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## Five Things We Need to Learn About Incel Extremism: Issues, Challenges and Avenues for Fresh Research

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### ABSTRACT

In recent years research on the involuntarily celibate or “Incel” community has contributed a small but significant stock of knowledge about toxic varieties of extreme misogyny being shared on lightly regulated online communication boards. Simultaneously, we have witnessed the potential for Incel ideas to find expression in disturbing outbursts of extremist violence. This paper uses existing research to consider what we know and what we need to find out about this milieu if we are to further our knowledge and understanding. Ultimately, we highlight five key questions that need to be investigated more thoroughly and call for a wider range of methodological approaches in this endeavor. In particular, we argue that there is a need to build stronger connections with members of the Incel community in order to pursue a better-crafted body of research. While this is challenging, it is necessary if we are to gain a sense of how much support there is in Incel communities for violence, the role of pornography within the community, the key dimensions of Femcel ideology, the connections between Incel ideology and extreme right-wing thinking, and the measures that might aid deradicalization once an individual has adopted ideas related to extremist misogyny. Ultimately, we argue that while certain pieces of research are leading the way in contributing fresh thinking and innovative methodological approaches, there is much work to be done to develop our understanding in these areas of enquiry.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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In this paper, we make proposals for ambitious new avenues of research into the Incel “community.” The paper is based upon a review of existing literature, considering what we currently know about Incels and the areas where there is a paucity of existing research. We posit ideas for how researchers might fill these gaps in future investigations. Many of the ideas discussed are incredibly methodologically challenging and it is recognized that some of the suggestions made here may ultimately prove too difficult to surmount. However, through carrying out this audit of current knowledge and considering how we might build upon the existing body of research, we hope to spark a conversation across the Incel research community about how we can continue to improve the stock of knowledge on this shadowy subculture.

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The paper begins with a brief overview of the evolution of the manosphere and the emergence of the Incel community. We then highlight the key aspects of Incel ideology and consider the utility of the term “extremism” to help us understand these ideas. Following this, we present five areas of investigation that would contribute to a better understanding of the Incel subculture. The five areas that we propose for further investigation are not intended to provide an exhaustive account of where we might go next, but rather to highlight a selection of avenues that would benefit from further investigation.

Firstly, we ask how seriously Incels take the more extreme dimensions of the misogynistic narratives that are circulated in their chat forums and how much might be dismissed as “shit-posting?” This is a recurring question in the emerging literature on the Incel community, which has begun to be explored, but needs further enquiry in future studies.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, we focus upon the role of misogynistic pornography as a radicalizing agent within the Incel community. There is a small body of research that suggests that the consumption and sharing of misogynistic pornography performs an important bonding role within the Incel community.<sup>2</sup> Kaitlin Regehr who has provided the most in-depth investigation in this area so far states that pornography forms part of the “in(ce)l doctriation” of young men.<sup>3</sup> This forms another area that merits further investigation in future research. Thirdly, we raise questions about the nature of female Incels (Femcels) and their role within this broader community. Femcels are largely overlooked in the literature on the Incel community, except through an occasional mention of their exclusion from male Incel forums. Again, this is an area that would benefit from greater enquiry if we are to gain a broader understanding of the Incel milieu. Fourthly, we note a recurring issue that is raised in the literature on Incels that questions the strength of the relationship between extreme right-wing ideas and Incel misogyny.<sup>4</sup> There seem to be certain areas of ideational overlap, but there has been limited investigation into the nature and strength of this relationship. Finally, we ask how Incels might be deradicalized. For this purpose, we argue that there is a need for research into those who have left the Incel community to help us develop measures to tackle the indoctrination of young men (and women) in these forms of extremist thinking.

## **The Evolution of the Incel Subculture**

The origins of the Incel milieu are found in the men’s rights movement that has been notable since the latter part of the twentieth Century. These movements largely emerged to assert the dominance of men during a period of perceived societal change. In doing so, they contributed to a powerful antifeminist movement that infers that feminism has placed men in a state of crisis.<sup>5</sup> These ideas have influenced a range of groups that broadly encompass this view of modern society. For example, in the 1970s Men’s Rights Activists (MRA) began to focus on issues related to family law, parenting, and reproduction which they perceived to marginalize men at the expense of women.<sup>6</sup> Some argued that feminism was diminishing the power of men and undermining their rights in all areas of society.<sup>7</sup> These movements particularly placed the blame on feminists for obscuring male experiences of victimization and for normalizing false rape allegations.<sup>8</sup> While these kinds of antifeminist ideas have a long historical pedigree, the expansion of the internet has provided new spaces in which these concepts have mutated and flourished.<sup>9</sup>

In online spaces, this type of misogyny has taken a range of forms in a series of interconnected discussion groups often labeled the “manosphere.”<sup>10</sup> For instance, the early part of the twenty first Century saw the emergence of the “Pick up Artist” (PUA) community. This community revolved around creating techniques and strategies to “pick up” women. This often included encouraging the use of harassment, manipulation and undermining of women’s confidence.<sup>11</sup> These techniques of “seduction” were characterized as having “game.” Participants within this community actively worked to develop their “game” to pursue large numbers of women by any means necessary.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps most disturbingly, Daryush Valizadeh, a well-known PUA, supported the legalization of rape in private spaces.<sup>13</sup> Given that most instances of rape occur within the home, or a private space, by someone known to the victim, from Daryush’s perspective, this would essentially eradicate most rape cases.

Research into the manosphere suggests that as MRA and PUA groups began to decline in popularity during the last decade, other groups such as Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) and the Incel community have gained in prominence.<sup>14</sup> MGTOW maintain that society oppresses men and they advocate for separation from, or abandonment of, women. As a result, this approach suggests that men should not partake in serious relationships with women. This idea is underpinned by the belief that women are biologically hardwired to use men for procreation by seeking out the strongest and most wealthy alpha males. Furthermore, it is argued that women will not settle down with, or care about men because it is in their interest to constantly seek out better partners if the opportunity arises.<sup>15</sup> Following this argument, it is suggested that due to the limited supply of alpha-type males, that women may opt to settle for a beta male who they can financially exploit.<sup>16</sup> While these views may seem shocking at first sight, they are only one competing antifeminist voice in the broader realm of online misogyny.

The group that has embodied perhaps the most extreme form of antifeminist ideology are commonly referred to as Incels (or involuntary celibates). Extremists within this group argue that men are fundamentally oppressed by, and constantly face injustice at, the hands of women. This group differs from the aforementioned groups in that they view their celibacy and separation from women as *involuntary* as a result of women’s domination of the sexual marketplace. They believe that women only focus on superficial characteristics of males, mainly physical appearance, with only the most attractive males in society (‘Chad’ in Incel terminology) being able to form sexual relationships with women. Below Chad is a sub-stratum of men labeled “cucks” or “normies” who are used by women for exploitative purposes. The remainder of the male population is forced to be involuntarily celibate as less attractive men are stripped of their mating opportunities.<sup>17</sup> Essentially, Incels view themselves as subordinated in a society dominated by women and a small number of attractive or wealthy men.<sup>18</sup>

### **Incel Ideology and Discourse**

Limited research on Incels makes it difficult to definitively ascertain a core ideology that is shared across the entire Incel milieu. Sharkey’s work in this area highlights the fact that a varying range of ideas predominate on different Incel platforms. She also notes, that certain ideas go in and out of fashion in Incel discussion forums, further

highlighting the movable nature of what we might describe as Incel ideology.<sup>19</sup> There are a range of beliefs that are associated with Incels including forced celibacy as the result of feminism, the belief that women are genetically inferior, and the belief that women consciously pursue only genetically superior men.<sup>20</sup> Some in the Incel community advocate extreme responses to their sense of group subordination including sexual slavery and violence against feminists.<sup>21</sup> Whilst the range of beliefs differs across various sections of the Incel milieu, there are certain conclusions that we can draw from the literature that provide us with a general picture of the ideological traits that loosely tie the community together.

Literature generally concludes that Incel ideology is centered upon misogyny which is justified by the belief that women's power in the sexual marketplace emasculates the majority of the male population.<sup>22</sup> For example, Brzuszkiewicz identifies three broad areas within Incel ideology. Firstly, she identifies the theme of self-perception and identity whereby Incels believe that their personal characteristics, particularly physical unattractiveness, disadvantage them in the competition for sexual relationships with women. As a result, they perceive themselves as victims of an unfair social hierarchy. Secondly, she identifies the theme of gender relations and misogyny in which Incels take a strong anti-feminist stance, explaining their victimhood as a result of a changing society that unfairly disadvantages less attractive males. Finally, her work identifies a common Incel belief that it is fruitless to show kindness toward women. This is underpinned by the ideology that women are naturally promiscuous, but only with particular types of men which exclude those with Incel characteristics.<sup>23</sup> This means that sexual gratification cannot be achieved regardless of any attempt to treat women with respect and kindness. Similar ideas are explored in the work of Chang who notes the manner in which dehumanizing terminologies are used by Incels to create a "monstrous-feminine" in order to justify their hostility toward women.<sup>24</sup>

Bates identifies certain pieces of terminology used by Incel communities which exemplify Incel beliefs about women and the limited number of men who are successful in the dating market. Women are often labeled as "femoids" or "foids," a dehumanizing term based derived from female humanoid. Those men who are deemed to be biologically attractive enough to appeal to women are labeled as "Chads" and these men are seen to selfishly dominate the sexual market place. In doing so, they further reduce the chances of success for "unattractive men." However, as Menzie notes in a discussion of femmephobia in Incel discourse, Chad is a contested figure in Incel discussions, with some seeing him as another victim of female domination of the sexual sphere despite the advantages given to him through favorable genetics.<sup>25</sup> The most "attractive" women in societies who pursue relationships with "Chads" are labeled as "Staceys." Those women who are deemed less attractive but are still able to attract sexual partners are labeled by the Incel communities as "Beckys."<sup>26</sup> The supposed ability of less attractive women to succeed in finding an intimate partner is at the core of Incel resentment. The supposition that women can dominate the sexual marketplace, regardless of how attractive they are, is seen to be the result of feminism being used as a sexual strategy to ensure all women are placed in a dominant position. With this powerful position, women are then understood to pursue only the wealthiest and most attractive partners. Men, by contrast, are left entirely at the mercy of women's choices.

Furthermore, feminists are understood to have created the illusion that women are the oppressed gender enabling women to more effectively pursue their goals.<sup>27</sup>

Research consistently discusses how Incels classify the different acceptance levels of this illusion amongst men. This is explained with reference to the pill analogy, which is a common feature of discussions across the manosphere and has been associated with various forms of conspiracy theory.<sup>28</sup> This concept originated from the Matrix film in 1999 in which humans were farmed and forced to live in an unconscious dream-like state by an alien civilization. In the film, some humans retain consciousness and can penetrate the dreams of others to show them their reality. Those in the dream are then offered the choice between two kinds of pills; the blue pill which enables them to keep dreaming and the red pill which will allow them to see an unpleasant reality. For the Incel community, this discursive tool is used to suggest that the growth of feminism has worked to disguise the exploitation and oppression of men. Men who are unaware of this reality are identified as being “blue pill” and oblivious to the realities of female control over men’s status and sexual agency. Those who are aware of this reality are considered to be “red pill.”<sup>29</sup> Upon seeing reality, these individuals will try to “looks max”; to adapt themselves to meet female standards to try and improve their chances of success with women.<sup>30</sup>

Committed members of the Incel community reject both the blue and red pill outlook and instead opt for the “black pill.” This is to suggest that those who have taken the black pill can understand and acknowledge that many men are simply unable to participate in relationships with women and that the characteristics which prevent them from doing so cannot be modified or changed.<sup>31</sup> Just as unattractive men cannot change their biological disadvantage, women are also believed to be biologically evil and cruel. This personality trait is argued to be the result of evolution and culture, compelling women to manipulate men for biological and economic resources.<sup>32</sup> These beliefs generally result in two types of responses from Incels, one being a defeatist approach in which coping mechanisms (including suicide) are advocated and the other involving advocacy for change including a reversion back to a more patriarchal past and in some instances the use of extremist violence.<sup>33</sup> However, these ideas are only really discussed in certain extreme fringes of the Incel community. This brings us to the important question of how appropriate it is to use the term extremist to describe the Incel milieu.

## **Incels and Extremism**

A key question that has been raised in recent literature on Incels relates to the utility of terms such as radicalization or extremism to help us understand the Incel milieu. For instance, Moskalenko et al. argue that the use of these terms is misleading and adds unnecessary stigma to a group who are largely nonviolent and mostly afflicted by mental health issues.<sup>34</sup> Other work, such as Regehr’s contributions suggest that there is a specific radicalization process that is undertaken by participants in the Incel community, which can lead directly to forms of extremist violence.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, if we review the work of Díaz and Valji we can find evidence of a more general affinity between misogynistic attitudes and varieties of political extremism.<sup>36</sup> It is true of course that the vast majority of Incels have not committed acts of violence and are unlikely

to do so in the future. However, as Cassam argues, extremism can take many forms including ideological, psychological and methodological. Cassam notes that it is rare that extreme ideas spillover into extreme methods.<sup>37</sup> With this in mind, we recognize that there are difficulties with applying terms such as radicalization and extremism to the Incel community, but we argue that there is a certain utility in using these terms to help us understand how people become enmeshed in Incel ideas even though very few will ever commit acts of violence.

To highlight the similarities between Inceldom and membership of other extreme groups it is useful to draw upon a recognized framework designed to explain the radicalization process. While the process of radicalization is subject to a complex and widely contested set of debates, we might begin by using the model set out by Doosje et al. (2016).<sup>38</sup> One of the strengths of this model is the fact that it is derived from a review of a wide selection of literature on radicalization and extremism. The model functions as a distillation of certain recurring themes across the literature. If we consider its utility in understanding Incel radicalization, we can begin to identify the contours of the relationship between Inceldom and extremism. Firstly, the model notes a selection of core traits across a range of extremist groups. They note serious grievances with societal organization and the institutional arrangement of power as a commonly recurring theme. A strong sense of difference between the “in-group” and other groups within society provides a reference point for self-identification. The sense that the in-group is in some way superior, yet disadvantaged in comparison with other societal groups. Finally, the acceptance of violence as a means to pursue political goals is discussed as a common feature of extremist organizations.

If we briefly survey the existing literature on Incels we can detect distinct commonalities between the Incel community, their broad ideology and this framework for understanding extremism. For instance, Incels perceive themselves as victims of a society that unfairly favors women and feminist ideology, thereby subordinating men and depriving them of sexual agency. Furthermore, Incels perceive a strong sense of group identity through defining themselves in opposition to women and sexually successful males. This identity is reinforced through appeal to pseudo-biological theories suggesting Incels are victims of an unfairly imposed genetic hierarchy. While Incels commonly discuss their sense of inferiority in relation to alpha males, this must be understood as part of a complex system of ideas in which Incels simultaneously see themselves as superior to females and the dominant males, though unfairly disadvantaged by the societal order. Through the invocation of the pill analogy, we can detect a well-rehearsed extremist refrain which suggests the importance of shadowy conspiratorial forces in driving unfair outcomes for members of the in-group.

While very few Incels actually carry out acts of violence, it must be noted that discussions on Incel forums often depict and glorify violence against the perceived enemies of the community.<sup>39</sup> From this starting point, we can begin to identify areas of significant overlap between extremist groups and the Incel milieu. The fact that the vast majority of those involved in the Incel community does not lead them toward violent action does not lessen the extremism of antifeminist, and anti-female views held across this community. Indeed, the majority of those who hold extreme views of most varieties will never cross the threshold into violent acts.<sup>40</sup> Yet, it is important to gain knowledge of the manner in which these extreme views are held so that we might

begin to understand how to effectively counter these extremist narratives. This brings us to consider how we can find out more and what steps we can take to develop this research agenda.

### **Broadening the Methodological Approach**

Whilst we have some knowledge of the core beliefs voiced by Incel groups, current knowledge of the complexities, intricacies and wider societal beliefs and behaviors beyond what can be found on Incel discussion boards is relatively sparse. This is because the vast majority of previous research has explored Inceldom via research methods that seek to explore these communities by gathering data from online websites, forums, and message boards. Yet there are some examples of impressive research that highlight the potential to move beyond online data collation and to engage in human focused research within the Incel community. For instance, Sugiura carried out ten semi-structured interviews with Incels and former Incels to provide an important dimension in her 2021 piece *The incel rebellion: The rise of the manosphere and the virtual war against women*.<sup>41</sup> Daly and Reed (2021) have also carried out small-scale interview research with members of the Incel community.<sup>42</sup> Moskalenko et al. (2022) have successfully carried out a piece of survey research with a group of 274 self-identified Incels.<sup>43</sup> These pieces of work are important steps forward and should be used as a guide for future research into the Incel community. We propose that much more of this type of research that is focused upon gaining access to human participants is essential if we are to expand our knowledge of the subculture and to answer many of the outstanding questions in the existing body of research.

What is needed is an exploration of the broader views and behaviors of those who participate in these online spaces. To gather this information, we need to engage with Incel members as active research participants. Whilst a relatively small amount of data in these areas is not surprising given the difficulties of reaching out to this group, many questions remain that can only be addressed through engagement with active and former participants in the Incel community.

Increasing the stock of research based on these interactive approaches would provide valuable insight into understanding not only the Incel milieu but also how misogynistic subcultures online may be influencing attitudes toward broader societal issues. For instance, greater engagement with active participants in the Incel community may contribute to our understanding of online radicalization and the consumption of poor-quality information in lightly regulated parts of the internet more generally. To do this, there is a need to seek out data that can be gained through inductive rather than deductive research mechanisms. This undoubtedly represents a challenging methodological task. It would require researchers to undertake at least one of the following: (1) relationship building with gate-keepers in the Incel community in order to gain sufficient trust for them to circulate surveys across the group or facilitate recruitment for interviews and focus groups; (2) Identifying and building trust with those who most frequently visit these sites; (3) Research may need to take the even more difficult, and ethically treacherous path of some form of covert ethnography to infiltrate the community and ask questions from within. These measures are difficult but necessary steps to build sufficient trust in the community and to gather data without research



being derailed by hostile trolling and other forms of antagonism toward the research community. For instance, Speckhard et al. built relationships with the moderator of a major Incel forum in order to circulate a survey around forum members.<sup>44</sup> However, working closely with people involved in a community defined by extreme misogyny raises clear ethical issues that can impact upon the researcher as well the researched.

The ethical difficulties associated with these forms of research have begun to be unpacked in a small pool of literature. Sugiura discusses the particular ethical challenges associated with researching the Incel community that relate to the personal wellbeing of the researcher.<sup>45</sup> Her work highlights the need for researchers in this field to take measures to ensure that their online persona does not give away too much personal detail that research subjects may seek to exploit in some way. This process creates complex thought processes in terms of striking a balance between researcher wellbeing and maintaining personal authenticity. Given the extreme misogynistic nature of this particular sub-culture, the wellbeing of female researchers and the potential for abuse (both online and offline) are particular matters of concern to researchers in this area. Yet, despite clear difficulties, pursuing this kind of research has been successfully navigated and has provided us with examples that the Incel focused research community can use as they pursue fresh investigations. With these examples of imaginative methodological approaches in mind, we present five research questions that would fundamentally help to further our understanding of the Incel community.

### ***Question 1: How Seriously Do Participants Take the More Extreme Elements of the Incel Ideology?***

Whilst we do have some understanding of Incel beliefs and ideologies, it is difficult to establish how far members conform to the same ideas and to what extent the members take these views seriously. Research that seeks to address this question needs to explore wider viewpoints of those who are engaging with these communities and the potential outworking of these views in the offline world. We currently do not know how seriously Incel members take these misogynistic attitudes, whether they conform to them ritually or whether they perceive these attitudes toward women as a form of online “banter.” Further to this, how many Incels seriously condone the use of violence against women? Have they thought about, or enacted, forms of political violence against women offline? Could participation in Incel discussion increase the likelihood of violence against female family members in domestic contexts? Uncovering these views would help to gauge the potential impact and consequences of these groups in the offline context.

Acts of violence carried out in the name of extremist misogyny have accompanied the growth of the Incel community, yet it is still not possible for us to get a sense of how many Incels genuinely endorse these actions. While these actions have so far been sporadic lone-wolf attacks, they have been sufficient to raise questions about the potential for increasing Incel violence.<sup>46</sup> Do these attacks indicate a growing likelihood of future acts of terrorism inspired by Incel ideology? Currently, Incels are not “organised” in a political sense, but might this be a possibility in the future? There is a small pool of research that delves into the question of whether Incels represent a

serious terrorist threat, but the lack of deep, research into the composition and the ideological commitment of the Incel community makes it difficult to assess how potentially dangerous this “group” is or may become in the future.

The most advanced work in this area so far is associated with Moskalenko et al.’s survey research. Their work suggested that the vast majority of Incels (79%) rejected violence as a means to change their situation.<sup>47</sup> However, this work also provided evidence of “troubling minority of Incels who embrace the most violent manifestations of the Incel subculture, glorifying Incel killers and fantasizing about raping and inflicting violence themselves.” (20).<sup>48</sup> Despite the impressive insight offered by this investigation, the authors note the relatively limited scope of this particular piece of research given that the data was drawn from one particular Incel forum and may perhaps not reflect trends in the wider community. A larger body of Research that explicitly asks Incels about their level of commitment to the more extreme aspects of the group ideology would help to measure the potential for further incidences of Incel violence. This would also open up avenues for the creation and implementation of policy responses designed to mitigate the potential for Incel violence in the future.

### ***Question 2: What Are the Links Between Incel Attitudes and the Consumption of Pornographic Materials?***

Feminist literature on pornography has been identifying the links between violence portrayed in pornography and violence against women since the 1980s.<sup>49,50</sup> They have also discussed the influence of pornography on the broader rape culture in society and popular culture.<sup>51</sup> Whilst there has been much debate about whether pornography has a causal relationship with forms of rape and sexual violence it is generally agreed that there is a gender gap between men’s and women’s use of pornography, with men overwhelmingly constituting the largest proportion of consumers.<sup>52</sup> It would be useful to explore the relationship between pornography and the reinforcement of rape and violence in the context of Inceldom. Particularly the question of whether pornography has a radicalizing effect on those who are drawn to the Incel community?

Although many issues remain unexplored, connections between the language used in pornography and Incel communities have been identified. For example, Tranchese & Sugiura draw upon the language used in Reddit forums to consider similarities in the discourse used in Incel discussion boards and those dedicated to discussions of mainstream pornography. Their work details examples of discursive crossover and commonalities in the language used within the pornographic context and Incel communities. For example, they identify the consistent use of derogatory and objectifying language with Incels often referring to women as “whores,” “cumdumps” and “cumrags” and describe women as being “ploughed” by “cocks.”<sup>53</sup> This language has historically been used within pornography to dehumanize women, reinforce the acceptability of aggression toward women, and legitimize the use of the penis as a weapon.<sup>54</sup> However, rather than suggesting Incel exceptionalism, this contribution serves to highlight the fact that this form of language is incredibly commonplace. This suggests that Incels are simply mirroring discourses taken from a much wider and more pervasive pool of societal misogyny when they draw upon this discursive repertoire.

However, there is much that we don't know about the role that pornography plays in the Incel community. For example, what kinds of pornography are those engaging with the Incel community using? How does their engagement with pornography influence their views of women and their engagement with the Incel community? How does this compare with pornography use in wider society? Does pornography play an important bonding role in the Incel community. To explore this, it would be useful to carry out in-depth research that asks Incel forum users about their consumption of pornography and how this relates to their Incel identity.

There are various studies that use survey and interview data to investigate the prevalence and frequency of pornography use. This includes the types of pornography groups of people tend to engage with, how it is accessed, behaviors whilst using pornography, and how pornography changes attitudes toward sex and relationships.<sup>55</sup> For example, Wright (2013) used data obtained through the General Social Survey (GSS), an ongoing full-probability interview survey that examines social beliefs and behaviors in the United States. He found that engagement with pornography was associated with an increase in risky sexual behavior, including paying for sex.<sup>56</sup> Foubert et al. (2011) also examined 489 survey responses from fraternity men and found that men who engaged with mainstream pornography reported a higher likelihood of committing rape and sexual assault and that those who watched sadomasochistic and rape pornography had a lower level of bystander intervention or belief that they would know how to intervene in sexual assault situations.<sup>57</sup>

With research evidencing that pornography use can influence perceptions of sex and relationships, it would be useful to establish how frequently Incel members engage with pornographic material, which types of material they engage with, how the consumption of pornography has impacted attitudes toward sex and relationships, and establish connections between the consumption of pornographic material and their participation in the Incel milieu.

### ***Question 3: What Is “Femcel” Ideology and How Is It Separated from the (Male) Incelsphere?***

Despite Incels being principally associated with misogynistic attitudes and ideologies, female Incels (known in the Incel community as “Femcels”) have been largely ignored. Female Incels are rarely discussed in academic or journalistic research on the subject of Inceldom, or they are simply mentioned in passing with very little examination of this subgroup's ideology or behaviors.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, our knowledge of female Incels would be non-existent were it not for the very few pieces of literature which provide some detail on this part of the community.

Research examining Incel forums has found that despite Incel view that women as a homogenous group that are evil and manipulative, Femcels perceive themselves as victims of a similar attractiveness hierarchy as male Incels. Similarly, to “truecels” (the most extreme and sexually deprived Incel), “true Femcels” believe that they are so hideous that only ugly men are likely to date them out of pity, and that their opportunities for sexual relationships are limited by the more attractive “Staceys.” In essence, just as male Incels feel that the most attractive men (“Chads”) obtain the most sexual relationships with women, disadvantaging Incels in the process, Femcels feel that the

most attractive women (“Staceys”) disadvantage their chances of sexual intimacy also.<sup>59</sup> Likewise, Femcels often refer to the “pink pill” which represents the recognition that undesirable women are unable to engage in sexual relationships as a result of society’s fixation on certain varieties of feminine attractiveness.

Whilst some literature suggests that the “pink pill” is the “Femcel version of the blackpill” other accounts suggest that it more closely aligns with the “red pill” with forum discussions on “looksmaxxing” (trying to improve the chances of success by altering their appearance) being common.<sup>60</sup> This often includes discussions around weight loss, make-up, clothing choices and cosmetic surgery. Zdjelar, (2016) even describes the “pink pill” as suggesting some recognition that dating is skewed (according to attractiveness) but not necessarily in favor of one gender group or another. Whilst the concept of the “pink pill” remains undefined and somewhat unclear, literature does suggest that online discussions within female Incel communities share similarities with that of males.<sup>61</sup> For example, common topics for discussion include ugliness impacting on life chances in relation to romance, education and careers, loneliness, lack of friendships, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. These issues are also consistently raised within the male Incel discussion groups, indicating clear commonalities amongst the communities.<sup>62</sup>

Despite these commonalities, female Incels are largely rejected from male-dominated Incel communities due to the Incel belief that all women can successfully obtain sex from men. Therefore, those women who are celibate are deemed to be too picky about their choice of men, with unrealistic standards resulting in a lack of sexual partners. Consequently, the male Incel community deem any claimed “Femcel” to be a “volcel,” someone is *voluntarily* celibate leaving self-proclaimed Incel women to defend their right to identify as an Incels, and commonly being subject to trolling from those in the male community.<sup>63</sup>

The exclusion of female Incels from the core Incel community regardless of their shared sense of oppression is the result of, the differences in how these groups attribute blame for their situation. In the male Incel culture, the cause of humiliation and despair is the result of external causes, i.e. women’s increasing power and their ability to sexually oppress particular men. This results in anger and blame being directed at women regardless of their claims to Inceldom. However, female Incels do not blame men for their experiences; instead, anger and blame are internalized, focus lies much more on the women’s inability to compete in the increasingly appearance-focused market.

This difference in the attribution of blame reflects broader gender inequality and assumptions around women’s sexuality. Women’s tendency to self-blame is itself part of a gendered script, as is men’s and societal tendencies to ignore and deny women’s feelings of oppression.<sup>64</sup> The assumption that women’s lack of success in the dating market is simply either of no interest or not a problem is underpinned by gendered scripts around sexual relationships that tell us that women do not have the same “natural” need for sex as men. Therefore, in the changing sexual economy where approaches to dating and sexual relationships are changing, it is men who are understood to be “losing out” or “falling behind.” In a sexual marketplace where women are seen to rule, and men are seen to lose out, comes an inability to believe that women may be suffering similar problems.<sup>65</sup>

Whilst research thus far provides a starting point in understanding the ideologies and experiences of those who identify as female Incels and how they are perceived by the (male) Incel community, many questions remain. The literature is unclear as to the extent of ideological variations of Inceldom amongst women. Questions also remain with regards to Femcel experiences of the broader Incel community. For example, an exploration of why women wish to associate with a community that refuses to accept them needs consideration. Similarly, why is it that Incel groups are so adamant that women are not able to be part of the community regardless of their ideological commonalities? It should also not be assumed that Femcel ideologies that align with male Incel ideologies are the only ideas held by female Incels. It must be considered whether there is any value in applying terms such as radicalization or extremism to the Femcel community. Until we are able to begin answering these questions, female Incels will remain a largely unknown entity. To develop this research further, we need to move beyond online research based on Femcel forums. We need to reach out to this community to tease out the distinctive dimensions of Femcel ideas and their relationship with male Incel ideologies.

#### ***Question 4: Is There a Strong Connection Between the Incel Community and Far-Right Groups?***

Not a great deal is yet known about the manner in which Incel ideological beliefs intersect with other varieties of political thinking. There is a sense in the literature that there may be some form of overlap between alt-right groups and the Incel community.<sup>66</sup> There are certain ideological and discursive commonalities between these broad and diffuse online groupings. For instance, both tend to draw upon the “red-pill, blue-pill” analogy to describe their ideological awakening.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, the demonization of feminist principles is a common feature of both Inceldom and discussions in extreme right-wing groups. However, this picture may be much more complex than we can observe at first sight. For instance, Incels have a much more complicated understanding of race and ethnicity than we tend to see in far-right groups. While there is a perception across the community that the sexual marketplace is affected by a racial hierarchy, with white men being seen as more likely to secure the attentions of women than racial and ethnic minorities, it is not clear that Incels endorse this outcome. Rather, this is seen as a problem caused by female hypergamy, in which women unfairly discriminate against minorities in their pursuit of wealthy, successful men.<sup>68</sup> This provides a clear contrast with white supremacist groups who seek to police racialized sexual boundaries in order to maintain their ideal of in-group homogeneity.<sup>69</sup>

While terms on Incel discussion boards such as “ricecel” to describe an Incel with East-Asian features; “blackcel” to describe an Incel with darker skin; or, “currycel” to describe an Incel with South-Asian characteristics, might seem clearly racist at first sight, in fact, members of ethnic minority groups often receive particular sympathy within the community due to their perceived additional barriers to sexual activity.<sup>70</sup> Jaki et al. (2019) have conducted perhaps the most in-depth investigation into these avenues of Incel discussion. Their study utilized mixed-methods research and a sophisticated deep learning system to trawl masses of Incel posts and conclude that only

around 3% of the material they surveyed exhibited explicitly racist language.<sup>71</sup> While the majority of Incels are white, there is widespread diversity within the community. Clearly, some on Incel discussion forums articulate some of the racist ideas associated with far-right groups, but it is difficult to get a sense of how prevalent these ideas are within the community simply by observing forum posts. Are explicitly racist posts the preserve of a minority or are they commonplace across the Incel community? Also, how seriously are racist ideas taken by participants in the Incel community?

Additionally, little is known about the more commonplace political beliefs across the Incel community. It is obvious that the group rejects feminism, but where do they stand on other matters of political concern? Given the generally nihilistic philosophy that underpins their ideas, we might expect Incels to be largely dissociated from broader political and social concerns, but the reality is that currently, there is no real research to draw upon that furthers our understanding of the relationship between Inceldom and broader political issues. This again is something that could be approached using a survey methodology if it were possible to gain meaningful access to the Incel community.

### ***Question 5: How and Why Do People End Their Participation in the Incel Community?***

If we are to understand the growth of misogynistic groups online, it is imperative that we learn how and why people leave these communities and how they may be able to change their views toward women and sexual relationships. Essentially, we need to explore what deradicalization might look like for a member of the Incel community and how we might begin to engage with and respond to these harmful ideologies. Here it would be useful to engage ex-Incels in research to examine the reasons why they left the community, whether their views have changed and what a successful deradicalization process might look like. There has been a small selection of work in this area such as Hintz and Baker's analysis of former Incel posts on Reddit forums.<sup>72</sup> Their work usefully highlighted certain processes of self-evaluation and changing circumstances that had helped some former Incels move away from identification with toxic misogynistic ideas.

It would be useful to engage in interviews with former Incels and to specifically ask for reflections on what might have prevented them from engagement in the community and how we might foster better education for young men who are drawn to extreme misogyny. Broader research into the deradicalization of former extremists has often garnered valuable insights from reformed extremists.<sup>73,74</sup> This type of investigation is largely lacking in academic research into the Incel subculture. However, there has been a small selection of journalistic pieces of work in this area that serve to suggest the potential importance of this type of investigation if we are to better understand how people can move away from participation in these toxic online spaces.<sup>75,76</sup>

So far there are a handful of these anecdotal accounts of the experiences of former Incels that have left the community and moved on. However, researchers need to focus upon building a much more robust body of work in this area. Finding out what causes people to leave the community, the difficulties that they face in moving on, and their

experiences after leaving. This work may be incredibly important in understanding how to prevent people from becoming engaged with online misogyny. What we need to know is how to better educate young men to guard against toxic misogyny and this strand of research would be extremely useful to facilitate that process. Furthermore, understanding how people move on from participation in the Incel community may contribute usefully to the wider body of research on deradicalization.

This type of research might best be conducted through in-depth discussions with former Incels such as interviews and focus groups. There are places where we might begin to search for participants. For instance, a small number of online forums are now dedicated to discussions about leaving the Incel community. One such forum called “Incel Exit” can be found on Reddit, one of the lightly regulated spaces that gave rise to the Incel community in the first place may now offer us a place to research the move away from toxic misogyny. Participants in these online spaces may be less reticent to engage with researchers than those who are still active within the Incel community. This type of work needs to be mobilized to provide unique insight into the issue of Inceldom. This should become a priority for those of us involved in this avenue of research.

## Conclusion

The Incel community embodies a range of difficult societal challenges. A small but significant community of men harbor deeply problematic views toward women that they express in unregulated online spaces. Examples of misogynistic hate speech are commonplace in these forums and in a small number of cases, Incel ideas have inspired shocking acts of violence. The vast majority of participants in the Incel community do not seem drawn toward similar acts of violence, though the reality is that we have little idea of how many Incels support these kinds of actions. We have little understanding of how the misogynistic views shared in these communities overlap with other forms of hatred toward women. There is still very little research that allows us insight into the relationship between the Incel community and other extremist groups. Nor do we have any real understanding of the ideological overlap shared between Incels and Femcels. In this paper, we have made steps toward pushing a fresh research agenda that builds upon the existing research into the Incel community whilst addressing some of the gaps in our existing knowledge.

We have presented five key gaps in knowledge, which if addressed would not only provide vital insight into the Incel community but also the operation of misogyny in society more broadly. This includes an examination of Incel commitment to relevant ideologies, the Incel use of pornography and its impact, connections between the Incel community and broader political movements, the place Femcels have within the broader Incel milieu, and how we might begin to investigate and implement deradicalization strategies. To learn more, researchers need to make the difficult steps beyond observing the discussions in Incel forums to make a more in-depth connection with participants in the Incel community. This process is littered with methodological challenges and ethical questions. If we are to make the leap from what we know to what we need to find out, it will be necessary for the research community to face these difficulties and overcome them.

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