Blackpill, explained *supra*, which is the deterministic philosophy implying that the game of sex and attraction is rigged from birth. According to Wending, this kind of determinism is imported directly from the alt-right, who use it in their pseudo-scientific arguments about race, IQ and social outcomes. Viewing their situation as genetic and unalterable makes Incels prone to another alt-right vice: constant bleating about supposed victimhood.

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<sup>79</sup> Wending, ‘Alleged Toronto van Attacker Highlights Toxic Links between Incels and the Alt-Right’.

<sup>80</sup> Futrelle, ‘Can the Radicalization of “Incels” Be Stopped?’

<sup>81</sup> Wending, ‘Alleged Toronto van Attacker Highlights Toxic Links between Incels and the Alt-Right’.



The SPLC began tracking male supremacy in 2012.<sup>82</sup> In the wake of the 2016 election, they also established a link between male supremacist ideas and the rise of the so-called “alt-right”.<sup>83</sup> The Anti-Defamation League, an NGO whose main purpose is to fight against anti-Semitism and hate, also delivered a report linking misogyny and white supremacy. They argue that hatred of women is a “dangerous and underestimated component of extremism”.<sup>84</sup>

“The hatred and resentment of women voiced by groups like involuntary celibates and men’s rights activists is disturbingly similar to white supremacists’ hatred of minorities. And some white supremacists, especially those of the alt-right, use the same degrading, violent anti-woman rhetoric we hear coming from misogynist groups.”<sup>85</sup>

## **2.5. Conclusion**

Ultimately, it seems that surprisingly little has been written by academics on the Incels as a phenomenon. But the Incels are not the only grouping of men online to express antagonistic opinions towards other races or genders. This research bases itself on existing literature concerning the manosphere and its evolution,<sup>86</sup> in order to situate the Incels in the overall existing body of knowledge.

This chapter aimed at gathering critical information about Incels, in order to better understand them. To do so, it was important to start broadly with the notion of “aggrieved entitlement” that many white males experience, according to Michael Kimmel. It is paramount to start with this notion as it may apply to a significant number of American white males, including men’s right activists and Incels, and it may serve as a catalyst for hate and potentially violent behavior. It is only by placing Incels in this broader context that it will be possible to derive meaningful observations from this research. The next goal of this chapter was to situate Incels in the wider spectrum of the ‘manosphere’, in which their movement originated, and to begin to define their place within the men’s rights movement at large. And, finally, this chapter approached the movement itself, its origins and ‘raison d’être’. What this chapter taught us is that the Incels seem to be a sub-product of a wider antifeminist phenomenon, and that it has to be understood in the particular context of the rise of extreme-right and alt-right movements.

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<sup>82</sup> SPLC, ‘Weekend Read: For Incels, It’s Not about Sex. It’s about Women.’

<sup>83</sup> SPLC.

<sup>84</sup> Maya Oppenheim, ‘Misogyny Is a Key Element of White Supremacy, Anti-Defamation League Report Finds’, *The Guardian*, 25 June 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/misogyny-white-supremacy-links-alt-right-antidefamation-league-report-incel-a8463611.html>.

<sup>85</sup> Oppenheim.

<sup>86</sup> Ging, ‘Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere’.

Finally, another particular field of research that will be an important key of analysis in observing and understanding the Incels phenomenon is the research focused on *online* groups. As mentioned by Ging, more attention needs to be paid to the online context within which these groupings take place. Namely, because this change demonstrates a “radical shifting in the parameters of antifeminism”<sup>87</sup>, and the issue has currently not been tackled by current writings on men’s rights movements. Indeed, since the migration of men’s rights activists towards the online world, the tone and communication strategies of these groups has substantially changed. The features of the Internet and the technological affordance of social media<sup>88</sup> have allowed these groups to establish “complex connections with a myriad of interconnected organizations, blogs, forums, communities, and subcultures, resulting in a much more extreme and ostensibly amorphous set of discourses and ideological positions”.<sup>89</sup> This *online* factor will be addressed in the next chapter.

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<sup>87</sup> Ging, 2.

<sup>88</sup> Ging, 6.

<sup>89</sup> Ging, 2.

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### 3. Chapter III: What does it mean to be part of a digital community?

#### *Internet as a social phenomenon*

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##### **3.1. Introduction**

This chapter aims at situating the Incel community in its online context. As this community exists online, it is of the utmost importance to gain a better knowledge of the cyberspace in which they interact.

As mentioned earlier, misogyny itself is not a new phenomenon. But the Internet is relatively new. It adds a new dimension to the creation of communities, and to the construction of the self. As Sherry Turkle remarks, “with the rapidly expanding system of networks – the internet – millions of people are linked in this new space that changes the way we think, the nature of our sexuality, the form of our communities and our very identities”.<sup>90</sup> It is clear that the computer is more than a mere neutral tool for its user. It does, in fact, much more. In some cases, it may go so far as to allow individuals to live in a virtual world, if that is what they desire. Harris and Rea further stated that “instead of simply building information, people create entire communities comprised of self-built worlds and avatars centered around common interests, learning, or socialization in order to promote information exchange”.<sup>91</sup>

And indeed, for many, the Internet has become an integral part of everyday life. Internet is not merely a neutral, practical addition to our lives, it has in fact become a very real part of them, and as such, must be analyzed as a social phenomenon. With the Internet, comes the opportunity to create new virtual communities, in which one participates with people from all over the world, with whom one converses daily, has fairly intimate relationships, and yet may never physically meet. “Computers don’t just do things *for* us, they do things *to* us, including to our ways of thinking about ourselves and other people”.<sup>92</sup> Computer screens are the new location for our fantasies. They have enabled us to become comfortable with new ways of thinking about evolution, relationships, sexuality, politics, and identity. “Interactive and reactive, the computer offers the illusion of companionship without the demand of friendship. One can be a loner yet never be alone”.<sup>93</sup> For these reasons, the computer desperately needs to be understood as an extension of the self because, as introduced here, the Internet can create a

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<sup>90</sup> Turkle, *Life on the Screen - Identity in the Age of the Internet*, 9–10.

<sup>91</sup> Albert L. Harris and Alan Rea, ‘Web 2.0 and Virtual World Technologies: A Growing Impact on IS Education’, *Journal of Information Systems Education* 20, no. 2 (2009): 137.

<sup>92</sup> Turkle, *Life on the Screen - Identity in the Age of the Internet*, 26.

<sup>93</sup> Turkle, 30–31.

new sense of self and sociability for its users. This is the exact context within which I aim to approach the Incel community.<sup>94</sup>

### **3.2.A community?**

Before further investigating the Internet, what it does and what it has changed, I will first address the notion of community, since this is a term I will frequently use when speaking of Incels.

On the Internet as well as outside of it, there are communities: big or small, easily accessible or very secretive – or somewhere in between. Although the word “community” seems to intuitively “feel good”<sup>95</sup> – it is good to *have* a community, to *be* in a community – it is also a word which, when imported in academic texts, causes immense difficulty to grasp, understand and precisely define.<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, when speaking of Incels, we are speaking of a *community*, and therefore some key elements of this notion need to be approached. Anthony Cohen raised one important aspect of communities, which, even in the absence of a thorough definition, manages to tackle an important issue that all communities share to different degrees, and that may be helpful in approaching the Incels as a community.

The symbolic construction of the community, as Anthony Cohen coins it, takes place in every social group through the use of a specific language, expressions and some specific ways of approaching topics. As Cohen outlines, “a reasonable interpretation of the certain word’s use would seem to imply two related suggestions: that the members of a group of people (a) have something in common with each other, which (b) distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other putative groups. ‘Community’ thus seems to imply simultaneously both similarity and difference.”<sup>97</sup> It is through the construction of a symbolic community that the creation of an “us” versus “them” dynamic is enabled. Indeed, the use of certain terms, words and expressions both brings the member of a community closer and draws a line with those who are not a part of this community. This drawing of a line between “us” and “them”, between members of the community and non-members, is achievable only through the building of a community that has distinct characteristic features in comparison with other communities. I will argue in Chapter V that this is found in the Incel community.

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<sup>94</sup> Zizi Papacharissi, *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Cultures on Social Network Sites*, Zizi Papacharissi (Routledge, 2011).

<sup>95</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*, Themes for the 21st Century Series (Polity Press, 2000), 8.

<sup>96</sup> Anthony P Cohen, *Symbolic Construction of Community* (London: Routledge, 1993), 12.

<sup>97</sup> Cohen, 12.

### **3.3. What changed with the Internet?**

To understand *what* the Internet changed is to be able to contextualize the Incels on a very basic level – their interactions. Internet and computer-mediated communications operated a small revolution at the level of people’s interactions online.

In 2001, Jamison wrote that “the Internet is an interconnected network of computers”.<sup>98</sup> And indeed, internet-mediated communications enabled the transition from mass communication (‘from one to many’) to communication among peers (both ‘one to one’ and ‘many to many’).<sup>99</sup> According to Livingstone, the new additions the Internet brings to the table “rely on speculation regarding the user’s role and engagement”.<sup>100</sup> De facto, this transition from “one to many” to “many to many” communication is a game changer. With the advent of online communication, the traditional one-way message transmission from one source to a large, relatively undifferentiated and anonymous audience, quickly became obsolete. On the Internet, “interpersonal communication involves smaller number of participants who exchange messages designed for and directed towards particular others”.<sup>101</sup> The message becomes more powerful as it does not emanate from a higher hierarchical other (e.g. an unattainable newspaper editor) but from someone at the same level, using codes which are known by the receiver, and are therefore considered more trustworthy.<sup>102</sup>

Whereas time and space constrain the physical spaces, online, people can connect to one another across great distances and engage with content produced over extended periods. This allows people to work around the physical barriers of interaction and to reduce the cost of interacting with people in places far away.<sup>103</sup>

Because of this disappearance of time and space constraints, the Internet is said to be made of networked publics. “Networked publics are publics that are restructured by networked technologies”.<sup>104</sup> They simultaneously consist of the space constructed through networked technologies and the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technologies and practices. Thus, networked publics, just as other publics, serve a number of similar functions – they allow people to gather for social, cultural and civic purposes, and help

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<sup>98</sup> Elizabeth Jamison, ‘What Is the Internet?’, October 2001, 24.

<sup>99</sup> Sonia Livingstone, ‘The Challenge of Changing Audiences Or, What Is the Audience Researcher to Do in the Age of the Internet?’, *European Journal of Communication* 19, no. 1 (2004): 75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323104040695>.

<sup>100</sup> Livingstone, 80.

<sup>101</sup> Papacharissi, *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Cultures on Social Network Sites*, 19.

<sup>102</sup> Papacharissi, 19.

<sup>103</sup> Papacharissi, 53.

<sup>104</sup> Papacharissi, 39.

them connect with a world beyond their friends and families.<sup>105</sup> On the Internet, networked publics make “one to many” and “many to many” interactions far easier, as networked media allows anyone to be a media outlet and to participate in grassroots journalism.<sup>106</sup> However, networked publics unfortunately reproduce many of the biases that exist in other publics – the impacts of class, race, gender, organizational hierarchy, and network diversity persist in cyberspace.<sup>107</sup>

In short, social interactions changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the arrival of the Internet. This is the basis of Henry Jenkin’s idea of “participatory culture”, which suggests that our individual and collective engagements with mass media fundamentally shifted during the early 1990s, when the Internet became more commonly available in the workplace and in people’s homes. Although the sort of active engagement visible in popular media today is not new, what changed with the Internet is the scale and ubiquity of our ability to “talk back” to the media and, most importantly, to be heard by that very media. This experienced a rapid increase with the internet’s penetration into our everyday lives.<sup>108</sup> In addition to this, the ability to connect with other Internet users through this interconnected network – despite the usual barriers of distance or language – is a game-changer.

### **3.4. What does the Internet do?**

Now that I have established an understanding of the basic changes that the Internet has brought to users’ interactions online, I will now look at *how* these changes affect said users.

The infrastructures of platforms such as Facebook or Twitter allow users of the Internet to feel closer to events they are physically removed from. This last decade, numerous stories have arisen depicting how social media can be of use as a catalyst for social expressions.<sup>109</sup> The #MeToo movement, the yellow vests movements in Europe and the migration crisis are all examples of events that many people felt – and still feel – close too, although they were sometimes physically removed from them. The Internet enables quick and flexible organization, transmission of information and communication. Papacharissi addresses how the Internet, through various news platforms, “invites people to take their own place in current event,

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<sup>105</sup> Papacharissi, 39.

<sup>106</sup> Simon Waldman, ‘All the News That’s Fit to Blog’, *The Guardian*, 6 November 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/nov/06/highereducation.news>.

<sup>107</sup> Chen and Wellman, ‘Chapter 22: Minding the Cyber-Gap: The Internet and Social Inequality’, 534.

<sup>108</sup> Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, Postmillennial Pop (NYU Press, 2013).

<sup>109</sup> Think of the #MeToo movement earlier this year.

developing various forms of civic mobilization”.<sup>110</sup> These platforms manage to convey a sense of immediacy that makes users feel as though they are there, wherever “there” may be. Although this capability is not new or specific to the Internet, broadcast journalism and 24/7 television news cycles in particular have certainly amplified it. Prior to that, print journalism had already enabled people to construct their own biased mental images of the lives of others. This is what Walter Lippman coined ‘pseudoenvironment’<sup>111</sup>, which is “the feeling someone can have about an event he does not experience. [It is] the feeling aroused by his mental image of the event”.<sup>112</sup>

As the Internet follows and amplifies the storytelling of events, it allows for situations unknown to users to become meaningful to them, by evoking affective reactions. Everything becomes a matter of narrative and storytelling and there is no such thing as “a fact for a fact”, isolated from its affective potential. Tuning affectively into an event we are physically removed from does not mean that reactions are strictly emotional, of course, but it does mean that we are prompted to interpret situations by feeling like those directly experiencing them, even though, in most cases, we are not able to think like them. We feel the emotions we imagine they must feel themselves, but our experience of their reality is exactly that: imagined.<sup>113</sup> Technologies network us but it is narratives that connect us to each other, making us feel close to some and distancing us from others.<sup>114</sup> With the Internet, this phenomenon of the pseudoenvironment is increasingly prevalent, and online communities are able to create their own pseudoenvironments, especially via acts of self-journalism – by sharing the news articles and stories which are of interest to them.

Acts of self-journalism enable a false consensus effect,<sup>115</sup> and this is especially true amongst radical and extremist online communities. This idea of “self-journalism” was first brought by a study emanating from survey data obtained from members of neo-Nazi online forums. The concept of self-journalism, which is the act of self-reporting or choosing the articles shared on a platform, contributes to the idea that participation in online forums

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<sup>110</sup> Papacharissi, *Affective Publics : Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*, 4.

<sup>111</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (Transaction Publishers, 1922), 15.

<sup>112</sup> Lippmann, 13.

<sup>113</sup> Papacharissi, *Affective Publics : Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*, 4.

<sup>114</sup> Papacharissi, 5.

<sup>115</sup> Magdalena Elzbieta Wojcieszak, ‘Computer-Mediated False Consensus: Radical Online Groups, Social Networks and News Media’, *Mass Communication and Society* 14, no. 4 (4 July 2011): 527–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2010.513795>.

exacerbates false consensus by creating a particular pseudoenvironment, which leads to overestimating public support for one's own views.<sup>116</sup>

If we take into account the fact that the number of online hate sites had increased by more than 60% in 2011<sup>117</sup> and that there was “a marked upswing in the use of ‘chat rooms’ for communications among extremists”<sup>118</sup> in 1999 alone, this idea of a pseudoenvironment which users are physically removed from but feel close to, as well as the idea of self-journalism exacerbating false consensus and overestimating public support of certain views, are two important concepts for my research. Indeed, in the case of the Incel forum, we have the creation of a pseudoenvironment in which users only share news relevant to their views. This, in turn, might encourage other users to become more vocal, to publicize their cause and therefore attract additional adherents.<sup>119</sup> In the case of the Incels, these concepts are key to understanding and contextualizing the forum's dynamic.

Now, another important question for this research is how online comments and sharing can affect the perception of users. Here Papacharissi suggests “that one of the more fruitful approaches in understanding new technologies may be through the consideration of the multiple and simultaneous social influence agents embodied in the channels that these technologies make salient”.<sup>120</sup> Do comments under YouTube videos, for example, affect a user's perception of said YouTube video? Sundar and Nass investigated the effects of different types of source attributions upon receivers' perception of online news content.<sup>121</sup> They confirmed the influence of online peers on the perception of information, and found that when other users were perceived to be the source of online news, the stories were liked more and perceived to be higher in quality, as well as more representative of the news.<sup>122</sup>

Sundar and Nass, Wojcieszak and Lippmann each contributed to the general body of knowledge concerning users' perceptions of online information, and how it might influence them and the group they are a part of. This is of great interest for this research since, as analyzed below in Chapter V, self-journalism is an important part of the Incel forum.

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<sup>116</sup> Wojcieszak, 527.

<sup>117</sup> Wojcieszak, 528.

<sup>118</sup> SPLC, ‘Hate on the Net, Intelligence Report.’, *Southern Poverty Law Center*, 1999, <http://www.splcenter.org/intel/intelreport/article.jsp?aid=363>.

<sup>119</sup> Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, ‘The Spiral of Silence - A Theory of Public Opinion’, *Journal of Communication* 24, no. 2 (June 1974): 43–51, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1974.tb00367.x>.

<sup>120</sup> Papacharissi, *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Cultures on Social Network Sites*, 26.

<sup>121</sup> S. S. Sundar and C. Nass, ‘Conceptualizing Sources in Online News’, *Journal of Communication* 51, no. 1 (March 2001): 52.

<sup>122</sup> Sundar and Nass, ‘Conceptualizing Sources in Online News’.



It has previously been argued that social media affords visibility to voices frequently marginalized by the societal mainstream, and that it has enabled the birth of alternative narratives.<sup>123</sup> In the past few decades, movements that use digital means to connect with larger audiences and express their point of view have arisen. Nevertheless, although it has been confirmed by research that online media is utilized as resources which helps accelerate mobilization, it presents a necessary but not sufficient cause for radical mobilization.<sup>124</sup> As such, it is of the utmost importance to understand that online activity cannot be confused with impact. On a secondary level, Papacharissi notes that online activity may energize disorganized crowds and/or facilitate the formation of networked publics around communities, actual and imagined. According to her, these publics are activated and sustained by feelings of belonging and solidarity, however fleeting or permanent those feelings may be. Dean draws attention to the notion of affect and describes the “circulatory drive” that characterizes networked publics, in that through the sharing of links, images and status updates which remain visible online, a record or a trace of this information always remains. “Sustained by ongoing reflexivity that is regenerated by singular moments of expression and connection deposited by individual users, the affective flow and affective links remain and resonate with networked publics even after the link is shut down”.<sup>125</sup> Affective attachment to media cannot produce communities, but it can produce “feelings of community”. This is interesting, because it would mean that it is not the online platform itself that produced the Incel community, but what its members have shared there, the news that have been pinned, etc., that builds the feeling that this community is unique. It is therefore very relevant to conduct a content analysis of the top categories in the forum as this will indicate which topics the community addresses and what feeling of community it creates.

### **3.5. Internet’s impact on the radical milieu**

It is difficult to define with precision if a group, a social environment, is radical or not. The word “radical” itself is blurry and can have different meanings. For some, a vegan person can be considered radical and so can a Dutch foreign-fighter on his way to Syria. In the academic world, the topic of the “radical milieu” is one the most under-investigated one.<sup>126</sup> What this

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<sup>123</sup> Zizi Papacharissi, ‘Towards New Journalism(s) - Affective News, Hybridity, and Liminal Spaces’, *Journalism Studies*, 13 March 2014, 5.

<sup>124</sup> Ines von Behr et al., ‘Radicalisation in the Digital Era The Use of the Internet in 15 Cases of Terrorism and Extremism’, *Rand Europe*, 5 November 2013, 1–56.

<sup>125</sup> Papacharissi, *Affective Publics : Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*, 9.

<sup>126</sup> Peter Waldmann, ‘The Radical Milieu: The Under-Investigated Relationship between Terrorists and Sympathetic Communities’, *Perspectives on Terrorism* 2, no. 9 (June 2008): 25.

thesis means by “radical milieu” is “a specific, immediate social environment which shares their perspective and objectives, approves of certain forms of violence, and (at least to a certain extent) supports the violent group morally and logistically”.<sup>127</sup>

Interactions amidst radical communities have, like other interactions online, also been reshaped by the advent of the Internet. When speaking of terrorism or radical communities, the focus is usually on their darkest, most violent sides. But Klaus states that the reality is that “[radicals] also use the Internet for the same reasons everybody else does; for organization and planning, proselytizing and entertainment, and to educate the believers. In fact, most of the online communication of [radicals] is mundane to the point of appearing innocuous”.<sup>128</sup>

A radical milieu is described as a “specific social environment whose culture, narrative, and symbols shape both the individuals and the group, and the social networks and relationships out of which those individuals and groups develop and emerge”.<sup>129</sup> Peter Waldmann and his co-authors further describe a radical milieu as being “a collective of people sharing certain perspectives and a unitary identity: a “subculture” or a community”. Waldmann’s conception of radical milieus does not seem to have social relationships as a core characteristic, but necessitates, implicitly or explicitly, face-to-face interaction amongst the members of any given milieu. On the other hand, the internet has been proved to facilitate the virtual establishment of strong social and personal bonds in many different contexts<sup>130</sup>, thus there is no reason to believe that this should not hold true with respect to violent political extremists.<sup>131</sup> Conway aims at proving that the concept of radical milieu should be expanded to the virtual sphere, “by showing that many of the basic characteristics of traditional radical milieus are also apparent in their online counterparts, while acknowledging the latter’s own unique characteristics and complicating factors”<sup>132</sup>. One can then understand the government’s fear of the potential of the internet to act as a vehicle for violent radicalization, due to the alleged effects of extreme political violence like al-Zarqawi’s, combined with the advantages of the cyber world (e.g., a potentially vast audience, geographical reach, and multimedia capabilities).

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<sup>127</sup> Stefan Malthaner, ‘The Radical Milieu: Conceptualizing the Supportive Social Environment of Terrorist Groups’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, no. 37 (2014): 979, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2014.962441>.

<sup>128</sup> Jytte Klausen, ‘Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 1 (2014): 2.

<sup>129</sup> Maura Conway, ‘From Al-Zarqawi to Al-Awlaki: The Emergence and Development of an Online Radical Milieu’, *CTX: Combating Terrorism Exchange* 2, no. 4 (2012): 1.

<sup>130</sup> Nancy K. Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, Polity Press, 2015.

<sup>131</sup> Conway, ‘From Al-Zarqawi to Al-Awlaki: The Emergence and Development of an Online Radical Milieu’, 1.

<sup>132</sup> Conway, 1.

However, there are many academic researchers who provide counterpoints to the argument that the Internet has a prominent role in violent radicalization. More precisely, some researchers have found on an empirical level that although the Internet can create more opportunities to become radicalized<sup>133</sup> and act as an echo chamber – especially in the case of jihadi radicalization – on the other hand, it does not allow radicalization without physical contact, nor does it increase opportunities for self-radicalization.<sup>134</sup> Conway takes the lead in arguing the opposite, or at least in reviewing this claim. Her view is that the violent extremist cyber-world is a progressively more important staging post for “real world” violence.<sup>135</sup> Europol has even described the internet as “a crucial facilitator for both terrorists and extremists”.<sup>136</sup> Conway concludes her argument by saying that “one does not radicalize oneself in cyberspace, any more than one becomes radicalized by oneself in the ‘real world’”. The concept of the violent online radical milieu emphasizes that although so-called “lone wolf” terrorists— like Anders Breivik—may act alone, oftentimes they are at least partially the product of some radical online milieu”.<sup>137</sup> This is key for the orientation of this research, as the Incels are a pure product of the Internet and, although Incels themselves are the product of their radical milieu, or at least claim their belonging to the Incel movement before and/or after their actions, these have always been considered as the acts of lone individuals. The interest of categorizing the main topics of conversation of an Incel forum, understood as a radicalizing milieu, is to better understand a new phenomenon: a radical group that exists exclusively online.

### **3.6. Conclusion**

This chapter enabled me to contextualize the Incel community in the online context in which it finds itself. When beginning this research, I decided to approach the community through its “online” characteristic because the Internet seemed to be, if not a game-changer, at least as important as ‘real life’, through the impact it had on people’s interactions, perceptions and sometimes even attitudes. First, the Internet enabled the “many to many” connection of people with each other, at a low cost and without physical barriers. As a result, communication and information sharing became easier, more effective and targeted, and communities started forming online. Second, this new type of interaction enabled by the Internet had an impact on

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<sup>133</sup> Daniel Koehler, ‘The Radical Online: Individual Radicalization Processes and the Role of the Internet’, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 116.

<sup>134</sup> von Behr et al., ‘Radicalisation in the Digital Era The Use of the Internet in 15 Cases of Terrorism and Extremism’.

<sup>135</sup> Conway, ‘From Al-Zarqawi to Al-Awlaki: The Emergence and Development of an Online Radical Milieu’, 6.

<sup>136</sup> Europol, ‘TE-SAT 2011 - EU Terrorism Situation And Trend Report’, n.d., 7.

<sup>137</sup> Conway, ‘From Al-Zarqawi to Al-Awlaki: The Emergence and Development of an Online Radical Milieu’, 8.

users' perceptions. Indeed, the Internet enabled users to feel close to events physically removed from them. Because of this, the Internet and social media became catalysts for social expression and organization. News articles and stories online, on social media and shared in communities have an important role because they contribute to creating a pseudoenvironment, an imagined version of the world one user feels is accurate. These pseudoenvironments can become partisan, especially in the case of radical communities, where members, through self-journalism, share news with the rest of the group on the basis that it fits with their philosophy. Through self-journalism, the available version of world news becomes crooked, biased, and this has the potential to create a false consensus effect, which leads to overestimating public support for one's own views, and can encourage members of the community to become even more vocal, to publicize their cause and attract new members. This, in turn, can affect civic engagement and shape or re-shape political attitudes.

The final section of this chapter tackled the impact of the Internet on radical milieus. Here, there is a clear disagreement between some researchers who argue that there is a need for face-to-face interaction in order for the Internet to have an actual impact on the growth of radical acts (as opposed to simply creating more opportunities for people to become more radical), and others who believe that research must go one step further in acknowledging that one can become radicalized online, just as one can become radicalized in real life, without any face-to-face interaction with already radicalized members. This section is of particular interest for this research as in the case of Incels, three deadly attacks have been committed by men identifying with the Incels philosophy, when we know that the community only exists online, and that there are so far no proof or lead backing up the idea that any of the Incels assailant had met with another Incel member prior to their attacks.

Finally, I briefly reviewed what a community entails and how an "us" versus "them" dynamic can be created through the use of language and certain words. This is important, as if any person who is unfamiliar with the Incels were to glance at Incel posts online, it is likely that he or she would not understand half of their contents.

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## **4. Chapter IV: A methodological approach to Incels**

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### **4.1.Introduction**

This study aims to investigate the narratives of the Incels. As stated in above-chapters, it rapidly appeared to me during the research process that quite a lot of things had been written and said about Incels over the last years, mostly in newspapers, on YouTube and on various blogs. These sources enabled me to better grasp the fundamental principles and narrative of the Incel movement, but helped me realize that academic sources were crucially lacking in this area of research. This chapter aims at unveiling how I conducted this research on Incels and why methodology as well as the gathering of primary data were crucial. Methodology has been key in conducting this research, as Incels had not yet been empirically researched by academics. For this reason, I wanted to use a methodology as strict and replicable as possible in order to provide other researchers with a solid starting point when potentially further investigating this phenomenon in the future. To that end, I have used the technique of digital ethnography combined with a content analysis applied to my data collection, in order to approach the narratives of the Incels in their online environment. A case study is useful when observing an under-researched phenomenon – indeed, there is little to no academic literature on the Incels as a movement, as seen above. Therefore, primary sources are desperately needed in order to be able to produce relevant research that rigorously investigates the topic at hand.

In this chapter, I will explain in detail what a digital ethnographic research consists of and how I proceeded with my content analysis, as well as give a detailed account of my codebook. Lastly, I will address the inevitable limitations of this type of research and explain why, although they are certainly noteworthy, these limitations do not take away the validity of this research.

### **4.2.Research Focus**

In this study, I first focused on a singular research case: the online environment of Incels. To do this, I selected a location to study them: the forum Incels.me. I had to select a single forum because of time and money constraints – I did not have access to a research team, and was of course unable to analyze every source available by myself. That being said, before delving any further into this chapter, some elements of background information on the selected forum must be mentioned.

The forum is an open-source platform, functioning on the basis of registered members. A non-registered user is able to see some threads but not all of them, and they cannot access the links and pictures provided by the poster of the thread. Only members may post and comment on other posts. As of March 2018, I became a member of the community.

Members cannot send each other private messages on the forum, and therefore they must post a new ‘thread’ (what is also called a ‘post’) to interact with other members. Each thread can be ‘upvoted’ or ‘down-voted’, depending on its popularity and perceived relevancy. On the homepage, there are three posting sections available: “Inceldom Discussion” (containing more than 1 200 000 posts), where members are encouraged to discuss Blackpill related topics and experiences, “Offtopic” (containing more than 300 000 posts), where members are encouraged to talk about anything that is not related to the Blackpill and “Meta & Feedback” (containing more than 12 000 posts), where moderators of the forum can pin threads concerning the theorization of the Blackpill, introductory posts to the Incel world and general news concerning the functioning of the forum. Moderators can temporarily or permanently ban members who do not respect their policies concerning content (e.g.: you can only be an Incel if you never had a girlfriend before) or contravening to the Blackpill philosophy (e.g.: a user defending women or advocating for new ways of approaching them).

On the forum, there are sections where it is possible to view the most active users – those who have posted the most – and those who are the new, as well as all the other users. All users have pseudonyms and avatars. The posting rate on the forum is relatively high, as there is a new post approximatively every 3 minutes. Posts are showed in timely order on the front page – not in order of popularity. The lifespan of a post, if not pinned by moderators, is thus quite short.

The following assumptions were applied to this study. I assumed that:

- The researched top 50 members are not in the top because they are “trolls”. A “troll”, in the context of the Internet, has been defined as a person “whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflicts for the purpose of their own amusement”;<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Phillips Whitney, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*, MIT Press, 2016, 16.

- The researched top 50 members are not in the top because of “shitposting” (slang for an online comment or blog post deemed deliberately offensive and without value).<sup>139</sup>
- The researched top 50 members posting and commenting identify as incels;
- The researched top 50 members posting and commenting are not researchers or journalists;
- The researched top 50 members, spending most of their time there, can teach us the most about the Incel community. This is why I focused on the 50 most active users;
- It is impossible to conduct interviews with Incels, and passive observation through digital ethnography was the best technique available.

#### **4.3.Digital ethnography**

During this research, I used the technique of digital ethnography. This technique is particularly useful when researching an online forum, and it was the best and quickest way to answer my research question. This section will present what this technique consists of.

If every generation has its own experience of some rapid and monumental social and technological change, ours is definitely the advent of the Internet.<sup>140</sup> As Gabriella Coleman puts it, it represents a massive change because “whenever and wherever individuals and groups deploy and communicate with digital media, there will be circulations, reimaginings, magnifications, deletions, translations, revisionings, and remakings of a range of cultural representations, experiences, and identities, but the precise ways in which these dynamics unfold can never be fully anticipated in advance.”<sup>141</sup> One only has to not have to look at online culture very closely to find evidence of what Coleman describes. Facebook<sup>142</sup>, Reddit<sup>143</sup>, 4chan<sup>144</sup> and a range of other online platforms have already been analyzed in attempts to make sense of this remaking of identities. The Journal of Computer-Mediated Communications, an academic journal, was created to analyze the question of online communication. This is to say that the discipline is of growing importance and that many dimensions of computer-mediated

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<sup>139</sup> Salter, ‘From Geek Masculinity to Gamergate: The Technological Rationality of Online Abuse’, 247.

<sup>140</sup> Nancy K. Baym and Annette N. Markham, ‘Making Smart Choices on Shifting Ground’, in *Internet Inquiry - Conversations about Method* (Sage, 2009), vii.

<sup>141</sup> E. Gabriella Coleman, ‘Ethnographic Approaches to Digital Media’, *Annu. Rev. Anthropol.*, no. 39 (2010): 488, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.012809.104945>.

<sup>142</sup> Nicole B. Ellison, Cliff Lampe, and Charles Steinfield, ‘The Benefits of Facebook “Friends:” Social Capital and College Students’ Use of Online Social Network Sites’, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, no. 12 (23 August 2007): 1143–68.

<sup>143</sup> Massanari, *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play - Learning from Reddit*.

<sup>144</sup> Michael S. Bernstein et al., ‘4chan and /b/: An Analysis on Anonymity and Ephemerality in a Large Online Community’ (Fifth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media, Barcelona, 2011), 5–57.

communication are still yet to be discovered. Profound questions remain concerning the role and place of the Internet in society, and how researchers can make sense of it. To understand communities enabled by the web and other new media, some academics have used the ethnographic approach.

Ethnography in general is a difficult concept to define and anthropologists themselves do not have a unified conception of ethnography.<sup>145</sup> I will understand ‘ethnography’ as Clifford and Marcus defined it, as the “attempts to unpack the culture of a space and explore it from the perspective of an insider”.<sup>146</sup> Digital ethnography, just like regular ethnography, is more of a methodological orientation than a single method. This technique can include several methods for analyzing communities, including, for instance, passive observation, text analysis and historical search<sup>147</sup>, all while taking detailed field notes.<sup>148</sup> With digital ethnography, these methods are applied online, as an attempt to understand how individuals and communities shape and are reshaped by these spaces.<sup>149</sup>

Annette Markham highlights how important it is for researchers to acknowledge their local subjectivities and encourage them to reflect on the ways in which their assumptions are colored by before-hand assumptions or prejudices.<sup>150</sup> Concerning my experience with Incels, I stumbled upon the first reference to “Incels” on Reddit, in early 2016, and then proceeded to lurk<sup>151</sup> in their community (/r/Incels) and other related communities (/r/TRP, /r/MensRights and /r/Seduction). I developed something of a fascination for these groups and their narrative, which were so far away from what I was accustomed to hearing in my group of friends, in my family or at university. After /r/Incels was banned from Reddit in November 2017, I followed them to their new home: Incels.me. Since then, I occasionally lurk, to see what is being said there, who are the top posters, and what is the general spirit of the community.

Ethnographers have long discussed the “loss of distance”<sup>152</sup> that happens when engaging with a community. My experience with Incels was no different. At times I was led to thoroughly examine their claims and experiences. Indeed, if a group can feel so strongly about a topic (in this case, about women and sex) it cannot be the full product of their fantasy, there must be a

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<sup>145</sup> Dell H. Hymes, ‘What Is Ethnography?’, 1977.

<sup>146</sup> Massanari, *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play - Learning from Reddit*, 75:11.

<sup>147</sup> Margaret Diane LeCompte and Jean J. Schensul, *Essential Ethnographic Methods - A Mixed Methods Approach*, AltaMira Press, 2013.

<sup>148</sup> Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (The University of Chicago Press Books, 2011).

<sup>149</sup> Massanari, *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play - Learning from Reddit*, 75:11.

<sup>150</sup> Baym and Markham, ‘Making Smart Choices on Shifting Ground’.

<sup>151</sup> Blair Nonnecke and Jenny Preece, ‘Why Lurkers Lurk’ (Americas Conference on Information Systems (AMCIS), Association for Information Systems AIS Electronic Library (AISeL), 2001), 294.

<sup>152</sup> Massanari, *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play - Learning from Reddit*.



part of truth. And of course, there is. But what is interesting is to re-contextualize it and to understand within the framework of radicalism. Requiring mandatory sex from women is an extremist request, no matter what the justification behind it may be. Hating women because they are the withholders of sex is a dangerous and biased claim.

Engaging in an ethnographic study is difficult – cultures are messy and intertwined with one another. It is rarely something that can be summed up on the page. Ambiguity and qualifying statements seem to be the norm in many ethnographic studies, and this one was no different.<sup>153</sup> This is potentially one story among many that could be told about this space. It is, however, a study grounded in serious and strict methodology of data analysis, and is one I feel confident will at least serve as a starting point for creating a beginning of understanding of Incels.me and its members.

In the course of my research, I remained a strictly passive observer and never interacted with the users. Indeed, my goal was to apply digital ethnography, based on passive participant observation.<sup>154</sup> Furthermore, “in accordance with the project’s IRB, as observers and not participants, I will not engage in any attempt of conversation”.<sup>155</sup> This method allows me to become part of the field I aim to observe, which in turn allows me to derive meaningful conclusions and interpretations. Like many sociologists, I approached this forum like a neutral and unknown territory, the rules of which were unfamiliar to me. My ultimate goal was to gain more knowledge about the phenomenon, and to understand the narratives and primary concerns that govern this space.

Considering what has been said about this method, this thesis is also relevant as it contributes to testing out this – relatively new – technique of doing digital ethnographical research in a radical online environment.

#### **4.4. Content Analysis**

This exploratory research is based on primary sources from the online forum Incels.me.<sup>156</sup> For this research, I opted for the technique of content analysis to determine the top 12 topics discussed on the forum, and therefore, to investigate the narratives of the Incels. I chose content analysis because, as stated above, since I saw how poor the academic sources were in this area

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<sup>153</sup> Massanari, 75:13.

<sup>154</sup> Mia Bloom, Hicham Tiflati, and John Horgan, ‘Navigating ISIS’s Preferred Platform: Telegram’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2017, 5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2017.1339695>.

<sup>155</sup> Bloom, Tiflati, and Horgan, 5.

<sup>156</sup> Robert A. Stebbins, ‘What Is Exploration’, in *Exploratory Research in Social Sciences*, SAGE Publications, Researchmethods, 2011, 2.

of study, I wanted to use methodology which was as strict and replicable as possible, in order to provide other researchers with a solid starting point when potentially investigating this phenomenon further in the future.

I believe content analysis was the best technique available for this research, because it has been defined in the past as “a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding”.<sup>157</sup> And, as stated already, the purpose of this thesis is to make inferences by “objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages”.<sup>158</sup> Since few *academic* sources have tackled the Incel phenomenon, this thesis’s main goal was to bring empirical and replicable knowledge to this area of study. Content analysis is a tool that allows researchers to “shift through large volumes of data with relative ease in a systematic fashion”.<sup>159</sup> Furthermore, it is a necessary and useful tool that enables researchers to “discover and describe the focus of individual, group, institutional, or social attention”.<sup>160</sup> And indeed, in this case, the goal is to discover and describe the Incel group and their focus.

This research employed a qualitative content analysis. Qualitative because I did not just count the amount of times a word or expression appeared in the posts – this would have been unproductive in this case – but I had to read, understand and classify the posts in the categories I thought were the most appropriate. The collected posts – the data – were analyzed according to both deductive and inductive qualitative content analysis, in a mixed approach, as described in Andersson et al.’s analysis.<sup>161</sup> First, I conducted the data analysis deductively. I established my categories deductively first, not from a theory found in other academic articles but from what I knew from the movement, what I expected to find there and what some journalists said I would find there. Then, seeing that these categories established deductively were not enough to explain what I found on the forum, I established more categories inductively, from what I directly witnessed in my data collection. Elo and Kyngäs stated that one of the major benefits of content analysis is its flexibility in terms of research design – and that the use of deductive

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<sup>157</sup> Steve Stemler, ‘An Overview of Content Analysis’, *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation* 7, no. 17 (2001): 1.

<sup>158</sup> Stemler, 1.

<sup>159</sup> Ewa K Andersson et al., ‘Registered Nurses Views of Caring in Coronary Care – A Deductive And Inductive Content Analysis’, *Journal of Clinical Nursing* 24 (n.d.): 3483, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jocn.12975>.

<sup>160</sup> Robert Philip Weber, *Basic Content Analysis* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1990), 15.

<sup>161</sup> Andersson et al., ‘Registered Nurses Views of Caring in Coronary Care – A Deductive And Inductive Content Analysis’, 3483.

and/or inductive methods should be determined by the purpose of the research, which in this case is twofold.<sup>162</sup> This is one more justification for the use of content analysis in this study.

To sum up, I created categories from the data collection that are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive. I created the categories in mixed approach inductively and deductively. Deductively, from what had already struck my attention on the forum in the past – because I had to start somewhere. And then inductively when my category “other” became disproportionately large, and I realized there was a need to create new categories based on the observed data.

I retained two coding rules in my analysis:

- 1) Only one category will be coded by unit of analysis (a post);
- 2) If a post seems to display elements pertaining to two or more categories, I will analyze the extent to which each category is present in said post, and attribute it to the predominant category. If the proportions remain unclear, the post will be discarded.

#### **4.5.Procedure**

I analyzed the last 20 posts from the 50 most active users on the forum Incels.me. The forum holds a list of its most active users, most recent users and administrators. I believe it is relevant to look at the 50 most active users, because these members are aware of the forum’s discourse, abide by it and often reflect on different aspects of their “Inceldom”.<sup>163</sup> Furthermore, the data is directly relevant in answering my research question because it is by looking at the everyday conversations between Incels that I will be able to classify their top 12 topics of conversation. My data comes from the online forum Incels.me, which, to my knowledge, is the biggest online Incels forum. The “universe” of this study consists of their posts and comments, but I only analyzed and categorized their posts in my content analysis. A post is a discussion started by a user of the forum. It is the means a user of the forum has to communicate with the rest of the forum, since private messages are impossible. A post is thus a key aspect to understanding the kinds of message they wish to share.

I gathered the posts during the period of September to October 2018. The final total amount of posts is 971, because some members were very active in commenting on other people’s posts but did not post a lot themselves, and I only considered the posts emanating directly from the members studied.

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<sup>162</sup> Satu Elo and Helvi Kingäs, ‘The Qualitative Content Analysis Process’, *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 62, no. 1 (n.d.): 108, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2007.04569.x>.

<sup>163</sup> In Incel’s vocabulary, “inceldom” refers to the state of being an Incel, see Glossary.

My first goal was to determine the top 12 topics of conversations amongst this forum's most active users. I created categories while gathering the posts' data to classify them as precisely as possible, in order to have the most accurate image of their environment and the narratives within it, as explained in the section above. As I realized that non-active profiles (called lurkers in the literature<sup>164</sup>) – such as mine – could get banned from the forum, I thoroughly documented these 971 posts. I copied all the links of the posts in a Word document and made screenshots of threads to make sure I would have a tangible proof of all these discussions, should I lose access to them in the future.

#### **4.1.Categories**

My categories so far (not in order of importance) are as presented below (full codebook in the annex).

- Theorizing the Blackpill: Posts relating to some scientific or pseudo-scientific explanation backing up the Incels' philosophy regarding either women (why women should be considered as inferior to men – or hated), themselves (why Incels have no hope in life, related to their personal situation) or life in general (why being an Incel impacts them in their everyday life);
- Display of animosity towards women: Posts conveying some form of animosity towards women, with no expressly 'scientific' explanation to back it up;
- Display of animosity towards non-Incel men: Posts conveying some form of animosity or mockery towards men, with no expressly 'scientific' explication to back it up;
- Suicide related: Posts displaying the will of an Incel user to end his life or reflecting on another user that committed (or may be about to commit) suicide;
- Others: Other posts that do not fit into the above-mentioned categories;
- Sharing their experience as Incels: These posts aim to demonstrate that as Incels, they experience a world different to the world of "normies". These posts link the

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<sup>164</sup> Nonnecke and Preece, 'Why Lurkers Lurk', 294.

personal experience of the user to the Incel ideology. This category is different to the “Blackpill” because whereas the Blackpill is theoretical and has an explicative meaning, backed-up with pseudo-scientific claims, this category is merely an exemplification of the Blackpill in their day-to-day lives. E.g.: “Women are afraid when I show my head out of the door, it’s truly over”;

- Intergroup war with The Red Pill and r/Inceltears: The subreddit /r/Inceltears is dedicated to mocking and scrutinizing Incel activity. Therefore, the two groups often post mocking or diminishing posts concerning the other and what they said. The Red Pill is a group linked to Men’s Right Activists that sometimes mock Incels because they do not work out or make any efforts towards changing their situation. This leads to the same conflicts as with /r/IncelTears;
- Personal sharing: This category gathers the “social media” type of posts found on the forum. These posts have no other goal than to share what happened in their day, advice or even random thoughts, which have nothing to do with the other categories. This category can be compared to the “status” function on Facebook or Twitter. It does not require a response but often gets many;
- Posts related to the functioning of the forum: Here are posts related to the technical functioning of the forum. It can address the banning of certain users, questions regarding the slowness of the forum, questions regarding new possible additions to the categories of the forum...;
- Posts fostering interaction with other users: Since it is not possible to send “private messages” on the forum, interacting with other users has to be done through a post;
- Need to leave the community: Posts displaying the desire of users to leave the Incel community, for various reasons;
- Lifefuel: Posts addressing the desire of a user to, while remaining an Incel, attempt to approach girls or to improve their situation via education, sport... This is rare as the Blackpill as a philosophy forbids any kind of hope concerning their personal situation, as long as they belong to the Incel group.

#### **4.2.Delimitations**

Every research has its flaws and limitations, and this one is no exception. One limitation is that this research takes place in the online world and therefore, the internal validity of the research may be at risk. Indeed, on online forums, it is easy for the most “extreme” individuals to speak up and push aside other less extreme members. The voices that are heard may not be a good representation of the entire movement. In addition to this, it is relatively easy to express radical opinions that may not reflect one’s own “real-life” views. That being said, this research is grounded in online phenomena and focusses on the role of the Internet in radical communities, so it is necessary to accept this limitation.

Secondly, the findings of this research will be idiosyncratic and will not be applicable or generalized to other groups, as the research only takes place on one forum. I am aware of this limit and accept it, and I believe more accurate findings will come out of it than if I had attempted to make my results universal.

From the beginning, I had to select a single space to approach the online environment of Incels, and I was also aware of time and money constraints. Indeed, I cannot research all Incel forums, and I cannot set up a team of researchers to do so with me. Furthermore, I could only study Incels.me for a limited amount of time, in a particular timeframe that may be subject to change. I gathered the posts in a short timeframe (between September and October 2018) and this period may also reflect a particular atmosphere on the forum that may not be exactly the same as before or after it. Again, I believe this limitation is acceptable since it is based on solid data and will therefore represent a good basis for future research on this topic.

Finally, another delimitation is that Incels are aware that they have become a topic of interest for non-incel people. Indeed, the amount of “views” a post has (how many times people have clicked on it) is visible on the forum – and the amount of clicks that posts receive does not match the amount of comments or members there actually are on the forum. As the increase in views occurred after major attacks committed by Incels, they now believe that the forum is being watched by state authorities, journalists, and other persons monitoring the content of the forum. For this reason, the policy of content concerning posts on the forum has become stricter, and members are not allowed to post threads openly glorifying violence against women or calling for violent action without being permanently or temporarily banned.

I accept these delimitations and I believe that this research nevertheless brings elements of interest to the study of this particular movement.

### **4.3.Conclusion**

To conclude, I have laid out in this chapter the arguments explaining why the use of a strict and replicable methodology is crucial to this research. Indeed, through digital ethnographic research and the use of content analysis, the study's goal was to provide a strong academic basis for potential future research. Since this research is exploratory, its main resource from which to draw inferences and patterns is the data analysis.

In this chapter, I have presented my codebook, created both inductively and deductively – according to the research's needs – which allowed me to compute and categorize the Incels' main topics of conversations. To that end, I first needed to gather the data, which I did through digital ethnography. Then, I needed to classify this data into different categories, following strict rules as to how to classify them, which I did through content analysis with the discipline this method entails. Both these methods were presented in this chapter.

Finally, I covered the potential and unavoidable limitations this study might have. But with all the evidence presented here concerning the need for specific methods, I believe that these limitations are largely overcome by the benefits this study brings. After all, one has to start somewhere and cannot cover everything at once. Furthermore, covering everything at once is not a desirable goal. Indeed, by laying only the first stones of this field, I am allowing other researchers to engage with my results and bring their own academic creativity to complete it.

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## 5. Chapter V: An immersion on Incels.me

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### **5.1.Introduction**

In this chapter, I will present the results of my content analysis. Once I have analyzed the posts, I will describe the 12 most discussed topics on Incels.me, as well as outline the proportions in which they appear throughout the posts. The aim of this chapter is the following: once their topics of conversations and the space occupied by each of them on the forum are reviewed, the reader will be capable of understanding the Incels' narratives, what they talk about and what their world entails. This approach is key to understanding the Incels' narratives. This chapter aims at uncovering some of the underlying core characteristics of the forum Incels.me during a particular time period and among its most active members.

The data gathered during this research forms a basis from which Incels can be studied in a more rigorous and academic way. This chapter's purpose is to lay out what has been found in the analysis, and to that end, screenshots illustrating the findings will be provided (in the annex).

### **5.2.Background characteristics of Incels**

During the process of data collection, in addition to classifying the posts in the 12 above-mentioned categories, I also noted some elements of information related to the subjects of this study, in order to gather more knowledge about their backgrounds, ages and motivations. Although this was not the main goal of this study – as it had proven overly difficult for me to gather this type of data from the users of the forum with any certainty – I believe it is useful information that might help contextualize the analysis of their posts, which is the main goal of this study.

At the end of October 2018, the moderators of the forum created a Telegram group<sup>165</sup>, most likely in order to work around the constraints of the forum – indeed, they could no longer express themselves freely without the increasing gaze of non Incel users. Therefore, it is likely that users now post considerably less private information on the forum itself, preferring to do so in a perceived “safer” environment such as Telegram, which is an encrypted means of communication.

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<sup>165</sup> See Fig. 3 in Annex.



Nevertheless, pieces of private information can occasionally still be found on the forum. I believe it is worthwhile to lay out what I discovered about some of the users' places of residence here – if only to help others in future research on this topic.

Out of 50 users, I managed to establish the current country of residence of 28 of them. This data was established by browsing each user's profile (fig. 4).

Fig. 4 – Table displaying the country of residence of 28 Incel users.

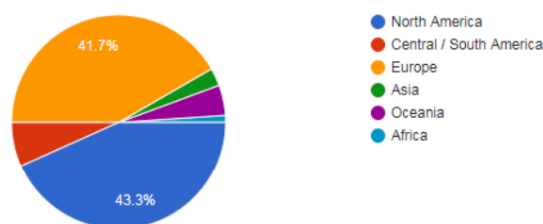
<i><b>Country</b></i>	<i><b>User</b></i>
<b><i>UK (6)</i></b>	Ritalincel, _Incelinside, Chincel, SolitarianWalker, VP, Gremlincel (Ireland)
<b><i>USA (11)</i></b>	The Ultimate (Michigan), Raiden, Indari, Robtical, NEETandTidy, Crustaciouse (NYC), Mylifeistrash, Sadist, Grotesque, FaceandLMS, RedPillRobert
<b><i>Australia (2)</i></b>	PM, MayorOfKekville
<b><i>France (3)</i></b>	FMC, Fontaine, HenryDeMontherlant
<b><i>Russia (1)</i></b>	Weed
<b><i>The Netherlands (1)</i></b>	EthnicelNL
<b><i>Germany (1)</i></b>	Mainländer (often travels to Brazil)
<b><i>Brazil (1)</i></b>	KilluminoidBR
<b><i>Canada (1)</i></b>	Tehgymcel (egyptian living in Toronto)
<b><i>Eastern Europe (1)</i></b>	VLÖ

This data, although it was not gathered with the most rigorous methodology, is backed up by data released by Incels themselves. Indeed, to celebrate the one-year anniversary of the forum in November 2018, the moderators posted a number of graphs detailing the demographics of the forum, as well as various facts about its members.<sup>166</sup> According to them, 400 members participated in their survey.

<sup>166</sup> <https://incels.is/threads/one-year-anniversary-of-the-site-survey-results.87435/>

*Fig. 5 – origins of Incels users*

What continent are you from?



The group studied in this research can be described as international, as shown in the table and graph above. I will therefore make the assumption that they have never met in person or planned to do so (so far). It is interesting to note that Incels themselves seem to reflect on the way in which their supposed common situation of “inceldom” (i.e. their shared inability to attract women and the consequences this condition entails) has brought them together<sup>167</sup>. Moreover, the state of being unable to ever attract a woman is a recurring topic of conversation on the forum.

The majority of users seem to be between 16 and 25 years old, although a minority identifies as “oldcels”, a term which usually refers to Incels over 25 years old. Of the 50 users studied, only one claims to be in his 40s, while one other user claims to be 36 years old.

In the annex, I have included a poll made by a user<sup>168</sup>, asking other users to give out their age and level of baldness. Although this research is not interested in the Incels’ balding phenomenon, it is worthy to note that out of the 43 respondents to this poll, 14 are below the age of 20, 26 are between 20 and 30 years old and only 3 are older than 30.

Again, although it may seem like this data was not gathered following the most rigorous methods (for instance, the samples from which it stems are relatively small), it is once again backed up by graphs made by Incels themselves. Indeed, as part of the one-year anniversary survey, the following graph was released<sup>169</sup>:

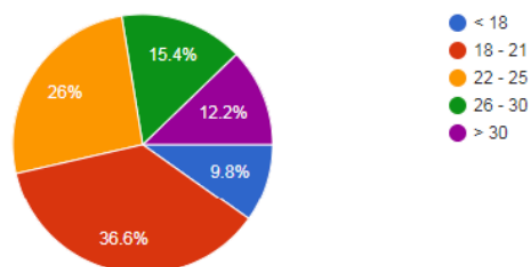
<sup>167</sup> For illustration of this, see fig. 6, 7 and 8 in Annex.

<sup>168</sup> See fig. 9 in Annex.

<sup>169</sup> <https://incels.is/threads/one-year-anniversary-of-the-site-survey-results.87435/>

Fig. 10 – Age of Incels users

How old are you?



As already mentioned when describing the delimitations of this research in Chapter IV, all of this data on the users is provided by the subjects themselves. On the other hand, it has been previously stated that these users are wary of sharing information on the forum, due to their awareness of the fact that their audience no longer consists of Incels only. Thus, it appears legitimate to ask whether this data should be taken into consideration at all.

The stance behind this paper is that the data remains interesting and valid (to a certain extent). Indeed, an interest in what the subjects have to say about themselves is crucial in a digital ethnographic process. Nevertheless, it is important for the reader to keep in mind the provenance of this data, and its likely limitations.

Incels differentiate themselves from one another according to physical characteristics, as seen often in their pseudonyms. As such, one can assume that the user “Blackcel” is identifying as an Incel because he is black. Many report to be “ethnicels”, like the user “EthnicelNL”, which suggests that the user believes himself to be an Incel because of his “ethnic” profile. The issue of race is often tackled on the forum, as it is a common belief amidst Incels that being white is a considerable advantage when it comes to relationships. There are numerous Blackpill threads – pinned posts available for anyone interested in learning more about the Blackpill – concerning the issue of race and its impact on relationships<sup>170</sup>.

Almost every Incel – besides Volcels<sup>171</sup> – owes his condition to one or several physical characteristics that set him apart from the Chads, the Tyrones<sup>172</sup> and the Normies. While some speak of their “manletism”<sup>173</sup> (i.e. their short height, which supposedly condemns them to a life

<sup>170</sup> See fig. 11 in Annex.

<sup>171</sup> ‘Volcels’, often considered amidst the community as “fakecels” are voluntary celibates.

<sup>172</sup> A “Tyroner” is a Chad of color, usually black.

<sup>173</sup> See fig. 12 in Annex.

of incelism), others mention their weak jawline, the size of their philtrum, the large space between their eyes, or anything else that might impact their ability to attract women.

It is a common activity among Incels to overanalyze and obsess over their perceived flawed physical characteristics in order to understand and rationalize their involuntary celibacy<sup>174</sup>.

### **5.3. What do they post about?**

In order to analyze content posted by the 50 most active users, I chose to select their 20 most recent posts, posted between September and October 2018. As not all accounts had 20 posts on them, the selection method yielded a total of 971 posts. The majority of these were made between July and October 2018, and therefore reflect a particular time period – after the reactions triggered by the Minassian attack had lost their intensity, and before the Tallahassee attack of November 2018. In addition, all the data analyzed was gathered before the creation of the Telegram group.

Interestingly, when comparing the graphs encompassing the data of 10, 20, 30, 40 or 50 users with each other, I observed that the pattern in the repartition of the categories changes only marginally when considering fewer or more users in the graphs. When comparing specifically the repartition of the categories between the 10 first users<sup>175</sup> and all 50 users<sup>176</sup>, we can see that each category more or less occupies the same amount of space in each graph. Thus a pattern can be seen in the frequency at which each topic of discussion is present, whether we are looking at 10 or 50 users. This pattern repeats itself in the graphs encompassing 20, 30 and 40 users. I can therefore assume that there are organic similarities in the proportion in which topics of discussion are discussed on the forum.

The final repartition of the categories is as follows:

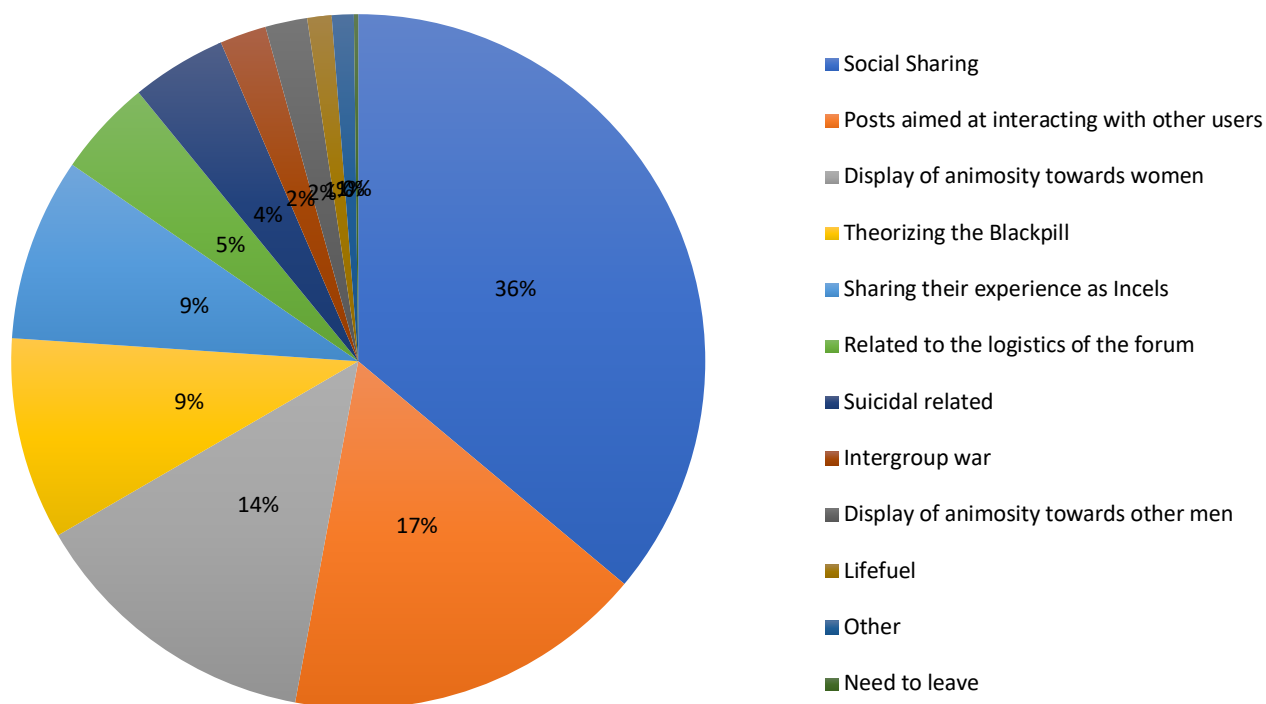
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<sup>174</sup> See fig. 13 in Annex.

<sup>175</sup> See fig. 14 in Annex.

<sup>176</sup> See fig. 15 in Annex.

## Final repartition



- 1) Category 801 – **Personal sharing**: 350 posts; (36,04%)
- 2) Category 1001 – **Posts fostering interaction with other users**: 163 posts; (16,78%)
- 3) Category 201 – **Display of animosity towards women**: 133 posts; (13,69%)
- 4) Category 101 – **Theorizing the Blackpill**: 92 posts; (9,4%)
- 5) Category 601 – **Sharing their experience as Incels**: 83 posts; (8,54%)
- 6) Category 901 – **Related to the logistics of the forum**: 44 posts; (4,53%)
- 7) Category 401 – **Suicide related**: 43 posts; (4,42%)
- 8) Category 701 – **Intergroup war**: 21 posts; (2,16%)
- 9) Category 301 – **Display of animosity towards other men**: 19 posts; (1,95%)
- 10) Category 1201 – **Lifefuel**: 11 posts; (1,13%)
- 11) Category 501 – **Other**: 10 posts; (1,02%)
- 12) Category 1101 – **Need to leave**: 2 posts. (0,2%)

With the aid of the graph shown above, I will now take a closer look at each of the categories. As explained in the methodological chapter (Chapter IV), these categories are the product of a qualitative research in which each post was analyzed according to a strict and rigorous method, following a number of rules emanating from my codebook, before finally being classified. What follows now is an in-depth approach to each of these categories in order to unravel what they encompass and justify how each category was defined in the first place.

### *5.3.1. Personal sharing*

Contrary to expectations, it is the “personal sharing” category that gathered the most posts by far, with 36.04% of all posts analyzed. Initially, when building my categories deductively, I had not considered the “personal sharing” category. After browsing the forum for an extended period of time, I created what were the first obvious categories to me. These categories were “display of animosity towards women”, “display of animosity towards men”, “theorizing the Blackpill” and “suicidal posts”. However, additional categories had to be included, using inductive reasoning, because the existing categories proved insufficient during the classifying process. The “personal sharing” category is one that was created inductively. From the atmosphere I perceived on the forum, I believed at first that most posts would be aimed either at displaying animosity towards women or at theorizing their philosophy – the Blackpill. But more than a third of all analyzed posts proved very similar to what can be found on other, mainstream social media – posts concerning their everyday life, sharing a funny video remix, songs which are of sentimental value to them, personal advice on games, etc.<sup>177</sup>

Interestingly, I found that within the “personal sharing” category, posts could be further divided into two sub-categories: the miscellaneous “personal sharing” posts and the “blackpilled” “personal sharing” posts. Indeed, often enough, these “personal sharing” posts involve a Blackpill twist. In other words, these are posts which initially appear to express a random personal thought, a joke, a video, etc., but contain clear references to the Incel ideology, i.e. the Blackpill and the general narrative of the community. The function of these posts seems to be the demonstration of a clear sign of belonging to the group. Through these, Incel users address common mainstream themes with an added ‘Incel’ touch<sup>178</sup>. Included in the annexes is an example of a running joke within the Incel community: “Take the catpill”, take the birdpill” and “it’s over” are all expressions referring to how the game of love and seduction is rigged

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<sup>177</sup> See fig. 16 & 17 in Annex.

<sup>178</sup> See fig. 18 & 19 in Annex.

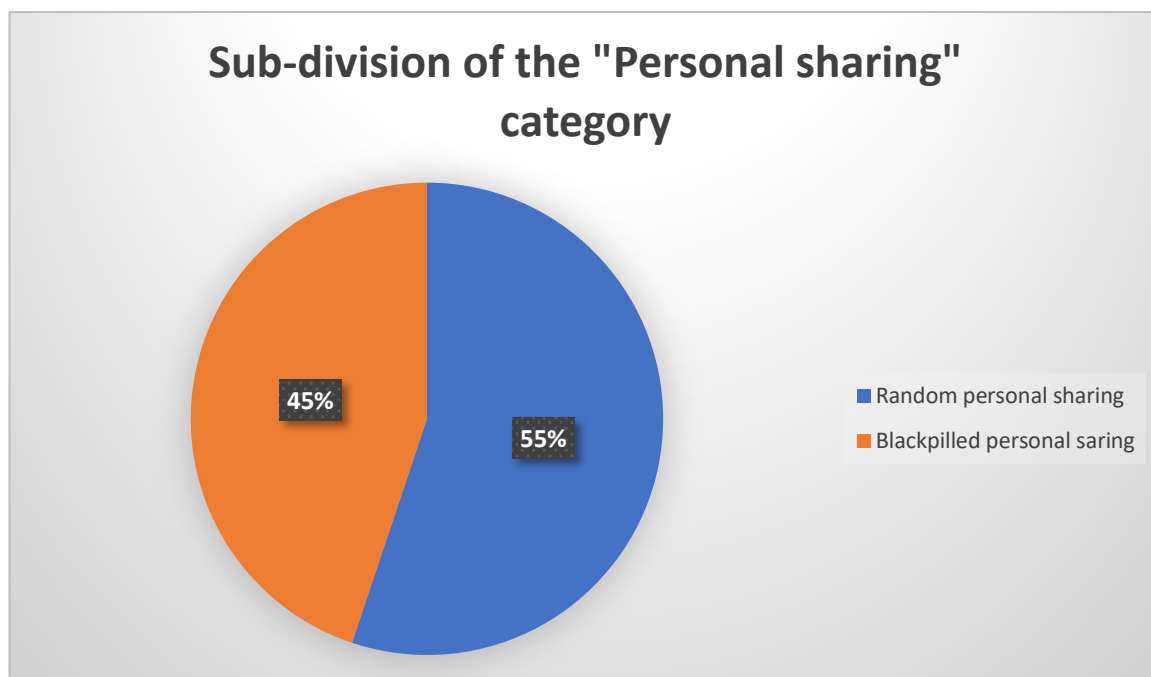
from birth and how everyone around them “moggs”<sup>179</sup> them – even cats, dogs and birds<sup>180</sup>. These posts cannot, however, be counted as “theorizing the Blackpill” or as “display of animosity towards women” as they are quite harmless. And yet, they clearly display that the author of the post identifies as an Incel, and that the post is aimed at fellow Incels. Moreover, there are elements in these posts that cannot be understood by someone who is not acquainted with the community. These posts express their will to share something personal with the community, but they are also connected to the reality of the community and what binds them all together. The phenomenon of symbolic construction of the community as coined by Anthony Cohen<sup>181</sup> can be found here, as well as in every social group through the use of a specific language, expressions and specific ways of approaching topics. It is the construction of a symbolic community that enables the creation of an “us” versus “them” dynamic, through the building of a community which has distinct characteristic features in comparison with other communities. The “Us” side – the Incels – speak of the ‘birdpill’, of going ‘ER’, of ‘Stacies’, etc., while the “them” side – the normies – does not understand these expressions, is “bluepilled” and believes that feminism is a good thing. This “personal sharing” category seems to function as a first point of entry into the Incel community. In this category, one finds posts which are purely social, consist of advice, of sharing songs, of reflections on themselves etc., allowing the users in question to gather comments and to get to know other users. And on the other hand, one finds posts which, to different degrees, reflect that the user posting is part of the Incel community, due to the vocabulary he uses, the topics he addresses, the stance he takes, etc.

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<sup>179</sup> See Glossary.

<sup>180</sup> See fig. 20 in Annex.

<sup>181</sup> Cohen, *Symbolic Construction of Community*.



Out of all the posts in this category, 193 posts fall into the sub-category “random personal sharing” and 157 posts fall into the sub-category “Blackpilled personal sharing”. This is interesting as there is an almost equal amount of “basic” posts about their lives, their days and their thoughts, as there are about Blackpilled topics. Coming back to Cohen’s definition of the symbolic construction of the community, it seems the Blackpill related subdivision might serve as a point of entry and a signal of belonging to the Incel world. Indeed, the forum, besides being a place where men can meet and exchange on various topics, has a clear directive: only Incels and blackpilled men may interact on the forum, as stated in its official rules.<sup>182</sup> These posts, seemingly random but actually related to the Incels, their vocabulary and their narratives, are points of entry into the community, because the language used a) proves that they are part of the group, b) shows a clear distance from the “normies”, or the non-Incels and c) makes the community fun, with memes, funny images and puns.

### 5.3.2. *Posts fostering interaction with other users*

Since it is impossible to send private messages on the forum, users have to publish posts clearly aimed at interacting with other users (e.g. specific questions for them, advice requests, etc.) This category totals 163 posts (16.78%) and is, like the previous one, part of the larger social dimension of the forum. The difference between the two categories is that whereas the “personal sharing” posts can be made of anything the user feels like sharing without expressly asking the community or a specific user anything, the posts fostering interaction with other users must

<sup>182</sup> <https://incels.is/threads/rules-terminology-and-faq.799/>



contain a clear question, be addressed to fellow Incel users of the forum and have garnered responses from other users. Posts in this category usually include either random questions about a user's lifestyle, requests for specific practical advice<sup>183</sup>, or polls<sup>184</sup>, etc. Polls are particularly appreciated by users and are often used. They represent an easy way for users to have a clear vision of trends on the forum, and the differing opinions of users on various topics.

With this category, the importance of the social aspect of the forum becomes truly undeniable. Incel users spend a tremendous amount of time on the forum. Since its creation in November 2017, some users' interactions total up to 17.000, like 'Ritalincel'. Among the 50 users I studied, the user with least amount of posts, 'Blackcel', had still posted more than 3000 messages in a period of less than a year.

### 5.3.3. *Display of animosity towards women*

This category gathered 133 posts, or 13.69% of all the posts analyzed. In this category, I only retained the posts which were explicitly and exclusively discriminating, insulting or objectifying towards women. These posts generally consist of some kind of anti-woman propaganda, and the goal is usually to undermine women's credibility as humans by exposing their "true nature"<sup>185</sup> (according to Incels). In this category, women are often referred to by degrading terms such as "femoids", "fesnails", "foids", "landwhales" or "roasties"<sup>186</sup>.

In the annexes, it appears clearly that the forum and its users have a specific narrative concerning women. There are different personality traits which seem to be automatically attributed to women. After rigorous analysis of the posts in this category, I found that the personality traits attributed to women were the following: hypocrite (2 out of 133 – 1.5%), liar (7 out of 133 – 5.26%), cruel (12 out of 133 – 9%), shallow (11 out of 133 – 8.27%), stupid (13 out of 133 – 9.77%), 'whorish' (28 out of 133 – 21.05%) and cheaters (2 out of 133 – 1.5%). To these we can add the statement that society treats women well as opposed to men, who are treated unfairly by comparison (8 out of 133 – 6%).

This category also contains some posts glorifying violence against women, rejoicing from it and expressing the user's will to physically hurt them (19 out of 133 – 14.28%).

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<sup>183</sup> See fig. 21 in Annex.

<sup>184</sup> See fig. 22 in Annex.

<sup>185</sup> See fig. 23 in Annex.

<sup>186</sup> See Glossary.

Regarding the 133 posts that I assigned to this category, it is worthy to note that I did so according to the most dominant category present in the post – a number of other posts also displayed animosity towards women.

#### *5.3.4. Theorizing the Blackpill*

In this category, I classified the posts aimed at theorizing the Blackpill philosophy and to back up the Blackpill's claims with scientific proof and evidence mainly intended to explain why Incels do not manage to enter into any kind of relationship, and why the game of seduction and life is rigged from birth. This category gathered 92 posts, that is to say 9.4% of all the posts analyzed.<sup>187</sup>

#### *5.3.5. Sharing their experience as Incels*

Right behind the category “theorizing the Blackpill” comes this category, collecting a total of 83 posts (8.5% of all posts). This category is interesting because it gathers posts in which users describe their experience as Incels, or in other words how the condition impacts their everyday lives. This category gathers all the supposed elements of proof showing that the Blackpill is real for them, and how it manifests itself in their everyday lives. Here is where we find demonstrations of how being an Incel is inherent to their existence, and constitutes first and foremost a lived experience.<sup>188</sup> This category also englobes posts claiming to prove that being an Incel is not well seen by society<sup>189</sup> and explaining why Incels find it hard to fit in.

This category as well as the “theorizing the Blackpill” category seem to be part of a larger ideological dimension that will be discussed in the following chapter. Both aim at proving the Blackpill is correct and that its implications are as undisputable as they are cruel for Incels. One does so through theory and scientific explanation, while the other does so through users' experiences and testimonies.

#### *5.3.6. Related to the logistics of the forum*

This category, with 44 posts and 4.5% of all posts, is a technical one. Since the platform is the only place they have to interact, users frequently have suggestions or questions about its functioning and what could be improved to make conversations smoother, to regulate new members or to ban – or de-ban – users.

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<sup>187</sup> See fig. 24 & 25 in Annex.

<sup>188</sup> See fig. 26 in Annex.

<sup>189</sup> See fig. 27 in Annex.

### *5.3.7. Suicide/depression related*

As it quickly appeared at the very beginning of my investigation on the forum, many users report being depressed and/or having suicidal thoughts. This topic is regularly discussed on the forum, with 43 posts and 4.42% of the total amount of posts analyzed. In the annex, the reader can find posts questioning whether another user has “roped”<sup>190</sup><sup>191</sup> yet, about their personal state of mind<sup>192</sup> and potential future plans to end their life. It is interesting to note the other users’ reactions to these posts. Although I initially thought that users might post their distress on the forum because of the support they might find there, the community actually has a very strict policy concerning suicide, which consists in encouraging it. Indeed, in the Incel philosophy, since everything is believed to be rigged from birth, their narrative consists in stating that since they have no hope of ever changing their lives, suicide – whether or not committed after an attack – is one of the only options available to Incels.

### *5.3.8. Interactions with other groups*

On the Internet, like in the real world, some communities do not get along with other communities. In the case of the Incels, there happens to be many internet communities designed to make fun of them online. With 21 posts and 2.16% of all analyzed posts, this category gathers all the posts that aim at mocking other communities, either to get back at them or to encourage criticism against them. One community in particular is often targeted by the Incels: /r/IncelTears. Out of 21 posts, 18 (85%) are directed towards /r/IncelTears. /r/IncelTears is a subcommunity of the platform Reddit. In their own words, the community “IncelTears is a part-mocking, part-watchdog subreddit for posting screenshots of hateful, misogynist, racist, violent, and often bizarre content created by “incels” (hateful involuntary celibates).”<sup>193</sup>

Occasionally, the Incels are also involved in online feuds with members of The Red Pill. One post attacks TRP, one attacks and criticizes Reddit at large and the last post trolls a Christian forum and mocks its users.

### *5.3.9. Display of animosity towards other men*

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<sup>190</sup> To ‘rope’ is a reference to the rope used for hanging. To ‘rope’ means to die.

<sup>191</sup> See fig. 28 in Annex.

<sup>192</sup> See fig. 29 in Annex.

<sup>193</sup> <https://www.reddit.com/r/inceltears>

This category, with a total of only 19 posts, or 1.95% of all the posts analyzed, gathers posts which are not aimed against men in general, but against some men specifically.

Usually, these posts are aimed towards “normies” and the characteristics most often used to describe them is “cuck”, “betabux” and “soyboys”, which are all terms designating weak men.

#### *5.3.10. Lifefuel*

This category, gathering only 11 posts (1.13%), is interesting because it appears to go against the usual narrative or philosophy of the community. In these posts, users speak of their will to meet a girl, of their efforts to do so or of other efforts they would like to start making in order to improve their lives in general.<sup>194</sup> This goes against the usual narrative of the community because it generally views as useless the quest to find a girlfriend or to try to get in better shape, as the dice is rigged from birth and the Incels’ condition will never change.

#### *5.3.11. Other*

With 10 posts (1.02%), this category gathers all posts that were unclassifiable under the other categories.

#### *5.3.12. Need to leave*

With only 2 posts (0.2%) and the smallest proportion out of all the categories, this category, much like “Lifefuel”, goes against the general spirit of the community. Both of these posts come from users who publicly expressed their need and will to leave the community – at least for a while – because of the negativity emanating from the forum, which was becoming overwhelming and difficult to bear.<sup>195</sup>

### **5.4. First reflection on the category analysis**

Interestingly, more than half the posts gathered (52%) reflect the purely social aspect of the forum. I had assumed that the forum would lend itself to more theoretical communication about the Blackpill, to more animosity towards women and to more expressions of their personal “mal-être”. As it turned out, this was largely not the case, and the forum proved to be a very practical social place where users can find advice, fun cartoons/memes and can get to know other users. Nevertheless, the forum also contains a great deal of Blackpill philosophy in very simple terms, sometimes merely through an image/meme or a specific word. Although on one

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<sup>194</sup> See fig. 30 & 31 in Annex.

<sup>195</sup> See fig. 32 & 33 in Annex.

hand the category “theorizing the Blackpill” accounts for only 9.2% of all the posts analyzed, on the other, references to the Blackpill philosophy, subtle or not, are present everywhere on the forum (this is illustrated in the screenshots above). Whether it is through the use of specific terms (e.g. “femoids”, “normies”...) or expressions (e.g. “it’s over”), the forum has a very clear underlying philosophy and showcases itself as a distinct community, with specific codes.

In the end, as other research on radical online groups has already noted, the focus in radical studies on what makes the group radical “overshadows the reality that [radicals] also use the Internet for the same reasons everybody else does; for organization and planning, proselytizing and entertainment, and to educate the [members of the community]. In fact, most of the online communication of [radical groups] is mundane to the point of appearing innocuous.”<sup>196</sup> This pattern can be found on the radical forum of the Incels. Indeed, most posts concern social issues, the sharing of memes and other innocuous topics. But even in the most innocuous topic addressed by a member, there is usually a hint of the Blackpill philosophy and a reminder that all members of the forum recognize it, to different extents.

### **5.5. Incels and self-journalism**

Another pattern that I found continuously on the forum – although it took some time to pinpoint exactly – are the acts of self-journalism. Many posts that I had to classify into different categories seemed oddly similar in the form they took. And indeed, I later understood that through newspaper articles and stories from various websites, Incels were relaying outside “proof” of the Blackpill on the forum. In the beginning, I did not think much of it but as time went by I found an academic article by Magdalena Elzbieta Wojcieszak addressing the idea of computer-mediated false-consensus. Wojcieszak researched an online Neo-Nazi group and found that “participation in these forums exacerbates false consensus – that is to say, overestimating public support for own views.”<sup>197</sup> That, in turn, “might make participants more vocal, publicize their cause, attract additional adherents, and affect the aggregate opinion distribution”.<sup>198</sup> In the case of the Incels, all categories confounded, 12.56% (122 posts) of all the analyzed posts fit Wojcieszak’s definition of self-journalism.

### **5.6. Conclusion**

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<sup>196</sup> Klausen, ‘Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq’, 2.

<sup>197</sup> Wojcieszak, ‘Computer-Mediated False Consensus: Radical Online Groups, Social Networks and News Media’, 527.

<sup>198</sup> Wojcieszak, 528.

To conclude on this preliminary analysis, as in the case of previous research on radical communities, the goal of the Incels' communication does not seem at first to be centered around propaganda, theorizing their doctrine, translating their scriptures or recruiting new members. A large majority of the communication is not "radical" per se. The forum is first and foremost a social platform – a place to share random videos and thoughts, and meet like-minded users. Nevertheless, it is important to outline that acts of self-journalism and hints of the Blackpill are omnipresent under the surface. As I have said before, these hints are visible through the use of certain words, expressions and the sharing of newspaper articles and stories fitting into and legitimizing the Blackpill's narrative.

Overall, the group seems to operate between two dynamics. One, radical, with an underlying radical ideology and plainly harsh, violent posts. The other, social, friendly, creating a sense of belonging and home for regular users. The two dynamics are two sides of a same coin and are intertwined together. I believe there is worthwhile research to be done on whether the social aspect of the forum acts as a point of entry – a pull factor – into anti-woman thinking and radicalized behavior.

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## **6. Chapter VI – Reflecting on the dimensions**

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### **6.1.Introduction**

As briefly mentioned in the previous chapter and after having reviewed in detail what Incels talk about and to which extent, I realized that there were patterns which could be drawn from the different categories observed. Indeed, some categories seemed oddly similar in some ways, and deserved to be examined as such. The following sections will present the three dimensions that I found to be predominant on the forum: the social dimension, the ideological dimension and the counter-narrative dimension. Finally, two categories did not fit into any dimensions – they will be included under “other”.

### **6.2.Larger dimensions existing on the forum**

This chapter aims at drawing wider patterns from the 12 categories defined in Chapter V. This process is interesting because it enables the researcher to step away from the studied subject and to start forming a theory. Indeed, the fifth chapter was about examining the Incel forum

while paying close attention to details, in order to understand exactly what its users mean to express. This sixth chapter aims at reflecting on those 12 categories in light of the third theoretical chapter about the Internet, the space it occupies in people's lives and the consequences that can result from its use.

### *6.2.1. Social Dimension*

The social dimension includes only two categories, but together they make up for more than 52% of all the analyzed data. The fact that these two categories, "social sharing" and "posts aimed at interacting with other users", are so predominant on the forum undeniably raises questions as to the role they play. Both seem to act as a means to create a feeling of belonging on the forum – a feeling which, for Incels, cannot be found anywhere else, and certainly not in the outside world. In total, more than 52% of all analyzed posts were assigned to these two categories. This is extremely important because, contrary to what I believed before studying them, many of the posts in these two categories are purely social, practical or lifestyle oriented. Some users clearly feel at home (fig. 42) and safe in this community where they can express their feelings freely without being judged and meet like-minded people. With such a considerable part of the forum being purely social, I assume that this social dimension is very important for the users. A likely reason for this is that they have never met in real life (and probably never will), and therefore resort to these "random" questions or to posting small facts and stories about themselves. Another potential explanation is that these men experience some degree of loneliness, having either very few friends (fig. 43) or none at all (fig.44). In that case, the need to create a community and a sense of belonging plays a vital part on the forum.

Another potential explanation for the considerable space given to the forum's social aspect is that, since the group only exists online and, unlike other groups, they do not meet outside of the Internet, there is a need for becoming acquainted with other members – which would naturally happen if they were not entirely Internet-based. Indeed, as seen in the third chapter, the Internet has to be seen as a tool that allows the self to extend itself and to interact just as it would in the "real world". As seen in Chapter III, the Internet is to be seen not as a merely neutral tool but as an extension of the self, as it enables individuals to live and thrive in an online world, if that is what they desire. And in the case of the online community, it appears to be an absolutely autonomous online world, with its own codes and members. The large social dimension can then be explained by the fact that, men being social animals<sup>199</sup>, the Incels' online

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<sup>199</sup> Citation of Aristotle, 384ACN – 322ACN.



community should be viewed as having the same characteristics as any other community. That is to say, that before becoming acquainted with and adhering to the ideology of the movement, members first enter it in a social context, which brings them a sense of belonging and a sense of home.

For this reason, I will reiterate the point made by Jytte Klausen, when he states that “[radicals] also use the Internet for the same reasons everybody else does; for organization and planning, proselytizing and entertainment, and to educate the believers. In fact, most of the online communication of [radicals] is mundane to the point of appearing innocuous”.<sup>200</sup> I argue, as Maura Conway does, that the Internet, via the platforms it hosts, can be a staging post for “real world” violence. “One does not radicalize oneself in cyberspace, any more than one becomes radicalized by oneself in the ‘real world’”.<sup>201</sup> And in order to have the opportunity to become radicalized, the social dimension is paramount as a first introduction to the community. Alek Minassian and Scott Paul Beierle had both written Internet comments about the Incels and their ideology before committing their attacks, and had stated their connection to the movement. These two men are the product of an Internet community, and this raises the question of the impact of online radicalization.

### 6.2.2. *Ideological Dimension*

This dimension, encompassing more than 40% of all the analyzed posts, is at the very core of the Incel community. Here is where the Incel philosophy is theorized, illustrated and applied to other parts of the Internet. In other word, this dimension accounts for all the explanations of what the Incels are, the implications of the Blackpill according to them, the definitions “us” and “them” and the choices they make based on this. In this dimension, we find the following categories: “Display of animosity towards women”, “Theorizing the Blackpill”, “Sharing their experience as incels”, “Suicidal related”, “Intergroup war” and “Display of animosity towards non-incele men”.

Before beginning the research itself, I thought this dimension would be the most predominant one. And although I have now shown that it is not, I still believe that it represents the core of the community. This dimension has a very important role in shaping the community and defining its rules. The most obvious category in this dimension is “Theorizing the Blackpill”. This category is the theoretical one and, in these posts, one can find scientific

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<sup>200</sup> Klausen, ‘Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq’, 2.

<sup>201</sup> Conway, ‘From Al-Zarqawi to Al-Awlaki: The Emergence and Development of an Online Radical Milieu’.

“proof” backing up claims made by the Incels. For example (fig. 42): Dominant men (Chads) are not only at an advantage in relation to their sexual success but also on the job market and in how people perceive their internal qualities. Supposedly, this is because “scientifically”, and because of evolution, confident men are perceived as more reliable and more prone to leadership. This explains why Incels feel like they are subhuman compared to these Chads, and since it is a “scientific” fact, they believe it is an unchangeable state. One is either born a Chad or one is not. The next category, “sharing their experience as Incels”, offers tangible “proof” that the Blackpill is real by giving examples of it in their everyday lives. For example (fig. 43): a user (that is to say, an Incel) explains how women do not even talk to him anymore because of how ugly he is, proving that women are shallow and will not look beyond looks. The “suicide related” category embodies one of the only choices open to Incels once they accept the Blackpill, according to their statements (fig 48). Indeed, if no woman will ever be attracted to them, and if their Incel status dooms them to fail in almost every aspect of life, what is the point of living? This is typically the stance taken by Incels when a fellow member posts a message of distress. The “Intergroup war category” is part of the “us” versus “them” struggle. The Incels are inherently opposed to bluepillied normies and their naive worldview. This sparks online feuds against some groups. The last category included in this dimension, “display of animosity towards non-incel men”, is connected to the last one. Indeed, although not all non-Incels inspire the most violent sentiments on the forum, none is spared or shown empathy either, no matter the situation.

To sum up, this dimension is at the core of what the forum is, what being an Incel means and what consequences it entails. Thanks to this dimension, users are capable of saying what the community is and what it is not, what posts are allowed and not allowed, who is allowed and who is not allowed on the forum and what opinions one gets banned for, as well as gets praised for.

### 6.2.3. *Counter-narrative Dimension*

This dimension includes the categories “Lifefuel” and “Need to leave”, which together constitute a little more than 1% of all posts analyzed. Both these categories go against the usual narrative and philosophy of the community. The first one because it advocates for change in the life of the user (the user speaks about improving himself, talking to girls, getting his life together) and the second one because it gathers posts actively aimed at explaining their departure from the community – temporarily or permanently – because of the negativity emanating from the community, which can sometimes be overwhelming (fig. 55 & 56). The posts gathered in these categories usually receive comments from other users branding them as

“fakecels”, and reminding them that these posts are against the rules of the community. It is interesting because the posts included in this dimension seem essential in delimiting exactly what the Incel community is and what it is not. Although on one hand, thanks to the social dimension, the Incel forum manages to attract a substantial amount of young or older delusional men, on the other hand, there is a need for the established, core Incel members of the forum to play the role of policing content and reminding users what Incels are, what they are not, and what their stances are – otherwise, Incels would lose their specificity and potentially morph into something else. As Mike Wending outlined it, it is easy for young men deluded by their dating experience to fall into the “rabbit holes” of the Incel platform. But once they become regular members and start regularly posting on the forum, they soon find themselves vigorously policed by more established members.

Therefore, if the counter-narrative dimension exists, if dissident voices exist in the community, I argue that it bears an essential role: delimitating what the community is.

#### *6.2.4. Other*

In the last, “Other” dimension (6% in total of all the posts analyzed), we find the “other” and the “logistics of the forum” categories. That is to say, this dimension includes the two categories that cannot be classified under any other dimension. The first because it was unclassifiable in any other category in the first place, and the other because it is a purely practical category that relates to the technical use of the platform.

### **6.3. Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter was to reflect on the results of the content analysis by looking at the bigger picture – in other words, by asking what wider patterns could be drawn from this study. I found three main dimensions that encompassed almost all categories: the social, ideological and counter-narrative dimensions. A final “other” dimension was added for the last two categories, which could not be classified under any of the others dimensions.

What these dimensions show is that it seems that the first step to entering the Incel community is through its social aspect. In this way, men who are tired of their unsuccessful dating life find other men with the same issues to talk to and express their frustration, but also to share funny videos, to entertain and be entertained by peers, to share thoughts and to seek advice. Within this dimension, which is a point of entry into the community, hints of the Blackpill and their ideology begin to appear through blackpilled personal sharing posts. This observation echoes a point made by Klausen, who states that radicals use the Internet like

everyone else – not only for recruitment purposes and to display their ideology, but also to be entertained, meet new like-minded people and find a community to which one belongs. The social dimension of the forum is similar to the roles filled by Facebook or Instagram. Incels can speak about their meals, issues with their parents, something that upset them, etc.

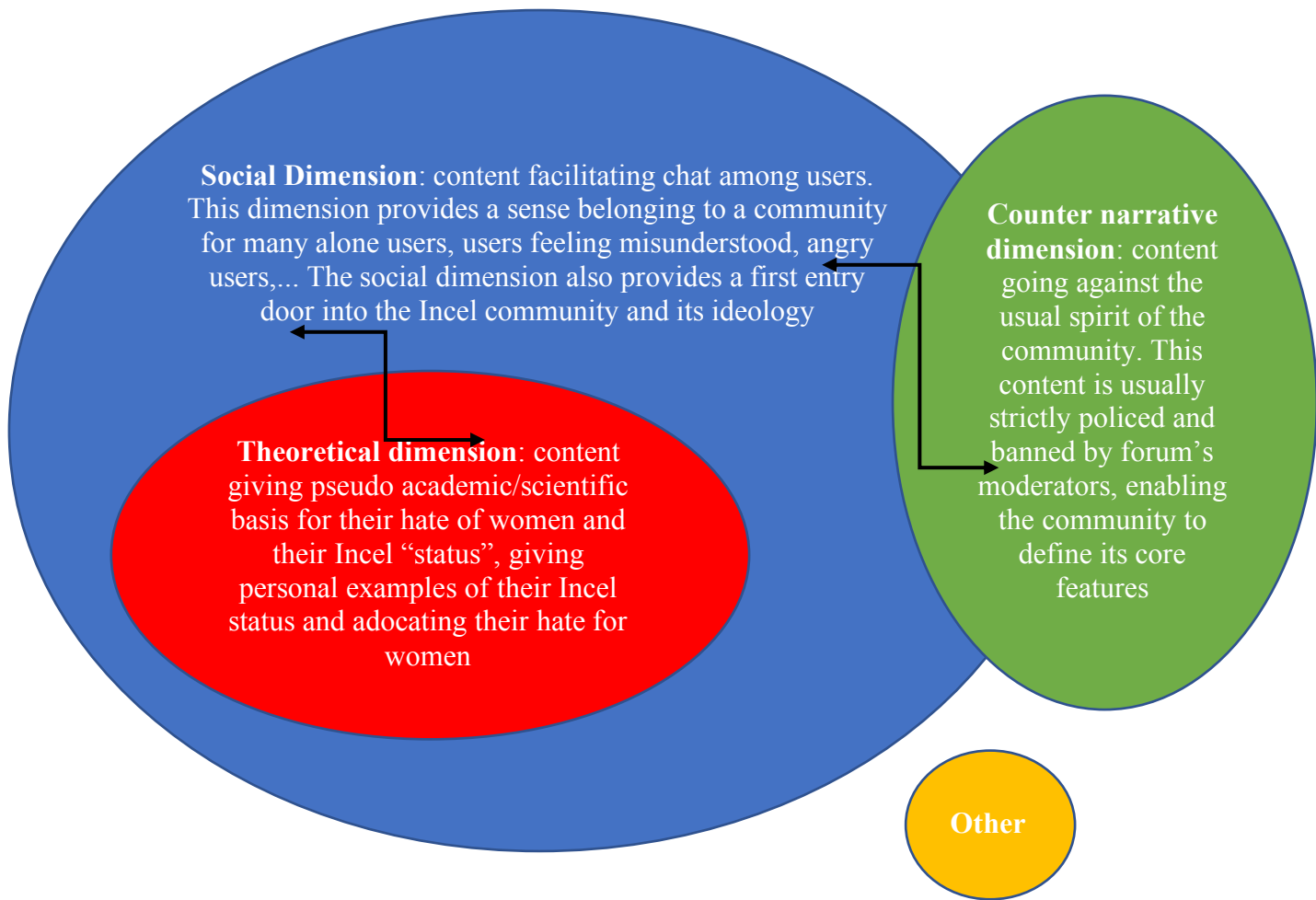
Then, the core of the community is represented by the ideological dimension. This dimension sets the tone on what Incels are, what they stand for, what is acceptable and what is not. The philosophy of the group, its theorization and its attempts at evidence are found here. This dimension is supported by the counter-narrative dimension. Indeed, posts that can be categorized as such are so quickly policed by other members that, in effect, their very existence seems to serve more as validation of the ideology than anything else, as they enforce what is acceptable to say and what is not.

Conway argues that the web is as much a place for potential radicalization than the real world. My results seem to back this stance. If an online radical platform reproduces the same characteristics as an offline radical group (social and ideological traits, policing of members contradicting the narrative of the group), then the creation of the concept of “violent online radical milieu” should be considered.<sup>202</sup> Alek Minassian, Elliot Rodger, Anders Breivik and many others were lone actors, but were partially the product of the radical milieu they evolved in, as testify the videos, manifestos and other types of messages they left behind.

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<sup>202</sup> Conway, 174.

*Graphic representation of the four dimensions present on the forum.*



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## 7. Chapter VII – Conclusion

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### **7.1. Going back to the beginning**

This thesis was aimed at better understanding who the Incels were, primarily within their online context.

My research began with two key observations. First, the online tools FiveThirtyEight and Google Trend (see fig. 1 & 2 in Annex) enabled me to situate the boom in the online search for the word “Incels” in 2018, with a shy start in 2014. This corresponds to the period during which journalists and social media users began to take interest in this group, writing articles about them and investigating some of Incels’ preferred platforms. Journalist David Futrelle, who became an expert on the topic, is a good example of someone who began researching the group early. He tried to formulate answers as to how to stop the group’s “radicalization” and quickly warned the public of their dangerous potential.<sup>203</sup>

My second observation, connected to the first one, was that besides these journalists and social media bloggers, close to no academics had written about the Incels phenomenon, and that primary sources concerning this group were lacking. This can most likely be explained by the fact that the “manosphere”, a loose confederacy of interest groups centered around men’s rights<sup>204</sup>, is populated by hundreds of websites, blogs and forums dedicated to “savaging” feminists in particular, and women in general<sup>205</sup> and the Incels are just a subgroup within it. Academics had previously focused on other subgroups in the manosphere.

These two observations launched me on a quest to attempt to fill this gap in the academic literature and to answer the following question: what are the central topics discussed by Incels on the forum Incels.me? To answer this question meant to understand the group’s dynamic and to approach what it means to be an Incel.

From an early stage, I established that the community’s exclusively online existence was not merely a neutral fact and that it was of the utmost importance to take this characteristic into account in the research. In her academic work, Ging had explicitly stated that more attention needed to be paid to the online context within which such groupings took place, namely because this change demonstrated a “radical shifting in the parameters of

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<sup>203</sup> Futrelle, ‘Can the Radicalization of “Incels” Be Stopped?’

<sup>204</sup> Ging, ‘Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere’, 1.

<sup>205</sup> SPLC, ‘Intelligence Report: The Patriot Movement Explodes - Misogyny: The Sites’.

antifeminism”<sup>206</sup>, and that the issue had not yet been tackled by current writings on men’s rights movements.

This is how I decided to add the Chapter III “Philosophy of the online life” in this thesis and to keep in mind throughout this research that the phenomenon I was observing was fundamentally an online phenomenon.

## **7.2. Results**

After having reviewed what had already been written in the mainstream media and by academics about the Incels and about the role of the Internet in peoples’ lives, I conducted a content analysis, with data gathered through digital ethnography in order to answer my research question. I gathered the last 20 posts from the 50 most active users of the forum (for a total of 971 posts) and classified them into twelve distinct categories. Three clear and global dimensions could be drawn from the twelve most discussed topics on Incels.me. These were the social, ideological and counter-narrative dimensions. In addition to these, and with two categories that could not fit into the above-mentioned dimensions, I also created the “other” dimension.

These categories are interesting because they show that, unlike what I had expected, the social dimension is the most predominant on the forum. This social dimension, as David Futrelle<sup>207</sup> stresses, can create a feeling of belonging and a sense of community among the forum’s users and might act as a first point of entry for angry and/or lonely men to the Incel philosophy. This social dimension, through the sharing of memes and songs, enables new members to become acquainted with soft features of the community (like its vocabulary) and to slowly become influenced by the Incels’ theories on women, their own Incel status and the consequences this status entails. In my opinion, this social dimension is essential in convincing new members to adhere to the movement’s ideology.

The theoretical dimension comprised pseudo-scientific claims explaining why women should be considered inferior, and why they should be despised due to their very nature. In this dimension, users could also share their experience as Incels, “proving” that their theories were right and consequently strengthening the movement.

Finally, the counter-narrative dimension included the posts contradicting the usual narrative of the forum: posts stating the user’s will to improve his life or desire to meet women. This dimension is interesting because these posts were quickly banned, or strictly policed by

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<sup>206</sup> Ging, ‘Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere’, 2.

<sup>207</sup> Futrelle, ‘Can the Radicalization of “Incels” Be Stopped?’

other users, who heavily criticized the person posting and reminded him that there is no such hope when one is an Incel. I believe this dimension plays an important role in defining the accepted features of the community. In other words, the community can express its identity through the policing of what is not part of it.

### **7.3. Raising questions**

This thesis, I hope, raised important questions concerning the power of online radical communities and their radicalization potential. Indeed, as Mike Wending stresses, extreme forums may have a radicalizing power that must not be overlooked.<sup>208</sup> Alek Minassian, Scott Paul Beierle and Elliott Rodger were not the first to apparently be influenced by this woman-adverse online environment, and they may not be the last. The Anti-Defamation league also warned readers that hatred towards women is a “dangerous and underestimated component of extremism”.<sup>209</sup> This NGO linked groups such as the Incels to the alt-right, saying that their hatred for minorities were disturbingly similar. Out of this research, I would like to open the question of the potential for online violent radicalization of the Incels, currently referred to as “attacks” and “lone wolf acts” in the media.

The Internet is a key factor in this research as it allows people to take their own stance, their own place in events they are physically removed from. Through various news platforms, people can feel close to events they may not be close to physically, and this can trigger affective reactions and enhance mobilization of all kinds. On a forum such as Incels.me, members share news article and stories with each other, and therefore create a pseudoenvironment, an environment in which knowledge of the world and its injustices is built by the user through news shared by other users. This pseudoenvironment is increasingly made possible by the Internet, and online communities are able to create their own pseudoenvironments, especially via acts of self-journalism – by sharing news articles and stories they are interested in. But these acts of self-journalism enable a false consensus effect, and this is especially true among radical and extremist online communities. In the case of Incels, acts of self-journalism make Incels feel as though external forces – biology, feminism, society at large – were stacked against them and that feminism is hurting the natural order, thus disabling them from ever being intimate with a woman. Through the sharing of articles (12% of all analyzed posts), they create their own world, which can be witnessed through the lens of the forum.

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<sup>208</sup> Wending, ‘Alleged Toronto van Attacker Highlights Toxic Links between Incels and the Alt-Right’.

<sup>209</sup> Oppenheim, ‘Misogyny Is a Key Element of White Supremacy, Anti-Defamation League Report Finds’.



It has also been argued already that online platforms afford visibility to voices frequently marginalized by the societal mainstream and enabled the birth of alternative narratives. Although it is important not to confuse online activity with impact, it is also important to realize that the Internet allowed marginal voices to gather, to find a place of their own to have discussions, despite time and space constraints. And as such, this research argues that online platforms are as much a place for potential violent radicalization as the real world. All members of the Incel community may not commit attacks, but some have, and other may as well. A very important component that this thesis aims at supporting is exactly this: online platforms are as much a place for potential radicalization as the real world. This claim is currently supported by a minority of researchers in the general debate about radicalization, as it is often said by researchers that the Internet is not a radicalizing factor, and that a face-to-face interaction is necessary in order to be violently radicalized. For the Incels, it has not been the case, and this argument should be reviewed in light of the empirical data I provide here.

#### **7.4.Limitations and future research.**

As already mentioned, the results of this thesis are limited as they are based on only one Incel platform and the data was gathered during a certain period of time, and based on a limited number of users.

Since this research takes place online, its internal validity may be at risk as on online forums, it is easier for the most “extreme” individuals to speak up and push aside other less extreme members. These voices may not be representative a) of the entire movement and b) of what the extreme individual actually thinks outside of the Internet, as the Internet can often be a place to “lash out”.

Another delimitation is that Incels are aware that they have become a topic of interest. As seen in Chapter IV, the amount of “views” a post has garnered is visible on the forum. As the increase in views occurred after the Minassian attack, users now believe that the forum is being watched by people monitoring the content of the forum.

Nevertheless, while acknowledging these limitations, this thesis opens up the question of gender-based terrorism, as suggested by van Buuren and Sciarone in the case of the Incels<sup>210</sup>, and provides empirical data to support a future thesis, should someone want to argue that the Incels’ attacks should be classified as gender-based terrorist acts. Indeed, if one starts from the claim that the Incels’ online forum can be a propitious milieu for violent radicalization, then

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<sup>210</sup> van Buuren and Sciarone, ‘Make War, Not Love?’

the Incels who were violently radicalized (such as Alek Minassian or Scott Beierle) could be considered as terrorists. Van Buuren and Sciarone argued that since the Incels have a high sense of entitlement, as sociologist Michael Kimmel argued, and view society as skewed, believing they are entitled to women, their attention and acceptance, these attacks against women could be classified as gender-based terrorism.

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