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CLIMBING THE MASCULINE HIERARCHY: EXAMINING CONSTRUCTIONS OF MASCULINITY THROUGH INCEL IDENTITIES

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CLIMBING THE MASCULINE HIERARCHY: EXAMINING CONSTRUCTIONS OF
MASCULINITY THROUGH INCEL IDENTITIES

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science in Social Sciences
Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice

by
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August 2022

Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

In a gender-segregated digital space known as the Manosphere, a group of men calling themselves “Incels,” or involuntary celibates, express feelings of hostility and hatred towards women. Incels hold a low position on a masculine hierarchy where the men who hold the most power in society are those who have access to women’s emotional and sexual services. Incels are characterized by feelings of entitlement to women’s services and aggrievement by their inability to access them. As a result, they often appear to fantasize about or engage in acts of violence to compensate for their lack of masculine privilege. However, there are men who try to escape these harmful ideologies and leave the Incel community altogether. In this study, I analyze 130 Reddit threads from a community of men attempting to leave the Incel community. This case study permits the examination of the ways low-status men challenge and/or reinforce the masculine hierarchy. Findings demonstrate the pervasive power of the masculine hierarchy. Aside from a few exceptions, men who were presumably attempting to leave the Incel community embraced their low status on the masculine hierarchy and accepted the inevitability of that hierarchy. Their reluctance to challenge the masculine hierarchy suggests they recognize that this hierarchy both justifies their subjugation under more privileged men and their power over women. In other words, for these men, the masculine hierarchy is simultaneously a prison and a bastion of masculine privilege.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to victims of gendered violence everywhere.

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The completion of this thesis could not have been done without the care, patience, and help of many people. I would first like to acknowledge the guidance and mentorship of Dr. Heather Hensman Kettrey. Without Dr. Kettrey I would not be the academic, student, and researcher I am today. I will truly never be able to express the gratitude I feel towards her and her mentorship. I would also like to acknowledge the patience and support of my committee members. Their advice and enthusiasm about this project have been priceless. I want to thank my wonderful partner Samuel, who has provided me much needed encouragement, support, and cups of coffee. Thank you to my friends and classmates, who listened eagerly when I discussed my thesis for the thousandth time. Finally, thank you to my family. I would not have completed this journey without their endless love, support, and encouragement.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In the corner of the digital realm, there is a gender-segregated space known as the Manosphere, where hostility toward women thrives (Ging, 2019; Hoffman et al., 2020; Scaptura & Boyle, 2020; Ward, 2020). The Manosphere is a place where men discuss their perceived gender-based victimization and advocate for acts of revenge upon society, mainly upon women. Within the Manosphere, a particular group known as Incels, or involuntary celibates, who express feelings of hatred and rage towards women based on perceived sexual rejection, has garnered national attention after some of its members have incited mass shootings (Ging, 2019; Hoffman et al., 2020; Malamuth et al., 1991a, 1995; Malamuth & Brown, 1994; Ribeiro et al., 2020; Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). Although such acts of mass violence are concerning, Incels' anger is not always directed outwardly toward others. The Incel group can broadly be broken up into two larger facets or ideologies. One facet externalizes their anger by supporting violent acts of revenge against women, such as rape and murder, to "level the playing field" based on their perception that women possess undue power in sexual interactions. Another subset of Incels internalizes their anger by threatening to commit acts of violence against themselves and each other, leading some to exhibit depression, social isolation, and even suicidal ideation or behavior (Ging, 2019). Vulnerable young men can easily become enraptured with the Incels' tale of male sexual rejection and revenge-seeking fantasies.

Incels place high value on male privilege and women's subservience to men (Ging, 2019; Hoffman et al., 2020; Scaptura & Boyle, 2020; Ward, 2020). They avidly endorse the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which explains a pattern of practices in which the power structure of society enforces and allows men's dominance over women. (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

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Hegemonic masculinity embodies the most privileged way of being a man, and requires that other men position themselves in relation to this construct, while legitimizing the subordination of women to men (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Thus, men are ranked on a hierarchy and the most masculine men (e.g., those who exhibit the most socially valued masculine traits as defined in patriarchal, Western societies, such as physical strength, professional/financial success, and sexual dominance with women) are the ones at the top of the hierarchy, possessing the most privilege and power in society (Gilmore, 1990; Kalish & Kimmel, 2010; Kimmel, 2017). However, not every man displays these traits; rather men are ranked on a hierarchy, with the few who possess hegemonic masculinity placed at the top and all others distributed at lower positions according to the extent to which they exhibit positively idealized masculine traits.

Incels' endorsement of hegemonic masculinity seems self-defeating. Incels subscribe to a hierarchy that rewards only the most dominant men and, by falling at the bottom of the masculine hierarchy, Incels are not masculine enough to receive the privilege they believe they are owed. Rather than placing blame for their low status on dominant social constructions of masculinity, Incels place it directly on those men at the top of the masculine hierarchy and, to a greater extent, on women (Ging, 2019; Ribeiro et al., 2020). Incels therefore display traits of hostile masculinity; they have a desire to be controlling and dominating towards women, and view sexual conquest as a crucial component to reinforce their own masculinity (Malamuth et al., 1991a, 1995; Malamuth & Brown, 1994). In this group's mind, women should be sexually subservient to men, but instead, women control men's access to sex.

Previous research has indicated Incels believe that men who have access to sex and the ability to have romantic relationships with women hold the most masculine power in society

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(Ging, 2019; Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). Incels believe they are helpless victims who fall at the bottom of the masculine hierarchy and perceive women's sexual rejection to be a reinforcement of this unfair structure (Ging, 2019; Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). Rather than challenging the concept of hegemonic masculinity, they push to achieve the masculine ideal of physical strength, professional/financial success, and sexual prowess with women (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2017) while simultaneously viewing this ideal as personally unattainable. Incels perceive their masculinity to be under continuous threat, and they fantasize about using overt masculine behaviors (e.g., the use of violence) to overcompensate for their perceived loss of masculinity (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020).

However, the anger and revenge-seeking fantasies that are often associated with self-identification as an Incel are not always lasting, as some men eventually seek to leave the Incel community. Those Incels who choose to leave a community whose members are defined by their low position on the masculine hierarchy have the opportunity to challenge those dominant constructions of masculinity that have relegated them to their low status. At the same time, these men may be reluctant to overtly challenge a hierarchy that they may ostensibly be able to climb. Specifically, by disengaging from the Incel community, these men may have the opportunity to dissociate themselves from a low-status group and, consequently, gain some degree of masculine privilege on the very hierarchy that has devalued them. Thus, the current investigation uses Incels as a case study to examine how a community of men who fall at the bottom of the Western masculine hierarchy challenge or reinforce hegemonic masculinity as they attempt to exit their low-status position.

Studying the rhetoric of men who aim to leave the Incel community has the potential to contribute to the scholarly literature on masculinities by highlighting the complex ways that men

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negotiate their precarious status on a hierarchy that solidifies their power over some (i.e., women) and their subjugation under others (i.e., higher status men). Before proceeding with such an investigation, it is important to situate the Incel community within the existing literature on the misogyny paradox, aggrieved entitlement, hostile masculinity, masculine norms, and the Manosphere.

The Misogyny Paradox, Aggrieved Entitlement, and Hostile Masculinity

Incels' feelings of anger and victimization can be understood as a manifestation of three theoretical concepts: the misogyny paradox, aggrieved entitlement, and hostile masculinity. Ward (2020) defines the misogyny paradox as "boys' and men's desire for girls and women ...expressed within a broader culture that encourages them to also hate girls and women" (p. 27). Specifically, Ward argues that men and women are socialized to believe that they are so different from each other that they will never be able to fully understand one another, despite there being very little empirical evidence of vast differences between the sexes (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Connell, 2005; Zell et al., 2015).

Subscribing to the misogyny paradox can create inherent distrust and misunderstanding between men and women and thus can plague heterosexual relationships with conflict. Ward (2020) argues that, by casting women and men as opposites (such as men being sexual and women being emotional), the misogyny paradox socializes men to believe that they have an unspoken right to women's sexual subservience and emotional support. In other words, women are expected to serve as both sexual objects and emotional counselors to men.

This expectation of women's sexual and emotional service can have dangerous implications, such as when men who believe they have a right to women's services experience women's sexual and emotional rejection. Such rejection can foster a sense of "aggrieved

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entitlement,” or anger surrounding the belief that privileges to which one is entitled have been wrongfully denied (Kimmel, 2017). In this case, Incels, who believe their gender entitles them to women’s bodies and emotional support may become angry when denied such masculine privileges. In fact, Kalish and Kimmel (2010) argue that “aggrieved entitlement is a gendered emotion, a fusion of that humiliating loss of manhood and the moral obligation and entitlement to get it back” (p. 454).

This sense of aggrieved entitlement may ultimately lead Incels to exhibit hostile masculinity, which is an insecure and distrustful orientation toward women (Malamuth et al., 1991b, 1995; Malamuth & Brown, 1994; Malamuth & Thornhill, 1994). Men who display hostile masculinity often display hypersensitivity to perceived threats to one’s self-worth, which is tied to their desire to dominate and control women (Malamuth et al., 1991b, 1995; Malamuth & Thornhill, 1994). Further, sexual conquest is a critical component of hostile masculinity, and oftentimes is used to gain back the masculine privileges that men feel is lost or wrongfully denied to them; in other words, it is a solution to feelings of aggrieved entitlement. To address this aggrieved entitlement, men who exhibit hostile masculinity may express desires to be sexually and physically aggressive towards women (Gilmore, 1990; Kalish & Kimmel, 2010; Kimmel, 2017; Malamuth et al., 1991b, 1995; Malamuth & Brown, 1994).

Women’s sexual and emotional rejection may therefore be particularly problematic for Incels, who feel both entitled to the privileges of hegemonic masculinity and aggrieved by their inability to access such privilege, and thus may become hostile towards women. When Incels are rejected by women, they may experience pronounced feelings of aggrievement over the power they believe they are entitled to possess. They may overcompensate for this perceived loss and attempt to gain power by implementing socially prescribed masculine coping mechanisms, such

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as aggressive behavior, and devaluing traditionally feminine coping mechanisms, such as help-seeking (Connell, 2005; Kalish & Kimmel, 2010; Kimmel, 2017; Ward, 2020).

Masculine Norms and Coping with Aggrieved Entitlement

The existence of hegemonic masculinity and a masculine hierarchy implies that masculinity is fragile, and therefore, men are continuously forced to prove and maintain their position on the hierarchy (Vandello & Bosson, 2013; Weaver et al., 2010). Connell (2005) argues that masculinity has been culturally defined in direct opposition to femininity, and thus, feminine behaviors are deemed inappropriate for men, and can result in a loss of status on the masculine hierarchy. This means that, when dealing with emotional distress, men are dissuaded from using traditionally feminine coping skills and, instead, are often limited to masculine coping skills, which minimize emotional expression and emphasize aggression (Connell, 2005; Courtenay, 2000; Kimmel, 2017). Instead of being encouraged to seek help for emotional distress or to allow themselves to express emotional vulnerability, men are socialized to believe that emotional silence, self-reliance, and the rejection of weakness are the most appropriate coping mechanisms (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Cleary, 2012; Connell, 2005). Dominant masculine gender norms can dissuade men from seeking help from mental health professionals, leaving them to deal with stress in social isolation, and often in unhealthy ways such as through the use of violence or alcohol/drugs (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Brown et al., 2019; Connell, 2005; Lynch et al., 2018; Wendt & Shafer, 2016). Importantly, although men's reluctance to seek help for emotional distress can be problematic, the promotion of men's help-seeking behavior in absence of any efforts to challenge dominant gender norms may not be the best approach to solving men's sexism and violence.

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Messner (1997) argues that, despite men's sexism and violence being rooted in social constructions of masculinity, many proposed solutions to these problems simply state that if men are free to display their emotions (e.g., crying in public), they will no longer feel a need to dominate others. He specifically argues that encouraging men to freely express emotional vulnerability, without challenging dominant constructions of masculinity, simply allows men to adopt feminized coping mechanisms without sacrificing masculine privilege.

This is perhaps best exemplified by the "Men's Liberation Movement" of the 1970s, which formed in reaction to the second-wave feminist movement and was originally intended to parallel it (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2017; Ward, 2020). The original Men's Liberation Movement critiqued men's gender roles, encouraged role-sharing in marriage, and promoted men's self-improvement through counseling (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2017; Messner, 1998). One such example is the mythopoetic movement, which entailed homosocial groups of men retreating into the woods on excursions to "recover" their lost masculinity. Men of the mythopoetic movement wanted to stop paying the emotional costs of masculine privilege (e.g., being unable to express emotions and being alienated from other men); however, they did not change their desire to reap the benefits of masculine privilege. Eventually, the Men's Liberation Movement exhibited an ideological shift and adopted an overtly anti-feminist rhetoric, viewing feminism as the reason for men's purported maltreatment and women's liberation as an infringement on men's rights (Messner, 1997; 1998). These antifeminist ideologies and the perceived victimization of men have since found their way online in the Manosphere.

The Manosphere

The rise of the internet has encouraged the formation of homogenous social networks that reflect social boundaries of the physical world, which are often delineated along the lines of

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ideology, race, and gender (Robinson et al., 2015). The spaces where such homogenous groups can form digital communities are known as networked publics (boyd, 2014). According to boyd, the digital spaces in which these publics exist are not separate from the physical social realm; in fact, they are connected with each other. These networked publics complement communities that exist in the physical world and can be thought of as “the imagined community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice” (boyd, 2014, p. 8).

With the rise of the digital age, anti-feminist ideologies and hostile masculinity can now be found in deeply gendered networked publics that reinforce the notion that men are systematically oppressed, and that this oppression is created by women (Ribeiro et al., 2020). The Manosphere is an example of such a networked public in that it is a digital space comprised of a group of men who share similar beliefs about women’s purported sexual power over men, and exhibit endorsement of hostile masculinity. Common venues for these ideologies include websites such as Reddit and 4chan, where endorsement of hegemonic masculinity, hostile masculinity, and anti-feminist rhetoric are central to many homosocial men’s communities (Ging, 2019; Ribeiro et al., 2020). Examples of homosocial men’s communities within the Manosphere include Men’s Rights Activists (MRA), Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), Pick Up Artists (PUA), and Incels. The latter group is the focus of the current study.

One online space in which Incels congregate is Reddit. Launched in 2005 by Alexis Ohanian and Steve Huffman, Reddit is a popular social media site organized by “subreddits” (i.e., community pages organized around specific interests, which are identified with “r/” followed by the community name). Subreddits contain collections of threads created to discuss specific topics such as current events, politics, movies, etc. Within a specific subreddit, users (i.e., Redditors) can create their own threads or comment on existing threads. Redditors can also

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“up-vote” and “down-vote” content posted to Reddit, such that up-votes add to a thread’s score and down-votes subtract from a thread’s score. This pushes threads with the highest scores to the top of the site where they achieve high visibility and forces those with the lowest scores to the bottom of the site. Data from the Pew Research Center indicate the typical Reddit user is male (72%), between the ages of 18 and 29 (51%), and White (57%) (Shearer and Matsa, 2018).

Importantly, Reddit is one of the main social network sites composing the Manosphere, with Incels being one of the most active communities on Reddit (Farrell et al., 2019; Ging, 2019; Ribeiro et al., 2020; Scaptura & Boyle, 2020).

Incels

Incel is short for “involuntary celibate” (Ging, 2019; Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). Incels blame feminism, and women more broadly, for their unwanted celibacy. The ideologies, language, and rhetoric of the Incel community developed out of a broader sense of entitlement to women’s bodies and emotional labor (Ging, 2019; Scaptura & Boyle, 2020; Ward, 2020). Incels are characterized by feelings of aggrieved entitlement over their lack of access to women’s subservience. The aggrieved entitlement expressed by this specific group is particularly concerning, as it sometimes manifests in the form of hostile masculinity, in which Incels may endorse threats to hurt themselves or others, as well as incite real acts of violence (Ging, 2019; Hoffman et al., 2020; Ribeiro et al., 2020; Scaptura & Boyle, 2020).

Incels use the internet, specifically social media sites such as Reddit and 4chan, as a way to organize campaigns against women and those men who possess the privileges of hegemonic masculinity (Ging, 2019). The demographic composition of Incel communities has not been systematically measured (Jaki et al., 2019). Instead, Incel forums and websites have distributed their own surveys to measure demographic characteristics of their members. For example, a

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survey conducted by the now defunct Incels.com reported that respondents using their platform were predominately young men who had never been sexually intimate or had a meaningful relationship with a woman (Incels Wiki, 2021). Approximately 80% of respondents to this survey were from Europe or North America and a little over half of respondents were White.

The Incel community first began to gain national attention in 2014, after Elliot Rodger engaged in a mass shooting, killing six people in Isla Vista, California. Rodger proclaimed himself an Incel, as written in his manifesto where he detailed his desire and plan to seek revenge on women whom he believed had rejected him. Rodger is not the only Incel to gain notoriety for violence. In April 2018, Alek Minassian drove a van into a crowded street in Canada, killing 10 people and injuring 14 others. On social media, Minassian described himself as an Incel and stated that his attack was an act of revenge against women and their perceived sexual rejection of him.

Both Rodger and Minassian were hailed as “heroes” within Incel communities, with some even stating that more Incels needed to rise up and claim their “retribution.” Most recently, in July 2021, Tres Genco, who was a self-identified Incel and frequented popular Incel websites, was arrested for planning to kill women in sororities at his university. Genco was known to post on Incel websites about his idolization of Elliot Rodger. He even emulated Rodger by writing his own manifesto where he expressed his desire to “slaughter” women out of “hatred, jealousy, and revenge” (Planas, 2021). Incels have been known to fantasize about this kind of violence, writing on Incel forums about their desire to rape and kill women for their perceived rejections; some idolize Minassian and Rodger, hailing them as “Supreme Gentlemen” and martyrs (Baele et al., 2019; Ging, 2019; Hoffman et al., 2020; Kimmel, 2017; Ward, 2020). However, not all Incels display such traits of hostile masculinity nor pose a threat to the safety of others.

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The Incel community is composed of heterogenous ideologies, with the two most predominant being the Red Pill and Black Pill theories. The former advocates for violence against others and the latter advocates for violence against oneself. These theories have their roots in the 1999 movie *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999). In *The Matrix*, most individuals live in a continuous world of illusion. However, those who take the Red Pill are “awakened” to the harsh reality of life. Incels apply this metaphor to their own experiences of aggrieved entitlement, with the Red Pill representing being awoken to the truth about women and the sexual disadvantages men purportedly face. The theory states that once you take the Red Pill, you are awakened to these disadvantages, and are better able to understand that women are shallow and should be manipulated, exploited, and ultimately deserve to be the targets of revenge (Ging, 2019).

Black Pill theory advances two overarching beliefs: (1) society is hierarchical and one’s place is determined by how well their physical characteristics match masculine or feminine ideals and (2) women are solely responsible for this hierarchy (Baele et al., 2019; Hoffman et al., 2020). According to Black Pill theory, the top of the hierarchy is reserved for the top men and women of society. These men and women are, respectively, deemed Chads/Alphas and Stacys. The basic principle is that there are only a small number of Chads, and these are the men who have sex with the greatest number of women, including Stacys. Chads are conventionally attractive, do not respect women, and are believed to have low intelligence. Although Incels do not explicitly use the term hegemonic masculinity, their description of a masculine hierarchy with limited spots reserved for the powerful men (i.e., Chads) directly parallels this concept.

Whereas Incels see Chads occupying the top of the masculine hierarchy, they see Normies, or the normal men in society, lying in the middle. Normies are not as attractive as

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Chads and are generally considered to exhibit unremarkable or plain physical characteristics. They may exhibit some traits associated with hegemonic masculinity; however, they do not possess all its benefits. For example, they are able to have sex with some women, but not typically with Stacys.

Finally, Incels place themselves at the very bottom of the masculine hierarchy. Incels are different from the Normies in that, whether real or imagined, they are deemed genetically inferior and are believed to have unattractive physical characteristics such as a protruding forehead, being overweight, or being short in stature (Baele et al., 2019; Ging, 2019; Hoffman et al., 2020). According to the Black Pill ideology, Incels are doomed, and should lay down and give up, or die. Thus, Incels who subscribe to the Black Pill theory tend to exhibit extreme feelings of self-loathing, depression, and suicidal ideation (Baele et al., 2019; Ging, 2019). These feelings are oftentimes encouraged by other members of Incel forums; it is crucial to their identity, and they recognize Inceldom as a permanent condition (Ging, 2019). There are, however, Incels who do try to escape these harmful ideologies and leave the Incel community altogether.

CHAPTER TWO

METHOD

In this qualitative project, I use Incels as a case study to examine how a community of men who perceive that they fall at the bottom of the masculine hierarchy challenge and/or reinforce hegemonic masculinity and privilege as they attempt to leave their low-status community. I specifically seek to answer the following research questions:

1. How do men leaving a community whose members are perceived to hold a low status position on the masculine hierarchy challenge and/or reinforce hegemonic and/or hostile masculinity?
2. How do men leaving a community whose members hold a low status position on the masculine hierarchy seek and/or reject masculine privilege?

In order to address these research questions, I applied a feminist epistemology (Harding, 1991; Sprague, 2005) and grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2014) to analyze a sample of comments obtained from a digital community of Incels on Reddit (Reddit, 2022). Data specifically came from a group of Reddit users who were actively seeking to leave the Incel community.

Data Sampling

I obtained the sample for this study during October 2021 from r/IncelExit, which is a subreddit for men attempting to leave the Incel community. This entailed accessing r/IncelExit and filtering the threads by upvotes and downvotes in descending order such that the top upvoted threads appeared first. I decided to limit sampling to original threads, and excluded comments or responses to those threads, because preliminary scoping revealed that Redditors responding to

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r/IncelExit threads claimed a diverse range of identities, with some appearing to be outsiders to the Incel community.

After ranking all pertinent threads in descending order, I found that the distribution of upvotes declined steadily, providing no logical cut-point for inclusion. Thus, to create a manageable sample of the most popular threads, I decided to include the top 150 threads. I excluded 20 of these 150 threads because they either lacked relevancy (e.g., a post detailing the rules of the subreddit), had been deleted, or were written explicitly by an individual who was not an Incel (e.g., an individual identifying themselves as either a woman, or not an Incel). The final sample thus, included 130 r/IncelExit threads. These threads were created between 2018 and 2021 and their upvote scores ranged from 416 to 53. The threads varied in length (i.e., between one paragraph and several pages) and discussion topic, providing a range of rhetoric that Incels circulate as they attempt to negotiate their shifting positions on the masculine hierarchy.

Data Coding and Analysis

Due to the gendered topic and exploratory nature of the study, I decided to utilize a feminist and grounded theory approach to data coding and analysis. Feminist methodologists argue that the presumption of objectivity in social science research is problematic because the assumption that researchers are free of bias ultimately privileges the perspectives of groups whose voices have historically dominated the discipline (e.g., men) over the perspectives of groups whose voices have historically been subjugated (e.g., women) (Sprague, 2005). Thus, instead of claiming an objective position, feminist scholars often situate themselves directly within their projects. They specifically aim to achieve “strong objectivity,” which entails recognizing one’s own biases and beliefs by taking ownership of one’s own research and

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intellectual property (Harding, 1991; Sprague, 2005). Thus, consistent with feminist epistemology, I discuss my findings in the first-person.

Data coding of my sample of 130 r/IncelExit threads followed Charmaz's (2014) approach to grounded theory. I first identified *initial codes* through a line-by-line analysis of all Reddit threads in the sample, and then took the initial codes and synthesized them into *focused codes* that identified the larger themes that groups of initial codes collectively highlighted. To address concerns of validity, I first conducted the line-by-line analysis of all Reddit threads independently and identified a preliminary list of initial codes. Then, I consulted with my advisor to check the clarity and consistency of these initial codes and, as a result, reduced the list of initial codes by eliminating any that had fewer than five supporting quotes. My advisor and I then collaborated to organize the remaining initial codes under focused codes that represented broader themes that connect subsets of initial codes together.

In my presentation of findings, I default to masculine pronouns to describe r/IncelExit users; however, since this site consists of men who are contemplating leaving the Incel community, I only refer to users as Incels if they defined themselves as one in their own words. Further, I include quotes as they appeared in their original format. I have preserved all original spelling, grammar, punctuation, and style formatting to accurately reflect the context in which these comments were presented. Unless otherwise noted, all content – including ellipses – appeared in the original postings.

CHAPTER THREE

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

My findings are organized under four main focused codes (see Table 1), which represent the points of exit where Incel Reddit users found themselves. These four focused codes include: (1) Embracing the Low Status on the Masculine Hierarchy, (2) Women Weighing Men Down on the Masculine Hierarchy, (3) Throwing Up the Pill of Inceldom, and (4) Accepting the Inevitability of the Hierarchy. I discuss initial codes with their pertinent focused code.

Embracing the Low Status on the Masculine Hierarchy

Instead of challenging the notion of masculine privilege, a group of Redditors in the sample clung to the masculine hierarchy and masculine privilege while dwelling in their low position. These users took stock of their sexual market value, evaluated intersecting hierarchies, conflated Inceldom with disability, excused their entitlement, and eventually constructed a community in which they could commiserate about their purported low status.

Taking Stock of Sexual Market Value

Members of r/IncelExit blamed their unattractive physical appearance for their low status on the masculine hierarchy. One member explicitly framed physical appearance as a commodity or liability to one's sexual market value, arguing that Incels believe "worth is tied to your 'sexual' market value." Similarly, another user applied this market concept by asserting that physical attractiveness makes dating increasingly difficult for unattractive men, and thus, may be associated with male virginity. As he argued:

The majority view on there seems to [be] that dating for average and ugly men is a ton of effort. I also see the stats on rising male virginity. Stuff like that kind of makes me not want to try, I have always been kind of lazy, lol.

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It is interesting to note that this Incel attributed his lack of motivation to pursue dating to the societal importance placed on physical appearance. Thus, he emphasized that factors he deemed out of his control, such as his perceived attractiveness, prevented him from pursuing factors he could control, such as his effort to foster intimate relationships. This user ultimately suggested that uncontrollable factors have a large role in defining positions on the masculine hierarchy.

Just as members of the Mythopoetic Movement of the 1970s appropriated feminist concepts (Messner, 1997), some members of the r/IncelExit community appropriated language from the feminist body-positive movement by comparing the outward shame they felt about being short to female body shaming, thus framing themselves as victims of sexism. One member stated, “The body shaming of short men is just completely normalized in our culture. I see it on a near-daily basis on twitter and tiktok. I see it every time I try to date.” This member implied that height and physical attractiveness are significant factors in relegating men to the bottom rung of the masculine hierarchy, placing Incels in a victimized position based on gendered body norms and physical factors they felt they could not control.

In some cases, this emphasis on the role of physical attractiveness and gendered body norms in determining positions on the masculine hierarchy seemed to produce self-loathing and social anxiety. In fact, many users described a deep fear of others’ perceptions of their appearance as a source of social isolation. As one member wrote:

My self-esteem is so completely shattered that I’ve gotten to the point where I don’t like leaving my home. Whenever I’m in public I’m so hyper aware of my body that if I’m near a congregation of more than 5 or so people, I feel like I’m on the cusp of an actual panic attack.

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Whereas this member of the r/IncelExit community seemed to feel disadvantaged and hopeless due to his lack of physical attractiveness, other Incels proposed various strategies to gain masculine privilege by increasing their sexual market value. One such member advocated for bodily modification to elevate his position on the masculine hierarchy:

At this point facial reconstructive surgery is my only hope. I don't care how much it'll cost or the risks it poses; I'll go bankrupt if it means I can just be average looking. I know I'll never be hot or even decently attractive, but I'll happily settle for "not looking like a cave troll" [quotations in original quote].

Notably, while this member advocated for reconstructive surgery to climb the hierarchy, he also noted the limits of physical attractiveness, arguing that although one's sexual market value is important in determining one's position on the masculine hierarchy, it can only be modified slightly, and thus only minimally improves Incels' positions on that hierarchy.

The previous quote illustrates Incels' emphasis on their unattractive physical appearance as the source of their low placement on the masculine hierarchy. That is, members lamented the valuable masculine traits that they do not personally possess. In a divergent approach, other Incels ranked themselves on the hierarchy by emphasizing those valuable masculine traits that they do possess. For example, one Incel affirmed his position above others on the masculine hierarchy by bringing forth other components of hegemonic masculinity, such as success, power, prestige, and physical athleticism. As he claimed:

It took a while, but I have and accomplished things that most men haven't: washboard abs (this is from being a former fat guy), no debt, my own car (no loans), getting a new job and picking up new skills during a pandemic, and a 4.0 GPA in graduate school.

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Although this member of the Incel subreddit did not mention sexual success, he brought forth other markers of hegemonic masculinity to reinforce that his position on the hierarchy was above some other men.

Intersecting Hierarchies

Some users of r/IncelExit applied an intersectional lens while taking stock of their sexual market value and positioning themselves on the masculine hierarchy. Specifically, Incels believed that being non-White detracted from their sexual market value. One such Incel stated:

I am a 5'4 male of a non-white ethnicity (which I will not specify) and according to incels this is a double whammy [...] it may be true that certain ethnicities are less desired than white men [...] I would much rather live in a nicer country where I have a little bit of trouble dating than in a country with no opportunities.

In determining what races were relegated to low statuses on the masculine hierarchy, Incels viewed Asians as occupying the lowest or most undesirable categories, referring to this racial disadvantage as the “ricepill.” For example, as one Incel detailed this disadvantage:

I'm not gonna sugarcoat it and argue something stupid- I know we [Asians] don't have it as easy as white or black guys [...] I let the ricepill get to me tho a couple years ago, and I always assumed that when I was out at bars that girls didn't like me cuz I was Asian.

However, this member later challenged this narrative by describing a story of sexual success. Through this story, he mentioned that being of Asian descent did not necessarily mean that you would not be able to engage in a sexual relationship. As he explained, “ricepill is overstated, your chances at intimacy aren't over just cuz you're asian. Don't let the ricepill put yourself in a defeatist mindstate before you even try.” It is important to note that this Incel did not dispute the existence of a “ricepill.” Instead, he minimized its effects, thus implying that the

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racial hierarchy was still important in determining one's position on the masculine hierarchy. By intersecting masculine and racial hierarchies, Incels of color affirmed their low status on the masculine hierarchy while also lamenting their inability to obtain White masculine privilege.

Conflating Inceldom and Disability

At times, Incels blamed uncontrollable mental and biological factors, such as neurodivergence, for inhibiting them from gaining positions of privilege and power. In this sense, they conflated Inceldom and disability, attributing the latter to the former. For example, several members of the r/IncelExit subreddit mentioned Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) as factors that prevented them from gaining an elevated position on the masculine hierarchy. One such member questioned why a woman would date somebody with ASD when she could theoretically date someone who was neurotypical:

Like many autistics I struggle to navigate social situations, sometimes struggle with executive functioning, for instance with household chores and often get obsessed with special interests. Why would a woman go for that when she can go for a neurotypical person who is able to be more socially intelligent and more able to fit in the world of employment and generate steady income? [...] Women have so many options these days, I don't see why not just go for neurotypical.

ASD and ADHD were not the only forms of neurodivergence that Incels believed inhibited them from gaining status on the masculine hierarchy. Rather, some Incels broadly blamed mental illness for their Inceldom. One such Incel wrote, "But the thing is: most of us are incels because of mental illness. Anxiety, depression, autism, whatever. Ugly poor dudes are banging right now, but they are mentally healthy and able to socialize better." By comparing himself to neuro-typical men, this member framed disability as a leading reason for individuals

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identifying with the Incel community and affirming their low positions on the masculine hierarchy.

Excusing Entitlement

Whereas the aforementioned Incels identified reasons for their lack of masculine power and access to women's bodies, others excused their sense of entitlement to women's bodies by justifying it as simple disappointment. In one thread, an r/IncelExit member wrote a rebuttal against the outside criticism that Incels believe they are automatically entitled to women and sexual relationships, simply because they are men. As this member wrote:

No one owes you a date. But simply wanting something and being upset that you don't have it, doesn't mean you're entitled. If you apply for a loan and get declined, it doesn't mean that you feel entitled to that loan. If you want to buy a PS5 but they all sold out quickly, doesn't mean you feel entitled to a PS5. You're just in an unfortunate situation and you're allowed to feel disappointment.

This member appeared to be aggrieved by his lack of access to women's bodies, and therefore, justified it by framing his entitlement as mere disappointment. Additionally, his logic dehumanizes women and women's bodies by equating the disappointment of a sexual rejection with the disappointment of being unable to purchase an object, such as a PS5.

Some Incels took excusing entitlement to a new level and fully embracing it. These members of the r/IncelExit community promoted feelings of anger and supported the notion that aggression over their perceived lack of sexual and intimate relationships with women was justified and not their fault. One user stated, "It's okay to be pissed. You're mad that it feels like you have no means to obtain a need that's important to you. Society has let you down, by not providing proper social pipelines." This member framed the lack of sexual and emotional

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partners not as an individual problem, but rather a larger societal problem. Rather than critiquing the masculine hierarchy that values this member so poorly, he instead critiqued society for failing to provide him with the necessary tools to climb that hierarchy.

Constructing a Community of Commiseration

As apparent in many of the previous quotes, r/IncelExit users often dwelled on their perceived deficiencies and lack of access to women's bodies. In some cases, Incels used these deficiencies as a foundation to construct a community of commiseration. These Incels expressed no desire to leave their low position on the masculine hierarchy, instead preferring to wallow with other Incels in their lack of masculine power. One such Incel lamented the banning of a popular Incel subreddit (i.e., r/IncelsWithoutHate) and the loss of community he subsequently suffered. As he expressed:

That sub honestly helped me a lot more than anything else. Just having people that actually read what I typed out and sympathized and understood me was a special feeling. I even felt like I could actually find someone and stop being so lonely. I feel for these people that just wanted somewhere to talk about their issues.

Lamenting the loss of the same Incel forum, another Incel threatened radicalization by stating, "I used to not believe the idea that 'if you make people not be allowed to talk about ideas, they'll get more radical'. But as someone that found a lot of good, where can I vent to now?" This Incel insinuated that, without connection to a community of other low-status men, Incels would radicalize, perhaps hinting toward the threat that lone Incels may pose in complete social isolation.

Whereas the aforementioned Incels lamented the loss of a now defunct Incel forum (i.e., r/IncelsWithoutHate), others seemed to use r/IncelExit to form a collective identity and sense of

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community with other Incels. For example, one Incel expressed that he identified with Elliot Rodger, a mass-shooter who targeted women for sexually rejecting him. As this Incel explained, “The sad reality is that I identify more with Elliot Rodger than I do any regular, well-adjusted man, and that scares me profusely.” Although this member does express ambivalence over his identification with Rodger (by stating it scares him), his identification with this high-profile Incel on this forum is nonetheless ironic. This is because r/IncelExit was designed as a space for Incels to contemplate their exit from the Incel community, not to lionize its martyrs.

Women Weighing Men Down on the Masculine Hierarchy

The previously discussed quotes exemplify the ways that Incels often embraced their low status on the masculine hierarchy. Yet, at times, users of r/IncelExit, seemingly rejected their low status or framed it as underserved by blaming women for their position. Reflecting Ward’s (2020) concept of the misogyny paradox, which argues that men who subscribe to the masculine hierarchy believe they have an unspoken right to women’s emotional and sexual service, users of r/IncelExit argued that by withholding these services, women have the power to both elevate men to high positions on the masculine hierarchy and to hold them down. Incels who circulated this logic believed that it was women’s responsibility to elevate those men relegated to a low status on the masculine hierarchy. These Incels did not aim to deconstruct the masculine hierarchy; rather, they aimed to deploy women as a force to increase their position of power on that hierarchy. Members typically did this by arguing that women have the power in dating, claiming idolization of women is not the answer, and framing women as saviors.

Women Have the Power in Dating

One way that users of r/IncelExit established women’s influence over men’s positions on the masculine hierarchy was by arguing that women hold all the power in dating and sexual

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relations. One such member remarked, “It seems that men complaining about being lonely are enemy number one. [...] Why is there so much hate? *Why not accept that dating is harder for men* [emphasis added]?”

By claiming dating is harder for men, this user hinted toward the notion that women have the power advantage in dating relations. Similarly, another Incel highlighted women’s supposed advantages by noting that women appear to take a passive or inactive role in dating, while men are forced to actively pursue women. As this Incel explained:

Women have it easier than men: It seems to men that women have an advantage in that they can sit passively while men pursue them but men have to do the pursuing. This is true but belies the larger picture.

This quote exemplifies two related tenets of hostile masculinity: (1) women should be viewed as sexual conquests but, in reality, (2) women have the true advantage over men in dating (Gilmore, 1990; Kalish & Kimmel, 2010; Kimmel, 2017; Malamuth et al., 1991b, 1995; Malamuth & Brown, 1994). Some members of r/IncelExit expanded on these tenets by proposing explanations and solutions for their perceived sexual disadvantage. In a post titled, “A Online dating Survival Guide: From a Guy who used to be bad at dating,” one Incel provided a list of solutions for overcoming, tricking, or even beating women in dating. Proposed solutions included carefully choosing which pictures to display online and hiding or masking qualities women supposedly deem unattractive or are unable to understand, such as videogames. This member brazenly prefaced this list by stating, “**Women have the advantage in online dating** [bolded in original quote], but all is not lost so lets get to work.” This call to action reinforced the idea that women hold power in dating relations, but suggested that this power imbalance is mutable and men can act to correct it and alter it to their advantage.

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Idolization of Women is Not the Answer

In their calls to correct the power imbalance that presumably favors women in dating, Incels claimed that many Incels idolize women, and that this idolization only further empowers women. As one Incel poignantly explained:

I think a lot of incels grow up with a patriarchal/essentialist view of women. They are these docile, passive creatures who can never be shallow and stoop as low as men can. I think this is what makes the black pill alluring towards incels. They found out gasp!!!... women are not these angelic beings I thought they were.

The idolization of women seemed to be a common regret among Incels, as several r/IncelExit members specifically emphasized the distress they experienced from doting on women and never obtaining their sexual favor. One such user explained:

I feel guilty for constantly finding myself attracted in some way to practically every girl I interact with, whether it's talking to them, or seeing a video or whatever. [...] I feel a nagging sense that I'm being a "simp" or somesuch. I feel that I'm constantly being dirty, creepy, weird and so on. How do I stop feeling like this all the time?

This quote is particularly illustrative in its use of the term “simp,” which refers to a man who is too attentive or submissive to women without gaining sexual access. It is also interesting that, by asking “how do I stop feeling like this all the time,” this particular member seemed to seek advice from the larger Incel community regarding how he might fix his attraction to women and usurp the power that women presumably hold over him.

Women as Saviors

Just as Incels blamed women for their low status on the masculine hierarchy, they also appeared to believe that it was women’s duty to elevate Incels from their low position through

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acts of emotional and sexual service. One such Incel pointed out that his hatred of women didn't stem from true animosity; rather, he did not trust women. As he stated, "A game changer for me was realizing the fact that I didn't just hate women, I simply didn't trust them." Incels who were suspicious of women often held women responsible for gaining their trust. One Incel illustrated this by stating, "The thing is that many of us have a 'toxic speech' about women here and there and I think the only way to fight this 'discourse' is to let women prove to you how wrong you are." Thus, this member framed women responsible for proving their own trustworthiness.

In addition to holding women responsible for proving their trustworthiness, members of r/IncelExit also placed women in a position where they are responsible for humanizing themselves. For example, one Incel credited a female friendship for humanizing women for him, as well as for instigating his exit from the Incel community. This former Incel explained:

The catalyst of me leaving the community happened rather amusingly, due to the community, a woman had quite specifically asked a online friend of mine if she knew any incels, he pointed her in my direction. [...] I built a strong platonic connection and started to understand that women are actually people, not just evil robots out to mine your resources.

Like this Incel, others detailed stories of successfully interacting with women, whether in a platonic, romantic, or sexual sense. For example, one member wrote, "why am I so thankful all of a sudden? Well, because I finally found a girl who really liked me back." This member viewed his relationship with a woman as instrumental to increasing his position on the masculine hierarchy. In essence, he appeared to believe that she saved him from Inceldom by making herself romantically available to him.

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This user was not alone in his view that romantic/sexual success is the true way out of Inceldom and the best way to advance the masculine hierarchy. In fact, other r/IncelExit members referred to the action of using sex to move up the masculine hierarchy as “ascending.” One such Incel detailed a story in which he hired a sex worker so that he could move up the masculine hierarchy. As he described:

And for once I felt like I wasn't wasting my youth. For 30 minutes I felt like a normie even though I was paying for this girl to be with me. And she was 21 which is just a year younger than me, so I got to experience sex with another young person which is something I've always wanted to experience.

By framing women as necessary to help men move up the masculine hierarchy, this Incel and others did not aim to deconstruct that hierarchy; rather, they used women as commodities to advance their position of power.

Throwing Up the Pill of Inceldom

Not all members posting on r/IncelExit sought masculine privilege and/or endorsed the masculine hierarchy. In fact, some Incels critiqued the masculine hierarchy and seemed to reject hostile masculinity and masculine privilege or focus on individual self-protection tactics. These Incels de-romanticized teen love, argued that ascension was not an exit, refused to commiserate, constructed Inceldom as a cult, and deconstructed the masculine hierarchy.

De-Romanticizing Teen Love

Some r/IncelExit members questioned men's presumed entitlement to sex and women's bodies by critiquing unrealistic expectations surrounding teen sexual relationships. Mirroring social scientific research that has demonstrated young people often overestimate the amount of sex their peers are having (Chia & Gunther, 2006; Cohen & Shotland, 1996; Lambert et al.,

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2003), some Incels blamed such unrealistic expectations for fostering the sexual disappointment that many Incels exhibit. One member reflected this by stating:

A lot of incels really, genuinely believe that the average highschool student has had sex with dozens or hundreds of girls/women, and that the average college woman has had thousands of sexual partners. I think a big part of the incel inferiority complex is just how staggering these myths make human sexuality seem.

Another expressed concern that the romanticization of teen love would lead to the proliferation of the Incel community. As he explained:

We need to stop teacing vulnerable teens about all this Highschool "love" bullshit because its not real at all and could potentially create more incels. Teens are extremely gullible and have a very narrow view on the world, so while its true that this stuff is mere entertainment, theres a shocking amount of teens who dont have a life that are absorbing all this shit as if it were real.

In their critiques of the romanticization of teen love, members often held the media responsible for Incels' overestimation of the sexual activity they are supposedly missing relative to their peers. As one user explained:

I think its not a big surprise that a massive chunk of incels are teenagers with extremely lacking social lives. They rely on media and internet to get their fix but a lot of the media is actually reinforcing their incel beliefs.

By critiquing the romanticization of teen sexual experiences, as well as the media's role in its propagation, these members attempted to dismantle the Incel community's larger belief that they are entitled to sex and women's bodies, and that being deprived of this entitlement places them in a low position on the masculine hierarchy.

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Ascension is Not an Exit

Whereas some members of r/IncelExit questioned the role of sexual deprivation in relegating Incels to the bottom of the masculine hierarchy, others took this logic a step forward by advocating against using sex as an avenue for obtaining privilege on the masculine hierarchy. Instead of using sexual conquest as an opportunity to “ascend,” these members advocated for pursuing internal self-improvement. One such user argued:

What happens if, after having sex, you don't get the intimacy you're looking for? What if it's a short-lived thing and you're quickly back to being an incel, without the confidence or emotional skills to deal with that? A focus on ascent leaves the flawed worldview intact, and just tries to move you to a different status within that worldview.

This member referenced the masculine hierarchy explicitly, noting that having sex just allows for a status change; it doesn't dismantle the overall worldview of hegemonic masculinity and the masculine hierarchy. He noted that having sex as a method of exit does not guarantee a change in worldview; rather, having sex simply masks internal problems and is a temporary fix.

Other members of r/IncelExit continued this argument, with one writing, “the goal isn't to help you get laid because, personally, I don't believe that would help you stop being an incel.” By challenging the importance of sex in determining one's position on the masculine hierarchy, this logic questions men's entitlement to sex from women and, thus, has the potential to undermine many tenets of hostile masculinity. The push for internal reflection, as opposed to seeking the sexual conquest of women, steps away from viewing women as either saviors or weights that pull men down on the masculine hierarchy. Instead, it seemingly turns the focus away from obtaining masculine privilege.

Refusing to Commiserate

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A number of r/IncelExit members expressed the belief that the best option to ensure their personal well-being was to exit Incel communities completely. In contrast to commiserating with other Incels (a theme that was previously discussed), these individuals focused on their own personal self-interests. In this way, these Incels did not challenge gender structures such as the masculine hierarchy, but rather focused on how they could benefit themselves individually. For example, one Incel explained:

Take it from an incel who hanged around in incel circles for like 4-5 years now - forums and discord servers. I can safely say that incels are the biggest pieces of shit around, even though i'm an incel as well. The extreme amounts of hatred, racism, retardation, mental illnesses those guys exhibit is insane.

Interestingly, this user identified himself as a current Incel with no suggestion that he was leaving the community, yet he was also careful to separate himself from other Incels whom he identified as hateful, emphasizing his own individual well-being over identification with the group.

While this member, and others, recommended exiting the community as a whole, some refused to commiserate with the rest of the Incel community but expressed difficulty leaving. One such Incel likened his difficulty leaving Incel websites to an addiction by stating, "I have stopped visiting places which spread the blackpill. Completly. The first days were very hard. It was very hard just not visting those sites. So, my cope was to listen to music, until the urge went away." Another Incel warned others against spending time on Incel websites by writing, "Idk if anyone will care or if I'm just being self-important by posting this here, but wasting time on this fucking site has only made me even more of a trainwreck of a human being than I already was." Although these Incels saw the larger Incel community as being harmful to their individual well-

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being, they also struggled with detangling themselves from the community that ensnared them.

Yet, these Incels did not appear to be concerned with challenging the masculine hierarchy.

Rather, they seemed to view exiting the Incel community as a method of self-protection.

Constructing Inceldom as a Cult

In their discussions of the harmful nature of the Inceldom, some members of r/IncelExit explicitly framed the Incel community as a cult. These individuals noted the internal hostility of the community and the desire of the larger community to keep its members in their low-status position on the masculine hierarchy. One Incel specifically likened exiting the Incel community to attempting to disavow a cult:

What is happening here is a grooming process to keep you from leaving the cult. They convince you that no one else can help you, the only people you need are your new friends in the community, that hey are the only people who understand you.

This same Incel continued by calling out the harms of Incels' larger community of commiseration, further writing:

These people act like they care and are on your side, but they are not, they want you to believe you can't succeed....because they don't feel that they can. They want to keep you with them, not because they like you, but because if you do break out it will make them feel bad, as long as they know you are stuck there with them, they get to feel they are not alone in the pit

It is interesting to note that this Incel claimed that competition may occur between men who are moving between positions on the masculine hierarchy, and these men aim to keep other men in their low positions as a means of affirming their own masculinity.

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One user of r/IncelExit took the disparagement of the Incel community's cult-like culture a step further by suggesting Incels to seek different communities with more positive cultures. He specifically argued: "Community is essential and great, loneliness is toxic. You can find communities which help and don't hurt." However, this member did not specifically mention any particular community that would be considered positive.

Deconstructing the Masculine Hierarchy

In their critiques of the Incel community, some r/IncelExit members went so far as to attempt to dismantle the masculine hierarchy, at least in theory. For example, one member began by referencing the "Red Pill" and "Black Pill" theories within Incel culture, stating, "The first step to exiting is to throw up the pill." By using graphic imagery of physically vomiting, this member advocated for rejection of the masculine hierarchy through complete eradication. He continued, writing:

The pill is poison in the only way to get better. The very first step has to be throwing up the pill and acknowledging that it is a sickness. It has to be a meeting new ideas with an open mind and being willing to change not based on evidence but based on an actual desire to get better because at this point the evidence no longer matters and any amount would easily be disproven by one's own personal viewpoint.

Another Incel echoed this and pointed to how dismantling the Incel worldview, which endorses the masculine hierarchy, could lead to self-improvement and a healthy relationship by proclaiming:

I prefer to focus on taking apart the incel worldview to remove the shame spirals and hateful views, while at the same time building the social skills and self-care habits until

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the person's properly ready to build healthy relationships and date. Focusing on whether they're buff or doing the right dating strategy kind of misses that point.

Although this Incel hinted toward ascending through his focus on obtaining a romantic relationship, it is noteworthy that he attributed equal responsibility to men and women in maintaining a healthy relationship, which he argued could only be gained through the personal growth of both partners. By placing himself in an equal position to women, this Incel avoided deploying masculine privilege and resolved to take responsibility for his own well-being.

Accepting the Inevitability of the Hierarchy

Whereas many members of r/IncelExit embraced or rejected their low position on the masculine hierarchy, another group of members accepted the inevitability of the hierarchy. These Incels were neither angry about their low position on the masculine hierarchy, nor were they critical. Rather, they were apathetic to their position, accepting their status as unchangeable. These members focused on diverting their attention from their low position by pursuing self-improvement and accepting self-defeat, or by diverting their attention away from Inceldom.

Self-Improvement and Self-Defeat

In order to accept their low position on the masculine hierarchy, some Incels adopted individual strategies for self-improvement, mainly through the pursuit of hobbies. Interestingly, these Incels' plans for self-improvement seemed to stem from feelings of self-defeat in their efforts to obtain a sexual or romantic relationship. As one Incel described:

Yeah life still sucks but I cope with exercise and my new found hobby of fixing things like cars and motorbikes. I'm in my 30s so I do feel like I missed out on a lot in terms of developing romantic relationships but I don't see the point of complaining because no one really cares about people who complain at least not when men complain anyway.

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By accepting the presumably immutable nature of his low position on the masculine hierarchy, this Incel avoided challenging the hierarchy itself. Instead, he mirrored the sentiments of past Men's Rights Movement activists by framing himself as a victim of sexism (e.g., arguing that nobody cares about men's complaints).

This member, and others who were apathetic to their personal position on the masculine hierarchy, expressed views that were similar to those of the mythopoetic movement. As previously discussed, the mythopoetic movement entailed homosocial groups of men attempting to "recover" their lost masculinity. Men of the Mythopoetic Movement wanted to stop paying the emotional costs of masculine privilege associated with femininity; however, they did not change their desire to reap the benefits of masculine privilege (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2017; Messner, 1998).

Some Incels echoed these thoughts by claiming femininity for themselves as a way to exist on the masculine hierarchy with minimal discomfort. One such Incel wrote:

Being a *romantic* [bolded in original] doesn't mean that you're emotional, hysterical, reactionary or illogical. There's this notion that *romantics* are somehow more "feminine", but if we look throughout history, that's not really the case. In some societies, throughout history, being rational where seen as feminine.

He continued by stating, "Emotional outbursts, fashion, true beauty and even genuine love, where the traits of the manliest of men" and then concluded by arguing:

In either case, "*feminine traits*" where considered bad and that's something that harms all of us. Even if you believe yourself to be more of a *realist*, I think that you should connect with your romantic side. You do have one, all of us have.

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This Incel claimed traits historically associated with femininity as a masculine trait for himself and other men, but he did not challenge or deconstruct the masculine hierarchy. Instead, he advocated for redefining some feminine traits (e.g., emotional expression) as a new marker of masculinity, which would presumably elevate the status of those very traits.

CHAPTER FOUR

LIMITATIONS

Findings from this study should be interpreted within the scope of some important limitations. First, the study is limited by the sample size of included posts. By only including the most highly ranked posts, I potentially excluded a range of ideas that were not deemed popular by members. Second, I am unable to guarantee with absolute certainty that every poster in the sample identified as an Incel or as an Incel exiting the community. Although I attempted to mitigate this by deleting posts by users who explicitly indicated they were not Incels, there is no way of knowing whether all posts that were retained in the sample were created by Incels. Third, I gathered my data during a singular month, and thus potentially excluded posts that were created after that month. Finally, I gathered my sample from one subreddit, and thus results are not representative of every member of the Incel community on Reddit or other social media platforms.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Despite these limitations, findings from this study have important implications for our understandings of masculinity and power. The current investigation used Incels as a case study to examine how a community of men who perceive that they fall at the bottom of the masculine hierarchy and are characterized by hegemonic masculinity, challenge and/or reinforce hegemonic masculinity as they attempt to exit their low-status position. This study specifically questioned how these men (1) challenge and/or reinforce hegemonic and/or hostile masculinity and (2) seek and/or reject masculine privilege.

Findings from this study illustrate the pervasive power of the masculine hierarchy. The defining characteristic of the r/IncelExit community is that its members are contemplating leaving a group that defines itself as inhabiting a low position on the masculine hierarchy. Yet, aside from those men who advocated for “throwing up the pill of Inceldom,” the members posting to this community largely embraced their low status and accepted the inevitability of the hierarchy that oppresses them. Members’ comments suggested that they have a clear understanding of their low positions on the masculine hierarchy and, despite claims that women have all the power in dating scenarios, their reluctance to challenge the tenets of hegemonic masculinity suggests they recognize that this hierarchy both justifies their subjugation under more privileged men and their power over women. In other words, for men in the r/IncelExit community, the masculine hierarchy is simultaneously a prison and a bastion of privilege.

Rather than holding privileged men accountable for this perceived oppression, members’ comments suggest they believe women hold the keys to the prison. That is, Ward (2020) argues that men who subscribe to the masculine hierarchy believe they have an unspoken right to

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women's emotional and sexual services. The men in the r/IncelExit community seemed to believe that, by withholding these services, women can relegate men to low positions on the masculine hierarchy, but by making themselves accessible, they may also "save" men from these positions and afford them some semblance of masculine privilege. This tension of casting women as both oppressors and saviors may explain why women are the frequent targets of Incels' anger and revenge. In other words, Incels cling to a masculine hierarchy that promises them some power, even if it is simply power over the women they believe have relegated them to low positions on that hierarchy.

Examining messages from those men who chose to "throw up the pill of Inceldom" seems to only further exemplify the pervasive power of the masculine hierarchy. Some men clearly advocated for leaving the Incel community, but they seemed to do so out of self-preservation rather than out of concern for the targets of Incels' hate. That is, they expressed the harmful effects that commiserating with other Incels has had on their individual well-being – sometimes even likening it to an addiction. In this way, Incels are similar to members of the mythopoetic movement of the 1970s, who challenged proscriptive gender norms that were harmful to their personal well-being (e.g., norms that prohibit men from expressing vulnerable emotions) while refusing to relinquish masculine privilege (Kimmel, 2017; Messner, 1997; Ward, 2020). Men of the mythopoetic movement, as well as other men's liberation groups, eventually came to see advances in women's rights as infringements on men's rights (Messner, 1997; 1998). Thus, as long as a masculine hierarchy that values the masculine over the feminine continues to exist, men's groups that fight to maintain that hierarchy will flourish among those men who are aggrieved by their status on that hierarchy.

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It is important to note that this study was conducted with men who are merely contemplating leaving the Incel community and may still be entrenched. Although there are a few examples of programs that aim to challenge men's hegemonic masculinity (Jewkes et al., 2015; Schrock & Padavic, 2007), these programs are typically sought by, or mandated for, men who have exhibited abusive behavior. Men who commiserate with like-minded men in online forums for extremist groups may be unlikely to seek such interventions. Thus, future research with men who have successfully left the Incel community, or other men's groups with extremist ideologies, may be helpful in identifying ways that men break loose from the promises of privilege that the masculine hierarchy uses to ensnare them. Doing so may mitigate the proliferation of a group whose commiseration has, at times, culminated in acts of mass violence committed against both those who subjugate them (e.g., privileged men) and those whom they subjugate (e.g., women).

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Table 1.

Table of Focused Codes and Subcodes

Focused Codes	Subcodes	Example Quotes
Embracing The Low Status on The Masculine Hierarchy	<i>Taking Stock of Sexual Market Value</i>	“At this point facial reconstructive surgery is my only hope. I don't care how much it'll cost or the risks it poses; I'll go bankrupt if it means I can just be average looking. I know I'll never be hot or even decently attractive, but I'll happily settle for "not looking like a cave troll" [quotations in original quote].
	<i>Intersecting Hierarchies</i>	“I am a 5’4 male of a non-white ethnicity (which I will not specify) and according to incels this is a double whammy.”
	<i>Conflating Inceldom and Disability</i>	“But the thing is: most of us are incels because of mental illness. Anxiety, depression, autism, whatever. Ugly poor dudes are banging right now, but they are mentally healthy and able to socialize better..”
	<i>Excusing Entitlement</i>	“No one owes you a date. But simply wanting something and being upset that you don't have it, doesn't mean you're entitled. If you apply for a loan and get declined, it doesn't mean that you feel entitled to that loan. If you want to buy a PS5 but they all sold out quickly, doesn't mean you feel entitled to a PS5. You're just in an unfortunate situation and you're allowed to feel disappointment.”
	<i>Constructing a Community of Commiseration</i>	“I used to not believe the idea that ‘if you make people not be allowed to talk about ideas, they’ll get more radical’. But as someone that found a lot of good, where can I vent to now?”
Women Weighing Men Down On The Masculine Hierarchy		

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Focused Codes	Subcodes	Example Quotes
	<i>Women have the Dating Power</i>	“Women have it easier than men: It seems to men that women have an advantage in that they can sit passively while men pursue them but men have to do the pursuing. This is true but belies the larger picture.”
	<i>Idolization of Women is Not the Answer</i>	“I think a lot of incels grow up with a patriarchal/essentialist view of women. They are these docile, passive creatures who can never be shallow and stoop as low as men can. I think this is what makes the black pill alluring towards incels. They found out gasp!!!... women are not these angelic beings I thought they were.”
	<i>Women as Saviors</i>	“The thing is that many of us have a ‘toxic speech’ about women here and there and I think the only way to fight this ‘discourse’ is to let women prove to you how wrong you are.”
Throwing Up The Pill Of Inceldom	<i>De-Romanticizing Teen Love</i>	“We need to stop teaching vulnerable teens about all this Highschool "love" bullshit because its not real at all and could potentially create more incels. Teens are extremely gullible and have a very narrow view on the world, so while its true that this stuff is mere entertainment, theres a shocking amount of teens who dont have a life that are absorbing all this shit as if it were real.”
	<i>Ascension is Not an Exit</i>	“the goal isn't to help you get laid because, personally, I don't believe that would help you stop being an incel.”
	<i>Refusing to Commiserate</i>	“Take it from an incel who hanged around in incel circles for like 4-5 years now - forums and discord servers. I can safely say that incels are the biggest pieces of shit around, even though i'm an incel as well. The extreme amounts of hatred, racism, retardation, mental illnesses those guys exhibit is insane.”

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Focused Codes	Subcodes	Example Quotes
	<i>Constructing Inceldom as a Cult</i>	“What is happening here is a grooming process to keep you from leaving the cult. They convince you that no one else can help you, the only people you need are your new friends in the community, that hey are the only people who understand you.”
	<i>Deconstructing the Masculine Hierarchy</i>	“The pill is poison in the only way to get better. The very first step has to be throwing up the pill and acknowledging that it is a sickness.”
Accepting The Inevitability Of The Hierarchy	<i>Self-Improvement and Self-Defeat</i>	“Yeah life still sucks but I cope with exercise and my new found hobby of fixing things like cars and motorbikes. I'm in my 30s so I do feel like I missed out on a lot in terms of developing romantic relationships but I don't see the point of complaining because no one really cares about people who complain at least not when men complain anyway.”

Note: All quotation content – including ellipses- appeared in the original postings, unless noted. This includes all original spelling, grammar, and punctuation.