

# [Incels and the stories they tell]

*[A narrative analysis of Incels' shared stories  
on Reddit]*

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# **[Incels and the stories they tell]**

A mediated narrative analysis of Incels' shared stories on Reddit and their present constellation of hybrid masculinity

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Incels and The Stories They Tell – A narrative analysis of Incels' shared stories on Reddit

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# Abstract

After the separation of pro- and anti-feminist groups in the USA in the 1970s, we saw a growth in more overtly anti-feminist politics throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In the 2010s, a more hateful culture emerged, largely due to the possibility for anonymity on the Internet. This is The Manosphere, a now transnational, conglomeration of forums, blogs and websites which center around the concept of The Red Pill, a philosophy meant to awaken men to feminism's misogyny and brainwashing. This thesis is about a specific group found in The Manosphere, a group of men who view themselves as unable to find a partner or have sex despite desiring to. They are known as Incels or involuntary celibate. I wish to describe and understand this online culture and community by looking at the shared stories they tell through a narrative analysis. Incels are a new phenomenon, and my thesis is the first academic study to cover the present constellation of Incels.

The research question is as follows: What are the main narratives that emerge in the shared stories told amongst Incels on /r/Braincels? I focus on co-tellership and shared meanings through these supporting research questions: How are the characters from the Incel-world represented? What are the Incel community norms and rights associated with the narrative interactions? Whose interests does the stories serve?

I use mediated narrative analysis to analyze the shared stories on three levels: at level one, I look at the shared story through character portrayal. At level two, I look at the sharing and interaction in the shared story. This means discussing the relational work and interactions amongst tellers. I also look at the positioning of Incels to hegemonic masculinity, are they distancing or aligning themselves with hegemonic masculinity? At level three, I look at the shared meanings, that being the main narratives and whose interests the stories serve.

The five main narratives that emerged through my data are as follows: 1) the narrative of sex is what decides a man's worth 2), the narrative of "looks are

everything; personality is nothing", 3) The narrative of women being subordinate to men, 4) The narrative of anti-feminism and 5) The narrative of loneliness.

Throughout my analysis, I look at the constellation of Incels' hybrid masculinity in light of hegemonic and hybrid masculinity theories. I find that Incels position hegemonic masculinity as superior to both Incels and women. Women are presented as subordinate to men, and feminine traits are positioned as subordinate to masculine traits. Incels place themselves in another masculine identity than hegemonic masculinity by contrasting themselves to the stereotypical masculine ideal, Chad. In addition, Incels distance themselves through talking about their failures and expressing emotions. This is not accepted when performing hegemonic masculinity.

Lastly, I find that /r/Braincels functions as a channel for venting frustration for the men who consider themselves Incels, and who consider our modern day society unfair and cruel to (what they categorize as) ugly men. At the same time, they show concerning categorizations of gender and misogyny. They present themselves as victims, and women as the enemy.



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# 1 Introduction

In the Vice documentary “This Is What The Life Of An Incel Looks Like” (Vice News 2018), we meet Joey (23), who spends his days sitting in his room with in front of the computer with the window blinds drawn. Joey has no job and does not go to school. He spends his time smoking cigarettes and running chat rooms. When asked what an Incel is, he answers:

It’s just something you are. Volcel is voluntary, incel is involuntary celibate - meaning you’ve tried, many times, and, failed. And there’s mentalcels, which should probably fit best with me, someone who can’t form a relationship because of mental blockage” (Vice News 2018)

This thesis is about a group of men who view themselves as unable to find a partner or have sex despite desiring to. They are known as Incels: a portmanteau<sup>1</sup> of *involuntary celibate*. In this study, I wish to describe and understand this online culture and community better by looking at the shared stories they tell, through a mediated narrative analysis of the threads and comments on the subreddit. However, to understand how this community came to be, we need to start at the beginning.

In 1997 a girl named Alana from Toronto, Canada started a simple, all-text website called Alana’s Involuntary Celibacy Project. Here, she posted articles, theories and ran a mailing list on subjects of involuntary celibacy. This website was intended for people who struggled to form loving relationships (Taylor 2018, Kassam 2018). In an interview with BBC, she describes the website as a friendly place, where “there was probably a bit of anger and some men were a bit clueless about how women are unique, individual humans, but in general it was a supportive place” (Taylor 2018). Alana tells The Guardian (Kassam 2018) that she started the website after observing other, socially awkward people who also were struggling with meeting and dating other people. She wanted to create an inclusive community, which embraced those with marginalized sex lives caused by rigid gender norms, mental illness, and social challenges.

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<sup>1</sup> Portmanteau is a word that combines the sounds and meaning of two words

Alana thus started the first website for Incels: people who are involuntary celibate. She left the community after some years due to her own success in romance and social life. Almost ten years later, in 2014, she would read about Elliott Rodger, an Incel - a term she herself coined, in "Mother Jones", a feminist magazine (Taylor 2018, Kassam 2018).

Rodger killed six people on 23. May in 2014. Two of his roommates and another man were stabbed to death by Rodger. He then shot three girls outside a sorority house in Santa Barbara. Two of them died. After driving away, he fired his gun towards a deli and killed his last victim, before shooting himself in his car. Rodger left behind a Youtube video and a manifesto titled "My Twisted World", where he tells about rejection, loneliness, and insignificance (Woolf 2015). He describes his life as a dark story of sadness, anger and hatred. He writes about how he was forced to go through with these killings "because the females of the human species were incapable of seeing the value in me" (Rodger 2014:1). He ends his 137 pages long manifesto with asking why he "was condemned to a life of misery while other men were able to experience the pleasures of sex and love with women" (Rodger 2014:137). He concludes that he is the true victim and that he wishes to punish *everyone* (Rodger 2014:137). To people outside the Incel community, the term Incel became known after Rodgers killings, though several articles on the Incel community published by the media. While Rodger was condemned in the papers, some people found in the internet's darker corners like the subreddit /r/Incels and 4chan, hailed him.

What initially was intended as a website for lonely, socially awkward people of both sexes had in a decade become a community for lonely boys and men who express hatred towards women and sexually successful men, as well as self-hatred and bizarre humor. We now find Incels on places like 4chan, Reddit and other chat forums. Who are they?

Incel is a new term for both researchers and the media. However, it has received more attention in recent years. In 2018, the word Incel was shortlisted as the Word of the year by Oxforddictionaries.com. The winner of this contest is "judged to reflect the ethos, mood or preoccupations of that particular year" ("word of the year" 2019). When searching for Incels or involuntary celibate through the international news media database, Factiva.com, I find 1055 articles, starting in 1998. From 1998 to

2014, we find a total of seven articles concerning involuntary celibacy; some of them discuss the romantic comedy "40-year-old virgin" from 2005. In 2014, we see a jump in the number of articles (24) in the aftermath of Elliott Rodger, who killed six people on 23. May 2014. In 2018 we see another jump in numbers (996), after Alek Minassian`s van attack in Toronto, killing ten people and leaving fifteen people injured. Before the van attack, Minassian had posted on Facebook that "The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys!"<sup>2</sup> (Crilly, Guly & Molloy 2018), and referring to Rodger as "the supreme gentleman" (Crilly, Guly & Molloy 2018).

In the recent months, Incels have received attention in the Norwegian public in the aftermath of the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation`s (NRK) TV-show Trygdekontoret`s episode titled "Verdiløse Menn", which translates into "worthless men" (NRK 2019). Here, we meet a Norwegian Incel, along the side of a self-proclaimed sexist and the leader of the Norwegian version of The manosphere: Mannegruppa Ottar. To my knowledge, this is the first time any Incel has attended any national TV-show.

In the remainder of this introduction, I will address the previous academic research on Incels and The manosphere, before presenting my research questions and outline of thesis.

## 1.1 Researching Incels in The manosphere

Incels are thus a new phenomenon. There is little academic research covering Incels. There is plenty of research concerning celibacy (for example Bell & Sobo 2001), many in context with religion (for example Schultz 2016), and others in the context of resistance to the power of the male sex-drive discourse (for example Gareth 2012). In the first academic research article concerning specifically *involuntary* celibacy, published in 2001, Denise Donnelly , Elisabeth Burgess , Sally Anderson , Regina Davis & Joy Dillard examines the development and maintenance of involuntary celibacy through a life course analysis. The same year, Elisabeth Burgess, Denise

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<sup>2</sup> Chad and Stacy are characters from the Incel world. They are symbols of good-looking men and women and I will elaborate on these characters in chapter 2.

Donnelly, Joy Dillard and Regina Davis (2001) also publish an article covering the methods of web-based research used in their first article. In 2008, Elisabeth Burgess and Denise Donnelly publish the article “The Decision to Remain in an Involuntarily Celibate Relationship”. Denise Donnelly is a sociologist, while Elisabeth Burgess is a Social Gerontologist, both at Georgia State University.

There is some research mentioning Incels in context with the research of The manosphere (Nagle 2017; Ging 2017; Massanari 2017; Paananen & Reichl 2019). The manosphere is a loose confederation of anti-feminist online spaces such as blogs and forums, which Incels are considered a part of. The particular relevant research for this thesis is the work of Debbie Ging (2017) and Angela Nagle (2017). Nagle is a non-fiction writer, and former PhD-student of the School of Communications at Dublin City University, where Debbie Ging was her supervisor (Dublin City University 2019). In her book, Nagle (2017) provides critical observations of (amongst other things) The manosphere. Despite Nagle writing from a clear leftist and feminist view, which she herself makes clear in the book, she gives an informative description of this online universe, and I will use her work in my background chapter.

Ging is an Associate professor in the School of Communications at Dublin City University. She teaches Media Studies, Film Studies and Television Drama, with a focus on gender and sexuality (Dublin City University 2019). Ging (2017) theorizes the masculinities that exist in The manosphere. She finds new hybrid configurations of masculinities that complicate the traditional hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity. By drawing on tropes of victimhood, beta masculinity and involuntary celibacy, these new hybrid masculinities work to conceal hegemonic masculinity in historically new ways.

The concepts of hybrid and hegemonic masculinity will function as a common thread in my analysis. In relevance to this, Schmitz and Kazyak (2016) identify two groups that use different ideological strategies to support hegemonic masculinity amongst Men's rights activists (MRA's), a different anti-feminist group in The manosphere. These strategies are presented as *Cyber Lads in search for masculinity* and *Virtual Victims in search for equality*. Cyber Lads use extreme anti-feminist rhetoric and encourage violence against women. Virtual Victims seek social legitimacy through a (seemingly) nondiscriminatory language and supporting research. However, they still

blame feminism for oppressing men through social and structural misandry. Both Schmitz and Kazyak (2016) and Shawn P. Van Valkenburgh (2018) describes the objectifying of women as a strategy for reconciling the dichotomy of women being both desirable and undesirable. Even though these strategies and concepts are used in the Men`s rights activist- part of The manosphere, I can recognize these strategies amongst Incels.

Since there is limited research covering Incels in particular, I needed to broaden my literature search. Incels are closely linked to the topic of online hate culture, as they are known for their misogynist and anti-feminist views and rhetoric, which we find throughout The manosphere(Nagle 2017; Ging 2017; and Massanari 2017). Today, we are experiencing increasing sexual cyberbullying (Ehman & Gross 2019) and trolling of women just for the fun of it (Paananen & Reichl 2019). We are also seeing an explosion of hateful and extreme speech online, accommodated by social media and the Internet, which is hard to control (Ganesh 2018; Massanari 2017). Barath Ganesh (2018) identifies three formal features of online hate culture that make it ungovernable: “its swarm structure, its exploitation of inconsistencies in web governance between different actors, and its use of coded language to avoid moderation by government or private sector actors” (p. 30). Similarly, Adrienne Massanari (2017) shows how toxic technocultures are thriving on Reddit due to several factors; its design, it`s governance structure, algorithmic logic, administrators lack of intervention as well as its reputations as a geek-friendly environment (Massanari 2017:342). I will discuss her article in my background chapter, looking at the prerequisites for the growth of anti-feminism on Reddit and the administrative changes done to fight the toxic technocultures found here. Like Ging and Nagle, Massanari is also a media and communications researcher, whereas based in Chicago (Massanari 2019).

Taking the previous academic research into account, the need for a *new, sociological* view on Incels is evident. Moreover, this means that my research is the first academic research done on the present day constellation of Incels, where women are excluded from the definition.

## **1.2 Researching virtual communities**

As I am conducting research on a virtual community, I chose the qualitative method of online ethnography. I will loosely follow the online ethnological procedure of Skågeby (2011), which consists of first defining a setting and a research perspective, then making an entrance to the community followed by a description of data collection.

I have chosen Reddit as my source for data for this thesis. Reddit is an online community where users can post links to content found on the Internet. Other users can vote the links up or down if you like or dislike the posts. The visibility of the posts is decided by the total up- and down votes. In this way, the most popular posts will be shown on the front page. In November 2017 the subreddit dedicated to Incels, /r/Incels, was banned for inciting violence against women (Hauser 2017). I have been spending time on the new subreddit for Incels. This subreddit, or community if you will, is now quarantined by Reddit as it is "dedicated to highly shocking or highly offensive content" ("Quarantined Subreddits" 2019). Every time you enter, click on a thread or go back to a previous page, a warning comes up:

**Are you sure you want to view this community? This community is quarantined. It is dedicated to shocking or highly offensive content. Are you certain you want to continue?**

This warning indicates that Incels are unwanted and offensive.

In my data collection, I have analyzed six different threads on /r/Braincels, where each thread consists of one hundred to two hundred comments. As such, my data comprise of around 1000 comments. I chose the threads of interest to my thesis, and this means that some topics and views of Incels are unaccounted for. However, as I have observed this community over five months, I will still argue that the narratives I find are representative for Incels in general. In line with the EU General Data Protection Regulation, I have read and copied the direct citations from the website, conducting what I call a direct document collection.



Who the real people behind these citations are is not relevant to my thesis. In general, they are men or boys, who presume a white, male centrality. However, they most likely consist of many ethnicities.

Doing research on this online community has shown to be an ethical challenge. There are no clear rules on what is considered public or private space on the Internet. I discuss my ethical choices in detail in chapter five. In this way, my study contributes to the work of ethnography online. I argue that the large number of users, the quarantine of /r/Braincels (which actually helps me as a researcher, making direct citations impossible to backtrack through a google search) and the anonymization of usernames makes it possible to conduct ethical research on this virtual community.

To analyze my data, I have chosen mediated narrative analysis as presented by Ruth Page (2018). This method includes a flexible approach to what narratives are and consists of. As such, I define shared stories online as narratives. Shared stories have several tellers and the linearity is distributed across the contributions of these tellers. Shared stories are told in many directions, not following a chronological timeline. In addition, shared stories do most often not have an ending. Someone can always continue the story by adding a comment. This means that I will analyze the comments found in each story in context of the rest of the specific story. In line with the mediated narrative analysis, I will include the semiotic resources and relational work found in these shared stories in my analysis. Images and interactions are important elements of shared stories online.

This study looks at three narrative characters: the protagonist, the antagonist and the disputable object. The protagonist is the acting part, the disputed object is the goal of the action, and the antagonist is the part that tries to prevent the protagonist in reaching its goal (Rafoss 2016: 28). I will also examine how Incel position themselves in regards to hegemonic masculinity in line with the theory of hybrid masculinities as presented by Ging (2017).

I will use every start of a thread: the picture, link or texts that are first posted, as the beginning of a story, and then use the comments below as a continuation of the same story. These threads include both shared and individual stories, and I will refer

to them as *stories*. The larger, collective stories I find by analyzing these stories, I will define as *narratives*.

I am interested in identifying the most important narratives that are evident in the shared stories told on the subreddit for Incels: The main research question is as follows:

What are the main narratives that emerge in the shared stories told amongst Incels on /r/Braincels ?

I focus on co-tellership and shared meanings through these supporting research questions:

How are the characters from the Incel-world represented? What are the Incel community norms and rights associated with the narrative interactions? Whose interests does the narratives serve?

### **1.3 Outline of the thesis**

I start my thesis with a background chapter in chapter two, where I present The manosphere and the concepts that unify them. These concepts are important for understanding Incels and their worldview. A presentation of Donnelly et.al's (2001) theory of becoming involuntary celibate will then follow. Their research gives insight into the process and consequences of involuntary celibacy. I close the background chapter with a presentation of Reddit, its position as a hub for anti-feminism, and I address the recent administrative changes done to fight this position.

In chapter three, I present the theories of hegemonic and hybrid masculinities. I will use these theoretical concepts in my analysis, looking at how Incels position themselves in relation to hegemonic masculinity. In chapter four, I present the theoretical perspective used in my analysis: a mediated narrative analysis.

The method and data in my thesis will be discussed in chapter five. Here, I discuss my methodological approach: ethnography online. This method includes setting a declaration of research perspective and setting before conducting research. I am a

woman, an outsider with some inside knowledge due to lurking and reading about the phenomenon Incels. I will enter the community as an invisible fly on the wall. A discussion of the ethical considerations regarding research on online communities follows.

My analysis follows in chapter six and seven. In my analysis, I will discuss each shared story, each of the six threads, at three levels: *At level one*, I will give a description of each shared story and a discussion of the portrayal of the characters in this story. *At level two*, if relevant, I will look at the relational work in the shared stories. Here, I will discuss the positions the tellers take up in the interaction and what norms and rights are associated with these interactions. In addition, throughout the whole analysis, I will address Incels' constellation of hybrid masculinity. This means discussing the positioning of hegemonic masculinity, and positioning of Incels to hegemonic masculinity: are they aligning or distancing themselves from it? *At level three*, I will discuss the broader, cultural meanings I find in the shared stories. This means identifying and discussing shared meanings found in the narrative. *At level three, part two*: Lastly, I will sum up and discuss whose interests the narratives serve in light of Ging's (2017) theory of hybrid masculinities, in a separate chapter. Thus, I look at the sociocultural implications of the narratives.

I present my conclusion in chapter eight.

## 2 Anti-feminism online: entering The manosphere

Angela Nagle writes about The manosphere in her book *Kill all normies: online culture wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-right* (2017), and claim that feminism and The manosphere are at war on the internet. Nagle (2017:86) links the growing anti-feminist masculinist politics online with the expansion of feminism and radical liberal gender politics. She describes the growing number of anti-feminist websites, blogs and subcultures online as "growing to an extent that would undoubtedly have been written up as a «digital revolution» if it had different cultural politics" (Nagle 2017:86). These anti-feminist online communities are known as The manosphere, and is used to describe everything from progressive men's issues activists like Men's Rights Activists (MRA's), who deal with neglect of male health, suicide, and unequal social services, to Pick Up Artists (PUA's), Men Going Their own way (MGTOW) and Incels. The PUA's believe in "learning the game": how to manipulate women with certain behavior to get them to sleep with them. MGTOW is a group of men that claim that they have chosen to exclude women in their lives to be able to focus on themselves. Nagle describes Incels as "the nastier corners of the internet, filled with involuntary celibacy-obsessed, hate-filled, resentment-fueled cultures of quite chilling levels of misogyny" (Nagle 2017:86). Both The manosphere and Incels started out as American phenomenon's, but they are now considered transnational due to the easy access to websites over the Internet. Following, I present a short historical background of anti-feminism, focusing on the United States of America (USA).

### **The separation of feminism and men's liberation**

In the USA, in the early 1970s the women's liberation movement had become a force to reckon with, mostly visible "in the streets" in form of grassroots groups, local consciousness-raising groups and mass public demonstrations, and in academia (Messner 2016:7). Debbie Ging (2017:2) and Michael A. Messner (2016:8) explains how this second-wave feminism in the 1970s inspired the men's liberation movement to focus on the critique of the conventional understandings of masculinity. The men's liberation movement soon split into pro- and anti-feminist groups, mainly because of

the disagreement over the claim that male privilege affects women unfairly. The antifeminist groups continued to use a conservative language of sex roles, while the pro-feminist movement adopted a radical discourse, focusing on ending men's institutional privilege and violence against women (Messner 2016:8). Messner (2016) identifies three specific social changes in the 1980s and 1990s, which he believes created the "present moment of gender formation" (p.9) we know today: the institutionalization and professionalism of feminism; the emergence of a postfeminist cultural sensibility; and deindustrialization and the rise of the neoliberal state (Messner 2016:9). By the mid-90s the men's movement became primarily focused on institutions in which men were excluded or discriminated against (Nagle 2017:87-88):

The critique of the restrictive traditional male sex role gave way to a celebration of masculinity itself, and feminism became the political enemy force. This wave of more overtly anti-feminist men's politics included the National Coalition of Free Men, who rejected the idea of male privilege (Nagle 2017:88).

In the 2010s a more hateful culture emerged, under the conditions of anonymity. It also took on a more right-wing character (Nagle 2017:88) According to Nagle (2017:88), they started living up to the most negative feminist caricatures of men's rights activism: rage-filled, hateful and chauvinistic. This is the Manosphere: the home of the MRA's, the PUA's, MGTOW and Incels. A conglomeration of groups, which started out in North America – which now can found in most countries, including Norway.

### **The unifying concepts in The manosphere**

At first glance, there seems to be little coherence amongst the groups in The manosphere. It is important to note that they often discuss and fight with each other. However, what these groups do have in common are the anti-feminist attitudes and rhetorical concepts. These common denominators are essential for understanding the interactions on /r/Braincels. In this part, I will map out the common concepts that unify the Manosphere, followed by a discussion of the contradictions following these views.

The subreddit “*The Red Pill*” has been central to the development and growth of the anti-feminist politics on the Internet. (Nagle 2017:88). Here, they (mostly) discuss seduction strategies in light of evolutionary psychology (Van Valkenburgh 2018: 8). The red pill is an analogy referencing to the film “The Matrix” from 1999, where the leading character Neo is given the choice between taking two pills; the red or the blue pill:

Taking the blue pill means switching off and living a life in delusion; taking the red pill means becoming enlightened to life`s ugly truths. The Red Pill philosophy purports to awaken men to feminism's misandry and brainwashing and is the key concept that unites all of these communities. (Ging 2017:3)

When you swallow the red pill, you will see how female oppression is a myth. It is believed that feminists fabricated this myth, while the truth is that women play the victim while *men* are being exploited through alimony and child support. Feminism is a sexual strategy: it puts women in the best position to select mates, to locate the best DNA, to change partners when they want and to gather the most resources possible (Van Valkenburgh 2018:6). Through feminism, women are able to pursue wealthy and attractive partners. The Red Pill is an antidote, a strategy against this feminist strategy. Thus, to be free of the claws of feminism, you have to acknowledge this truth. Only then, you can start working against feminisms influence over you (Van Valkenburgh 2018:6). In his analysis of The Red Pill subreddit, Shawn P. Van Valkenburgh (2018) finds that The Red Pill is an expression of hegemonic masculinity<sup>3</sup>, while also integrating “neoliberal and scientific discourses into its seduction strategies” (p. 1). According to the author, the Red Pill “privileges scientific rationality and integrates common economic discourses involving meritocracy, rationalization, quantification, and market-based exchange into its seduction ideology“(p.16). Rationality is masculine. For example, sexual relationships are valued by quantity instead of quality, and emotional vulnerability is frowned upon. Moreover, The Red Pill forum presents men’s need for emotional and intimate connections as caused by feminism. Real men do not need real love; they are

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<sup>3</sup>. Hegemonic masculinity is “the mythology of gender dominant within cultural representations of males, reflecting normative behavioral ideals for males in a culture in a particular period (regardless of the actual prevalence of such behavior in that society). Such representations promote stereotypical masculine heterosexual values” (“Hegemonic masculinity” 2019).

manipulated by women to believe so (Van Valkenburgh 2018:12). The neo-liberal discourse of quantity and rationality is used to exclude the importance, or even existence, of intimacy (Van Valkenburgh 2018:16):

When an unstoppable force—the need for intimate sexual connection—meets an immovable object—emotional rigidity—erotic energies can be displaced onto women who are framed as commodities, exchangeable in a sexual marketplace (Van Valkenburgh 2018:16).

In line with their focus on rationality, The Red Pill forum believes knowledge of *evolutionary psychology (EP)* is crucial for success in the sexual market (Van Valkenburgh 2018:8). This evolutionary view permeates The manosphere.

EP stems from Darwin's theory of natural selection and study human behavior as the product of psychological adaptations (Confer et.al 2010). Human behavior has evolved to maximize gene reproduction, and women and men have different reproductive interests. Therefore, they evolve different strategies for reproduction and end up with different personalities (Van Valkenburgh 2018:8). Women are believed to be driven by their contradictory biological drive when finding husbands and sexual partners. They marry men who are supportive and have sex with men who have good genes. Men with good genes are not supportive, and men who are supportive does not have good genes (Van Valkenburgh 2018:9). This dichotomy is presented as the "Alpha fucks/ Beta Buxx" (AF/BB) – principle in The Red Pill forum. Women want genes from alpha males and a beta male who provides money (Van Valkenburgh 2018:9). Alphas are the high-ranking males and the betas are the low-ranking males in the social hierarchy, and all human social interaction is interpreted through this social hierarchy. Some men try to rise from a "nice guy"-beta to a sexually successful alpha by following the strategies presented by the PUA`s (Nagle 2017:89). The Red Pill forum also believes you can become attractive to women by imitating alpha behavior and appearance, a strategy that Van Valkenburgh(2018) calls "applied EP" (p.10). Incels, on the other hand, believe they are doomed by societies cruel rules to never have sex because they are too ugly or socially awkward (Reeve 2018).

Lastly, I wish to explain the concept of *Chad and Stacy*, which pervades, and stems from The Red Pill subreddit. Chad is the archetypical alpha bad boy ("Manosphere

glossary" 2019). He is tall, handsome and sexually successful ("Chad" 2019). Incel Wiki describes him as:

Contrary to popular opinion, chad doesn't cockblock other men. He doesn't need to. Chad has women coming to \*him\*. He opens his tinder and finds dozens of matches and messages just in the last week. Chad can say nearly anything he wants to a woman on a dating app and within a few messages get her number and a place/time to be intimate. Sometimes the only difference between chad and an incel is a few millimeters of bone and fat on the face ("Chad" 2019)

The difference between Chad and non-Chad (incel) is literally a few millimeters of bone.



Image 1. "The difference between Chad and Incels" (N.D)

Chad also comes in several ethnic variations such as Tyrone (black), Chadpreet (Indian), Gaston (French) and Jason (English) ("Chad" 2019). In image 1, we see a popular image of how Incels view themselves compared to Chad. Chad can get every woman he wants but tends to go for Stacy rather than Becky (a subordinate female). Stacy is the archetypical babe:

Stacy is the ultimate embodiment of every wicked, depraved aspect of feminine nature (...) She is vain, obsessed with jewelry, makeup, and clothes. She is an entitled whore whose rich daddy funds her Caribbean vacations to go "find herself" ("Stacy" 2019).

### The Stacy



Image 1. "The Stacy" (N.D).

The character Stacy is an example of how Incels and The Red Pill focus on physical traits, while at the same time diminish her human aspects by characterizing her as



vain, arrogant and entitled. At first glance, there seems to be humor attached to these characters. However, Incels discuss Chad and Stacy in grave seriousness.

### **A new sexual hierarchy**

Nagle (2017) utters frustration regarding the contradiction and hypocrisy you find in many of the communities in *The Manosphere*: “They want the benefits of tradition without its necessary restraints and duties” (p.96). By benefits, she means the benefits of the sexual revolution, i.e. pornified women who will sleep with them. The restraints are the insecurities men may experience in contact with sexually liberated women (Nagle: 2017:96).

Nagle (2017:97) suggests the drive behind the conservative sexual politics of the rightist anti-feminist (and even the drive behind the personal motivation for young men turning to the far right) is the sexual revolution and the decline of longtime marriage. This decline has resulted in what Nagle (2017) describes as an “ever-extended adolescence” (p.97), in form of “freedom from the shackles of loveless marriages and selfless duty to the family” (p.97), for both women and men. With this extended adolescence comes a higher rate of childlessness and a steep sexual hierarchy (Nagle 2017:97) Following this steep sexual hierarchy, new sexual patterns have emerged. We can see a greater level of sexual choice for some elite men, while a large part of the male population is celibate. Nagle puts these celibate men, Incels, “at the bottom of the pecking order” (Nagle 2017:97).

Lastly, Nagle (2017:97) claims that Incels own anxiety and anger about their low rank in the social hierarchy is what produces the rhetoric found in these online societies. These forums and websites are, according to Nagle, filled with pain and rejection, and hate towards women and non-whites. Moreover, they use anti-feminist and racist rhetoric to “be masters of the cruel natural hierarchies that bring them so much humiliation” (Nagle 2017:97). Here, Nagle points to what Rachel M. Schmitz and Emily R. Kazyak (2016) identifies as strategies to support hegemonic masculinity: using hate speech and demonizing feminism to assert their own position in the hierarchy. I will elaborate on these strategies in chapter three, where I present some theoretical terms concerning strategies of supporting hegemonic masculinity, as well as theories of hybrid masculinities.

Continuing, I will present the research of Donnelly et.al (2001) on involuntary celibacy. We are now leaving the anti-feminist sphere of The manosphere and Incels, to get an understanding of what involuntary celibacy is, how it happens and the consequences of being involuntary celibate. This research is from 2001, and as I described in the introduction, a lot has happened since the early 2000s. One important change is who the involuntary celibates are defined as. Donnelly et.al (2001) include heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, transsexual, as well as both women and men in their definition. The present constellation of Incels do not consider women eligible to be involuntary celibate. However, Donnelly et.al's (2001) material is still relevant for my thesis as they produce a theory of how someone becomes involuntary celibate and how and why they stay involuntary celibate.

## **2.1 Involuntary celibacy: not being “on time”**

In their article, titled “Involuntary celibacy: A life course analysis”, Donnelly et.al (2001) examines the development and maintenance of involuntary celibacy. The authors (2001:159) use survey data from 82 respondents, recruited over the internet. Amongst their participants, 76 percent is men, while 85 percent of them are white and 85 percent between the age of 18-34 (Donnelly et.al 2001: table 1). In their research, they find three groups of involuntary celibates: Virgins (those who never had sex), singles (had sex in the past but were unable to establish current sexual relationships) and partners (currently in a sexless relationship) (Donnelly et.al 2001: 163). I will not address partnered involuntary celibates, as this group is not relevant for my thesis.

Donnelly et.al (2001) define involuntary celibate as "one who desires to have sex but has been unable to find a willing partner for at least 6 months prior to being surveyed" (p.159). According to the authors, it is considered normal to go up to six months without sexual relations. However, they recognize that the length of the celibacy period is arbitrary: what really is important is whether the persons define themselves as involuntary celibate (Donnelly et.al 2001:159).

### **Falling off the track and getting left behind**

In modern Western societies, we see a change in the intervals of marriage, remarriage and having children (Donnelly et.al 20015; Skrede 2015). Donnelly et.al (2001: 160-161), claim that the timing of these life transitions seems less important than before. Being "off time" in these transitions has few consequences. However, when it comes to sexual activity, cultural expectations seem to be more rigid and have greater consequences. Adults who have never had sex, or go long periods without a partner, may experience feeling "off time". Once this feeling of being different from others occur, it may become more difficult to interact and establish intimacy. Thus, the chances for sexually intimate relationships may be reduced. They theorize that "involuntary celibacy is more than one event; it is a combination of the timing, sequencing, and duration of sexual behavior" (Donnelly et.al 2001:161). They use a life course perspective and suggests that:

Persons who become off time in regards to life transitions involving sexuality begin to feel as though they are no longer traveling the same path as their peers. Once this happens, it may be difficult (but not impossible) to conform to the normative sexual trajectories that their age peers are following (Donnelly et.al 2001:161).

What is a *normal sexual trajectory*? Donnelly et.al (2001) describes the normal sexual trajectory in most industrialized societies as:

Normative expectations about sexual transitions, assuming that persons will begin to date in their teens or early twenties, experiment with and initiate sex at some point thereafter and eventually marry or partner in a long-term relationship which includes an active sexual component (p.160)

Their idea is that people are expected to follow this trajectory and remain sexually active for major portions of our adult lives, excluding people with a handicap or other challenges. Family, peers and media reinforce these expectations. Finally, we use these normative expectations to measure others and ourselves as to being "on time" or "off time" (Donnelly 2001:160). What Donnelly et.al (2001) is missing in their research, and what I believe is an important part of involuntary celibacy, is what the normal sexual trajectory is. The authors describe it as normative expectations

concerning sexual transitions; we assume that people will begin to date in their teens or early twenties, following with experimentation and initiating sex at some point later, and then eventually marry or partner in a long-time relationship. An example of this can be seen in the Vice documentary about Incels (Vice News 2018), mentioned in the introduction, where Joey (an Incel) explains how he believes women who are 20 years old have slept with hundreds of men. He is certain in his case. If he believes all women in their twenties have slept with hundreds of men, we can understand why he feels off track and therefore intimidated by women. Is this a common belief amongst Incels?

Continuing, I will present some statistics of trajectories towards involuntary celibacy, followed by a discussion of the consequences of involuntary celibacy

### **Different trajectories and factors of becoming involuntary celibate**

In Donnelly et.al's (2001) research, men were overrepresented in all categories with 76 percent in the Virginal category and 80 percent in the Singles category. The partnered celibates tended to be older than the other two categories. The majority of virgins and singles reported that they never dated as teenagers (Donnelly et.al 2001: 161-162). Moreover, they report that traditional gender roles seemed to influence their sample. Men reported hesitance in initiating dates and women reported lack in an invitation by men (Donnelly et.al 2001:162).

The trajectories towards involuntary celibate vary between groups. Virgins become off time in their teens and early twenties and they never experience a transition to sexual activity. Singles show some signs of difficulty in their adolescence but establish sexual relationships somewhat similar to their age peers' trajectories. Like partnered celibates, they tended to get off time as adults as they were unable to maintain sexual relationships (Donnelly et.al. 2001:165). The respondents name several factors for being involuntary celibate. Shyness and body image, as well as structural constraints such as living arrangements, work arrangements and lack of transportation, are given as reasons for not having a sexual relationship (Donnelly et. al 2001:165). According to Donnelly et.al (2001:165), in all likelihood, the relationship between these barriers and involuntary celibacy is reciprocal, rather than unidirectional. While shyness, lack of social skills, poor body image, living

arrangements, and sex-segregated occupations contribute to involuntary celibacy, it is also likely that celibates are shyer, less confident in social situations, view their bodies more negatively and are less likely to leave housing or job situations that isolate them from potential partners (Donnelly et.al 2001:165).

### **The Consequences of celibacy**

Amongst all respondents, 35 percent states dissatisfaction, frustration or anger about their lack of sexual relationships (Donnelly et.al 2001:166). In addition, they all perceive the lack of sexual activity in a negative light. Donnelly et.al (2001:167) states that there probably is a reciprocal relationship between involuntary celibacy and unhappiness, anger and depression. The negative feelings from involuntary celibacy can probably also cause people to feel less self-confident and to be less open to sexual opportunities when they occur. In addition, their results show that the longer the duration of the celibacy, the more likely for the respondents to view it as "a permanent way of life" (Donnelly et.al 2001:167). The older the virgins got, the more likely they were to view their situation as permanent. The same goes for singles: the longer the period without a partner, the more likely they were to view their celibacy as permanent (Donnelly et.al 2001:167). Donnelly et.al (2001) states that the feeling of being of time correlates between the singles and virgins largely due to:

Perceptions that "everyone else" was having sex, 44 percent of virgins and 56 percent of singles said that they were different from their peers (...) Involuntary celibates as a group appear to have difficulty with the timing and maintenance of culturally sanctioned age-based norms of sexuality (p.166-167)

Cultural expectations about masculinity and femininity seem to affect the respondents in many ways. Men were more likely to have graduated or had professional jobs as well as spend more time on the computer than women. The traditional male trajectories became a barrier to meeting and dating women. Women, on the other hand, were more likely to report that their bodies were a real barrier to establish a sexual relationship. In addition, women were less likely feel shy than men, but they report being constrained by traditional gender roles by not being able to act outside the traditional ways (Donnelly et al. 2001: 167)

Donnelly et al's (2001) respondents report using the Internet to find moral support, rather than for viewing pornography. Only 22 percent report using the internet for sexual stimulation. Mostly, the Internet was used to create a sense of community and fill emotional needs (2001:167). Donnelly et.al (2001) also mention an important aspect of the internet use of their respondents: they mainly use the Internet for seeking moral support. Mostly, their respondents used the Internet to create a sense of community and fill emotional needs. The authors do not elaborate on this find, and none of the other discussed authors in this thesis addresses this. It is understandable that men are seeking other men to unite over a common enemy: women and feminists. However, Incels are also telling stories of self-hate. Why are Incels seeking these forums to project, not only hate towards women but also hate towards themselves?

The authors conclude that more research is needed. Especially for groups as females, elders, persons of color as well as the poor and working class which was underrepresented in their sample. They suggest that women may view celibacy as less problematic than men, as men are socialized to be sexual aggressors and to expect to have many sexual partners (2001:168)

Until the phenomenon of involuntary celibacy has been fully investigated and the results disseminated, it will remain a taboo topic, cloaked in mystery and ignorance, and untold numbers of persons will continue to suffer in silence and isolation (Donnelly et al. 2001:168)

To sum it up, Involuntary celibacy starts out with feeling "off time" in comparison with others, this creates - or reinforce an already existing -barrier in form of shyness and feeling different, and is more likely to continue the longer the period of celibacy last. There most likely is a reciprocal relationship between involuntary celibacy and unhappiness, anger and depression.

Donnelly et.al's (2001) theory of involuntary celibate shows us that involuntary celibacy happens to both men and women, but there is an overrepresentation of men in their sample. Persons who become off time in regards to life transitions involving sexuality begin to feel different from their peers. Once this happens, it may become difficult to get back on track; back to the normal sexual trajectories that their age

peers are following. The authors do not discuss what their respondent's portrayed, normal sexual trajectory is. I will argue that what is considered a normal, sexual trajectory must be an important part of how you compare yourself to others.

## **2.2 Reddit: a hub for anti-feminist activism**

My data consists of comments on Reddit, and as such, a presentation of Reddit is needed. I will use the work of Adrienne Massanari (2015), who has written an article addressing The manosphere and how Reddit facilitates toxic technocultures.

Massanari (2015) examines how the platform and algorithmic politics of Reddit provides fertile ground for the emergence of what she calls toxic spaces, in her article “#Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit’s algorithm, governance, and culture support toxic technocultures” (2015). She uses two examples of toxic technocultures, two events which happened on Reddit, in her paper: The Fappening and #Gamergate. The Fappening involved illegally acquired naked photos, so-called nudes, of celebrities being shared and discussed on anonymous image-board 4Chan and Reddit.com (Massanari 2015:330). Gamergate started out as a hashtag campaign concerning the lack of ethics within gaming journalism but ended up being a campaign of “systematic harassment of female and minority game developers, journalists, and critics and their allies” (Massanari 2015:330). These happenings are both parts of The manosphere. They are examples of the possibilities that the internet (and Reddit in particular) present for aggregating illegal material and encouraging harassment across communities. I will not elaborate on these happenings in this thesis. Rather, I will focus on why Reddit became a hub for anti-feministic activism, how Reddit works and the new policies implemented in the wake of these happenings.

### **What is Reddit?**

Reddit is an open-source platform where anyone can create a community of interest, also called a subreddit. Reddit relies on user-submitted and user-created content.

The moderators, who set and enforce the rules of the subreddits, are volunteers. By creating an account, you can customize the list of subreddits to include only those of interest to you. This customized list is your "front" page (Massanari 2015:330).

Redditors (the individual Reddit-users) can also up-vote material they find interesting and down-vote what they find uninteresting or off-topic. The material with the highest number of up-votes appears higher on the subreddits front page and thus receives more attention from viewers. This is the default filter. You can change this filter to show other material, but most users use the default filter because most people want to view the most popular content. Redditors receive karma points based on the difference between the number of upvotes and down votes on their submitted material. These karma points show how much each Redditors have contributed to the Reddit community (Massanari 2015:330).

Accounts on Reddit are pseudonymous and easy to create. According to Massanari (2017:331), this creates more playful and candor interaction than what we find on, for example, Facebook or other social networking platforms that administer a "one name/real name" policy. In addition, this playfulness is supported by the administrators' lack of interfering:

Presumably, to encourage this sense of play and candor, Reddit's administrators take an extremely hands-off approach toward content shared by users. The few rules they enforce prohibit sharing private information (doxxing), or sexualized images of minors, distributing spam, interfering with the site's regular functioning, and manipulating voting (Massanari 2015:331).

However, there have been changes in policies on Reddit since Massanari wrote her article. More on this later. For now, I will explain how Reddit became a hub for anti-feminist activism, which is largely due to its geek-friendly environment.

### **Reddit: a popular center for (white) geek culture**

According to Massanari (2017:331), Reddit has become a popular center of geek culture due to three reasons: Firstly, Reddit is easily accessible to anyone. You can find a subreddit dedicated to almost any topic, and if not, you can create your own subreddit. This easy access opens up for a flora of niche interest. Secondly, Reddit's



default subreddits, which tend to have the largest subscriber base, highlight geek interest. This highlighting happens when subreddits for, for example, gaming, science, and technology, news and music regularly land on the default, /r/all subreddit. Subreddits dedicated to sharing knowledge such as /r/askscience and /r/explainslikeiamfive are popular as well. These themes are geek interest, according to Massanari. Thirdly, these geek interests become visible for most users through the default subreddits (Massanari 2017:331).

Massanari then discusses geek culture:

Geeks valorize expertise and specialized knowledge and geek culture often revolve around the acquisition, sharing, and distribution of this knowledge with others. They often value wit, cleverness, and craft, negotiating between a sense of collectivism and individualism within the communities of which they are a part (Coleman 2013 in Massanari 2017:332)

Despite the ways geek culture welcomes unpopular interests, we can also see a problematic view of gender and race (Massanari 2017:332). Their online interactions are often racialized, gendered and “often presume a white male centrality” (Massanari 2017: 332). In addition, these spaces tend to view women as objects of sexual desire or unwelcome intruder, or both. They use a gendered discourse, which creates a barrier to entry for women. Women feel unwelcomed or end up being harassed (Massanari 2015:333).

When combining problematic geek culture and the algorithmic politics of Reddit: the voting, the karma points, default filter, sharing, re-sharing, and the lack of interference of moderators, we get what Massanari calls a toxic technoculture (Massanari 2015:337). Reddit’s algorithm makes content that is popular amongst white nerdy males become more visible through voting, and the visibility creates more up-votes – and the content again becomes more visible. This creates a “herding” or power law effect around the material of certain groups, and this gives these groups an “outsized presence”, which does not reflect the actual size of the actual community (Massanari 2015:337, Ging 2017:6).

**New policies: new Reddit?**

As already mentioned, the policies of Reddit has changed since Massanari wrote her article in 2015. The author herself addresses some changes in the "aftermath" in her article, such as the banning of revenge porn and the banning of several subreddits. Today, the most significant changes are the extension of the rules of unwelcome content and the quarantine function, discussed below.

In 2019, the list of *unwelcome content* is extended to content that is: illegal, involuntary pornography, encouraging or inciting violence, threatening, harassing, bullying (or encouraging others to do so), impersonating someone in a misleading or deceptive manner, soliciting transactions or gifts involving certain goods and services (Reddit.com 2019). In fact, the original subreddit /r/Incels was banned in 2017 by Reddit due to their new policy of banning inciting violence against persons or groups, and in this specific case: against women (nytimes.com).

In addition to extending the list of unwelcome content, Reddit has implemented the *quarantine function* in an attempt to prevent certain subreddits content from being "accidentally viewed by those who do not knowingly wish to do so, or viewed without appropriate context" (reddit.com). By displaying a warning that requires users to explicit opt-in (pressing "yes") to view the content, they wish to shield unknowingly outsiders. While also sending a signal to the users that their content is problematic (reddit.com). In addition, the quarantine makes sure Reddit does not profit from problematic content:

[Quarantined communities] Generate no revenue, do not appear in non-subscription-based feeds (eg Popular), and are not included in search or recommendations. Other restrictions, such as limits on community styling, crossposting, the share function, etc. may also be applied. Quarantined subreddits and their subscribers are still fully obliged to abide by Reddit's Content Policy and remain subject to enforcement measures in cases of violation (reddit.com).

Removing these communities from non-subscription-based feeds (from the subreddit called "Popular", which displays the most popular content), makes them less visible. This is precisely what has happened to /r/Braincels.

Massanari (2015:343) is hesitant of the significance of these policies. Lastly, she claims that the solution of allowing, but not publicize or profit from hate-filled subreddits does nothing to fix the underlying problem. The members of these spaces will only take their toxicity in other, more mainstream areas of Reddit. This way, “their retrograde views continue to be implicitly legitimized by Reddit administrators” (Massanari 2017:343). By not collecting profit from advertising on these sites, the rest of Reddit ends up subsidizing these toxic spaces. In this way, “the trolls win” (Massanari 2017:343).

## 3 Theorizing The manosphere

In the previous chapter, we learned that The manosphere is a new type of transnational anti-feminism found online. After a separation of pro- and anti-feminist groups in the USA in the 1970s, we saw a growth in more overtly anti-feminist politics throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In the 2010's, a more hateful culture emerged, largely due to the possibility for anonymity on the Internet. This is The manosphere, a conglomeration of forums, blogs and websites which center around the concept of The Red Pill, a philosophy meant to awaken men to feminism's misandry and brainwashing. Massanari shows how Reddit's algorithm makes content that is popular amongst white geek males more visible through voting and sharing. The problematic geek culture combined with this herding of power creates what she calls toxic technocultures. Reddit has implemented new policies to fight these toxic technocultures.

In this chapter, I will present the concept of hegemonic and hybrid masculinity. I start with a short overview of what hegemonic masculinity is. Chapter 3.2 addresses hegemonic masculinities as theorized by Schmitz and Kazyak (2016) and chapter 3.3 discusses hybrid masculinities as theorized by Ging (2017). Subsequently, I will present the theoretical terms I will use in my analysis.

### 3.1 Hegemonic masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity is a contested concept among researchers. It is inspired by Gramsci and his concept of hegemony which was used to understand the stabilization of class relations, and which implies an active struggle for domination by the hegemonic part (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005:830-831, 832). The fundamental feature of hegemonic masculinity is that there are several configurations of masculinity and these masculinities exist in a hierarchy: we consider certain masculinities as more powerful and socially central than other masculinities. The concept of hegemonic masculinity assumes the subordination of non-hegemonic masculinities. Domination over subordinate masculinities is not accomplished through force. Rather, domination is secured through a pattern of hegemony: "through cultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalization, and

marginalization or de-legitimization of alternative masculinities and women" (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005: 846). Thus, hegemonic masculinity is *performed masculinity*, not a set of fixed traits. There is a constant negotiation about what hegemonic masculinity is, and it works in part through the production of archetypes of masculinity (such as "Chad"). These are symbols that have authority despite it being an unobtainable ideal (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005: 846). Therefore, Hegemonic masculinity is not normal masculinity; it is an unobtainable ideal. Hegemonic masculinity is normative masculinity.

## **3.2 Strategies to support hegemonic masculinity**

As already mentioned, Schmitz and Kazyak (2016) identify two groups which utilize different ideological strategies to support hegemonic masculinity. The authors explain hegemonic masculinity as a concept that:

Illustrates how a glorified version of masculinity works to systematically subjugate and oppress femininity and women, including men who do not conform to stereotypical masculine ideal (Connell 1987, 2005, 2005 in Schmitz and Kazyak 2016:3).

Moreover, hegemonic masculinity is manifested through cultural representations that portray men as physically strong and impressive in combination with repressing emotions or other signs of weakness (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016: 4). The Red Pill forum, discussed in chapter 3, is an example of this, where intimate and emotional relationships are portrayed as unnatural for men. When supporting hegemonic masculinity, typical masculine traits are glorified, and feminized traits are discarded. According to Schmitz and Kazyak (2016:5), this results in a position of societal power and privilege for men as a group, even if some individual men feel powerless. The authors also address how hegemonic masculinity functions as an ideal that few (or no) men can actually attain (Schmitz and Kazyak 2016:5).

In their article, Schmitz and Kazyak (2016) analyze the most prominent websites of Men`s Rights Activists (MRA), on the internet. MRA's are a group, or a movement,

which focuses on the crisis of (white) masculinity. They believe women and social minorities have a stronger societal position than men have. In comparison with The Red Pill, MRA's focuses more on politics and power, while The Red Pill seems to be more focused on how to be successful with women. However, you can find MRA's on The Red Pill and MRA's are Redpilled: they are aware of feminisms power and brainwashing of men. Through their movement and website, MRA's wish to establish resources for men to rise to their previous position as privileged. They wish to regain social power – as they are entitled to because they are men. Thus, according to Schmitz and Kazyak (2016: 10), all MRA's support hegemonic masculinity: they want to maintain a gender hierarchy with white, heterosexual men at the top. However, they use different strategies for support. Both strategies include demonization of feminism as the source of men`s social oppression. They believe that feminism has created a "war on men", and that feminism strips men of social rights and privileges, and redistributes them to women (Schmitz and Kazyak 2016: 10). The two strategies for regaining power is namely the "Cyber Lads in search for masculinity" and "Virtual Victims in search for equality".

*Cyber Lads* are described as extreme in their anti-feminist rhetoric, which includes encouraging violence against women (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016:11). They have all swallowed the red pill, and reinforce the stereotypical masculinity through advice columns on maximizing muscle-building, how to achieve economic success, as well as hunting and gun ownership. Men and masculinity are considered superior to women and femininity, and feminism is considered evil as it oppresses men (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016: 6-7). Women are portrayed as repugnant, untrustworthy and unreliable, and at the same time as objects to be won. Schmitz and Kazyak (2016:8) suggests that this objectifying of women is a strategy for reconciling the Madonna-whore dichotomy<sup>4</sup>, a strategy we can recognize from The Red Pill forum.

In contrast to the extreme rhetoric of *Cyber Lads*, *Virtual Victims* adapts the language of feminism. They use words like "equality" "fairness" and "justice" in search for social legitimacy. In addition, they legitimate their views through research findings and news stories (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016:11). Virtual victims argue that men are

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<sup>4</sup> Madonna-whore dichotomy: women are put on a pedestal as desirable, but at the same time thrown down the gutter as detestable (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016: 8).

equally, or even more, oppressed than women are. They believe men suffer because of unrealistic societal stereotypes, much like the feminists' beliefs, but Virtual Victims blame feminism for their suffering. According to Virtual Victims, men are in crisis and a victim of social and structural misandry. By emphasizing how women`s rights are prioritized over men`s rights, they delegitimize women`s issues: “In many ways, women receive special privilege and protection, while male pain and suffering are trivialized or ignored by our society” (The National Coalition for Men 2011).

### **3.3 Hegemonic and hybrid masculinities**

Similarly, Debbie Ging (2017) also seeks to theorize the masculinities in The manosphere. Ging (2017:3) claims that hegemonic masculinity often is presented as a certain type of masculinity, with certain traits. In contrast, she argues that hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed character type. She also argues that toxic masculinity is not a collection of certain toxic traits. Instead, she claims that in some contexts, hegemonic masculinity may refer to men engaging in toxic practices. However, these toxic practices are not always the defining characters of hegemonic masculinity. Sometimes, hegemonic masculinity includes distancing yourself from such toxicity (Ging 2017:3), and this results in hybrid masculinities; new ways of performing hegemonic masculinity while at the same time distancing from it.

#### **Non-homophobic masculinities: a strategy for supporting hegemonic masculinity?**

Ging (2017:4) addresses the recent heated debates in masculinity studies, concerning the meaning of changes in the performance of heterosexual masculinity, such as how they dress, greater emotional expression and reduced homophobia. Some researchers argue that reduced homophobia has opened up for more inclusive or non-homophobic masculinities, which again allows heterosexual men to be more emotionally expressive and physically tactile. (Anderson 2008a; McCormack 2012 in Ging 2017:4). Moreover, they argue that these masculinities are inclusive, meaning that they are “somehow not engaged in hegemonic patterns of practice vis-a`-vis women” (Ging 2017:5). Ging (2017:5) argues that gay and pro-gay men can be misogynistic too. She suggests that these non-homophobic masculinities simply can be “a strategy to ensure economic, social and political power for the straight, white

middle-class man, in an era of gay rights” (Ging 2017:5). By overemphasizing non-homophobia, and claiming this aspect facilitates more emotionally expressive masculinity, Ging (2010:5) believes we are missing the contradictory and anti-feminist politics that these hybrid masculinities utilize to support hegemonic masculinity.

Geek masculinity has received a similar debate. Kendall (2011) discusses how geek masculinity draws on *some* aspects of hyper-masculinity while rejecting other aspects. Geeks valorize intellect over emotion, while they lack other aspects, such as sexual and sporting abilities. This allows them to view themselves as marginalized, despite being white males with cultural capital, not seeing their own privilege.

### **Masculinity: positioning through discursive practices**

To make sense of these contradictions found in the masculinities found in The manosphere, Ging presents the concept of hybrid masculinities, from the theories of Demetriakis Demetriou (2001) and Tristan Bridges and C.J Pascoe (2014).

Demetriou (2001) argues that hegemonic masculinity is not “a purely white or heterosexual configuration of practice” (p.1). It is rather a hybrid union, which uses practices from several masculinities to secure the reproduction of patriarchy (Demetriou 2001:1). Hegemonic masculinity borrows strategically useful elements from other masculinities to ensure continued domination (Ging 2017:5) over subordinate masculinities - creating internal hegemony (Demetriou 2001:341). When the sociocultural landscape changes, like the rise of gay rights, hegemonic masculinity is negotiated into new configurations: gay culture becomes more visible and accepted by men, as well as heterosexual men appropriating elements from this culture (Demetriou 2001:349-50). This borrowing, appropriation and negotiation results in a web of hybrid patterns that secure external hegemony (Ging 2017:5), which is dominance over women (Demetriou 2001:341).

Bridges and Pascoe (2014:250) claim these *hybrid masculinities* symbolically distance some groups of men from hegemonic masculinity. Hybrid masculinity's practices works in ways to create some discursive distance between young, white, heterosexual men and hegemonic masculinity. This allows them to position



themselves as outside the systems of privilege and inequality (Bridges & Pascoe 2014:254). While at the same time, hybrid masculinities are confirming existing social and symbolic boundaries of hegemonic masculinity, which in sum works to conceal the systems they are rejecting being a part of (Bridges & Pascoe 2014:250). They are distancing themselves in one way and aligning themselves in a more subtle way. One example is men, who walked in the "Walk a Mile in Her Shoes" march, wearing women's clothes and heels to show solidarity to female victims of domestic abuse. However, while they show support through walking and dressing up, they joke about wearing women's clothes and same-sex desire. They are distancing themselves from sexism and gendered dominance found in hegemonic masculinity, while at the same time repeat forms of gender inequality that undergird domestic violence (Bridges & Pascoe 2014:254)

In addition, hybrid masculinities present the masculinities available to young, white, heterosexual men as less meaningful than the masculinities associated with other, marginalized and subordinated masculinities. They do this by placing white, heterosexual masculinity in other identity locations such as for example white trash, or Incels, as to deny that white masculinity is normative. These privileged social categories borrow from other, not privileged social categories, to reframe themselves as symbolically part of socially subordinated groups. White men frame themselves as victims, and inequality is thus less easily identified (Bridges & Pascoe 2014:252).

According to Bridges and Pascoe (2014), hybrid masculinities reinforce existing social and symbolic boundaries in "ways that often work to conceal systems of power and equality in historically new ways" (p. 246), often along lines of race, gender and class:

By using style and elements from less powerful masculinities, young, straight white men's hybridization often obscures the symbolic and social boundaries between themselves and these other masculinities (Bridges & Pascoe 2014:245).

**Theorizing the masculinities of The manosphere.**

This obscuring of boundaries makes it difficult to theorize hybrid masculinities. In addition, the anonymity, possibility for erasing or intensifying material, and the transnational nature of social media make the theorization even harder.

Ging (2017) argues that the internet opens up for “affective publics” (Papacharissi 2014, in Ging 2017:6), which is political assemblages that gathers “around emotional involvement and empathy rather than political principles” (Ging 2017:6). They connect over personal storytelling. This is a successful strategy in our modern society where we experience “information overload” (Ging 2017:6). By drawing on emotionally charged tropes of victimhood, intensified through social media, hybrid masculinities are defusing threats to power and privilege (Ging 2017:6):

Men can dodge among multiple meanings according to their interactional needs. Men can adopt hegemonic masculinity when it is desirable, but the same men can distance themselves strategically from hegemonic masculinity at other moments. Consequently, ‘masculinity’ represents not a certain type of man but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices.” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005:840)

Thus, these affective publics and the focus on individualism opens up for ideological fluidity and strategic performativity. They are building an affective consensus around what they express as a collective, gendered experience: men’s position in the social hierarchy caused by feminism (Ging 2017:16). Ging (2017:16) concludes that we need to understand The manosphere as a discursive network of systems.

In this part, I have presented how the MRA`s use different strategies in supporting hegemonic masculinity which again is a strategy to reclaim social power over women and minorities. Ging argues that The manosphere consists of hybrid masculinities that connect over their gendered experience of men`s position in the social hierarchy caused by feminism. They use narratives of personal suffering to build an affective consensus that connects them.

### **3.4 Theoretical terms for further use**

Through this chapter, I have provided a presentation of hegemonic and hybrid masculinities. I will now discuss what theoretical terms and thoughts I will use in my analysis.

Both Schmitz and Kazyak (2016) and Shawn P. Van Valkenburgh (2018) describes how the objectifying of women is a strategy utilized in The manosphere for reconciling the dichotomy of women being both desirable and an object of hate. These men are discursively performing masculinity in a way that excludes women as human beings but still allows men to want women in a sexual way. The character "Stacy" is an example of how they focus on physical traits, while at the same time diminish her human aspects by characterizing her as vain, spoiled and shallow

Schmitz and Kazyak (2016) find that Men's Rights Activists (MRA's) use two different strategies to support hegemonic masculinity: Cyber Lads and Virtual Victims. *Hegemonic masculinity* is described as a concept that:

Illustrates how a glorified version of masculinity works to systematically subjugate and oppress femininity and women, including men who do not conform to stereotypical masculine ideals (Connell 1987, 2005, 2005 in Schmitz and Kazyak 2016:3).

Hegemonic masculinity is manifested through cultural representations that portray men as physically strong and impressive in combination with repressing emotions or other signs of weakness (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016: 4). Typical masculine traits are glorified, and feminized traits are discarded.

Ging (2017) claim that The manosphere consists of a web of *hybrid masculinities*, which symbolically distance young, white men from hegemonic masculinity, while at the same time align themselves with existing social and symbolic hegemonic boundaries. What unites this web of hybrid masculinities is a perceived threat to hegemonic masculinity, and their loss of privilege and place in the social hierarchy to feminism, minorities and women. Men can adopt hegemonic masculinity when needed, and at the same time strategically distance themselves from it.

I will define hegemonic masculinity as normative masculinity, working to secure patriarchy, making not-hegemonic masculinity subordinate to this normative

masculine ideal. In addition, hegemonic masculinity marginalizes femininity. In this way, hegemonic masculinity accomplishes hegemony over both women and subordinate masculinities (Arxer 2011) Hegemonic masculinity is performing and glorifying stereotypical masculinity to suppress femininity and women, and other men who do not conform to this stereotypical ideal.

Thus, hegemonic masculinity is a position obtained through discursive practices, where white, heterosexual men are the most prized position to have. Hybrid masculinities are the several configurations of practices, different types of groups expressing different masculine practices, which also support hegemonic masculinity, in a more subtle way. Incels are one of these hybrid masculinities, and I will look at how this masculinity is performed and expressed. How are they symbolically distancing themselves from hegemonic masculinity? How are they aligning themselves? What strategies do they use to support hegemonic masculinity?

In combination with these theoretical concepts of hegemonic masculinity, I will use narrative analysis, to which I now turn to in the next chapter.



## 4 Narrative analysis

I have chosen a narrative analysis to understand the culture and community of Incels better. The word narrative derives from the Latin verb *narrare*, "to tell", which points to the simple fact that a narrative is always also an action. Someone tells someone something (Gripsrud 2015:206). Narrative analysis is an obvious choice of analytical tool, as I wish to examine the stories Incels tell:

By focusing on narrative, we are able to investigate not just how stories are structured and the ways in which they work, but also who produces them and by what means; the mechanisms by which they are consumed; how narratives are silenced, contested or accepted and what, if any, effects they have (Squire et.al 2013:3).

More specifically, I have chosen a mediated narrative analysis, as I am examining *shared* stories. I will focus on how these shared stories are co-produced and which main narratives I find. However, while the mechanisms of consumption of stories and the effects narratives have certainly are interesting, I do not have time and space for this in my thesis.

### **Stories and narratives: from individual stories to the broader, cultural stories**

There is an ongoing discussion of what a narrative is, and what the term includes. Jane Elliott (2005:12) gives a conceptual distinction between first-order narratives and second-order narratives. She defines first-order narratives as the stories that individuals tell themselves and their own experiences. The second-order narratives are "the accounts we may construct as researchers to make sense of the social world, and of other people`s experience" (Elliott 2005:13). In other words, a second-order narrative is a method of presenting social and historical knowledge. More specifically, when we use these second-order narratives to examine the representation of individual lives, we can understand them as collective stories (Elliott 2005:13). Similar to the order of narratives, Sofie Tanum and Anne Krogstad (2014) refer to the broader, cultural stories as narratives, while the individual life stories – the first-order stories – are referred to as stories. Inspired by Elliott and Tanum and Krogstad, I will in my analysis use every start of a thread: the picture, link or texts that

are first posted, as the beginning of a story, and then use the comments below as a continuation of the same story. These threads include both shared and individual stories, and I will refer to them as *stories*. The larger, collective stories I find by analyzing these stories, I will define as *narratives*.

In this chapter, I will first discuss what narratives and shared stories are. I continue with a presentation of Ruth Page's (2018) mediated narrative analysis. The analytical framework for this thesis will then be presented.

## 4.1 What is a narrative?

Jostein Gripsrud (2015) defines a story, or narrative, as “a portrayal of a human (or human-like) subject who has a project (will, wish desire) and who lives through a chain of causally connected happenings” (p.194). Tore Witsø Rafoss (2016) presents a more simple definition: “A narrative is a representation of characters who acts in time” (p.24). This definition includes the two most rudimentary elements in all narratives: the characters and actions (Rafoss 2016:24). According to Jane Elliott (2005), a narrative “can be understood to organize a sequence of events into a whole so that the significance of each event can be understood through its relation to that whole” (p.3). In short, narratives are chronological: it places events in a sequence, and they are meaningful and social: they are produced for a specific audience (Elliott 2005:4).

Thus, through events set in time, these events are presented as related to each other by cause and effect. In stories, we move from one relatively stable state to another: I was tired; I drank a coffee, now I am awake. This movement between states is the project (Gripsrud 2015:195). If not all parts of this movement between states are clearly represented in the narrative, we as an audience will think about these missing parts as logical prerequisites for, or, in addition to, what is directly presented to us (Gripsrud 2015:195). In other words, we as readers tend to read causality into narratives, even if there is no explicit causal link told by the narrator (Elliott 2005: 7). Following this, a narrative is as a way of thinking, or a cognitive scheme (Gripsrud 2015:195-196). We, humans, know how to read a story: we know how to fill in the blanks. We use stories to understand the world and our place in it. In Rafoss` (2015)

words: "to survive we need to understand and communicate about objects in the form of nouns and processes/actions in the form of verbs" (p.25).

As we now know, narratives arrange events in time. That is, not in nature's time, but in human time (Rafoss: 2015:27). A story is rarely told minute by minute, or second by second – which would be in nature's time: the time we all live by, and which will continue without us if we die. Rather, a story consists of isolated events. Like an embarrassing meeting with your boyfriend's parents a year ago, and the invitation to his sister's wedding today. By temporally organizing these two isolated events together in a story, you transform them into meaningful parts in a bigger entirety: you are dreading the wedding because you feel uncomfortable meeting his parents again. These elements exist in every story: someone does something. Witsø Rafoss (2015:25) suggests that this can be the reason for the stories' universality: they are effective cognitive structures that give meaning to both simple and complex human actions. Gripsrud (2015:199), who states that stories maintain a central part in our culture as it is a cognitive form that we use when we want to understand change, as well as our own lives and the world around us, supports this view. Stories make it possible to imagine how our lives and the world could have looked different if we - or others - made different decisions in certain situations (Gripsrud 2015:199) We learn through experience, as well as others experiences (Gripsrud 2015:199). Thus, we learn through our own and others' stories. As Gripsrud puts it: "Stories are the schemes of experience" (Gripsrud 2015:199)

### **Three narrative characters**

When we first think of a character in a story, we typically think of a human who manipulates its surroundings. This is the prototypical narrative character (Turner 1996:38 in Witsø Rafoss 2016:28). However, by using metaphors and metonyms, a story can also be about characters that are not individuals (Witsø Rafoss 2016:28) Incels, for example, is both individuals and a community. When talking about one Incel in a thread on /r/Braincels, they are talking about all Incels.

In this thesis, I will separate between three characters, as written by Rafoss (2016). These characters are understood as narrative functions and as a "logical extension of the story's focus on targeted action" (Rafoss 2016: 28). The protagonist is the acting



part, the disputed object is the goal of the action, and the antagonist is the part that tries to prevent the protagonist in reaching its goal (Rafoss 2016: 28).

As already mentioned above, *the protagonist* is the main character in the story. The motives, goals and actions of the protagonist are normally the main theme of the story. A good story engages us, and if we do not feel engaged, we would stop paying attention to the story. Moreover, to engage us, we need to understand the protagonist and its experiences. This can happen through projecting our own experiences on to the protagonist, so we can immerse ourselves in its trials and triumphs (Rafoss 2016:28).

Rafoss (2016:29) describes *the disputable object* as the goal the protagonist wishes to obtain. This can be a physical object or an abstract object. It can also be a human but portrayed with little autonomy. In the case of */r/Braincels*, a physical object can be a stronger chin or big muscles. An abstract object is a real connection with a woman, sex or better self-confidence. The first is believed to help with the latter. Rafoss (2016) explains that he uses the word object (despite the occasionally human representation), as it is “typically something that needs to be sought, controlled and protect” (p. 29). It is also the grammatical object (Rafoss 2016:29): Noora (subject) wants (verbal) freedom (object). We as humans always work towards our goals and try to finish our projects. This is a basic condition for living. We must act to survive and make meaning (Rafoss 2016:29-30). Thus, stories are based on the inherent insecurities in our actions: will we succeed or fail? Will we obtain the disputable object?

By introducing *an antagonist*, working against the protagonists, we increase the potential for drama. With an antagonist comes more uncertainty connected to the protagonist's project, and the conflict between the two becomes the central point of the story. If we identify with the protagonist and feel sympathy for him or her, we feel antipathy towards the antagonist. This is a well-known dramaturgical structure, which has dominated storytelling for thousands of years (Rafoss 2016: 31).

## **4.2 What is a shared story?**

Largely due to the internet and social media, we are now telling stories in new ways. We interact and co-create stories on Facebook, Instagram and in comment sections on news media articles. These are shared stories. Ruth Page (2018) defines a shared story as "a retelling, produced by many tellers, across iterative textual segments, which promotes shared attitudes between its tellers" (p.18). Shared stories consist of several contributions from several tellers. As such, the story itself is distributed amongst the tellers, and over several days, months or even years. In addition, these stories are open-ended (Page 2018:20). The threads on /r/Braincels can continue whenever a new teller posts something. This is distributed linearity (Page 2018:20). It is in this sense I will use the term shared stories in this thesis: as stories co-created by several tellers with a distributed linearity.

Shared stories are important because they are so widespread and dominant in our everyday lives. Both of these terms: *shared* and *stories*, dominate our modern-day communicative landscape (Page 2018:1). As we have learned, we use stories to make sense of the world. While sharing has become a prevailing part of how we interact: "Sharing has become ubiquitous as an iconic action – for example, clicking a 'share' button – which reproduces content across networks of online connections" (Page 2018:1). When using social media, we are all creating shared stories through our comments, likes and pictures. Most of us do this every day. A method of analyzing these shared stories is needed.

### **4.3 Mediated narrative analysis**

We now know what narratives are: representations of persons who act in time (Rafoss 2016: 24). The project of the person in the story is the movement between one relatively stable state to another. By organizing events in time in a story, these events are presented as related to each other by cause and effect (Gripsrud 2015:194-195). According to Elliott (2005:7), a narrative must include the minimal of the complicating action (what actually happened); the temporal component, as well as the evaluation (the meaning and significance of what happened) (Elliott 2005:7). In contrast, shared stories consist of several comments from several tellers, often with no obvious connection, neither in time nor in relation to each other. There is not always a complicating action nor an evaluation of what happened. Even the simplest

definition of narrative, presented by Aristotle in *Poetics*: “a story with a beginning, a middle and an end” (Chatman, 1978; Leitch, 1986; Martin, 1986 in Elliott 2005:7), excludes shared stories. Because shared stories often lack an ending. As such, how can a shared story be a narrative? To be able to define shared stories in online contexts as narratives, we need a flexible approach to what narratives are and consists of. Continuing, I will present Page`s (2018) mediated narrative analysis. I will discuss her flexible approach to narratives and her methodological approach to analyzing shared stories online. Lastly, I will present my theoretical framework, inspired by Page (2018), Rafoss (2016) and Ging (2017).

### **A flexible approach to narrative**

Page`s (2018) mediated narrative analysis is a combination of methods drawing on critical discourse analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, social semiotics and narrative analysis. Using this method, we can «explore shared stories in their observable forms as a type of practice, and as such, it questions their function within wider socio-cultural contexts» (Page 2018:5).

We use the term narrative in narrow and broad terms, both in academia and in our everyday lives. Page (2018) points to discourse psychology, where a narrative is defined as a cultural pattern or script. Much like Gripsrud (2015), who states that “stories are the schemes of experience” (p.199). This is a broad definition of narrative, which does not specify textual artifacts. These are story-like cultural patterns, like Lyotard`s grand narratives (Lyotard 1978 in Paige 2018:5), and what I call narratives in this thesis. When analyzing shared stories, this definition is useful for «describing the social patterns of belief that stories help constitute» (Page 2018:5-6). However, when analyzing shared stories, we also look at concrete examples of interaction. We, therefore, need a narrower definition. In the search for the right definition, Page (2018) first rejects sociolinguist William Labov's definition:

[his] definition of narrative emphasized events (as opposed to description), which are reported in sequence. But, his definition was narrow still, suggesting that the reported events are sequenced so as to match iconically the order in which the «real world» events occurred (Page 2018:6).

Labov focused his research on “single-teller narratives about highly tellable topics (usually dangerous events or conflicts” (Page 2018:9), in contrast to the multiple tellers and stories found in shared stories. Page (2018:7) continues the search for the suitable definition in the debate about narrativity in the decades after Labov and the sociolinguistic traditions of narrative research. She presents the idea of a prototypical narrative: a text, which checks all the boxes for what a narrative can consist of. The list is as following: textual features such as tense and aspect, structural elements such as logical connections evoked between reported events, a plot and a project (solving a problem or experiencing trouble). The more factors included in the text in hand, the more prototypical the narrative (Page 2018:7). As such, if a text checks just one of the boxes, it is a narrative, but far from the prototypical one.

By using this flexible approach to narrative, the shared story can include examples that are not «just plot-like, past-tense reports of troublesome events» (Page 2018:8), like Lebovian’s single-teller narratives about highly tellable topics. Instead, Page (2018:9) suggests treating shared stories as being atypical narratives in structure, tellership and linearity. This is what I will do in my analysis. By atypical I mean that in contrast to the typical narratives mentioned above, shared stories include several tellers and these tellers structure the narrative in many different forms, such as beginning with the end or with many digressions. In addition, the linearity of the narrative is distributed across the multiple tellers' contributions, not following a chronological timeline. I will focus on eventhood (the property of being an event) as a central element in the story, while not limiting my research on past-tense and plot-like sequences of troublesome events, told by a single teller (Page 2018: 8, 25). In line with my previous definition of the individual, smaller stories as stories, I will refer to the shared stories I analyze as stories. The broader, cultural stories I find in my analysis of these shared stories are referred to as narratives.

Thus, by examining multiple tellers and their contributions (their co-constructed stories), we can use narrative analysis in online contexts such as Reddit. Moreover, we can use narrative analysis in a new way, namely the mediated narrative analysis. I will continue with a presentation of this theoretical approach.

### **The toolkit for analyzing shared stories**

Page`s (2018:45) analytical approach includes three methodological tools: corpus-assisted discourse analysis, social semiotics, and interactional pragmatics. The first tool, corpus-assisted discourse analysis, uses a semi-automated tool that compiles content (text from forums, for example) and extracts the interactions from online contexts. This allows the researcher to tackle large amounts of data. However, the author herself argues that “corpus approaches cannot account in full for other levels of the shared story, especially those which relate to its mediated context of production and reception” (Page 2018:35-36). As such, and due to time and space restrictions in my thesis, I will not use this method in my analysis. Rather, I will focus on the two remaining analytical tools: social semiotics and interactional pragmatics.

### **Social semiotics: multimodality matters**

When telling shared stories, we use a range of different semiotic resources, both visual and verbal, such as images, speech, gestures, texts and memes (Page 2018:46). These resources are *modes*: "socially shaped and culturally given semiotics resource[s] for making meaning" (Kress 2010:80). In social semiotics, the sign is the core element. A sign is a mixture of form and meaning, and all signs exist in different modes (Kress 2010:54). Gunther Kress (2010) believes that all modes should be considered “for their contributions to meaning of a sign-complex<sup>5</sup>” (Kress 2010:54). Social semiotics focus on sign making over sign use. We create signs in interactions, and they are motivated – not arbitrary (Kress 2010: 24). We always mean something when interacting, and we always use signs when interacting. In this way, all signs are metaphors (Kress 2010:55): what we say, share and comment always convey meaning in a new way. Social semiotics thus gives us a *multimodal* perspective on the semiotic resources we use when we share (Page 2018:46). This perspective allows us to include verbal elements like texts, and visual elements such as icons, emojis and images as a form of narration, and as an interactional process (Page 2018:36). The use of these resources also "shape the context in which tellers interact with the stories as they are (re)produced and consumed (Page 2018:36).

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<sup>5</sup> Sign-complex is a complex of signs, meaning that we should look at signs in relation to the other signs included in the context of the signs.

When using a social semiotic method, we see language as a part of a larger semiotic system, connected to its wider social contexts (Page 2018:36).

### **Social semiotics: Images can be narratives**

As we now know, the modes of semiotic resources are an important part of the storytelling. Page (2018:37) argues that images can be narratives because images are sources of representation. We can read many and complex meanings out of images. They have high narrativity when representing the participants involved in some kind of action. It is easy to read an image of two boys, standing on a balcony with a cigarette and a beer in their hands, laughing: they are at a party. In shared stories, images are used to contribute to the narration between several tellers. In /r/Braincels, they post images as reactions – reaction images, instead of or in addition to written comments. Pepe the frog is frequently used. This green cartoon frog conveys many different meanings, all by which expression he has on his face or in different contexts. He can be sad frog, smug frog and angry Pepe. Even Donald Trump has his own Pepe, drawing Pepe the frog into the political sphere. In addition to images' narrativity, you can use images to position yourself relative to others in the same interactive context. When evaluating and interpreting the image in question (Page 2018:37-38), you are taking a stance of accepting or rejecting the story the image conveys. By sharing images, such as memes, we can share a lot of information in one click. One image tells a whole story, and this story can be shared across the distributed linearity created by the co-tellers in the shared story, as well as other websites and in other contexts. The sharing of images is an important part of the interactions on Reddit.com

According to Page (2018:40), multimodality is essential for understanding all of the different layers of context. The different semiotic resources give and receive context from the shared story. The formatting of the website is also a multimodal structure (Page 2018:40), as I have explained in the chapter about Reddit. The algorithm and default-filter present some content as more visible, while other content requires further interaction to be viewed. The quarantine is another example of a multimodal structure. Page (2018:41) claims that what is most important with a social-semiotic approach, is how these contextual resources are viewed as "socially meaningful and

as the means by which broader socio-political meanings can be construed" (Page 2018:41). In line with the socio-semiotic approach, I have previously addressed the algorithm and design of Reddit. In addition, I will address the semiotic resources used in the shared stories on /r/Braincels.

### **Interactional pragmatics: looking at relational work**

The socio-semiotic approach allows for a contextual analysis of the text and the semiotic resources used on /r/Birancels. Images, memes and website design all matters when analyzing shared stories online. However, Page (2018:41) points to the challenge of the movement between text analysis, consisting of narratives and semiotic resources, and the discussion of the sociocultural processes where the text is produced (Page 2018:41). Page (2018:41) solves this problem by introducing a new element in the analytical tool kit, namely interactional pragmatics. This framework is used to examine how social norms for narrative interaction operates, and what these norms can tell us about the relationship of the tellers in the shared story (Page 2018:41). According to Page (2018:41), sharing is a social practice, and this suggests a certain set of relational outcomes: "such as options to align more or less closely with other tellers, to create, maintain or threaten rapport" (Page 2018:41). As such, shared stories are relational work:

[relational work is] All aspects of the work invested by individuals in the construction, maintenance, reproduction and transformation of interpersonal relationships among those engaged in social practice (Locher and Watts 2008:96 in Page 2018:42)

According to Page (2018): "interactional pragmatics provides us a bridge between the tellers and the social outcomes of sharing at an individual and cultural level" (p. 41). By looking at the interactions in shared stories, we understand the relationship between the tellers. This is relational work, where the co-tellers continuously negotiate amongst themselves. In this way, we can see that sharing "can be ambiguous, misunderstood or disrupted" (Page 2018:45).

In addition, I have presented the unifying concepts of The manosphere in chapter three. Here, we get an understanding of the sociocultural context of the interactions

on /r/Braincels. This again gives us a better understanding of the text, the semiotic resources used in the text, as well as the relational work performed.

### 4.4 Three levels of analyzing shared stories

We have now learned that shared stories are atypical narratives and that they consist of “multiple tellers, distributed linearity, intertextuality and an emphasis on common ground” (Page 2018:27). In my thesis, I will focus on co-tellership and shared meanings. While intertextuality and distributed linearity is highly relevant when analyzing, I wish to dive deeper into the relational work and the broad, cultural meanings (the narratives) I find through my data.

Page (2018:27) presents three levels of analyzing shared stories. When combining these analytic levels with the four characteristics of the shared story, we get the mediated narrative analysis’ analytical tool kit. It consists of the said three levels, presented in table 1: the content of the story, the narrative interaction, socio-cultural context and ideological implications of the shared story (Page 2018:28-29).

Table 2. Levels of Mediated Narrative Analysis

Level 1	The text	Sharing is analyzed as a form of telling a story.
Level 2	The context	Sharing is analyzed in relation to its online interactions of (re)production and consumption
Level 3	Its social meanings	Sharing is analyzed as the “familiar” values and socio-cultural myths that are indexed or presupposed through the unfolding story

I will look at all levels in my analysis. In table 3, I present my table of theoretical inspired levels, combining Page’s (2018) meditated narrative analysis, Witsø Rafoss’ (2015) narrative characters and Ging’s (2017) theory of hybrid and hegemonic masculinity:



Table 1. Levels of Mediated Narrative Analysis, my adaption

Level 1	Shared story	Character portrayal: who are the antagonists, protagonists, disputable objects
Level 2	Sharing and interaction in the shared story	Relational work: Interactions amongst tellers The positioning of Incels to hegemonic masculinity: distance or alignment
Level 3	Shared meanings	Main narratives Whose interests does the narratives serve?

I will discuss each shared story, the six threads, at three levels.

At level one in, I will give a description of each shared story and a discussion of the portrayal of the characters in this story.

At level two, if relevant, I will look at the relational work in the shared stories. Here, I will discuss the positions the tellers take up in the interaction and what norms and rights are associated with these interactions. In addition, throughout the whole analysis, I will discuss Incels’ constellation of hybrid masculinity. This means discussing the positioning of hegemonic masculinity, and positioning of Incels to hegemonic masculinity: are they aligning or distancing themselves from it?

At level three, I will discuss the broader, cultural meanings I find in the shared stories. This means identifying the narratives and discussing shared meanings they convey.

Lastly I will sum up the narratives and discuss whose interests the narratives serve in chapter seven.

# 5 Method and data

This chapter contains a discussion of the methods employed in this thesis. I start with a discussion of the methodological approach and follow with a description of the use of the subreddit. The details of the data generation are then discussed. I close this chapter with an ethical discussion regarding research on online communities.

## 5.1 Methodological approach: Ethnography online

To choose the appropriate method for generation, handling and analysis of data for your specific research topic are important (Silverman 2001: 4). As I wish to understand the community of Incels better, a qualitative approach is suitable. Qualitative methods are preferred over quantitative methods when the researcher seeks a deeper understanding of a social phenomenon (Silverman 2001:32). More specifically, I will use a qualitative approach to data collection in *a virtual community*, which is a relatively new domain for researchers and, as such, relative new domain for gathering data. I will use online ethnography as my methodological approach.

Ethnography can be defined as "a description of individuals, groups or cultures in their own environment over a (long) period of time" (Skågeby 2011:410). Online ethnography is thus an ethnography of online communities. Similarly to ethnography, the choice of methods in online ethnography is flexible and adaptive (Varis 2014:11), and the methods most commonly used are qualitative in nature, such as direct observation, document collection and participation (Skågeby 2011:411). I will not participate in /r/Braincels , but rather collect data directly from the website and observe the community as an invisible fly on the wall.

I will loosely follow the online ethnological procedure of Skågeby (2011), which consists of first defining a setting and a research perspective, then making an entrance to the community followed by a description of data collection.

### **Declaring of research perspective**

Skågeby (2011: 413) strongly recommends declaring your research perspective before initiating research. This includes prior interpretations and personal experience

of the studied domain. This is to unpack my own position as an internet user in context with /r/Braincels.

My position as a researcher in is as *an outsider*, with some inside experience due to regular lurking on /r/Braincels and reading about the phenomenon in newspapers and other news media sites. This has given me some knowledge of the terms and expressions used amongst Incels and in the Manosphere. I believe this knowledge will help me understand the stories and narratives found on /r/Braincels. Fortunately, for me as a researcher, Incels are an internet phenomenon: their culture and community exists online. They are preoccupied with categorizing, theorizing and explaining their views on the internet. This means that there are several Incel dictionaries and Incel wiki's explaining common terms, theories and views. Information on Incels, and by Incels, is easy to access on the internet.

I am a *woman*, an unwanted person on this subreddit. I am also an object of hate. I initially found an interest in this group due to the anti-feminist and misogynistic attitudes found here. This could possibly influence my interpretations of comments, and subsequently the narratives I find. I believe it is important to ask questions contesting my own prerequisites as an outsider. One example of these prerequisites is how I first viewed the community. For me, /r/Braincels represented a toxic community of American, white men who hate women. Is this description correct? My time in this subreddit has shown that Incels consists of many ethnicities and nationalities. There absolutely is misogyny, but there are also stories about sadness and loneliness. To understand this community better I also needed to ask; what does the community mean to the users? Why do they come here? Which turned out to be important questions to ask, as their reasons are not just their hate for women, but also the feeling of being misunderstood and alone.

Another element of the Incel universe I initially had concerns about was the *humor*. There was a special kind of gallows humor that I was not embedded in. After watching the documentary "The life of an Incel" (Vice News 2018), I have a better understanding of the humor and language used amongst Incels. After conducting my research, I now also understand that the line between humor and seriousness is not even evident to the users of /r/Braincels. The line between sarcasm and reality is blurry.

Thus, I am an outsider with some inside knowledge. However, I am aware of this position, and I will continuously be aware of my position as an outsider when analyzing my data.

### **Making an entrance: an invisible fly on the wall**

The study of digital communication always involves a screen, which gives the researcher an opportunity to lurk: “to participate invisibly and unbeknownst to the people who are being observed” (Varis 2014:12). This means I have the opportunity to become not only a fly on the wall but an invisible one. Some would claim that lurking is not proper ethnographic observation, as the researcher does not participate. Others claim that lurking gives a unique opportunity for collecting natural data, where the informants are not aware of their status as informants, and therefore are unable to modify their behavior accordingly (Varis 2014:12). In addition to natural data, lurking on the internet gives us access to a previously unavailable type of data (Murthy 2008:845). Skågeby (2011) concludes his discussion of whether to enter the community openly or hidden with the following: “At the end of the day there is the question of how sensitive the material is judged to be and what potential harms and benefits that can result from the publication of the research” (Skågeby 2011:414). As such, the opportunity to observe the shared stories on /r/Braincels as a hidden researcher has given me the chance to gather natural data and insight into a community that is not previously researched. However, this, of course, raises some ethical questions. The ethical discussion concerning this choice follows at the end of this chapter. For now, I will continue with the setting and entering /r/Braincels.

### **Setting**

Online ethnography aims to unearth the deeper reasons for behaviors or attitudes found in virtual communities. When researching a virtual community, it is important to acknowledge that usage is most often situated in specific communities and with specific communication technologies. As such, when seeking to understand the values and attitudes of people on the internet, close observation and analysis of specific people and technologies, in specific places and times: a setting, is needed (Skågeby 2011:411). Skågeby (2011:412) stresses the importance of setting. A definition of the setting, in both social and technical terms, is needed to provide the

readers with the basic knowledge to contextualize the findings and insights. In the previous chapter, I discussed the usage of Reddit and Reddit’s algorithm. This is the technical setting of /r/Braincels. Reddit attracts white, male “geeks” due to its easy access and algorithm highlighting geek interests. Reddit works as a forum, only where popular posts are up-voted and therefore becomes more visible.

*“To discuss geek and nerd culture is to discuss masculinity—in particular, white male masculinity” (Massanari 2017:332).*

The social setting means the social context of the online community. The subreddit /r/Braincels consists of heterosexual males, gathering on Reddit to discuss their inability to have sexual relations with women. Who the users are is not relevant. I do not know and do not need to know their real identities. However, through media, Incels are portrayed as white; as the stereotypical, white "nerd". Complimentary to this, Donnelly et.al (2001) finds that 85 percent of the respondents in their research on involuntary celibacy, discussed in chapter 2, was white. In contrast, through my observations on /r/Braincels , I would argue that Incels could consist of all ethnicities. A poll done on /r/Braincels, presented below, shows that 40 percent of the respondents are South Asian, while only 28 percent are white. The rest of the results are Black, East Asian, Middle Eastern and Hispanic.

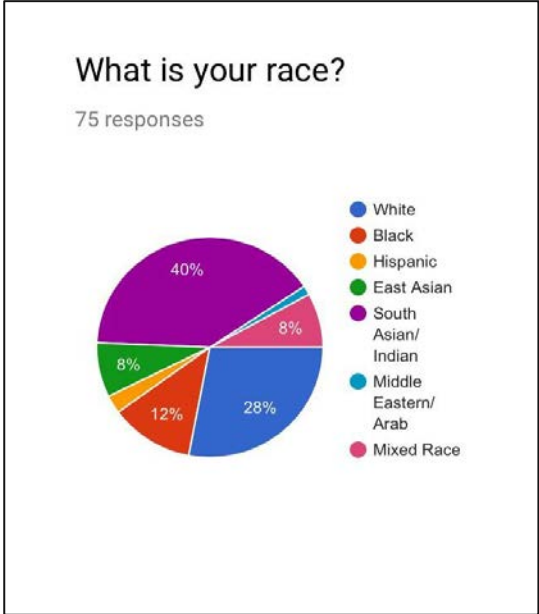


Image 3. “Poll on race from /r/Braincels”

The polls response rate is 0,0011 percent<sup>6</sup>, which means that the results are not anywhere conclusive. However, it shows us that Incels are not exclusively white. This statement is supported by the 260 comments below the poll, where the tellers discuss their race and ethnicity. Incels are concerned with race, just as they are concerned with gender. This does however not mean that the majority are not white, or that white masculinity is not the norm. In line with Massanari’s claims, I find that

<sup>6</sup> 75 out of 65911 answered the poll

Incels often presume a white male centrality (Massanari 2017: 332). They often use racialized language for every other race than white. Moreover, white masculinity is considered the norm and what is sought after. Therefore, I will argue that to discuss Incel culture and masculinity is indeed to discuss white, male masculinity.

In an attempt to make the process of document collection more transparent, I will take you with me, back to the first time I entered /r/Braincels. This is to give the readers an understanding of the social and technical frame of context for this community

### **Entering /r/Braincels**

It is early December, and I type in "incels reddit" in the Google search bar. Amongst the top searches are "ask an Incel", "Incelfies" (post your Incelfies for ratings), and other subreddits discussing Incels. The top search is a link to the subreddit "IncelTears: Because hating women will always get you laid". I click on the link and enter IncelTears. The about-section explains that:

IncelTears is a part-mocking, part-watchdog subreddit for posting screenshots of hateful, misogynist, racist, violent, and often bizarre content created by "incels" (hateful involuntary celibates). We do not condone blanket hatred of virgins or the romantically unsuccessful, only those who self-identify as "incel". Incels blame women, their genes, attractive men, and society at large for their inability to get dates or sex. Occasional meta/discussion and advice-seeking posts are also welcome ([reddit.com/r/IncelTears](https://www.reddit.com/r/IncelTears))

The threads consist of mostly of ironic and sarcastic discussions of posts and comments made by Incels on other forums and threads. One thread called "Weekly advice", which is a part of the watchdog-element of this subreddit and dedicated to advising Incels, refer to a subreddit for suicide watch: "Please go to /r/SuicideWatch for matters pertaining to suicidal ideation, as we simply can't guarantee that the people here will have sufficient resources to tackle such issues" ([reddit.com/IncelTears](https://www.reddit.com/IncelTears)). I find a comment referring to /r/Braincels as the most misogynistic place on earth, so I return to Google, and type in "Reddit Braincels", and /r/Braincels shows up. When entering, a warning comes up:

**Are you sure you want to view this community? This community is quarantined. It is dedicated to shocking or highly offensive content. Are you certain you want to continue?**

I am certain, and click "CONTINUE". Every time I click on a thread on the main page, trying to enter the thread, the same warning comes up. It is irritating and feels time-consuming. Sometimes I need to click "CONTINUE" twice to access. The same warning is always present at the top of the page in every thread.

Reddit has created barriers for viewing this community, such as quarantine. This means that the subreddit is hidden when googling "Incels" and "Reddit". This also means that you cannot google any posts or comments found on /r/Braincels. When clicking on the link to the subreddit, Reddit gives you a warning of highly offensive content, to give you a chance to think twice before entering. This indicates that /r/Braincels is a dangerous, or at least problematic, community.

## **5.2 Data collection**

My data consists of comments on the subreddit /r/Braincels. The three most common data collection methods used in online ethnography are document collection, online observation and online interviews (Skågeby 2011:414). Document collection is the gathering of archived data. In comparison to document collection, online observation is observing and gathering real-time, synchronous data (Skågeby 2011:414). Since Reddit consists of archived threads, and not synchronous "chatting", I will define my data collection as direct document collection (Skågeby 2011:414). My direct document collection is targeted (Skågeby 2011:415), which means that I have selected /r/Braincels because of its topical and demographical relevance to my research questions. This subreddit discusses and consists of Incels. I could have done a distributed data collection, where data from several sites or blogs are gathered. However, this would require more time and space in my thesis.

Between the months of January and May 2019, I have visited /r/Braincels regularly to get familiar with the rhetoric and views of the users, approximately every other week. I have spent many hours lurking. After receiving a confirmation from NSD to proceed

with my research from The Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) in April, I started analyzing the data directly from the website.

**From data to narratives**

My data consists of six different threads on /r/Braincels that I found interesting and deemed relevant to my thesis. Each thread consists of a hundred to two hundred comments in, which means my original data comprise of around 1000 comments. I initially had intended to analyze ten threads, but quickly found that I had enough data in the six most relevant threads.

Five main narratives emerged through my data: 1) The narrative of sex is what decides a man’s worth, 2. The narrative of “looks are everything; personality is nothing”, 3) The narrative of women being subordinate to men, 4) The narrative of feminism suppresses men, 5)The narrative of loneliness.

Table 1 Narratives derived from shared stories

The story of how women have replaced God in 2019	The story of how Chad always wins	The story of how women deserve abuse	The story of revenge on women	The story of loneliness	The story of the normal sexual trajectory
<i>Narrative 1</i> <i>Narrative 4</i>	<i>Narrative 2</i>	<i>Narrative 2</i>	<i>Narrative 3</i> <i>Narrative 2</i>	<i>Narrative 5</i>	<i>Narrative 3</i>

In table 1, I show which narratives emerged from which threads. I refer to the threads as *stories*.

The process of finding these narratives started with the lurking on /r/Braincels. After spending some time on the subreddit, I got an understanding of how Reddit works and an impression of the users. As of 25. May 2019 /r/Braincels consists of 69.760 users. The users post threads, vote and comment on each other's threads. The most commented and up-voted threads become most visible on the top list. Throughout



my research, I mostly read the top five threads on the list. Moreover, all the threads I chose as my data was on the top five of the top list.

I chose threads with at least one hundred comments, which sparked my interest and had continuity in its discussions. The one exception is the thread concerning the normal sexual trajectory, which had around 40 comments. I chose to include this thread due to its relevance to Incels views on a normal sexual trajectory. Many threads consisted of jokes and one-worded comments from the tellers. Other threads consisted of many digressions, going off topic regards to the original post. These threads were excluded.

After choosing the most relevant threads for my thesis, I took an inductive approach, rereading them before taking any notes. Thereafter, I read them again, taking notes on the different levels of my analysis: the text, the context and the social meanings. I saw that in the text, Incels portrayed women as the enemy and that Incels was portrayed as the victim. Regarding the context, I noted that there were few challenging voices. Lastly, I took note of how their stories all seemed to be based on the idea that they are ugly, and that no woman will sleep with them because of this

I continued my analysis by going through every thread again, writing down my general observations, the portrayal of characters in line with the narrative characters of Rafoss (2016), and copying in citations along with my observations as I read. I only copied direct citations directly from the website, not user names, into my thesis. This is to make sure the users' personal information is protected in line with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation. After this, I went over my writings and the six narratives emerged. In table 1, I present an overview of the different threads (which I call stories) and the narratives that emerged from them.

Lastly, I revisited my data after merging the mediated narrative analysis with the theory of hybrid masculinity, as shown in table 2 on page 41, looking at the positioning of Incels and hegemonic masculinity. I did this to let the data speak somewhat for itself before theorizing my findings.

### **Strengths and weaknesses**

As my theoretical perspective is mediated narrative analysis, I analyze the six threads as shared stories. This means that I need to look at all comments in the *context of the shared story*. Which again means that I need to analyze the shared story from start to beginning. This presented a challenge in my analysis chapter, where I struggled to find a straightforwardly way to describe and discuss my analysis and findings. I chose to focus on the narratives and split the shared stories into parts.

The fact that I chose the threads based on my own interests means that my data is not necessarily representable of all the material found on /r/Braincels. My position as an outsider and as a woman most likely has directed my attention to certain topics, leaving other, relevant topics out. However, I will argue that the stories and narratives found in my chosen stories represent the general narratives found on /r/Braincels. All threads was in the top five list of most popular threads on/r/Braincels. As such, these threads have all received considerable attention by the users, that being comments or up-votes. They are all important stories on/r/Braincels. In addition, I use the Incel wiki and Incel dictionaries as supplements when discussing these threads, using these resources as additions to my data.

The assessment of reliability is not applicable for my thesis, due to its qualitative nature (Thagaard 2010:198), and my measures to secure anonymity for the users. My research consists of observation and analysis of specific people (Incels), in a specific place (Reddit) and times (the spring of 2019). This means that my research is difficult to replicat. To ensure internal reliability, I clearly show what the users' citations are and what my arguments in my analysis are, to try to be as transparent as possible (Thagaard 2010:199), while at the same time not compromising anonymity. In addition, I have declared my position as a researcher, discussed the setting of/r/Braincels and given the readers an understanding of the contextual frame for this community through my description of entering the subreddit.

Lastly, my sample is small, which accordingly limits its generalizability

### **5.3 Ethical assessment**

The ethical considerations regarding my research have been both interesting and frustrating. The internet is now such a big part of everyone's lives, resulting in people

sharing more of their personal lives on the Internet. The lines between public and private spaces are blurred, and the researcher needs to take this into consideration when doing research on people on the internet.

Following, I will discuss the ethical decisions concerning my data collection.

### **Reddit: public or private space?**

Reddit can be categorized under the umbrella term "social media", meaning a variety of new technologies or internet-based forms of practice. Compared to traditional media, such as newspapers, social media is especially social due to their ability to continuously connect their users in their everyday lives (Larsen & Glud 2013:68). You can communicate with other users whenever – wherever, as long as you have access to the internet. Another social aspect is the possibility to create content together, as a community. The degree of interaction is high on social media. We share content such as pictures, videos, texts and communicate about the content we share. Sharing content is easy and does not require strong technical skills (Larsen & Glud 2013:68).

One challenge with collecting data through social media is the diffuse boundaries between public and private spaces. Reddit is accessible to anyone, and the Redditors on /r/Braincels are aware of lurkers. At the same time, they discuss personal and serious topics relating to their personal lives. Is Reddit public or private? Some argue that the internet is public space and that the actions and communication found here can be used for research, as long as you as researcher take precautions regarding anonymity (Liu 1999). Others criticize this view and claim that interactions taking place over the internet, which may be open to the public in the form of not requiring log in or invitations to view the interactions, may be of private character (Buchanan 2004 in Larsen & Glud 2013:79, Elm 2009, Zimmer 2010). To solve this discussion, Elm (2009) suggests extending the view of public and private space with the concepts of semi-public and semi-private space. This can help to increase understanding of internet platforms, while at the same time diffusing the ethical decisions and boundaries (Elm 2009: 75).

Larsen and Glud (2014 80-81) argue that different media are not inherently public or private. It is the different circumstances connected to the media that decides the degree of publicness, and these circumstances can vary between platforms, people and over time. The answer is to continuously assess each media in each case of research, not beforehand. The authors stress the importance of knowing that the line between public and private is a blurry one and that one concrete media is used and perceived in many different ways. All depending on the circumstances. Thus, the researcher needs to take a greater responsibility concerning the protection of the contestants' conversations.

### **Expected public sphere**

So far, we have gotten no clear answers as to what is public and what is private, and what this means for the data collection and publication of results from online communities. It was difficult to find articles actually discussing these ethical considerations in relation to actual research.

To the rescue comes The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committee (NESH), which published a research ethics guide for internet research in 2018 (NESH 2016). They argue that the user agreement for the forums you wish to use can give you a certain indication of the participants expected public sphere. In Reddit's privacy policy, they inform the users that:

When you submit content (such as a post or comment or public chat) to the Services, **any visitors to and users of our Services will be able to see that content**, the username associated with the content, and the date and time you originally submitted the content (my emphasis, "Privacy Policy" 2018).

The term *expected public sphere* relates to research where it is unclear if the participants understand and expect that their actions and statements actually is public, and that this information can be used for other purposes than what they originally had in mind. The researcher has an independent responsibility to assess what is reasonable criteria's for expected public sphere for the relevant project. In addition, when doing research on social media, NESH (2016) stresses the assessment of contextual integrity. The context of where the information or

communication takes place is key in the assessment of what is private and public. They bring up several relevant questions: How accessible is the website? What are the technical settings? Is there an age limit? How many have access? How much is the group or website talked about in traditional media?

NESH (2016) states that the stricter the access restrictions are, the more caution we as researchers need to exercise. Moreover, they point out that technical access limitations and "private" groups may be used to protect statements that are, in principle, public. In this way, even private Facebook groups can be considered public - if the group consists of thousands of users. The bigger the group is, the more public is the information.

In many cases, *informing or getting consent* from online forums is easy, either directly from the participants or via a moderator. However, there are several challenges connected to informing or getting consent in internet research. The participation may be volatile, while the information we wish to use is stored and available. In addition, the number of participants can make it impossible to get consent from everyone (NESH 2016). This is true for my research: It is not possible to get consent from over 69.000 users.

In light of NESH's guide (2016), I will define /r/Braincels expected public sphere as public. The website is accessible to anyone actively looking for Incels. There are no restrictions for access, other than the restrictions implemented by Reddit to warn people of offensive content. This group is labeled as problematic due to attention in the media and other Redditors, meaning that this group is well known and visited by outsiders, and talked about in the media. Moreover, while Incels are not fans of outsiders lurking on their subreddit, they are aware that journalists and others visit their site. In chapter 6.3.1 of my analysis (p.78), we can see how they adjust each other's statements accordingly. They often refer to IncelTears (a watchdog subreddit that monitor /r/Braincels). One teller in my data warns to attract the attention of the "bitches at Huffington Post" (Teller G, p. 96), due to the journalist's complaints about Incels. This means that they are aware that their information is public and that I may expect some negative feedback from the community. Lastly, /r/Braincels now has over 69.000 users, which I will argue makes this group big enough for the information this subreddit to be considered public.

## **Anonymity for the anonymous**

While I argue that /r/Braincels can be considered public, it does not mean that all information found on should be publicized. This brings us to another issue with collecting data online: anonymity.

Varis (2017:7) presents the need for the anonymization of usernames and avatars. While others may argue that usernames are not real names, Varis argue that this online self-representation should be seen as very real, because they are real to the people who use them themselves. They are often established, well-known identities, which holds a reputation. Thus, when necessary, usernames should also be protected. Varis (2014:7) also states that online material can easily be traced and located, also known as the issue of googlability or backtracking. You can easily google a quote and end up with the username that posted the quote. Skågeby (2017:418) also addresses the increasing possibility to search forums and blogs and concludes that researchers should be careful not to cite word for word since this makes quotes findable – and therefore not anonymous.

In regards to the users of /r/Braincel, their usernames are often linked to Incel culture. Other users on Reddit can click on each user and see all their comments and contributions. In this way, the usernames are linked to their comments and posts through Reddit. The fact that /r/Braincels is quarantined solves the problem with googlability. You cannot backtrack their citations through Google or Reddit. I will anonymize the usernames of the users on /r/Braincels, and I will not use any information about the users that can identify them or others in any way.

Lastly, when comparing the judgment on potential harms versus benefits from the research, I believe that there is potential little harm posing for the users on /r/Braincels, and that the benefits of understanding this culture better outweigh any possible negative feedback from the community.

# 6 Analysis

In this chapter, I will analyze six shared stories found on /r/Braincels. To remind the readers of my analytical disposition, I repeat my presentation from chapter 4.4.

I separate my analysis into two parts:

In chapter six, I describe and discuss each of the shared stories on three levels: at level one, I look at the shared story through character portrayal. At level two, I look at the relational work and interactions amongst tellers. I also look at the positioning of Incels to hegemonic masculinity: are they distancing or aligning themselves with hegemonic masculinity? At level three, I look at shared meanings, through the meaning and usage of the main narratives. In chapter seven, I discuss level three in more detail, looking at the sociocultural implications of the narratives. In chapter eight, I present a table that summarizes the narratives (Table 4, p 96),

Five narratives emerged through my analysis: 1) the narrative of sex is what decides a man's worth 2), the narrative of "looks are everything; personality is nothing", 3) The narrative of women being subordinate to men, 4) The narrative of anti-feminism and 5) The narrative of loneliness.

As my data is shared stories, I analyze each comment in relation to the shared story it is posted in. Some shared stories included several narratives, and I had to split the shared stories into parts, and place these parts under the relevant narrative. I will however contextualize the detached parts of the shared stories with a short explanation of the shared story from where it is detached.

I start with the most fundamental narrative, which is central for Incels worldview: 1) the narrative of sex is what decides a man's worth

## 6.1 Narrative one: The narrative of sex is what decides a man's worth

(...) everything young men do is to gain the approval of women. Guys are slaving away in gyms, studying, working, hoping someday their efforts will pay

off and a girl – any girl – will look at them and deem them acceptable. As a man, your value is determined by how many women who wants to fuck you, (J).

In the quote above, we see an example of how Incels draw on the *the narrative of sex is what decides a man's worth*. To elaborate on this narrative, I will use the shared story titled "How women have replaced God in 2019".

In this first shared story, we see that Incels equate women with God. Women are believed to be the ultimate judge of a man's worth because women decide if a man will get to sleep with them or not. The first teller (A) presents a theory of how females have replaced God. He explains how he came to this realization when he saw the thousands of adult men who pay pretty women for their excrements and urine. He compares this behavior to cultures that had sacred animals, such as the pre-Islamic Arabs and Indians, who "prize the excrement of camels and cows respectively" (A). He claims that the men who would previously sacrifice themselves for God would gladly sacrifice themselves for smelling women`s underwear today. He compares FinDom<sup>7</sup> to how men used to pay tithes to churches: they get nothing in return, besides being on the good side with God. Thus, men make women into godly creatures through their obsession with them.

Moreover, teller A states that: "female judgment is the ultimate test of the worth of a man in our society as it transcends wealth and social status" (A). His example of this is "how a janitor who is successful with women is ultimately worth more than a rich Incel" (A). According to the teller, this is similar to how piousness used to be the only measure of a man that transcended wealth and social status. Moreover, this is the reason why there is such a backlash against Incels and people who dare to criticize women: you are attacking God when attacking women, and you will be crucified for it. I would argue that Incels' "criticism" is more like an obsession: they relentlessly discuss women's sexual nature, women's looks and women's sexual activities. They relentlessly discuss the social structural-, evolutionary psychological- and sociobiological explanations for women not sleeping with them. However, if one is to believe that having sex *is* what decides a man's worth, it is understandable that one

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<sup>7</sup> Financial dominance: a sexual fetish of money slavery, where the submissive gives money to the dominant.



would obsess over the keepers of this asset: women. As such, women become the disputable object and the antagonists in this story.

Stating that sexual successful men are worth more than a rich Incel, supports hegemonic masculinity by subordinating not-hegemonic masculinity (not sexual successful men), to hegemonic masculinity (those who are sexual successful). Incels are distancing themselves from hegemonic masculinity by placing themselves in the category of not successful, while at the same time aligning themselves with hegemonic masculinity by showing support for the hegemony of sexual successful men. Sexual successful men are handsome, masculine men. Incels are often portrayed as having feminine traits

One teller suggests women have it easy because they can sell the waste of their bodies to sustain their lives. Since some women can sell their underwear online means that all women can, therefore all women have an easy life. This is similar to the virtual victims' strategy found amongst the MRA's, by Schmitz and Kazyak (2016), where they portray men as the victim. Women have it easy compared to men. We also see how teller A presents his theory in a rational manner, using the example of the janitor as facts. This is also similar to the strategy of Virtual Victims, where they seek social legitimacy for hegemonic masculinity through rationalization (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016).

### **Women are treated as God's – they are the ultimate judge**

As we have seen at the start of this shared story, women are portrayed as having replaced God, and as the ultimate judge of a man's worth. Teller F supports this:

Female judgment is the ultimate test of the worth of a man in this society. True af. A mans whole value is his perceived ability to attract women. A mans lms<sup>8</sup> is all he is today because lms is all women care about (F).

Where teller G responds:

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<sup>8</sup> LMS stands for looks, money, status

This is the fundamental truth of this sub and the cultural state of things in the west. (..) women are the only ones who can actively sell themselves to you while simultaneously demonizing you for not worshipping and praising for your servitude (G).

As we can see, men are presented as doing everything they can to get the approval of women. This is because the number of sexual partners gives men value. Moreover, women judge men on their looks, money and status in society. There is no one discussing *why* the value of a man lies in his sexual success. In light of these comments, it not completely clear why women would judge a man on his ability to sleep with other women. If we follow the evolutionary psychological and sociobiological views of Incels, where women are nature's judgment casters as they decide who gets to breed, it should also mean that females seek a long-term, faithful partner that can provide safety. Thus, a woman would not value a man of the number of conquests, as this would imply instability. Could the reason why women value men on their sexual success be that this signals that this man is an alpha male?

In search for answers, I visited Incel Wiki, the Wikipedia for Incels, where they explain women's "natural inclination" of sleeping with handsome men with the *Dualistic Mating Strategy*. According to Incel Wiki, women will sleep with men who have good genes (and who therefore have many sexual partners) and will marry (and not sleep with) the less attractive man who gives them stability. These less attractive men are called beta males, who are subordinate to alpha males. According to Incel Wiki, they are followers, trying to impersonate an alpha male. Sometimes they succeed in tricking women to believe they are alpha males, and they are therefore sometimes successful: "the average beta male has had 5 lays by the time he is 20" ("alpha, beta, omega", Incel Wiki 2019)<sup>9</sup>. According to Incels, beta males are cuckolded. This means that their girlfriends or wives are sleeping with alpha males while receiving support from the beta male ("Cuckoldry" 2019). Therefore, according to Incels, women value men on their sexual success because this signals that this man has good genes, that he is an alpha male. The alpha male is the symbol of

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hegemonic masculinity: the masculine, handsome man who is successful with women. Women are the slaves to their biological need for good genes.

Moreover, this theory of the Dualistic Mating strategy states that Incels are subordinated to beta males, making them omega males. This categorization of masculinity shows us the map of Incels' hierarchy of masculinity: alphas are the most valued (and as such, hegemonic) masculinity; betas are subordinate to alphas; omegas are subordinate to both. This map of masculinities hierarchy supports both hegemonic masculinity, and the *theory* of hegemonic masculinity.

What is also interesting in regards to the Dualistic Mating Strategy is that it is possible to alter your personality, and thus be able to sleep with women: betas can mimic the behavior of alphas, and some times trick women into believing they are alphas. This contradicts the other, fundamental narrative of Incels: *personality is nothing, looks are everything*. I will elaborate on this narrative and the contradictions found on regarding this narrative later in my thesis.

Lastly, I would argue that hat Incels are projecting their own judgment onto women, making them the antagonists. It seems to me, that men are the ones who judge other men on their ability to sleep with women. This is at least seems to true for the men found on this forum and in The manosphere.

In this chapter, I have discussed *The narrative of sex is what decides a man's worth*. This narrative is fundamental for Incels. They believe our modern day society evaluates a man after how much sex he has. Thus, Incels are worth nothing because they do not have sex. This places Incels at the bottom, or even outside of, the masculine hierarchy. Hegemonic masculinity is placed at the top of the hierarchy through the symbol of men with good genes: the alpha males. They are the ones who get to sleep with women, and therefore they are the ones who are worth most in our society.

## **6.2 Narrative two: The narrative of "looks are everything; personality is nothing"**

To show how Incels use *the narrative of "looks are everything, personality is nothing"*, I will use the shared stories titled "Chad always wins" and "women deserve abuse". In chapter 6.2.2, I discuss the contradictions to this narrative, found in the story titled "Revenge on women" which is also discussed in *relation to the narrative of women as subordinate to men*, in chapter 6.3.

The first shared story I will discuss is titled "Chad always wins" and starts with an image of a tweet by a girl who writes "Why would I date the "nice" boy that texts me back when I could date the really hot guy with commitment issues and a troubled past?" (A), posted by teller A. This tweet is used by teller A to confirm the narrative of "looks are everything; personality is nothing". Her statement indicates that she tends to go for the "bad boy", the boy who looks good and has a bad personality (i.e. commitment issues). For the co-tellers in this shared story, this statement is taken as evidence of women choosing handsome men with bad personalities over "nice guys" (Incels). I would argue that the girl does value personality, as she presents the commitment issues and troubled past in contrast to "nice guy" - in brackets, meaning that the nice guy is not actually a nice guy, maybe just a boring guy. The bad boy's personality may be bad, but it is valued, according to the girl who wrote this tweet.

This is an example of how Incels selectively choose what to read into women's actions and statements. Images of Tweets, Facebook statuses, as well as other accounts of women expressing themselves on social media, are often used on to confirm Incels' worldview. The interpretations of these accounts vary, depending on how they fit the narrative of Incels. If the statement fits their view, the statement is taken as true. If the statement does not fit their narrative, they present the statement as dishonest or as to include a hidden message. In the next part, I will discuss the concept of Blackpill. This concept is central to understanding how Incels view their place in society and their obsession with appearance.

### **Swallowing the Blackpill**

We now know that Incels equate a man's looks with his worth in society, shown in *the narrative of sex is what decides a man's worth*. Supplementary to this, the *narrative of "looks are everything; personality is nothing"* place appearance as the most important factor to be able to sleep with women. As such, looks are what decides

a man's worth. Incels are blackpilled, meaning they believe romantic relationships are based on these three interrelated factors:

1. Physical attractiveness
  2. Wealth
  3. Social Status
- ("Blackpill" 2019)

Physical attractiveness is presented as the most important aspect when finding a romantic partner. According to Incel Wiki ("Blackpill" 2019), five central themes about looks emerge from this thesis:

1. Looks are necessary to the formation of physical or romantic desire
  2. Looks are not distributed evenly among men
  3. Looks are not subjective.
  4. The Dualistic Mating Strategy
  5. Hypergamy
- ("Blackpill" 2019).

Incels believes that "women place a minimum threshold of physical attractiveness on potential mates" ("Blackpill" 2019). In addition, they believe women lie about how important physical attractiveness is to them. One could argue that physical attractiveness is *physical*, meaning mutual chemistry, which not always correlate with the appearance of the person you have chemistry with. Alternatively, one could argue that attractiveness comes from the combination of looks and personality. However, Incels rejects this notion. To support their argument of how looks are everything, Incel Wiki ("Blackpill "2019), refers to an article dated 1966, which supposedly finds that attractiveness is the only factor to predict interest in speed dating. In a closer look at the article (Walster et.al 1966), I find that this research is actually conducted at a "computer dance", randomly pairing individuals with each other. Thus, this is not speed dating. Moreover, the use of an article from 1966 seems contradictory for a group that bases their whole identity on how modern day society treats them unfairly. Apparently, the previous five decades have also been unfair times for non-attractive men.

Let us continue with the explanation of the Blackpill thesis: according to point two and three, looks are believed to be unevenly distributed amongst men, and attractiveness believed to be innate in humans ("Blackpill" 2019). According to *The Dualistic Mating*

*Strategy*, a theory also discussed in the previous part, women are presently dramatically more attracted to men in relationships than to single men. Women are naturally inclined to reject men who are not desired by other women - until they have a child. After this, women have an incentive to keep a non-selected man for raising the baby. This “natural sexual desire” of women results in some men having babies with many women. These men are believed to “have historically been and are currently more masculine than men who are not selected by other women. As a result, women prefer masculine men during ovulation” (“Blackpill 2019). Thus, women have an inclination to cheat on less attractive men to acquire the genes of these selected men (“Blackpill” 2019).

The fifth theme that emerges from the postulation of how appearance matters the most, is *Hypergamy*. This is a theory of how women are naturally inclined to "trade up" to men who have better looks, more money and better status (LMS) than they do. Women are described as extremely hypergamous because they are the naturally sexual selectors in our sexually liberated society. Women can pick and choose from men with better LMS than themselves. Since men are less hypergamous, women create an increasingly rampant incelism amongst the male population ("Blackpill" 2019).

Thus, Incels believe they are at the bottom of the hierarchy, subordinate to the beta-males (who occasionally is chosen by women, after women have a child). According to this explanation of how appearance is the most important part in attracting women, Incels will never have sex - therefore they are worth nothing. This *narrative of "looks are everything; personality is nothing"* facilitate a fatalistic and hopeless worldview: for Incels, since they are genetically ugly, there is no point in improving yourself.

The concept the Blackpill supports hegemonic masculinity by presenting masculine traits as the most essential element in regards to sexual success, which in turn decides your worth in society. These theories may seem ludicrous. This may be the reason why Incels try to support their claim by referring to research articles. However, most research articles are misinterpreted or misrepresented to fit Incels narratives.

### **Chad does not need a personality**

The co-tellers continue to confirm the *narrative of "looks are everything; personality is nothing"* in the comments following teller A's post. Women are portrayed as only being interested in looks:

Don't make the mistake to trying to alter your behavior so you come across less nice and more like Chad, they'll suddenly hate that behavior if it comes from an ugly man. You can't act like Chad, the look is everything, the behavior is nothing (A).

Others chime in. Chad can he can do whatever he wants and women will always find him attractive. One teller suggests that Chad does not have commitment issues, he has standards higher than a "mediocre slut with an ego" (B). Teller B also suggests that 90 percent of the time where women claim men have commitment issues, they are trying to absolve themselves of responsibility for not actively looking for commitment. Thus, Chad, is not the problem – women are. Thus, women are the antagonists, but who is Chad?

Chad is a frequent character in the Incel world, and in The manosphere. As mentioned in chapter 2, he represents the stereotypical alpha male. He is *all* men who are good looking. He is the antagonist, because he always wins the girl, without even trying. He has muscles and a strong chin and he is popular. Like the typical "jock" in high school movies. He is the disputable object, as he represents what Incels want to be. However, Incel can never achieve Chad's status because they cannot change their genes. I find that compared to women, Chad does not receive as much hate. Incels acknowledge Chad's existence and his superiority to them in their stories, but they rarely discuss Chads psychological and genetic predisposition, as they do with women. His existence and behavior are not questioned; he is just accepted. He is an omnipresent character that is presented as superior to Incels in the social hierarchy. In this way, Chad becomes a mythical character. He exists as a symbol of the unattainable masculine ideal: the symbol of hegemonic masculinity.

### **Auto moderators: reinforcing the narrative**

When typing certain words, an auto-moderator is triggered and posts an automatic response. When typing personality, the auto-moderator responds with the following statement:

Personality isn't really that important to most women. They often euphemize personality for good physical looks and social status. When gangbanger Jeremy Meeks was released from prison for robbing and beating another boy close to death, his girlfriend marries and had children with him. Meeks improved his personality so much that he later cheated on his wife with a rich bimbo and didn't even feel bad about it. (AutoModerator).

This auto moderator reinforces the narratives of Incels on by posting statements that support Incels' worldviews. Often through sarcasm, such as the last sentence about Meek. The auto moderator implies that Meeks did not improve his personality - he is just good looking. As such, looks are everything; personality is nothing.

### **All Women Are Like That (AWALT)**

As already mentioned, women are portrayed as shallow and arrogant. Teller C replies to the image of the tweet, claiming that women all women are the same: "Ignorance and arrogance at best, virtue signaling at the worst. AWALT" (C). AWALT means All Women Are Like That, and this is a common term used on /r/Braincels. By stating that all women are the same, Incels leave little room for women being individual human beings. Women are an entity that all follow their natural inclination to hunt for good genes. They are both the antagonist and the disputable object: women are the enemy as women decide whom they want to mate with, and they reject to have sex with Incels because of their appearance.

Virtue signaling is defined as "an attempt to show other people that you are a good person, for example by expressing opinions that will be acceptable to them, especially on social media" ("Virtue Signalling" N.D). However, the term can also mean making a statement because you want approval rather than actually believing it (Shariatmadari 2016). Thus, women are portrayed as either ignorant to the contradictions between this tweet and what they say they want: nice guys (referring to the Blackpill-theory of women lying about how much looks matter, implying that



women say they want nice guys, but they go for the bad guy because he looks good), or arrogantly displaying their preference of good-looking men. In the worst-case scenario, they are expressing their preference to get approval from other women or people. According to teller D, women brag about their poor decisions and being self-destructive in an attempt to make themselves look cool. This broadcasting of poor decisions is explained as women mistaking self-deprecation as a shield from criticism, “as to say see i`m really humble, I can admit that I human so the gives me an excuse to not self-improve” (C).

I would argue that Incels use self-deprecation as a shield from criticism. While instead of trying to be cool, they tell themselves and each other that they nobody`s, which gives them an excuse to not self-improve. None of the tellers points out this similarity in behavior. In contrast, after positioning women as shallow, arrogant and ignorant, one teller writes “meanwhile, you have to sort out all your problems just to get to look at a woman” (E). As such, according to Incels, women can be arrogant and act as they want, and face no repercussions. The same goes for Chad. Incels, however, only need to breathe to irritate or disgust women. Pointing out this double standard positions Incels as the victim. Their position as an ugly man is presented as hopeless.

### **6.2.1 Do not challenge the *narrative of "looks are everything; personality is nothing"***

In my data and observations of /r/Braincels, I see that tellers who challenge the hopelessness accompanying the *narrative of "looks are everything; personality is nothing"* are rare. If this happens, the challenging teller faces ridicule and hate speech.

In the story of "Chad always wins", one challenging teller explains that he is disabled and that he is experiencing success with women after improving himself. He explains how a more positive outlook in life has made his life better and that he is now in a relationship. In response to his story of successful improvement, teller F calls him "faggot" and asks why he visits this subreddit. Teller F adds:

Why do you care how we feel and act? we have no one, why do you come here to bluepill<sup>10</sup> us with your shit? just shower bro, just improve yourself bro, just be happy in life bro, just do it bro. Get out, go be a hero elsewhere”(F).

The shared story continues with the auto-moderator, which in response to the word "improve" presents a (fictional) story of a bald Indian janitor who improved himself into a tall, handsome, 20-year-old, white man who now can get any girl he wants. As it is impossible to change your age and ethnicity, this story is obviously not true. It is sarcasm. This use of sarcasm, as to say, "all stories of improvement is as impossible as this ridiculous story", dismisses the possibility to change Incels hopeless position as an ugly man. Thus, the auto-moderator reinforces *the narrative of "looks are everything; personality is nothing"* by dismissing any comments on self-improvement. Other tellers in this shared story also use exaggerated stories of self-improvement. Sarcasm is diligently used to silence challenging voices on /r/Braincels. By dismissing possibilities for improvement as ridiculous, Incels uphold their position as victims to external forces.

### 6.2.2 Volcel if you have a job?

We can also see how Incels draw on the narrative of "looks are everything; personality is nothing" in the story about "Revenge on women". Here, teller A tells a story of how he deliberately made a job-interviewing round uncomfortable for the women who were applying. In relation to teller A's employment, some tellers question if teller A is a truecel<sup>11</sup>, since he has a job: "You aren't a truecel if you are a wealthy man which I assume you are given your job role, there is always going to be someone willing to date you for your money" (B). This is a structural explanation of the relationship between women and men, in contrast to the *narrative of "looks are everything; personality is nothing"*, which is based on an evolutionary psychological model (women choose men because of their genes). This structural explanation is a common notion in the rest of The manosphere, where they believe that women will sleep with men who have money. Women are gold-diggers and status chasers. Following the structural model, an Incel with a job should be able to sleep with

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<sup>10</sup> Bluepill refers to people who believes that personality and confidence are the most important factors in attracting women ("Bluepill" 2019)

<sup>11</sup> Truecel is a true involuntary ceilbate

women, and therefore teller A is not involuntary celibate, he is voluntary celibate; a Volcel. Here we see a negotiation of what the identity Incel consists of. Teller A identifies as an Incel, while teller B rejects men with a job in his definition of Incels. This can be a strategy for keeping Incels in a marginalized identity. By rejecting men who are successful in other parts of life, that being in the labor market, leaves unsuccessful men as the true Incels and true victims. However, this also indicates that money can help you be successful with women and that it is Incels' own fault that they are not sleeping with women.

Teller C replies: "That's the point. Chad could literally make a fraction of what an Incel makes and not only date the same women but also attract them at the most primal level (sex, intimacy)" (C). This again suggests that Incels *can* find a sexual partner, if they get a job and make money. However, what is presented as the most important point is that Chad can find a sexual partner without money. The solution to Inceldom is ignored, and the discrepancy in logic is hidden by their focus on Chad, who can get women even with little money. Incels are portrayed as the victim of Chads looks and women's obsession with appearance.

This is an example of how Incels shift between different models of explanation, drawing on evolutionary psychology and structural explanation when needed. By shifting the focus onto Chad and women, Incels can excuse not taking responsibility for their own lives.

### **6.2.3 Women deserve abuse**

I will now continue with the story is titled "Women deserve abuse". Here, women are portrayed as willingly putting up with domestic abuse. Incels explain this by drawing on the *narrative of looks are everything; personality is nothing*.

#### **Chad abuses his girlfriend – and it is her own fault**

This story starts with the sentence: “When you hear the foie gras above you gets pushed down the stairs by her Chadlite bf<sup>12</sup> but she gets up and goes back to him” (A), accompanied by an image of Pepe the frog laughing so hard he has to dry tears from his eyes (see image 4). This image suggests that this situation is amusing. As such, women who are abused by their boyfriends are entertainment for Incels. Teller A elaborates on his story, telling how this couple is constantly fighting. One day, the couple fights in the hallway, and teller A hears her falling down the stairs:

Image 4. "Laughing Pepe the Frog"



He went down after her and as he tried talking to her all she could do was wheeze, moan and make this noise that sounds like “Se-Se-Se”. Probably some form of head trauma but it’s not like she had that many brain cells in the first place. lol enjoy Chad honey (Teller A 2019).

One teller suggests she was turned on by this, "since women clearly are turned off by nice guys" (F). The tellers agree that this serves her right. Another teller questions how stupid you have to be "to knowingly stay with a person who beats you" (D), claiming that this is enabling your own abuser. Women are presented as subordinate to men because only women stay in violent relationships, and they are stupid for doing so.

To explain why women stay with abusive men, the tellers draw on the *narrative of looks is everything; personality*: “Women let Chads get away with anything. It’s hilarious” (deleted user). Teller C adds, “He must have a huge 10-inch personality” (C). Again, we see that women are portrayed as only being interested in looks. Women are so shallow that they even put up with abuse to be with attractive men.

One teller claims that on average, a woman will leave an abusive relationship seven times and thus go back seven times. This is an example of how Incels represent statements as rational facts, supporting their narratives. It is also an example of how they position women as irrational and dumb.

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<sup>12</sup> Boyfriend

Continuing, the tellers position Incels as the real victims: "Yet you, incel, are somehow the problem. These chads beating their girlfriends? Nonono that's ok, let's bash incels instead" (D). Another teller compares Incels use of freedom of speech on the internet to homicides, domestic abuse and rape by "sex havers", asking what is worse. This implies that other people believe Incels are worse and that other people should care more about the actions of "sex havers" than Incels. In a timely response to this portrayal of Incels as innocent victims, Teller E writes: "Everytime an IT scum says women don't date us because they can detect our bad personalities, I think of all the women getting the shit beaten out of them by their chad bf and it makes me feel good" (2019). Enjoying violence against women is maybe not equivalent to a bad personality, but it will not help Incels having sex. Why would any woman want a man who enjoys thinking about women being abused? One teller suggests the lack of dating is caused by both bad personality and being ugly. It is suggested that both facial bones and leg bones are the determining factors for not having success with women. Teller D confirms *the narrative of looks are everything; personality is nothing* by stating that the "Obvious truth everyone knows, but will never admit, because their minds are too weak to accept that the dating market is utterly shallow and primitive. Looks > all" (2019).

In this shared story, violence against women is portrayed as correct and funny; one teller even calls it life fuel. According to the tellers, Incels using their freedom of speech online is not as bad as Chad beating up women. Moreover, women deserve abuse for choosing Chad. Many factors are presented as the reason for their Inceldom, but their misogyny is not one of them.

Because women make the choice to stay in an abusive relationship based on looks, they deserve the abuse. In other words, they deserve abuse because they choose Chad over Incels. Incels are the nice guys whom women are not attracted to.

In this chapter, I have shown how Incels use the narrative of *looks are everything; personality is nothing* to explain why they are unable to have sex with women. This narrative serves as the basis of Incels' identity. Since appearance is what decides your sexual success, and appearance is genetically determined (and appearance is not subjective), Incels cannot change their looks. Challenging voices are silenced by sarcasm, and the Auto Moderator on/r/Braincels confirms the narratives of Incels

through automated responses. Chad is the symbol of hegemonic masculinity. He is a character that presents the unobtainable masculine ideal, and he is positioned on top of the masculine hierarchy. Incels are the opposite of Chad, they are at the bottom of the hierarchy. Thus, Incels distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity through placing themselves in the marginalized masculine identity Incel.

Women are positioned as subordinate as they willingly choose abuse. Incels are positioned as something else than abusive Chad, even though they are applauding violence against women. By claiming that Incels receive undeserved attention compared to abusive men, they are the victim yet again, while they show amusement over the abuse of women.

### **6.3 Narrative three: The narrative of women being subordinate to men**

In relation to *the narrative of women being subordinate to men*, I will present and discuss two shared stories, titled "Revenge on women", "The normal sexual Trajectory"

In the first story titled "Revenge on women", women are portrayed as a different species not deserving of equal rights. Women are also portrayed as bad at their jobs because they are women. Liberal men are portrayed as antagonists by attributing them feminine traits. In the second story, the story about the normal sexual trajectory, we see that Incels believe other people have sex at a very young age and that women are labeled as sluts because of this.

#### **Revenge on women**

This shared story starts with teller A, who posts a story of how he deliberately made a job-interviewing round uncomfortable for the women who were applying: "I made them sit through a 30-minute interview and asked them a whole pile of discussion orientated questions. Little did they know that I was never going to choose their

whoring foid asses” (A). He explains how the women in these interviews viewed him as creepy and ugly:

I could tell they were uncomfortable with my ugly face (...) calling their Chad-lite boyfriend afterwards telling them about the creepy interviewer. Little do they know the jokes on them. I wasted their whole day and I feel great about it!!! I even got one of the tramps to rearrange her resume and resubmit it! Haha. I will now choose from one of the more qualified male candidates available. Foids belong in the kitchen, not in the workplace (A).

Teller A is the protagonist. He is the hero who finally gets his revenge on women, through the women who are applying for the job. If this story is true, it means that the attitudes on this forum have real-life consequences for women in the real world.

### **Women are subordinate to men**

Women are referred to as foids, meaning not human-like. In/r/Braincels own dictionary, the term foid is explained as "a derogatory dehumanizing term for women. Various short forms of "Female Humanoid Organism" to imply they aren't truly human" ("foid" 2019). As such, women are presented as something other than human, as a different species or a robot. This implies that women do not deserve the same rights and privileges as men. One teller refers to women as holes, claiming that they are:

Not physically, mentally or emotionally as strong as men. The rights we graciously gave them has now led them to believe they are equal to men and deserve the same pay and job opportunities. In the workplace holes will only gossip and slack off. Men are the better choice (E).

The metaphor of “women are holes” reduces women to objects, which is only eligible for sex. We can recognize this portrayal of women from Schmitz and Kazyak (2016) and Shawn P. Van Valkenburgh (2018) findings, where objectifying women is a strategy utilized for reconciling the dichotomy of women being both desirable and an unobtainable object of hate. Characterizing women as foids and holes, rejects women as human beings, while still allowing Incels to want women in a sexual way. Again, we see that women are both the antagonist and the disputable object. Teller E

claims that men gave women rights; however, these given rights do not include rights to the same pay and equality to men. It is not clear what the rights men gave actually includes. Since men had the possibility to give women rights, it implies that men are in a position to give rights. This positions men as superior to women. Women have mistaken these rights as equality.

Here, Incels are aligning themselves with hegemonic masculinity. They are a part of the group *men*, and men are superior to women. In this way, they secure external hegemony for hegemonic masculinity: men are hegemonic to women. Here, Incels express their privilege: "the rights we graciously gave them" (E).

Most tellers are supportive of the thread starter. They call him king, hero, that<sup>13</sup>-destroyer, foid banisher and tell him that he is doing Gods work. His actions are legitimate because he is fighting back against women and the society who supports them. In this way, teller A represents Incels, and in this story, Incels are victims taking revenge on the antagonist who has caused them so much suffering: women.

### **Women are not eligible to work**

One teller asks whether the women would have gotten the job if they were men, based on their credentials. He gets the following response: "are you implying simple-minded foids could ever do as good a job as a man? obviously, they were incapable"(C). We see that there is no room for questioning *the narrative of women as subordinate to men*. When doing so, it is implied that the challenging teller believes women can do a job as good as a man. Questioning the narrative of men as superior makes you an outsider.

In line with the *narrative of women as subordinate to men*, men are presented as superior in both work and education, securing external hegemony over women. Men are more qualified at jobs in general because they are men. Women LARP<sup>14</sup> at their jobs, which means they are faking doing their job. They half-ass their way through, and receive help from men, in jobs and education.

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<sup>13</sup> The term that is an acronym for "that hoe over there", meaning hoe or slut

<sup>14</sup> Live action role playing



We also see Incels supposedly focusing on meritocracy and rationalization, aligning themselves with hegemonic masculinity: women do not deserve their position or jobs because they are *not qualified*. However, their reason for not being qualified is being a woman. This implies that it is the gender, the genes, of women that makes them unqualified. Thus, femininity is subordinate to masculinity. Claiming that “women belong in the kitchen” (A), is a retrograde and reactionary view, which would cause reactions if expressed in a public debate. On /r/Braincels, it mirrors their longing for simpler times, where men had socioeconomic power and women were culturally subordinate to men.

### **Liberal men are feminine**

Teller D warns against hiring “Soy boys or white knight types”. Soy boy is a term used for men who lack masculine traits. “Soy” points to the allegedly negative effects of consuming soy, which is supposed to make breast grow and reduce male fertility (Sandman\_aktual 2017; “Soy Boy” 2019). The term is also used by the alt-right when talking about leftist or liberal men. In this way, Soy boy can also mean a man with “feminine” beliefs, such as support of gender equality. On Incel Wiki, a white knight is described as:

A guy obsessed with the idea of coming to a woman's aid. Typically overprotective of women and takes any minor complaints towards them very personally. Subconsciously believes women can do no wrong" ("White knight" 2019).

As such, liberal men are not wanted, because they do not fit into or fight for the hegemonic masculine ideal. Feminine traits are attributed to liberal men, making liberal men the antagonists. In /r/Braincels it also is common to refer to critical voices as “gay” or “faggots”, thus portraying homosexuals are subordinate to heterosexual men. Hegemonic masculinity is supported.

#### **6.3.1 Do not draw attention to Incels**

*“If true, then we've really stepped it up. Be careful, if more and more of us statuscels do this we're officially entering political-sabotage territory.” (H)*

As already mentioned, Teller A receives substantial support, calling him hero and foid-banisher. However, as we can see in the quote above, teller A is taking the misogynistic views from /r/Braincels out in the real world, sabotaging women.

In fear of drawing attention to Incels, there are tellers who express anger towards the actions of the thread starter:

Dude what the fuck? You're making us look bad you fucking dumb faggot. Hire based on criteria, and qualifications. Don't hire based on gender. You're an actual fucking retard. I hope someone exposes you and you get sued.  
Absolute fucking retardcel (E)

This shows that Incels consists of many different voices and that they have strategies to perform Incel-identity and support hegemonic masculinity. Similar to the strategies of Virtual Victims and Cyber Lads amongst MRA's, as presented by Schmitz and Kazyak (2016), some Incels are more extreme in their ways and rhetoric. However, the challenging teller seems more concerned with how they will look to outsiders.

Another teller comments: "posts like this make me realize why women have a higher iq than yall" (F). The other tellers ignore these challenging comments. During my research, I have not seen many tellers contesting the superiority of men or the idea that women deserve whatever negative thing that comes their way. Maybe the fact that teller A brought the ideas from this subreddit out in the real world made them uncomfortable. Maybe, Incels' bark is worse than their bite. Alternatively, it is because this post can function as evidence that Incels are taking their ideas out in the real world.

Some tellers are negative to the possible attention they might receive by openly admitting discrimination of women:

Fellas come on, this is the kind of shit that IT rips on us for. I get the "fuck women, sluts don't deserve jobs" shit but this is the kinda stuff that normies<sup>15</sup> give us flak for. We gotta be better than this (G).

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<sup>15</sup> Normal people

The same teller also expresses concerns of raising the attention of The Huffington Post, claiming that this kind of posts and actions are why "the bitches at huffington post"(G) are negative to Incels and write about them (or "whine about it", which is the exact words Teller G uses). In response to this, one teller claims Teller G only wants to see females hired. When challenging the narrative, you are either ignored or positioned as an antagonist.

### **6.3.2 The effect of IncelTears**

I have previously mentioned IncelTears, which is a part-mocking, part-watchdog subreddit for posting screenshots of content created by Incels. Some of teller's questions is if this story is true, or if this is *IncelTears-bate*. IncelTears-bate is a post written by IncelTears with the intention to provoke statements from Incels which IncelTears can use in their own subreddit - with the intention to either to mock or to get /r/Braincels shut down. IncelTears are mentioned in many of the shared stories on /r/Braincels. They are an antagonist which is portrayed as dumb, ignorant and not willing to recognize that Incels are suffering. Incels worry about what IncelTears write about them on their subreddit. They function as a ubiquitous watchdog who "sees everything" Incels write. /r/Braincels even had a rule stating that threads or memes about IncelTears will be removed, however this rule is not removed from the list of rules on /r/Braincels.

Incels are not supposed to raise attention and tellers get reprimanded when content is too provoking. They are not supposed to make Incels look bad, at least not show what Incels are capable of in the real world. This regulating of content can be seen as a consequence of the new rules and quarantine of Reddit. They worry about being shut down and regulate each other and each other's content because of this. The watchdog subreddit IncelTears also seems to have an effect on what Incels write on /r/Braincels.

### **6.3.3 The normal sexual trajectory**

In relation to the narrative of women as subordinate to men, I present the story of the normal sexual trajectory. This story supports my initial thoughts of how some

Incels have a distorted view on what a normal sexual trajectory is, which I discussed in relation to Donnelly et.al's (2001) research on involuntary celibacy in chapter 2.

According to Donnelly et.al (2001) a normal sexual trajectory is normative expectations concerning sexual transitions; we assume that people will begin to date in their teens or early twenties, following with experimentation and initiating sex at some point later, and then eventually marry or partner in a long-time relationship. Their idea is that we are expected to follow this trajectory and remain sexually active for major portions of our adult lives. Moreover, this normal sexual trajectory is presented as the standard that we measure our own trajectories too. Thus, what we believe is normal trajectories for other people can cause us to feel "off track". I will argue that this could be the case for Incels.

The story of the normal sexual trajectory starts with a link to a news article from The Sun, concerning a 16-year old girl who was injured during sex. She was allegedly trying to imitate porn, and now has to use a colostomy bag for the rest of her life. The link of the news article is accompanied by the text: "Life fuel: Roastie learns that sexual promiscuity has consequences" (A). Life fuel means that this story gives Incels a positive feeling, as opposed to suicide fuel, which gives Incel a negative feeling that fuels the wish for suicide. A roastie is a woman, a term that indicates that women are promiscuous:

[Roastie is] A woman whose labia have stretched as a result of having sex with multiple men. The idea is that the labia subsequently look like roast beef. Some incels use this term "ironically", whilst others appear to genuinely believe that labia change shape as a result of the partners that women have (Squirrel N.D).

In this shared story, we see how a normal sexual trajectory is portrayed and perceived by Incels on /r/Braincels. The tellers use this article as proof of girls having sex at a much younger age than boys do. Teller A writes, ironically: "Wait but I thought 16 year olds were innocent angels who don't know how babies are made?!"(A). The tellers tell several stories of girls they know, or know of, that started engaging in sex before turning 16. One teller writes: "I see this often too, the SJWs deny that it happens though" (deleted user). SJW is Social Justice Warriors, meaning

people who defend marginalized groups or persons, and they are perceived as overly sensitive. SJW can also mean people who simply disagree with the person calling them SJW (TheWokestPerson 2017). In response, teller B writes: "Hell this sub denied it, I was downvoted the other day when someone claimed the average age for losing virginity was 16 and I said now of days chads and stacies are fucking younger than that" (B). We see that some Incels believe the normal sexual trajectory for Chad's and Stacy's are changing. They are perceived as having sex at a younger age than 16. Several tellers points to the "sad fact" that 12-year old boys have more sexual experience than them, who are between the ages of 25 to 36.

If some Incels believe that it is normal to have sex when you are younger the age of 16, it may explain why they are Incels in the first place. If they felt like they were abnormal at 16, it may have caused them to feel less self-confident and intimidated by girls at a very young age. The research of Donnelly et.al (2001) supports this view:

The negative feelings from involuntary celibacy can probably also cause people to feel less self-confident and to be less open to sexual opportunities when they occur. In addition, their results show that the longer the duration of the celibacy, the more likely for the respondents to view it as "a permanent way of life" (Donnelly et.al 2001:167).

Women are portrayed as promiscuous and sleeping with men at a very young age, while men who have sex at a young age do not raise an eyebrow.

In this chapter concerning *the narrative of women as subordinate* we see how Incels align themselves with hegemonic masculinity by placing themselves in the category of men, as in contrast to women. Much like Cyber Lads and Virtual Victims, Incels consider men and masculinity superior to women and femininity. Women are not eligible to work, because they are women. Men are better at everything, because they are men. This also positions feminine traits as subordinate to masculine traits, and hegemonic masculinity's interests are protected through internal and external hegemony. Men who have sex at a young age are accepted while women in the same position are portrayed in a negative light. This supports *the narrative of women as subordinate*. In addition, I have shown that some Incels have an inaccurate view

of what a normal sexual trajectory is, and suggested that this may explain the Inceldom of some Incels.

## **6.4 Narrative four: The narrative of feminism suppresses men**

To illustrate this narrative, I use the story titled "How women have replaced God in 2019", presented in the first chapter in my analysis, concerning *the narrative of sex is what decides a man's worth*. In this story, women are presented as the ultimate judge and nature's judgment casters because they decide who gets to mate. Therefore, many men treat them like Gods.

While some tellers argue that women are perceived as God, other tellers speculate if feminism actually is Satanism: "There`s something deeply sinister about feminism/liberalism (...) Satanism could definitely be a piece of the puzzle but specifically for feminism, I can imagine Lilith worship being involved" (B). According to teller C, feminism and modern liberalism are influenced by Judaism. He also believes feminists are Lilith worshippers, but they are not aware of this themselves. Lilith is the name of a female demon mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. She was young, independent and dangerous. Her sexuality both tempted and threatened men (SNL.no 2019), much like women, in general, are portrayed as by Incels and The Manosphere, a problem solved by objectifying women (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016, Van Valkenburgh 2018). She is believed to be Adam's first wife, created by the same soil. Therefore, she believed she was entitled to the same rights as Adam, including sexual rights. Lilith soon left Adam in anger as he refused her an equal relationship. She mothered demons and punished newborn babies for their father`s sins (SNL.no 2019). Actually, many Jewish feminists view Lilith as an ideal, and in 1976, they started a Jewish feminist magazine called Lilith (SNL.no 2019). Theories like these are common when discussing liberalism and feminism. Feminism and liberalism are presented as having a hidden agenda. These agendas are often linked to Judaism.

If we look at the definition of feminism found on Incel Wiki, we can see a similarity to what Van Valkenburgh (2018) finds in The Red Pill forum, where they believe feminism is a sexual strategy to put women in power:

Feminism is the process by which women take credit for the innovations by mostly celibate men which made them want to enter the workforce more. It is also a philosophy which (falsely) claims that men currently have more societal power and reproductive choice than women, and therefore national movements must seek to give women more power and choice ("equality"). Feminism's defenders often imply (falsely) that infinite female sexual choice will, "trickle down", to sub-8<sup>16</sup> men in a country with high sexual dimorphism. Modern, millennial feminists regularly celebrate and promote male disposability in social life and dreephilia<sup>17</sup> with regards to incelism, at the same time that they claim they are the only valid representatives of male issues ("Feminism" 2019)

This is a misrepresentation of feminism, bordering on conspiracy theory. I will like to note that the texts on Incel Wiki are, like Wikipedia, written by individuals. This means that they do not necessarily reflect all Incels views. However, we can see that feminism is portrayed as an antagonist, a conspiring entity that seeks to give women power in both Incel Wiki and on /r/Braincels.

### **Watching porn is feeding the female spirit**

The original author (A) continues supporting his theory by claiming that markets for dirty underwear will soon be as big as religion, which is already the case in Japan. He adds:

Regardless of this, a majority of beta males in our generation do some type of "donation" towards the altar of the female. Be it premiums Snapchat, buying nudes, buying women gifts, food, or drinks before they've even asked them out, subbing to twitch streamers, asmr shit, the list goes on and on and on (A).

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<sup>16</sup> Men who are less attractive than an eight on a scale of ten

<sup>17</sup> Dreephilia is defined as "a sentiment that revels in the notion of suffering in silence" ("Dreephilia" 2019).

Teller B agrees, he thinks of “women/feminism as an egregore; a group spirit. And by pouring attention to porn (which is female-centric), social media models, cam girls, etc, we are essentially feeding the spirit” (B). Another teller suggests that Nofap<sup>18</sup> and energy directed towards gym/martial arts is the answer.

Incels complain about feeding the female spirit through pouring money and attention onto women. Suggesting marital arts as a distraction, and not masturbating are strategies used in the rest of The manosphere as well, to both attract the attention of and direct focus away from women. This need for distractions implies an unhealthy obsession with women.

How pornography is female-centric is not specified, but it could be that women are in focus in most (heterosexual) pornography, leaving the man faceless and anonymous. Feminists, on the other hand, have criticized pornography for being male-centric: being made by and for the male gaze. Claiming that pornography is female-centric is an example of how Incels uses feminisms arguments and turn them around, to fit into their narrative of men being suppressed. As Bridges and Pascoe (2014:252) argue: in hybrid masculinities, privileged social categories borrow from other, subordinate groups to reframe themselves as part of a socially subordinated group. By claiming that feminism is suppressing men, an element borrowed from feminism and their arguments against patriarchy, Incels frame themselves as victims. The fact that they are heterosexual males, which is a powerful position to have in our society, are obscured by claims of victimhood.

The critique of the porn industry is justified, but not by the grounds of being female-centric. The porn-industry is male-centric, claiming otherwise can be seen as a strategy to hide the exploitation of women in this industry, hiding the inequality which lies in the unhealthy gender roles found in pornography. Women are viewed as objects who are always willing to have sex. Men also suffer from these gender roles and unrealistic ideals of sexual relations, portraying men as muscular, extremely masculine and lasting for hours. The porn industry supports hegemonic masculinity through the portrayal of unobtainable masculine ideals, while at the same time

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<sup>18</sup> NoFap is a website and a supportive community for those who wish to avoid pornography and masturbation, a porn recovery website (nofap.com). NoFapping is abstinence from masturbation and pornography.



portraying women as objects. This makes the porn industry the enemy of both feminism and Incels. However, Incels support hegemonic masculinity through drawing the focus onto women's centrality in porn, hiding the problematic male gaze which porn is most often dominated by.

Lastly, Incels often complain about how others are telling them to improve, which is evident in this shared story as well. Teller H writes:

We are told by everyone, from media to supposedly red-pilled Jordan Peterson likes to do certain things (“clean your room”, moneymaxx<sup>19</sup>, “learn an art or craft”, become social, etc.) and avoid certain things (...) just to gain female validation – exactly the way it is in religion. And they are surprisingly vocal about that! (H).

We see that "others" are portrayed as focusing on female validation of Incels, by giving advice on how to better yourself. However, this advice is given in direct response to Incels own complaints of lack of female validation.

In this chapter, I have shown how *The narrative of feminism suppresses men* works to support Incels position as victims. They are unfairly treated because of women's rise to power. Feminism is compared to Satanism and is presented as antagonists who suppress men and Incels. As Bridges and Pascoe (2014:252) argue: in hybrid masculinities, privileged social categories borrow from other, subordinate groups to reframe themselves as part of a socially subordinated group. Incels borrow arguments from feminism and their arguments against patriarchy. By positioning themselves as the victims to "equality", they reject their privilege as heterosexual males, distancing themselves from hegemonic masculinity.

## 6.5 Narrative five: The narrative of loneliness

This story shows that many Incels on /r/Braincels feel lonely. They tell stories of having no friends and feeling left out, drawing on *the narrative of loneliness*

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<sup>19</sup> Maxx means maximizing, in this case maximizing money. Maxxing is ways of coping with Inceldom, like looksmaxxing (surgery).

The story I will analyze in this chapter has the title "I always wanted a friend. I'm so lonely" and starts with a cartoon of Wojak and Pepe (See image 1 in appendix). Wojak is also known as Feels Guy, often used as a "reaction image to represent feelings such as melancholy, regret and loneliness" (Triple Zed 2016). Pepe the frog is a frog cartoon character (see image 4, p.64) associated with the Alt-Right, but was originally used, and still is used, on image boards like 4-chan and amongst Incels on /r/Braincels. Wojak and Pepe the Frog sometimes appear in the same cartoon series called Poo Poo Pee Pee, where Pepe performs different unethical acts towards Wojak (Triple Zed 2016). In the cartoon posted on /r/Braincels, it is Wojak's birthday, and he cries because no one remembered. Then, Pepe shows up and they seem to be having a good time. However, when Pepe leaves, Wojak starts crying again. In this story, Wojak represents Incels and Pepe represents friends. If we see Pepe in relation with the Poo Poo Pee Pee-cartoon series, friends in this story are portrayed as people who perform unethical acts towards Incels. Incels are thus portrayed as lonely and sad, having no real friends

### **True friends are Incels**

The co-tellers elaborate on the cartoon posted by teller A. Through their comments, friends are presented as either fake friends or true friends. Fake friends are worse than being alone, because when you are with fake friends and feel alone, it is one of the worst things in life, and: "That is why you only accept fellow blackpilled incels as friends" (B). Fake friends are referred to as "normies", which is normal people: "It is important to learn the distinction between a fellow Incel and a low-tier failed normie" (C). Low-tier means a low-ranking person. These low-ranking normal people will ditch Incels the moment they get the opportunity to find better friends with higher status. Teller C also explains how his friends always make fun of him and talk about him behind his back, and how they use his problems to boost their own ego. He explains that this is why he is so miserable. Thus, true friends can only be a fellow Incel, because normies are always looking for someone better than an Incel.

Another teller claims that filler friends are better than being alone: they are better than having frenemies. Teller D suggests that you can use filler friends as matchmakers to find people that are more interesting. This is exactly what normies

were accused of earlier in this story, but no one comments on this. When normal people do this to Incels, they are fake friends. When Incels does it, it is a legitimate strategy for coping with being alone and lonely.

Incels use the term *normie* to separate themselves from men who are not Chad and not Incels. Normies are beta males: the ones in between. How can you separate between normies and Incels? According to Incel Wiki, a normie is a four or a six on the decile scale (rating system based on looks) (“Normie” 2019).

This can be seen as a strategy to support hegemonic masculinity, through the glorification of Chad, while at the same time placing Incels as the outsider. Incels masculine identity is portrayed as less valued than normal men's masculine identity. Chad is the high ranking male, while normies are the normal people who are subordinate to Chad. Incels are contrasted to normal people and Chad, and are presented as subordinate to both in the social hierarchy. The fact that Incels are Incels, not failed normies, seem to excuse their behavior compared to normies. Placing themselves in another category than normies justifies Incels hate towards women and their actions, like ditching friends for more interesting friends.

### ***/r/Braincels: a place to find non-judgmental friends***

In addition to finding explanations to why they are sexually unsuccessful, it seems that Incels come to these forums to find friends. Friends that do not judge their appearance and success with women:

I'm just now realizing how fake my "friends" are. Left out of group chats, not invited ever, edited out of photos the whole 9. It's the worst feeling in the world when you put your trust in somebody and they could not care less about you. I find solace here because, while y'all are edgy fucks, at least we don't judge each other for ugliness or inability to get women. It's a peaceful life" (D).

We see that *the narrative of loneliness* is used to explain why Incels come here.

On another note, Incels may not judge each other for ugliness. However, they do judge everyone else's appearance, always questioning if someone is a truecel or not. If you are good-looking, or not ugly enough, you are a volcel, a voluntary celibate.

While /r/Braincels have a rule against posting “selfies”, meaning pictures of yourself or pictures purported to be yourself, they often post images of other people through for example news articles or tweets. They rank and discuss these peoples appearance: how big the nose-to-chin ratio, their body type, if they are Chad or a Stacy, and so on. There is, for example, a thread discussing whether Joey, in the Vice documentary mentioned in my introduction, is a truecel, He is too good looking, according to many tellers. Joey, on the other hand, claims he is a mentalcel: involuntary celibate due to his mental challenges.

*The narrative of looks is everything; personality* is also used in this story about friendship: being ugly hinders friendship. Some tellers believe looks also matter in social situations: “no one wants to be friends with an ugly loser” (E). Chad is believed to have a high status in friend groups because he looks good. However, one teller argues with this: being ugly only hinders girls to like you.

Their preoccupation with appearance is striking. To find solace in discussing how you are lonely and ugly is hard to understand for an outsider, and it is an important part of understanding why these men come here. Here, they get confirmation that women and society, based on Incels looks, are treating them unfairly: that it is their ugliness and women`s nature of choosing the best looking partner that is depriving them of an intimate relationship. In addition, they find true friends that understand their position as a victim.

Not having friends and not experiencing romance is difficult for most humans. The loneliness and the feeling of being an outsider these men feel are important to take seriously. Many tellers express that the cartoon posted by teller A portrays their real-life situation. They explain how this image makes them sad because it is their real life. Several tellers say that they do not celebrate their birthday.

In this chapter I have shown how Incel tells personal stories about being lonely and having no friends, drawing on *the narrative of loneliness*. By discussing their loneliness, ugliness and failed lives, they create affective publics (Papacharissi 2014 in Ging 2017:6), where they gather around emotional involvement and empathy towards each other and hate towards women. Incels are true friends because they understand the pain caused by women and society. The feeling of loneliness and

being an outsider is common ground and connects them. By contrasting Chad as successful in both pursuing girls and friends, they are distancing Incels from hegemonic masculinity, while at the same time aligning themselves by glorifying Chad. By portraying women as the antagonist and the enemy, they create external hegemony, which is hegemony over women. The expression of emotions is also a way of distancing themselves from hegemonic masculinity, which rejects emotions as something unnatural to men.

In this part, I have described and discussed the five narratives that emerged through the six shared stories I chose from /r/Braincels.

Continuing, I will present the second part of my analysis, a more detailed discussion of the narratives and whose interests the narratives serve.

## 7 Discussion of whose interests the narratives serve

In this part, I will discuss level three in my analysis, the sociocultural implication of the narratives I find. I will look at whose interests is supported by the narratives, in light of the theory of hybrid masculinities.

As we remember from chapter four, hegemonic masculinity borrows strategically useful elements from other masculinities to ensure continued domination (Ging 2017:5) over subordinate masculinities - creating *internal hegemony*. Moreover, this borrowing, appropriation and negotiation results in a web of hybrid patterns that secure external hegemony (Ging 2017:5), which is dominance over women (Demetriou 2001:341).

*The narrative of sex is what decides a man's worth* is the basis of Incels identity. In my analysis, I show how the users of /r/Braincels believe that sex with a woman is what decides men's worth in society. As such, the consequences of not having sex is encompassing; Incels are worth nothing. Moreover, women are ones who decide a man's worth, because they are the ones who decide which men who gets to sleep with them. In addition, women are slaves of their biological needs for good genes. This means that women are always on the hunt for men with good genes, leaving the men who lack good genes (which manifests in their ugly looks) involuntary celibate. According to the *Dualistic Mating Strategy*, women will only sleep with less attractive men (beta males) after they have given birth. When they have a child, they need a beta male to support them and their child.

This connection of worth and sexual relations helps us understand their narratives and worldview better. It is in one way understandable that Incels hate women, because they are both the antagonist and the disputable object. Women possess the most important thing to Incels worth: sex. Moreover, women are not willing to give them sex. Therefore, women become the enemy and the antagonist.

We see how Incels' categorization of masculinity gives us a map of Incels' hierarchy of masculinity: alpha males are the most valued masculine identity; beta males are subordinate to alphas; and omega males (Incels) are subordinate to both. This map

places alpha males men at the top of the masculine hierarchy and makes them hegemonic.

Incels distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity by placing themselves in the masculine identity Incels. This unattractive identity is not part of the hegemonic masculinity, because they do not sleep with women and therefore have no worth in society. Therefore, I will argue that *the narrative of sex is what decides a man's worth* serves the interests of hegemonic masculinity. In addition, this narrative explains why these men came to /r/Braincels in the first place. They are experiencing loss of self-worth in a cruel society, and seek others who are in the same position.

This brings us to *the narrative of "looks are everything; personality is nothing"*, which is closely linked to the first narrative. Incels believe their genes and looks makes it impossible to attract any sexual partners. This narrative is fatalistic and facilitate a hopeless view on Incels' place in society. Incels are Blackpilled, meaning that they know that improvement is impossible because women only will choose men based on appearance. Incels cannot change their genes: their facial bones and bone structure, so they are doomed to a life without sex and worth in society. Money and status are mentioned as additional factors to attract women. However, in relation to Incels and attracting women, the importance of these factors are minimized.

Incels position themselves as subordinate to Chad, the stereotypical alpha male. Chad is the symbol of the unobtainable masculine ideal, which means he is the symbol of hegemonic masculinity. He is what Incels want to be. The white, straight, handsome man who can get every woman that he wants. In this way, hegemonic masculinity is glorified and supported.

Women are positioned as subordinate to both Incels and Chad because they are portrayed as shallow, arrogant, ignorant and virtue signaling – and all women are like that. This way, the hybrid masculine constellation of Incels create both external and internal hegemony. Incels position both themselves and women as subordinate. Wsee that this narrative also seem to serve hegemonic masculinity's interests.

*The narrative of women as subordinate* align Incels with hegemonic masculinity, and thus serves hegemonic masculinity. Much like Cyber Lads and Virtual Victims, Incels

consider men and masculinity superior to women and femininity. Women are not eligible to work, because they are women. Men are better at everything, because they are men. This also positions feminine traits as subordinate to masculine traits, and hegemonic masculinity's interests are protected through internal and external hegemony. As the title of the narrative indicates, *the narrative of women as subordinate* support hegemonic masculinity.

Through *the narrative of anti-feminism*, feminism presented as suppressing men. This claim to victimhood can be seen as an element borrowed from feminism itself, and their arguments against patriarchy. Thus, Incels frame themselves as victims by using element from other, marginalized groups' identity. The fact that they are heterosexual males, which is a powerful position to have in our society, is obscured by these claims. In this narrative, Incels align themselves with hegemonic masculinity by sharing the same enemy as all men: feminism. When feminism and women are the enemy, external hegemony is secured and hegemonic interests are protected.

Through *The narrative of loneliness* Incels rejects their heterosexual male privilege, by positions Incels as the victim to external forces. The narrative of loneliness can explain why they keep coming back to this subreddit. Here, they seem to find solace in discussing their lack of worth in society.

Chad is successful in friendship and love, even though he does nothing to deserve it besides being handsome. Incels are lonely, ugly and sad. In this way, the narrative serves hegemonic masculinity by glorifying masculine traits through Chad, while at the same time positioning Incels as subordinate. Incels are distancing themselves from hegemonic masculinity by expressing emotions, which is not accepted when performing hegemonic masculinity.





## 8 Conclusion

In my thesis, I have explored the Incel universe through comments on found on the subreddit for Incels called /r/Braincels. I define these threads as shared *stories* and the broader, cultural meanings I find as *narratives*. At the outset of this thesis, I showed how Incels are a new phenomenon and how my research is the first academic research done on this new constellation of Incels. I have described the common concepts found in The manosphere, a loose confederation of online anti-feminist blogs and websites and which Incels are considered a part of. I also address how Reddit works and how it came to be a hub for anti-feminism. Reddit has implemented new policies like the quarantine functions to fight problematic groups such as Incels. After an elaboration on the theory of becoming involuntary celibate, I present my research questions: *What are the main narratives that emerge in the shared stories told amongst Incels on /r/Braincels?* I focus on co-tellership and shared meanings through these supporting research questions: *How are the characters from the Incel-word represented? What are the Incel community norms and rights associated with the narrative interactions? Whose interests does the narratives serve?*

In chapter five, I elaborate on the methods and data and discuss the ethical concerns regarding research on virtual communities. In my analysis, I use the theories of hegemonic and hybrid masculinities. I use a mediated narrative analysis to analyze the shared stories on three levels: at level one, I look at the shared story through character portrayal. At level two, I discuss the sharing and interaction in the shared story. This means looking at the relational work and interactions amongst tellers. I also discuss the positioning of Incels to hegemonic masculinity, are they distancing or aligning themselves with hegemonic masculinity? At level three, I look at the shared meanings in the shared stories, that being the main narratives and whose interests the narratives serve. I have presented the five main narratives that emerged through my data: 1) the narrative of sex is what decides a man's worth 2), the narrative of "looks are everything; personality is nothing", 3) The narrative of women being subordinate to men, 4) The narrative of anti-feminism and 5)The narrative of loneliness. I present a summary of the narratives I find I table 4.

<b>Narrative</b>	<b>Shared meanings</b>	<b>Narrative characters</b>	<b>Hybrid masculinity</b>
	<i>The broader, cultural meanings</i>	<i>How are the characters in the Incel-worlds portrayed?</i>	<i>How do Incels position themselves to hegemonic masculinity?</i>
<b>The narrative of sex is what decides a man's worth</b>	In our society, a man's worth is directly connected to his ability to have sex with women. Incels do not have sex, and are therefore worth nothing	Women are the antagonists: they judge men on their ability to sleep with other women They are the gate keepers of the disputable object Women are also the disputable object: Incels need women to have sex	Incels are not a part of the hegemonic masculinity because they are sexually unsuccessful Hegemonic masculinity is positioned as superior to Incels through Chad
<b>The narrative of "looks are everything; personality is nothing"</b>	Women are only attracted to men with good looks. Incels are ugly, and their looks make it impossible to have sexual partners. Therefore, there is no point in trying to improve yourself	Women are the antagonists: they are only interested in looks. They deserve abuse because of this. Chad is the antagonist Chad is also the disputable object: he is the unattainable masculine ideal,	Incels are not a part of the hegemonic masculinity because they are not attractive, and therefore sexually unsuccessful. Hegemonic masculinity is positioned as superior to Incels through Chad. Hegemonic masculinity is positioned as superior to women.
<b>The narrative of women as subordinate</b>	Women are not human; they are not worth as much as men are. Feminine traits are not worth as much as masculine traits	Women are the antagonists Liberal men are antagonists IncelTears are antagonists	Women are positioned as subordinate to hegemonic masculinity Incels align themselves with hegemonic masculinity through their position as men, who are positioned as superior to women
<b>The narrative of loneliness</b>	Incels are lonely because of their low status in society. Normal people do not understand Incels' suffering and can never be real friends. Only fellow blackpilled Incels can be true friends	Normal people are antagonists: They are fake friends. They will always look for more interesting friends than Incels	Hegemonic masculinity is positioned as superior through Chad Incels distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity in contrast to Chad Incels distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity through expressing emotions
<b>The narrative of feminism suppresses men</b>	Feminism have wrongly positioned women as superior to men in society. Men are suffering because of feminism	Feminism is the antagonist Women are the antagonists	Hegemonic masculinity is positioned as superior to women

Table 4. The main narratives of Incels

## **Findings**

In my analysis, I look at how the characters in the stories are portrayed. Incels are the protagonists in all of these shared stories. They are sometimes the hero, taking revenge on women, but they are always the victim. Women, feminism, liberal men, IncelTears, Chads and Stacy's are all antagonists, fighting against Incels and making their lives harder. Chad and Stacy (who is a symbol of "hot women") are also disputable objects; the goals the protagonist wishes to obtain. Incels wish they were Chad and they wish they could sleep with Stacy. However, when the disputable object is also the antagonist, reaching the goal becomes impossible.

I find that Incels position hegemonic masculinity as superior to both Incels and women. Women are presented as subordinate to men, and feminine traits are positioned as subordinate to masculine traits.

Incels place themselves in another masculine identity than hegemonic masculinity by contrasting themselves to the stereotypical masculine ideal, Chad. In addition, Incels distance themselves through talking about their failures and expressing emotions. This is not accepted when performing hegemonic masculinity,

My data show that /r/Braincels functions as a channel for men who consider themselves Incels to vent their frustration. At the same time, they show concerning categorizations of gender. They present themselves as victims, and women as the enemy. The hybrid masculinity of Incels supports hegemonic masculinity through the subordination of women and Incels.

## **Contributions**

My study has empirically contributed by bringing insights into the culture of Incels which has not been studied before. The methodological discussion, especially concerning the ethical discussion regarding data collection contributes to the growing body of ethnography online.

In addition, this study gives insight into how the norms associated with interactions on /r/Braincels consists of four parts:

First, Incels interpret outsiders' accounts selectively to fit into their narratives. We see an example of this in story of "Chad always wins", discussed in chapter 6.2, where the tellers interpret the girls tweet to fit the *narrative of looks are everything; personality is nothing*. The interpretations of the accounts of women on social media and in the news vary, depending on how they fit the narrative of Incels. If the statement fits their view, the statement is taken as true. If the statement does not fit their narrative, they present the statement as dishonest or as to include a hidden message.

Secondly, Auto moderators confirm the main narratives with automatic responses. In chapter 6.2 and 6.2.1 I show how the auto moderator in /r/Braincels are triggered by certain words, such as "personality" and "improve". The bot then posts automated responses to dismiss any comments on improving yourself or that personality matters

Thirdly, challenging tellers are rare. In addition to the auto moderators, I have identified three strategies Incels use when faced with challenges to the main narratives: 1) accusing the challenging tellers of supporting women, 2) ridicule of challenging tellers through sarcasm and homophobic language and 3) ignoring challenging tellers.

Lastly, I find that Incels are not supposed to draw attention to the subreddit /r/Braincels. They are aware of lurkers and the watchdog subreddit IncelTears. They do not want the attention of reporters, Normies or IncelTears. This can be because of the quarantine function and the shutdown of /r/Incels.

### **Concluding remarks**

All research has its strengths and weaknesses. My research consists of observation and analysis of specific people (Incels), in a specific place (Reddit) and times (the spring of 2019). The assessment of reliability is not applicable for my thesis, due to its qualitative nature (Thagaard 2010:198), and my measures to secure anonymity for the users. To ensure internal reliability, I clearly show what the users' citations are and what my arguments in my analysis are, to try to be as transparent as possible (Thagaard 2010:199), while at the same time not compromising anonymity. In addition, my data consists of a limited number of comments, which accordingly limits

its generalizability. However, my descriptions of this community is detailed. Thus, this study can serve as a basis for further research on Incels and The manosphere.

The narratives I present in table 4 can be used in comparative studies of Incels on other websites or on other constellations of hybrid masculinities. They can be tested and elaborated on.

### **Suggestions for further research**

As Incels are a relative new phenomenon, especially for researchers, the need for further research is clear.

My findings indicate that Reddit's administrative implementations for tackling toxic technocultures like Incels has worked. We see that Incels are adjusting each other when it comes to language and expressing extreme views. However, this does not mean that Incels have less extreme views. We see examples of disturbing misogyny in the story "Women deserve abuse". It could also mean that they are taking their more extreme rhetoric to less regulated and observable places on the Internet, such as Discord and other forums which require log-in. It would therefore be interesting to conduct a comparative study of /r/Braincels and these other, less regulated websites and communities.

One could also ask what the quarantine does to the Incel phenomenon. What does the quarantine say about Incels? Does the warning give Incels more attention in media, as well as substantiate their reputation as provocative or offensive? These questions should be considered for future research.

Lastly, what are the consequences of these interactions for people in the real world? For both Incels and their objects of hate, women? We have already seen the consequences in two extreme cases, the killings of Elliott Rodger and Alek Minassian. Many Incels claim these two are not representative for their group and that Incels are harmless. However, in the story of "revenge on women" we see that an Incel takes the misogynistic views displayed on /r/Braincels out in the real world. He makes interviewing rounds uncomfortable for the women who are interviewed. In addition, he states that he does not intend to hire them, because they are women.

The consequences of this hybrid constellation of masculinity is not clear, but they are not insignificant.

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# Appendix – Cartoon of loneliness

