"*I didn't Leave Inceldom; Inceldom Left me*": Examining Male Ex-Incel Navigations of Complex *Masculinities* Identity Rebuilding Following Rejection of Incel-Culture

Nicholas Norman Adams & David S. Smith

Published online: 24 Jan 2025.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

Article views: 20

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

"*I didn't Leave Inceldom; Inceldom Left me*": Examining Male Ex-Incel Navigations of Complex *Masculinities* Identity Rebuilding Following Rejection of Incel-Culture

Nicholas Norman Adams 🆔 and David S. Smith 🆔

Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, Scotland

ABSTRACT

This study explores experiences of ex-incels—men who have withdrawn from incel communities—through eleven qualitative interviews analysed using R.W. Connell's hegemonic masculinity (HM) framework. Findings reveal some ex-incels adopt flexible masculinities, while others struggle with pre-scriptive norms perpetuated by the anti-feminist 'manosphere'. Findings spotlight identity reconstructions, where men both reject and remain influenced by rigid archetypes, performing hybrid masculinities. This study deepens understanding of incel ideology, its impact on identity, and interplay between inceldom and masculinities via contributing to *hybrid masculinities* theorising. Insights presents applications for gender theory and inform further research on HM's influence within unique cultural contexts.

Introduction

The term "incel," short for "involuntarily celibate," encapsulates a subset of individuals, predominantly male,[1] who perceive themselves as unable to secure romantic or sexual relationships. This is generally understood, by them, to stem from a combination of their own genetic inferiority and social engineering through the transformative impact of feminist modernity (Scheuerman 2021; Stijelja and Mishara 2023). Originating within the digital realms of internet forums during the 1990s, the incel community has developed into a multifaceted socio-cultural phenomenon, drawing scholarly fascination, apprehension, and serious social concern due to its associations with violent acts (Daly and Reed 2022). The specifics of incel forums vary, though generally members argue that women's empowerment has usurped a natural mating market in which individuals pair up with others who match their fitness. Often, members suggest that women's tendency to overestimate their own value means that a small minority of men enjoy the majority of sexual opportunities, i.e., "female hypergamy."[2] (Menzie 2022). Hence, incels tend to discuss women with a combination of desire and aggrievement. They yearn for women as sexual or romantic partners but resent them as gatekeepers of their developmental masculinity because they feel sexually marginalized by them (Johanssen 2021).

Researchers suggest incels routinely express deeply anchored feelings of loneliness, rejection, and dissatisfaction with accepted "social norms" of attraction, dating and finding a romantic partner (Daly and Reed 2022; O'Donnell and Shor 2022). These shared experiences, often grounded in narratives constructed around incels' sense of their own shortcomings, have been said to serve as a foundation for solidarity within their communities (Andersen 2023; Halpin 2022; Kay 2021; Schlaerth et al. 2024). Incels view themselves as shamed by women and subordinated by other men. Thus, they use their

spaces as counter-publics to bond with others who feel similarly alienated and aggrieved (Lindsay 2022). Additionally, incels frequently attribute their perceived romantic failures to both women's empowerment and dominant societal structures, promoting notions of male entitlement. In their forums, incels cement their distance from society by sharing a philosophy, memes, a lexicon and a categorization system for men and women. Researchers have argued such "solidarity motifs" connect with misogyny, resentment, and occasionally extremism (Byerly 2020; Kelly and Aunspach 2020; Lopes 2023). Some have demonstrated links within communities to terrorism and white supremacy through a radicalization process. Typically, a combination of members' perceived inability to fit in with mainstream society and the echo chambers of futility they visit make them increasingly resistant to the idea that their lives can change (DeCook and Kelly 2023; Gheorghe 2024).

"Masculinity anxiety" and incel beliefs predict the likelihood of individuals having violent fantasies, suggesting a pathway to real-world violence among those identifying with the sub-culture (Scaptura and Boyle 2020). However, research has demonstrated that not all members of incel communities endorse misogynistic, extremist, or exclusionary views (Moskalenko et al. 2022). Rather, media perceptions of incel communities appear to have, at times, exaggerated their threat and amplified stereotypical representations. This trend is most saliently captured in Brown's (2023) work examining incel-narratives. The author concludes that incels are recurrently pathologised as "deviant others" as a means for the media to localize wider societal sexism to select groups. However, Brown suggests that the reality is such sexist motifs and scripts are normalized in a range of social spaces, including the media, and that confining explicit sexism to fringe groups omits how commonplace gender-based violence and misogyny are. Similarly, bias in studying, analyzing and reporting incel communities has been discussed in recent scholarship. For example, following a meta-study of incel-focussed research, Maier (2022) concluded that collated findings do not support the position that *all* members of incel communities uphold and identify with negative traits recurrently presented as de facto anchors of "incel identity." They also point out that some studies include seemingly concrete assertions on group members' identity, behaviors, and central values without the authors clearly defining or demonstrating their understanding of incel-culture and culture-dynamics. This represents a concerning position where personal opinions, bolstered by a media trend of distaste, can influence academic scholarship. Relatedly, the dangers of researchers focussing on a vocal minority speaking for a whole group have been discussed. Incel forums vary heavily in the extremity of member's beliefs. Distinct spaces represent various attitudes, values and identities that anticipate different processes of sense-making, reasoning and motivations for community involvement (Baele, Brace, and Ging 2024; Ciocca et al. 2022; Maier 2022).

Notably, Maier (2022) highlights the significant role of mental health for many incel community members that often goes neglected. This omission may be because research into incels does not tend to engage with communities directly or explore their lived experiences (for recent exceptions, see Costello et al. 2024; Daly and Reed 2022; Maryn et al. 2024; Moskalenko et al. 2022; Smith, Butler-Warke, and Stevens 2024). It has been argued that interviewing incels can sometimes result in researchers "collaborating" in their misogyny or validating their perceived victimhood (Carian et al. 2024). We agree that an uncritical approach can do this and there is the potential to position misogyny as an inevitable response to sexlessness. Yet not speaking with incels directly relegates them to the position of a group to be written about but not engaged with and risks promoting misleading narratives about them, limiting our scope when the goal is to identify pathways in and out of inceldom (Hart and Huber 2023).

Similarly, some researchers actively distance incel's attitudes from linkages with mental health. For example, referencing Leidig's (2021) work on incel communities: "[...] not all incels have suicidal impulses, and aggrieved male sexual entitlement is not a mental health issue but rather an ideological one" (Leidig 2021, in Maier 2022:47). Others, such as Carian et al. (2024), have argued that because cisgender heterosexual men are not the most vulnerable population, but are most likely to commit acts of violence, then research centered around low mental health offers limited explanatory value in comparison to structural perspectives. As a caveat, we do not believe that the authors cited are

necessarily arguing against integrated approaches. However, because men with moderate to severe mental health issues vastly outnumber those who are incels, then membership is clearly not unicausal. Individuated approaches struggle to account for why and how these men come to identify with inceldom's specific gender taxonomies. For example, studies highlight how the unattainability of traditional masculine standards and the chokehold these expectations have on emotional expression among those who believe they have met them both impact men's mental health (Krumm et al. 2017; Valkonen and Hänninen 2013). It is important to explore the sociocultural conditions under which these ideals are encountered, sustained and replicated.

Yet we argue that structural explanations, such as men's exposure to a cisheteropatriarchal society, also lack explanatory power since they further beg the questions of why so few men are active on incel communities and why so few incels partake in acts of gender-based violence. A mental health oriented approach may help us better predict some of the men who are *most likely* to be radicalized following encounters with misogynistic content. In that respect, we call for a multifaceted response that situates incels in their wider sociocultural context while simultaneously acknowledging the vast differences in profiles between them and the general public. An oriented approach may help us. For example, incels have significantly higher rates of depression, anxiety, and loneliness than the general population with some statistics suggesting over 70% have severe or moderate depression and two-thirds have severe or moderate anxiety (Costello et al. 2022; Fontanesi et al. 2024; Speckhard and Ellenberg 2022). They also tend to show insecure and fearful attachment styles (Ciocca et al. 2022; Fontanesi et al. 2024; Sparks, Zidenberg, and Olver 2024). Particularly worryingly, survey data suggests that as many as one in five incels contemplates suicide on a daily basis (Whittaker, Costello, and Thomas 2024). And while the extent to which inceldom responds to or exacerbates mental health is currently ambiguous, an analysis of incel suicide posts shows an apparent link between their fatalistic belief system and members' reasons for wanting to take their own lives (Daly and Laskovtsov 2021). Thus, there is compelling evidence that incels represent an at-risk group and that researchers should contextualize the rise of inceldom against the mental health crisis among young men. Incels are also disproportionately likely to be neurodivergent, experience symptoms of PTSD or be victims of bullying (Moskalenko et al. 2022). Though we would not claim any of these traits to be causal, we ask if related experiences of isolation and social anxiety exacerbate the attraction of inceldom as a framework.

There are also socioeconomic predictors of inceldom, necessitating an intersectional approach. Data shows that incels tend to be economically underprivileged, with self-identified incels being disproportionately likely to live with parents or other care givers into adulthood, be unemployed and lack experience in further/higher education (Costello et al. 2022). Indeed, regional inequality is also a predictor of incel activity online (Brooks, Russo-Batterham, and Blake 2022). These predictors point to a group of economically deprived men who have internalized a role as a provider as the means of attracting a partner during a time of economic hardship. Against social pressures to demonstrate masculinity through fulfilling a role as a breadwinner, a failure to thrive under capitalism may compound their perceived masculinity threat, worthlessness and undesirability to women (Krumm et al. 2017). This meritocratic logic is central to how other areas of the manosphere adopt the framework of neoliberalism to explain a man's economic and sexual success as a function of their entrepreneurial labor (Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019; Smith 2023). Yet where some manosphere communities, such as Pick Up Artists, position themselves as prospective winners able to reconnect with natural masculinity and outcompete other men, incels see themselves at the bottom of the male hierarchy, unable to compete in an unfair system.

It is also important to recognize that the incel community is diverse; members possess wide ranges of experiences, beliefs and disparate factors that influence their identities. For example, though incels are sometimes characterized as white supremacists (e.g., by Carian et al., 2024), only 55% of their userbase in USA and Europe identify as white (Blake and Brooks 2023); far lower than the general population. Moreover, though incels sporadically employ racist language, they typically discuss race as a factor in their alienation (Jaki et al. 2019). This is borne out by data looking at racial discrimination

and fetishization in digital spaces (Zhou 2022). This does not mean they do not also uphold white supremacist logic and values, since their racial hierarchy replicates racist tropes and narratives. Still, white male rage explanations downplay the distinct sociosexual pressures members attribute to their race or ethnicity (Smith, Butler-Warke, and Stevens 2024). We do not need to accept their claims of being systemically disadvantaged for being men to accept that *among* men – they are, by some measures, often disadvantaged. As opposed to incels strategically trying to "mask their privilege" (Halpin 2022:829), it may be more productive to reflect on how socioeconomic marginalisations and poor mental health can exacerbate violent attitudes and embitterment among young men who are socialized with misogynistic attitudes and aspirations they cannot fulfil. Doing so brings incels in line with the way that other extremists are characterized (Gill et al. 2021).

Collating existing research together, understanding the incel phenomenon requires a deeply nuanced examination of its complex origins and influences. Hence it is important to note that, to our knowledge, though some existing studies have looked at posts on ex-incel forums (e.g., Hintz and Baker 2021), only two studies utilizes first-hand-data from self-identifying ex-incels that have left "inceldom" (Maryn et al. 2024; Smith, Butler-Warke, and Stevens 2024). Combined, the literature reveals the complex process of undoing an incel identity, with former incels demonstrating a range of ways to dissociate themselves from the label they used to identify with. Some group members made a clear distinction between their lived realities of – among other things – self-loathing and sexual alienation, and the explanatory framework they had adopted to contextualize experiences, i.e., incels could be an involuntary celibate without being an incel. Others naturalized a shift in their identity, maintaining some incel ideological tenets but framing a single sexual encounter as a pathway out of inceldom and a form of masculinity proof, i.e., inceldom is *still real*, but I'm not one of them. Finally, others subverted the in-and-out binary by seeing both their former and current selves as core parts of their identity. Doing so gave them a sense of empathy for those who still frequent incel sites, as well as the men they once were.

Despite some theory progress, previous research has focussed more on positive and negative identification with the incel label as opposed to exploring specific understandings of how incels' sense of themselves as a man both made them vulnerable to inceldom and offered relief. The relative lack of work in this area is important since incel group member testimonies can be critical for developing new progress pathways that offer solutions to reported links between incel-culture and damaging social attitudes and behaviors (Hart and Huber 2023). This study reacts to the present confabulations and inconsistencies within existing research. By centering the voices of ex-incels, we offer an uncommon perspective; a reflexive standpoint from those able to discuss their time in incel communities, the values, norms, attitudes and positionalities that drew them into these communities, and the factors facilitating their withdrawal from such groups.

Adopting a "hegemonic masculinity" research lens

R.W. Connell's concept of *hegemonic masculinity* (HM) defines a culturally dominant standard of male behavior, characterized by attributes such as authority, toughness, and heterosexuality, among others (Connell 2020). This standard is regarded as the most respected and revered; the most sought-after construct performed as *masculinity* in society, establishing a benchmark for male identity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Messerschmidt 2019). Connell identifies three categories of masculinities to elucidate their connection to this dominant standard: *hegemonic masculinity*, which enforces male-dominance and societal norms. *Complicit masculinity*, where men may not fully embody hegemonic traits, yet their complicit refusal to resist HM endorses its core principles and leverages advantages from HM's dominance. And *subordinate* and *marginalised* masculinities; both components include men performing identities that oppose, do not "live up to" or "clash" with components of HM in their displays, ideologies and gendered performances. Incels very much exemplify a form of *subordinated masculinity*, with members comparing themselves to *Chads*, i.e., stoic, attractive males.

The Chad archetype represents an aspirational figure to incels and a totem of their failure as men (Furl 2022). In contrast to incels, the Chad has effortlessly achieved a level of sexual prowess, political agency and social acceptance incels could only obtain through effort, surgery and pedagogy – if at all (Fowler 2022). This is because of Chad's conventional attractiveness and charisma that are viewed as being of the utmost importance. Like other parts of the manosphere (Smith 2023), incel taxonomies rank members by sexual conquest. Hence Chad's existence is a reminder of a standard incels themselves cannot reach, cementing their place at the bottom of the hierarchy of men. Yet, while incels see Chad as their physical superior, they denigrate him for his cognitive limitations. He is often depicted as emotionally shallow, intellectually limited and indistinguishable from other alpha males. He and (in particular) his black counterpart *Tyrone* are framed as brutish (Furl 2022; Menzie 2022). As an extension of their conflicting disdain and desire for women, incels covet Chad for his prowess, hate him because of his success and even sometimes pity him because he has enough erotic capital to be exploited by women. Thus, their mixed feelings on him reflect their often-contradictory views on women who they hate while desperately wanting their affection.

HM largely sustains its continued dominance by subjugating other masculinities and marginalizing femininities, and all forms of performed masculinities that exude any perceived linkages (and support) toward femininities. Thereby, HM reinforces gender hierarchies and power-structures based around the status quo of a singular ideology, much like HM's namesake: the *hegemony*-as-control framework developed by Antonio Gramsci (Gramsci 2011). To clarify, while not *all men* conform to the HM ideal, the influence of HM exerts significant cultural pressure on men to align *in some ways* with it, legitimizing the imprinting, normalization and replication of HM in numerous societal areas and across embedded structures; fathering, schooling, interactions and negotiations and others (Connell 2020). Importantly, HM is not upheld solely through mechanisms of direct subjugation over other masculinities and the marginalization of femininities, but also via subtle and nuanced process of legitimization by consent. Drawing on Gramsci's concept of hegemony, dominance operates less by force and more through embedding and legitimizing social consent to a hegemonic ideal (Gramsci 2011). As such, HM is normalized as a cultural masculine standard, exerting pressure on men to conform to its attributes, often indirectly. This allows HM to retain societal influence without dependence upon direct coercion, though reinforcing HM-archetypes within social and cultural structures and practices.

HM's dominance is perpetuated via HM positioning itself hierarchically over other masculinities, marginalizing those that resist its norms and reconfiguring aspects of resistance toward HM into acceptable forms. For example, figures such as the "vegan bro" identity or Bridges's (2014, 2019) "very gay straight" reflect how HM can reconfigure and integrate traits from marginalized masculinities and femininities, so long as they resist fundamentally challenging the existing masculine hierarchy. Such capacity to absorb different masculine performances allows HM to maintain its dominance while remaining reactive and changeable to evolving social practices. Demonstrating this adaptation, Bridges (2014) reveals how dominant men incorporate performances depicting marginalized masculinities, including those associated with femininity and homosexuality, in patterns that seem progressive but ultimately lead to reinforcements of HM. Hybrid performances concurrently see men distance themselves from overt homophobia and hypermasculinity, projecting an image of inclusivity. Despite this, Bridges contends that overarching hybridization processes fail to challenge root HM power-structures. Rather, reconfigurations subtly preserve existing hierarchical masculine dominance structures by reshaping marginalized traits to fit within the already accepted hegemonic hierarchy. This adaptability shows how HM evolves in response to social shifts while maintaining influence (Bridges 2014; Bridges and Ota 2019).

Considering the above position, even marginalized men can contribute to the dominance of HM by operating within a system that privileges HM, albeit at their own expense. Incels, for instance, exemplify this dynamic. Their self-perception as "beta males" compared to the dominant "Chads" (Menzie 2022) highlights how subordination reinforces HM's hierarchical structure. Importantly, Lucy (2024) points out that:

dominant and dominating non-hegemonic masculine presentations of sexually aggressive and successful men, reflected in the gendered incel construct of "Chad," have been misunderstood as hegemonic. Extreme, violent, dominant, and dominating behavior is not necessarily hegemonic, nor evidence of the legitimization of unequal gender relations. Failure to demonstrate how or if these traits legitimize unequal gender relations result in "slippage" (Beasley 2008) in which fixed, often toxic, masculine character types are assumed as hegemonic

It should be noted that "Chads" are typically revered (by many incel community members) for their dominant traits that example HM, primarily via mechanisms of subordination. For example, in incel discourse, Chads are depicted as oppressors who monopolize sexual access, fostering resentment that underpins misogyny. This characterization positions Chad as symbolic of an unjust social hierarchy, where only a privileged few men achieve sexual and social success, leaving others excluded. Chad's perceived dominance is also invoked in some manosphere narratives to uphold and legitimize traditional gender roles. His success is framed as evidence of male authority and female subordination, perpetuating the notion that women naturally gravitate toward dominant men, thereby reinforcing patriarchal structures. Moreover, the Chad archetype often serves as a rallying point within the manosphere, uniting men around shared feelings of exclusion or aspirations of emulation. This dynamic reflects hegemonic masculinity's capacity to foster male solidarity by marginalizing women and men who fail to conform to its ideals, designating them as inferior or other. However, we are careful to recognize that "Chads" (as per Lucy's argument) may also at times be considered to operate as dominant non-explicitly-hegemonic identities. However, their dominance is revered by other males primarily for its perceived alignment with HM-linked traits and praxis.

Despite incels' overt exclusion, they tacitly acknowledge and perpetuate the very system that marginalizes them, showing how HM ideals sustain through consent rather than coercion, aligning with Connell's structural interpretations of Gramsci's notions of hegemony and her application of this to understand masculine hierarchies (Connell 2020; Gramsci 2011).

Existing research studying incel communities using a hegemonic masculinity lens

Some past research has employed an HM lens to explore incel-cultures. Menzie (2022) investigates how "active" incels construct and express notions of femininity and masculinity, arguing that ingrained misogyny native to incel groups originates from notions that "feminism" disrupts a natural societal order based on heterosexual, monogamous relationships and normative structures of power. By applying the concept of "femmephobia" (othering of ideology and performances perceived as "feminine"), Menzie highlights how incels demean women; feminine behavior is typed as enduringly performative and intended solely for male approval. Through a combined online ethnography of incel subreddits and an analysis of Elliot Rodger[3]'s manifesto, Menzie delineates that incels use gender-based archetypes to (re)define their celibacy, revealing a "heteropatriarchal" framework where femininity and *hegemonic masculinity* are redefined to operate as contributors and detractors of contextual social capital (Menzie 2022). In a similar study, Ging (2019) explores anti-feminism narratives and ideologies on online platforms linking to "Red Pill" ideology,[4] which alleges to liberate men from feminist misconceptions. This informal collective, known as the manosphere, has become a prominent online ecosystem for discussing men's rights in global society. Ging identifies key units of the manosphere, exploring the definitions of masculinities it promotes. They conclude that, while some patterns of praxis resemble "traditional" anti-feminism, new emerging understandings of masculinity are arising. For example, conceptions that challenge the typical association of power with *hegemonic masculinity* by emphasizing victimhood, "beta masculinity,"[5] and diverse interpretations surrounding involuntary celibacy. Such forms of hybridized identities highlight complexities regarding the dynamics of male dominance online (and also offline) and how online spaces can amplify new forms of discontented manhood, presenting a blended perspective on incel identities at odds with notions of singular presentations of HM.

Ging's (2019) analysis demonstrates a requirement for more thorough explorations of hybrid masculinities in incel spaces, exploring how notions traditionally understood as vulnerabilities can

be co-opted into incel masculine identity. In this context, the concept of hybrid masculinities articulated by Bridges and Pascoe (2014) is important. Akin to our earlier argument referencing incel studies highlighting the diverse multiplicity of identities that make up incel subcultures (Baele, Brace, and Ging 2024; Ciocca et al. 2022; Fontanesi et al. 2024; Halpin 2022; Maier 2022; Sparks, Zidenberg, and Olver 2024), Bridges & Pascoe theorize that masculinities can be shaped via multiple influencers not only originating from the cultural hegemony of HM, but originating from norms belonging to subordinated and marginalized forms (see Bridges & Pascoe). This position clarifies Ging's suggestion that incels engage in a dual process of appropriating traits from subordinated identities while simultaneously asserting a contextually dominant identity that supports traditional patriarchal values. Research by Glace, Dover, and Zatkin (2021) provides similarly critical insights into motivations and influencing dynamics shaping identity within incel community spaces, defining pathways elucidating how incels construct identities in ways that complement and resist societal norms, underscoring performative dimensions of hybrid masculinities as they oscillate between motifs of entitlement and experiences of rejection.

To synthesize the above literature, incels appear to support ideological and behavioral standards connected with HM, for example, expressions of dominance and entitlement toward women. Indeed, Vallerga and Zurbriggen (2022) demonstrate that incel beliefs often reflect strong support for "traditional" masculine ideals, such as aggression; a fundamental motif of HM when operationalized to generate a position of authority over both women, and men who fail to perform such depictions. Their examination of HM linking with the incel, manosphere and red pill digital spaces positions it as both a coveted objective and the instigator of frustrations and anger for men interacting in such forums (see Vallerga and Zurbriggen 2022). Witt (2020) further examples confabulations in support and rejection processes for HM through the canonization of figures like Elliot Rodger, demonstrating that incel rhetoric, supporting misogyny and violence as identity motifs, reinforces patriarchal structures and legitimizes HM praxis. Thus, incels perpetuate HM's underlying principles to replicate the same process of power and domination they often paradoxically claim to oppose. Similarly, Thorburn, Powell, and Chambers (2023) examine the "incel movement" via a criminological lens. Employing digital ethnography alongside qualitative analysis of online forums, they unpack three connected themes: biological determinism, experiences of masculine shame and the dynamics of hierarchical gender relations. This analysis, like others, reveals hegemonic and hybrid masculinity perspectives to be present in incel narratives. Thorburn employs Kimmel's theory of "aggrieved entitlement" (Kimmel 2017) to investigate how participants conceptualize their blended masculine identities. This concept reveals a deep frustration and anger experienced by individuals, predominantly (but not limited to) white, heterosexual males, who perceive themselves to be unjustly deprived of the "deserved" status and privilege they feel owed as a natural product of their gender and race. Such entitlement, rooted in conventional patriarchal values propagated via historical cultural hegemony, becomes amplified as a reaction to shifting social standards of behaviors, including but not limited to gender equality. This position challenges assumptions of natural superiority. Thus, incels may perceive such dynamic changes as a direct threat to their societal status, position or privilege, constructing feelings of resentment and grievance. These are further validated and amplified in "echo-chamber" online forums that draw together individuals with similar frustrations and ideological thinking. These notions are often translated into resentment directed toward women, who they tend to view as the primary beneficiaries of societal changes (Kalish and Kimmel 2010).

Returning to their findings, Thorburn, Powell, and Chambers (2023)—in support of others – explore how incels adopt a "subordinate" self-identity that deviates from hegemonic masculinity, instead normalizing and idealizing marginalized, sexually unsuccessful male identities as validators of their masculinities. Thus the authors demonstrate how experiences of humiliation and rejection are central to shaping identity. Within online spaces, incels collectively articulate feelings of exclusion and injustice, reinforcing and valorizing their victimhood. A perceived entitlement to women's affection and sexual attention solidifies anger, particularly when community members perceive such interactions are unjustly denied to them. Thorburn,

Powell, and Chambers (2023) argue that this entitlement underpins incel's resentment toward women, who are held responsible for their romantic shortcomings, in addition to shifting societal standards of behavior and their impacts upon men, with incels constructing various narratives in support of the idea that changes in social structures and ideologies unfairly favor women. Drawing parallels with Thorburn, Powell, and Chambers (2023), Menzie's (2022) and Witt's (2020) deconstruction of Elliot Rodger, Halpin et al. (2022) focus on incel communities' depictions and idealization of Marc Lépine, the perpetrator of the 1989 École Polytechnique massacre. Through qualitative content and discourse analysis, Halpin et al. (2022) argue that some incels align themselves with violent figures to reclaim a sense of masculinity that operates *within* the hegemonic framework. As others have stated, incels position themselves as both victims of, and resistors against, a system that denies them the supposed rewards associated with HM. This exemplifies the concept of "weaponised subordination," whereby incels simultaneously reject hegemonic masculinity while reinforcing its structural values through violence and the perpetuation of traditional gender hierarchies. Maxwell et al. (2020) offer a similarly nuanced analysis of incel communities on Reddit, thematically exploring how incels express alienation, sexual frustration and isolation and loneliness. These emotions are contextualized within the broader framework of HM that incels internalize, developing associations between masculine worth and sexual success. The inability to meet these standards fosters rejection and failure. Halpin et al. spotlight the enduring influence of HM, which pressures men – whether they wholly embody HM ideals – toward ideologies that often reinforce the overarching HM gender hierarchy regardless of men's intended positioning. Collectively, the above studies position a complex relationship between HM and incel-culture, revealing how incels both reject and uphold hegemonic ideals, often via channeling hybrid forms of masculinities.

The present study

Two salient observations are evident when considering studies that utilize Connell's HM framework. Firstly, most studies applying HM operate using distanced analysis protocols; internet-based analysis exploring forum postings where the researcher retrospectively infers meaning to user-postings that have been read, downloaded and analyzed. This process de-localizes investigatory depth since, for example, a researcher is unable to ask follow-up questions, qualify meaning or develop further inquiry into incel perspectives, sense-making and meaning (see Adams 2023b). Secondly, as Lucy (2024) points out in their case-study of "incels" - Connell's theory of multiple masculinities is frequently a cornerstone in the study of *men and masculinity* [*masculinities*]. Yet, its application often overlooks the relational and legitimizing aspects crucial to understanding HM, leading to conceptual confusion. Other works have similarly cited examples of "slippages" in industrial locales where HM is utilized as a lens to explore risk-taking behaviors and arrange cultures of masculinities into hierarchies. For example, highlighting the dominance of a particular masculine group as "*hegemonic masculinity*" but failing to qualify the processes by which this grouped cultural identity exercises hegemonic constraint: ideological control, gendered subordination and domination of women, femininities, and masculinities operating outside of hegemonic or complicit support for the so-called-hegemonic construct. This questions the validity of such "hegemonic" descriptors, used at times to spotlight dominance or popularity (for further discussion, see Adams 2019, 2022, 2023a). Lucy's case study examines four investigations in the emerging field of research on anti-feminist masculine behaviors among incel communities, demonstrating their failure to address the political dynamics that define HM. Instead, these studies focus narrowly on fixed traits defined as "toxic," associated with dominant masculine behaviors, but *not always* HM. As scholars turn their attention to new male communities, it is imperative to correctly apply theoretical frameworks by appreciating their historical context and evolution, without falling into similar *slippage* territory when applying gendered theory (Adams 2022, 2023a; Lucy 2024).

Methodology

Ethical considerations and participant recruitment

Research ethical approval was obtained from the School of Applied Social Studies, Robert Gordon University, Reference: 212202. Recruitment focused on individuals who had previously identified as incels but had since dissociated from the label. Recruitment efforts were carried out via anonymous posts on various online platforms frequented by former incels, explicitly inviting those who no longer identified with the *incel* label to participate. Due to privacy concerns and to maintain participant confidentiality, the specific platforms used for recruitment are not disclosed in this paper. The term "ex-incel" is acknowledged as ambiguous since incel philosophy assumes lifelong membership since its foundations are supposedly genetic. Nevertheless, participants' conscious disassociation from the label indicates a significant shift in their mind-set and identity, thus we refer to them using this descriptor.

Interview procedure

A semi-structured interview guide was developed. One researcher conducted all interviews and handled participant communications. Fifteen individuals initially expressed interest in participating; three did not proceed after receiving further information, and one was excluded due to being under eighteen. Ultimately, eleven interviews were conducted over two rounds of recruitment. While this represents a small sample size, this is typical when engaging with hard-to-reach populations, including fringe identity groups (Abrams 2010). The sample size is sufficient for interview-based research, allowing for the identification of significant themes without reaching data saturation (Braun, Clarke, and Weate 2016; Hennink and Kaiser 2022).

Interview formats and data collection

Nine interviews were conducted via Zoom, with participants choosing whether to appear on video or remain unseen; all but one opted for audio-only. Two participants preferred asynchronous e-mail interviews. Allowing participants to choose their preferred format was deemed ethically appropriate due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter. Both interview formats used the same topic guide to ensure consistency and comparability of data. Interviews lasted between fifty and 150 minutes and were recorded for transcription. Table 1 provides basic demographic details while maintaining participant anonymity, with two individuals requesting non-disclosure of their specific country.

Data analysis

The research team (*researcher 1 – DS* and *researcher 2 – NA*) employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to inductive thematic analysis. DS initially analyzed and inductively coded all transcripts. NA then analyzed and independently coded each transcript with DS's coding hidden. Coding was then unblinded and themes identified were cross-coded. A further phase of deductive coding was completed by NA applying Connell's theory of *hegemonic masculinity* as an exploratory, interpretive lens. The researchers met twice formally to discuss emergent themes and agreed upon defining constructs within the data; themes of identity, masculinities, and changing sense of self, to foster inter-coder reliability; discussing, refining and (re)identified themes. The process followed the steps outlined in Table 2, ensuring consistency and reliability in theme development.

Findings: examining masculine sense-making via the *hegemonic masculinity* lens

As shown in Table 1, participants came from different locales and their experience as incels was significant, dating back, at the earliest, to 1998. The longest time "as an incel" was recorded at sixteen years and the shortest at two years. Analysis revealed findings congruent with existing research and some surprising

Table 1. Participant information.

Participant	Age	Region	Incel from	Incel until
1	23	United Kingdom	2016	2018
2	21	Central Europe	2017	2020
3	23	USA	2018	2020
4	28	Eastern Europe	2016	2018
5	29	Canada	2016	2019
6	28	USA	2017	2021
7	33	Canada	2010	2011
8	25	Italy	2010	2021
9	29	Brazil	2011	2018
10	32	USA	2009	2011
11	40	USA	1998 (approx)	2014

Table 2. Application of Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis.

Step	Description
1. Familiarisation	DS transcribed interviews, and NA reviewed transcripts.
2. Generating initial codes	Using *inductive* analysis principles, DS generated initial codes for all transcripts. NA generated codes for all transcripts. Initial themes were marked and identified for further clarification.
3. Searching for themes	**Step 1/** Each researcher identified latent themes across all transcripts; sharing and discussing these when independent phases of analysis were complete.
	Step 2/ A further phase of *deductive* analysis was conducted across the transcripts by NA, applying Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity as an interpretive lens to explore linkages between identity, ideological anchors to sense-making over identity and notions of masculinity(ies), and defining characteristics of 'what it means to be a man' in the context of 'incel-culture' and linked spaces and ideologies discussed.
4. Reviewing themes	Researchers collaboratively reviewed themes at two formal discussions and further iterative discussions via email and MS Teams.
5. Defining and naming themes	Team meetings were held to finalise theme pertinence and terminology.
6. Producing the report	NA drafted the outcomes publication with contributions and revisions from DS.

discoveries. Ex-incels developed complex *hybrid* notions of masculinities, identifying loneliness, hopelessness, mental health, and social isolation as key motivators for engagement and ideological subscriptions. The applications of Connell's HM theory proved to be a helpful framework for exploring themes, allowing for deepening prior findings and developing new perspectives. Three key themes represent interlinked processes of identity-sense-making, i.e., connecting with incel-culture, formational of "incel identities" and ideological rationale, and later accommodation of rejections and distancing. These three themes are:

1/The radicalisation process and formation and decline of incel group membership,

2/The development and solidification of a "defensive pessimism" mindset regarding men's ability to conform to and perform hegemonic masculinity – the "idealised" and most socially revered and desirable form of masculine identity as social performance, and

3/A timeline of reconstruction: the formulation of "new" masculinities incorporating both a rejection and (re) production of "hegemonic" motifs – leading to ideologies representing hybridised; juxtaposed masculinities.

Themes are explored as a narrative journey below.

The radicalisation process and formation and decline of incel group membership

The processes of engagement participants discussed often began with experiencing profound, prolonged loneliness and a perceived inability to achieve intimacy due to external factors believed to be beyond personal control. Initially, the term "incel" was associated with those who desired romantic and sexual relationships but felt thwarted by societal standards or perceived personal inadequacies revolving around their appearance or social status. Communities engaged with – and indeed the *incel* label itself, provided a crucial sense of belonging during periods of intense isolation, as participants

found solace in a space where their feelings of rejection and frustration were understood and shared. Over time, participants discussed the definition of "incel" within specifically online spaces, gradually broadening to include a diverse range of individuals, from those struggling with loneliness to others who expressed extreme misogynistic views. This widening of identity co-occurred with some participants viewing themselves as "trucels," i.e., those who *could not* engage in intimate and sexual relationships, and others as "fakecells:" persons engaging with and benefitting from "incel" spaces but who *had the chance* to find an intimate partner and/or had previously experienced intimacy, but whom "enjoyed" the culture and emulation of "true incel" ideologies (Jensen 2024). Interestingly, one participant had sexual experiences before joining incel sites, though he felt that it was not enough to validate him. This expansion shifted the term's original meaning and introduced a fragmented nature to the community. Notably, participants were initially drawn to incel forums through shared (and sharing of) experiences of perceived societal rejection, which fostered a strong sense of solidarity.

> Very soon I've found this community of guys, who had similar problems I had, and you know it kind of clicked. I thought that if others are having these problems, it can just be me right, there has to be something wrong with I guess society or women. That must be the reason why I'm not having any success in my dating life and romantic life. [**Participant 2**]

By acknowledging how they deviated from traditional male archetypes, and building a community around their divergence, incel forum members rebelled against societal expectations of "revered" masculinity. These included traits, depictions and performances of emotional control, physical strength, financial success and capital, focussed aggression, risk-taking, and high volumes of "sexual conquests" and perceived attractiveness toward women (by other men). Akin to findings from others (Halpin et al. 2022; Thorburn, Powell, and Chambers 2023; Witt 2020), these traits were perceived as "required" for developing relationships with women and participants self-identified as having few or none of them.

> With terms like "toxic masculinity" and "nice guys" and the whole Manosphere under review it felt like there were now even more expectations to act in a certain way for men, now just coded in academic and feminist language. I think I liked how incels were being unashamedly themselves, even if it was pathetic, there was a sense of rebellion in it that I appreciated. [**Participant 1**]

> [I liked] these inversions of the social hierarchy. In real life the most attractive guy, the most handsome, is the most popular – the higher value person. On the incel forum the ugliest guy, the guy who spent the most years without ever dating, the oldest virgin is the most popular; that's the Alpha male of the incel forum. [**Participant 8**]

Communal distancing and delegitimisation of HM appealed to members, allowing unfiltered self-expression of perceived societal "failures" that mainstream society often suppressed. This rebellion was about rejecting norms and embracing a raw, unfiltered identity, even if outsiders viewed it negatively. In that respect, incel communities matched Lindsay's (2022) metaphor of a counterpublic. Nihilistic philosophies, such as the concept of "LDAR" (Lie Down and Rot[6]), became coping mechanisms for dealing with disillusionment and societal pressures, encouraging members to reject conventional drives toward self-improvement and success in favor of embracing total defeat and the capitalization of social failure and romantic ostracizing. This is congruent with Thorburn, Powell, and Chambers (2023) who suggested that incel communities revolve around ritualized self-humiliation through unflattering comparisons with alpha males that they valorize into imagined acts of violence.

> Catharsis. It was fantasies of empowerment - fantasies of striking back against all society that condemned me and ostracized me for the sin of not being able to intuitively socialize properly. [**Participant 10**]

A significant driving aspect of engagements with incel-communities was their focus on mental health and sexual anxiety – two things that may be viewed as incompatible with revered HM-linked ideals of physicality and unemotional stoicism as modes of masculine domination. Many participants appreciated forums as a sanctuary to share their struggles openly without fear of judgment or intervention. The incel community provided a unique space where members could express feelings of despair and

suicidal ideation, fostering a sense of solidarity through shared vulnerability and resignation. Forums offered validation that participants felt was absent in other areas of their lives, particularly mainstream society.

> What turned me on to their side, was how viscerally some of them would describe their anxieties and their experiences of being rejected, and how much I could relate to those. It was almost kind of a shock at first, because I was so isolated socially before. I wasn't aware that there are people that were having really similar experiences to me ... That was how I ended up identifying myself with them. [**Participant 3**]

Discussing deeply personal and painful experiences without facing immediate dismissal or superficial platitudes allowed members to feel genuinely heard and understood. Hence there is a reverence with which incels discuss such communities, if not other individuals in them, as being like "family."

> It was also a safe place to share. Vulnerability is often demonised in men. I felt I wasn't allowed to share my problems with people in real life, and if I did it would lead to shame and betrayal. Being on an anonymous forum helped me be more open, as I didn't have to think about the repercussions of my vulnerability and could have it not only recognised but engaged with. [**Participant 1**]

> I'm probably totally misinterpreting the poetic meaning of these lyrics. But My chemical romance had a song, and, like one of the phrases, was "to join the black parade, to be the saviour of the damned" and it's like that's kind of like the community, like we're all the cursed fucking Gremlins rebelling back and trying to claw at the clouds, or whatever.[**Participant 10**]

However, while initially comforting, this open expression could perpetuate a destructive mind-set. The constant reinforcement of negative emotions and hopelessness, coupled with the absence of positive or constructive coping mechanisms, meant that the community's support represented a double-edged sword. On one hand, it provided much-needed empathy and a sense of belonging. On the other, it entrenched members further into their hopelessness, creating a feedback loop that rendered it increasingly challenging to break away from these harmful ideologies. By offering a refuge for men's most distressing thoughts, forums became both a lifeline and a trap, underscoring the complex and often contradictory role forums played in the mental health and ideological sense-making of their members. This intricate balance highlights the deep psychological impact of such communities, where the quest for self-examination, understanding and support could inadvertently reinforce the struggles participants sought to escape. As such, many participants portrayed such forums as echo-chambers that responded to and reinforced existing offline concerns; initial curious visits led to further engagements as existing ideological and societal opinions were solidified, reified and validated. Thus, engagement often represented *a radicalisation process*. This notion was explained in numerous interviews, with **Participant 2** providing the most direct articulation of this:

> It would be a radicalisation process [. . .] It's similar to any other radical group - any far-right - anything like that. At first, you see comments here and there, from another dude in a similar position. You see some casual misogyny [. . .] So I guess in a way [this can] radicalise you too and slowly you'll become more and more hateful; more misogynistic. A lot of incels are also far right, so I guess becoming an incel can radicalise you in this way too I suppose. And I wouldn't even say that it's similar to radicalisation process. I would say that it is a radicalisation process [**Participant 2**]

Participant 11 provided some key elaboration, with regard to incel community spaces forming echo-chambers, highlighting that those who worked on themselves often left the communities, while those who did not stayed. Thus, spaces tended to represent extreme pools of voices and affirmations from those who prioritized self-pity, hopelessness and "learned helplessness." Those were then amplified as a normal baseline in the context of the forum members:

> One of the issues with the incel community was that the people who tended to do well would leave, and the people who tended to not do well would stay – this is sort of the nature of how inceldom would work. And what would happen is that the people who probably learned the lessons, did better, and had something important to say, instead of wallowing in self-pity and learned helplessness, would go off and do their own thing. And then the people who didn't have those mechanisms would stay ... [**Participant 11**]

Table 3. Table of sub-themes uncovered from total-data highlighting motivations and meanings behind ex-incel's community engagement and sense-making around their involvement.

Aspect	Thematic Evidence
Initial Meaning of Incel	Incel initially meant striving for intimacy but feeling unable to realise this due to perceived-as-uncontrollable external factors.
Evolution of Incel Definition	The term broadened to include a range of individuals from those that were lonely to those expressing notions of misogyny.
Sense of Belonging	The incel community developed a space where participants felt understood, they could be vulnerable and open, and where they felt less isolated.
Shared Experiences	Shared experiences of rejection initially attracted participants, but diverging values, especially around nihilism and misogyny, highlighted internal conflicts that eventually began to fragment identities.
Rebellion Against Norms	The community offered a rebellious stance against societal expectations of masculinity and wider social factors that defined 'success.'
Nihilistic Philosophy	Nihilism served as a mechanism for coping with societal disillusionment, with concepts like 'LDAR' rejecting -delegitimising- societal pressures to strive and improve, instead legitimising embracing nihilism.
Internal Conflicts	Stratified values within the community, particularly around nihilism and misogyny, revealed ranging internal conflicts and spotlighted the range of different identity-pathways participants could take.
Gradual Disengagement	Leaving the community was a gradual process, influenced by external and internal factors, including critical viewpoints and positive experiences, and a recognition that the community was ultimately detrimental -for many- to their mental health.

Despite the entrenchment of this radicalization process, as participants engaged more deeply with communities, internal conflicts over their identities and how these were defined began to surface. While shared experiences of rejection initially bonded members, diverging values, particularly around nihilistic outlooks and pervasive misogyny, created tensions. Some members embraced extreme views, while others voiced discomfort with these, highlighting the complexity within the community and the varying paths members could take within the oft-homogenized cultures of incel identity (drawing parallels with findings by Bridges 2014; Brown 2023; Maier 2022). For many, such internal conflicts eventually led to a gradual disengagement from overarching "incel ideology groups" as individuals sought to reconcile their need for socialization and group-membership with their discomfort regarding the community's more destructive ideologies. For example, after witnessing members of the forums he visited abusing and trolling single parents on dating sites, **Participant 2** chose to disconnect with incel spaces. This was despite feeling like the people on the forum could understand his frustrations better than people in his daily life. Thus, individuals experienced a process of "identity-fracturing." Table 3 (below) shows sub-themes exploring prominent narratives for engagement and eventual disengagement with incel forums across all interview data.

Defensive pessimism – a deconstruction of ex-incels' rejection of hegemonic masculinity

Connell's work on HM is notable for highlighting that not *all men* directly subscribe to HM. Moreover, men claiming subscription to HM rarely achieve this idealized form of socially revered masculinity (Connell 2020). Interestingly (and mindful of Lucy's 2024), our ex-incel sample almost unanimously distanced themselves overtly from HM as an identity structure, and from explicit behaviors and practices often associated with legitimizing HM, as viable and valid notions of masculine identity. This rejection process was complicated and interlinked with *Defensive Pessimism* (DP).

DP represents a technique where individuals set low expectations and anticipate the worst outcomes to handle anxiety and enhance their performance. DP typically aids individuals to concentrate on potential issues and formulate solutions beforehand, sometimes leading to rejection of actions or possibilities; these feared to be unobtainable or their pursuit leading to failure (see Adams 2023c; Cantor and Norem 1989). Importantly, incels utilized DP to underpin collective, overt, rejections of HM, but also traits often conflated with evidencing HM that can lead to slippages in definition, for example dominant, non-hegemonic forms of masculinity (see Lucy 2024; Messerschmidt 2019). This

mind-set, characterized by an emphasis on perceived insurmountable barriers and negative self-assessments, stems from the belief that achieving "traditional" masculine success (i.e. the Chad archetype and dominant traits associated with this) was a wholly unattainable concept for incels. This focus reinforced existing insecurities and rationalized their anticipated failures as inevitable.

> I guess it showed me how genetics plays a role in everything. There's a lot of factors that are not in your control, like being more handsome or being born into a rich family, that give you certain advantages. That's kind of the sad reality – some people will just have better lives just because of the situation that they were born in and that the world was cruel […] It felt like, at the time, there was this sort of grand conspiracy against me by women […] They were only going to give affection to the top percentage of men, and the rest of us would have to go through years of development, becoming the peak masculine version of ourselves to have a relationship. [**Participant 5**]

The DP-mind-set served as a coping mechanism, protecting individuals from anticipated disappointment by setting low expectations perceived to be anchored in "real world" evidence and embracing a narrative of inevitable defeat; a nihilistic perception of social reality within which feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt were self-attributed when men felt they had not met certain romantic and social milestones. For instance, **Participant 8** recalled obsessively reading evolutionary psychology papers about attraction and courtship patterns to explain his sexual marginalization. While Connell argues HM provides a key structuring principle for society and that all men position their performances of masculinity in relation to this concept, the nihilistic culture of incel communities viewed what they described as "traditional masculinity" (i.e. factors that could – at times – be described as hegemonic masculinity and at other times as dominant non-hegemonic masculinity) as so unattainable, that even anything linking with complicit support for this ideal (and indeed anything approaching a verifiable definition of HM) was viewed as a waste of time and effort. Interestingly, this perception extended to participants viewing occurrences such as "dating" and "finding a partner" as products of a system that unfairly valued dominance, aggression, competition and physical strength and prowess as foundational "valued" components of "maleness." Thus, rejection of anything approaching HM subscriptions or linking with behaviors and ideology often incorrectly typed HM as a "slippage" was absent. Rejection of these notions of "traditional maleness" was viewed by many as a more rational and functionally less damaging choice than attempting to conform to "societal expectations" of what society (and women) were perceived (by incels) as looking for in a man.

> Because I looked around, and I saw everyone else could find a relationship, everyone else could find a companion, and I wasn't sure where to turn to so ... There was a lot of genuine despair in my life before 2017. And I recognised that going on the incel forums, and replacing that despair with anger and hate, wasn't a good thing. But truth be told, anger feels good. It feels a lot better than sadness and depression. [**Participant 6**]

As such, true HM (defined by subordination, domination, and marginalization of women and non-HM-conforming men, via Connell's network of functional praxis, Connell 2020) was not only deemed unachievable but also not worth the effort to pursue. Rejection was solidified through community interactions where shared experiences reinforce the echo-chamber construct discussed in the previous section; validating collective perceptions that striving for "traditional masculine" ideals is futile – an illusionary wasted effort. Application of DP-like thinking represented self-preservation underpinning an active rejection of HM and associated "traditionally masculine" behaviors, rationalized as a logical response to an unachievable standard that participants felt women unconditionally want them to meet (or at least strive toward the direction of achieving). DP shaped personal outlooks and fostered a collective ideological ethos of disengagement from "traditional" masculine goals and the pursuit of alternative masculine sense-making. For many, this process represented longitudinal engagement with online incel forums, contribution and monitoring of own and others' failings, and a collective sharing of these to legitimize the systemic inevitability of failure and defeat in attempting to "climb" the masculine hierarchy. Interactions often reaffirmed the mind-set that incels perceived the imbalance of power and social capital that was weighted against them could "always get worse," further amplifying their perceived inability to find a romantic partner. Instead of incels operating in direct pursuit of hegemonic ideals and motifs, the position of incels (prior to becoming ex-incels) led them to resist

considering hegemonic subscription as a legitimate way to make sense of their identities. They professed instead to develop identities that capitalized how *far* they were positioned from traditionally revered notions of what it means to be a man and the possibility of achieving HM (Connell 2020; Messerschmidt 2019).

A timeline of reconstruction: formulating "new" masculinities incorporating a rejection and (re)production of "hegemonic" motifs

Despite community members operating in an echo-chamber and heavily relying on DP-like thinking to justify and cope with their position, a timeline of identity reconstruction was visible in the data. This revealed the interplay between rejection and redefinition of hegemonic and "traditional" (dominant, but non-explicitly-hegemonic) masculine motifs. Following a period where participants rejected dominant masculine norms as impossible avenues of identity, they entered a gradual process of critical engagement and appraisal of their situation. Often, this was triggered following prolonged poor mental health, low-wellbeing and pronounced unhappiness. Participants recognized that while community engagements at times offered initial positively perceived affect toward them, allowing them to speak openly about topics such as rejection, low-self-esteem, suicide, and perceptions of life as meaningless, unfair and unjust, their prolonged engagements within these "support groups" ultimately compounded and contributed to their negative mental state. This prompted a renewed appraisal of firstly, the role of incel community groups, and secondly, a linked re-assessment and realization of the community's negative effects. Frequently, this triggered a period of "questioning" and "pause," where participants who frequently engaged with forums began questioning the validity of motifs, symbolism and perceptions propagated within these spaces.

> I had to start thinking about my future. How many women do I want to try to date? How much sex do I want before I find a wife? Or do I want to have kids? And if I want to have kids, when do I want to have them? And if let's say I had kids when I'm 38 or 40, I have to account for my type two diabetes, and my family history of it - it's actually what my aunt died of . . . I have to think 'let's say I have kids 38 or 40 and I die when I'm 60, do I want to have spent so many of those years on incel boards essentially injecting myself with anger? Is that really what I want out of my life? [**Participant 6**]

> I didn't leave inceldom; inceldom left me because it had changed so much. [**Participant 11**]

After more time, this skepticism transmuted into a positive-growth-journey of sorts, where some participants came to outwardly and near-totally reject incel ideology, recognizing this as outmoded and antithetical to personal development and positive mental health and personal growth. This could be captured most aptly by a turn toward "ex-incel" self-identity. However, while many ex-incels spoke of "moving past" previous incel ideologies and demonstrated actively reconstructing identities, this process was complex. Most fascinatingly, as participants grew to reject incel ideologies, they also relaxed their previously firm and established rejections of *hegemonic masculinity and dominant non-hegemonic "traditional" motifs* as legitimate pathways toward constructing *new* masculinity; selectively incorporating components of HM-congruent attitudes and values into their ideologies discussing identity, goals, their perceptions of what it means to be a man. Thus, rejecting incel ideology, in turn, increased participant's likelihood of embracing HM as a fitting alternative. This was a surprising finding, deviating from some existing incel-focussed research (Ging 2019; Menzie 2022).

Critically, this "reconfiguration" stage is marked by the selective incorporation of explicit hegemonic motifs redefined to fit ex-incel's new ex-incel identities that participants would have previously rejected under full subscription to incel cultural ideology. The nuanced reconstruction of masculinities among ex-incels represented a transformative journey. Participants reconstruct identities by blending "traditional" and new masculine traits, leading to hybridized masculinities that interconnect juxta-posed, previously rejected components of HM with motifs, values and beliefs concurrently operating in partial HM support. When considering *hybridisation*, it is important to avoid falling into the trap outlined by Lucy (2024), where some incel-focussed research labels behaviors as HM, but operates in

slippage; failing to align with Connell's (2020) definitions of HM as defined by the co-occurrence of specific sets of praxis, networked with the subordination of women and/or non-HM-conforming men (Connell 2005, 2020; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Table A1 in Appendix demonstrates a selection of quotes that evidence changed ex-incel identities but linked to notions legitimizing HM. While often not operating in full-HM-subscription – complicit support for HM-like ideological structuring is evident. This includes motifs of masculine distancing, domination, othering of other masculinities, masculine competition, recognition of hierarchical placement and the remaining presence of residual anti-feminist ideology presented in reconfigured ways.

Discussion

> I sometimes doubt if somebody could even be into me or like me. Because I guess, no matter what I do, I will never be a stereotypical masculine attractive guy right, so I guess – let's just say that I'm still recovering. [**Participant 2**]

Individuals leave incel communities for several interlinked reasons, predominantly stemming from engaging in personal growth efforts and a gradual realization that incel echo-chambers are damaging socially, and negative to mental health. The title of this paper encapsulates the notion of an evolution by participants away from accepting incel narratives and toward a reconfiguring of patterns of thinking, promoting first questioning then rejecting incel-culture. Participants began to critically reassess incel ideologies, particularly the misogyny and anti-feminism components, and aim for healthier views on relationships and masculinity. There was often a strong desire to engage more positively with society, connect with others, and break free from the isolation and inherent capitalization on anxiety, hopelessness, rejection, and despair that inceldom encourages. A significant factor underpinning change was the pursuit of self-betterment, as participants sought to improve their mental health and develop social skills that could help them build connections outside incel forums (with both men and women). This drive for personal progress frequently clashes with the defeatist and negative mind-set that operates as a foundation of incel-culture. As participants experience gradual positive life changes, such as forming new relationships or achieving personal goals, they begin to increasingly question their previous beliefs and distance themselves from a stance of capitalizing upon the pessimism they once embraced and having this validated as a shared, legitimate identity-form in pro-incel online spaces. In short, ex-incels begin to look for validation outside of digital spaces, reducing the "hold" of incel culture and echo-chamber validations as a legitimator of their identities, this pathway now becoming less valid and less used.

In tandem with reductions in seeking online validation, ex-incels start to actively reshape their understanding of masculinity – crucially, adopting and (re)constructing hybrid identity forms that merge aspects of *hegemonic masculinity* and "traditional" (dominant but non-hegemonic) motifs with more progressive values. This process further challenges the stability of their former incel-identities, which were grounded in rejecting traditional notions of masculinity and delegitimising and othering a structured masculine hierarchy organized by *hegemonic masculinity*, leading incels to adopt an "outcast" status linked to their notions of "manhood" that distanced them from the "Chad" archetype. However, ironically ex-incels began to accept elements of "traditional" masculinities and HM as they reintegrate into society, recognizing this as foundational for growth and social integration. For example, **Participant 10** built up his confidence as both a sexual prospect and a man through physical prowess and sporting achievements. Additionally, ex-incels views on women shift, as they move toward recognizing them as individuals with whom they can form meaningful relationships. Exposure to different perspectives also plays a part in encouraging these changes. In the end, leaving inceldom involves a complex reworking of identity and beliefs when individuals move away from damaging ideologies in search of a more fulfilling life. However, as the following section demonstrates, residual traces of incel ideology and linked sense-making appear to be incorporated into changed identities by novel, subversive and "hidden" hybridization mechanisms intertwined with new masculinities.

A *hybridised masculinities* framework

Our investigation revealed both expected and novel findings. Participants exhibited complex notions of hybrid masculinities as they reconfigured their identities, influenced by factors such as loneliness, hopelessness, mental health issues, and social isolation. The application of Connell's HM theory facilitated the identification of three interrelated themes, clarifying findings regarding incel identity and the move to developing an ex-incel identity: *the radicalisation process*, *the development of a defensive pessimism mindset*, and *the reconstruction of new hybridised form of masculinities*. Themes represent a journey of evolving and transforming identities that resulted in blended masculinities. The crucial finding was that ex-incel participants' later questioning and rejections of incel-culture also relaxed their rejection of what they perceived as *traditional notions of masculinity* as a valid, idealized identity archetype, triggering new identity reformations and developments.

Regarding their experiences of incel identities, participants self-identified as belonging to incel-cultures that represented the most subordinated tier of Connell's HM framework; the *subordinate* level (Connell 2005, 2020). However, and despite this, much of the attitudes, beliefs and values that anchor these communities both passively and actively propagate notions of misogyny, domination, othering of women and marginalization networked with notions of hypergamy, anti-feminism and perceptions of female-centric power structures as inflated, unjust, undeserved and male-exclusionary. A foundational component of incels' identities is that they perceive themselves as enduringly and structurally subordinated by HM to the degree that their only option is to wholly reject the pursuit of such ideologies since they perceive all aspects of HM (including complicit support) as unattainable. Thus, incel identities, while conforming to incel ideology are inherently *juxtaposed*. Paradoxically, these polar positions of support and rejection become interlinked to promote upholding a masculine hegemony. This unique conception of incel-culture has immediate theoretical applications. Applications illustrate some novel amplifications of the HM theoretical model when applied to unique cultural groups. To clarify, incels perform some components of Connell's foundational descriptions of HM; subordination of women and indeed delegitimisation of other forms of masculinity, while actively distancing from HM through the praxis of overt statements of nonconformance and rejection. These discoveries lend support to some positions in established research, highlighting the complexities of utilizing HM as a framework of analysis in incel communities (Halpin et al. 2022; Menzie 2022; Thorburn, Powell, and Chambers 2023; Witt 2020).

Once incels undergo identity reconfigurations from incel to ex-incel, ex-incel identities remain, on the surface, fundamentally inverse to complete *hegemonic masculinity subscription*; both self-identifying and operating in explicit rejection against "traditional" societal masculine notions. Ex-incels enduringly perceive themselves as operating outside of, and indeed, as unable to operate in congruence with, "traditional" notions of masculine practice. Ex-incels continue transitioning away from incel-dominant cultural thinking, developing an *ex-incel identity*, and rejecting fundamental ideological components of past sense-making. Participants strived to engage more with society, accept a process of positive change, and challenge *hyperised* forms of negative masculinities, which propagate that feelings of worthlessness and social subornation are fundamentally the fault of women. While engaging in this process, notions of masculinities begin to shift. Predominantly, this change represents a renewed focus on societal integration, attempts to "better oneself" and reengagements with social competitiveness and active pursuit of romantic relationships. However, in tandem with these "growth" occurrences, participants partially subscribed to some of the tenets of HM they had previously rejected as *unatainable*. They recognized that to "grow out" of incel cultural thinking, some level of HM-congruent subscription or complicit support is required. The manosphere more broadly conceptualizes men as sexual entrepreneurs competing for the finite resource of women's attention (Ging 2019; Smith 2023). Thus, when men who have previously codified women's sexual interest as masculinity reassurance reject a beta male identity, it can be through adopting the same neoliberal positioning that they previously felt subordinated by. Hence, **Participants 5 and 8** saw the relative optimism of the red pill as a stepping stone from the nihilism of the black pill.

Situating these findings in the context of existing research is challenging, given the novelty of discoveries in this work and their implications over *men and masculinities* theorizing. Notably, Lucy's (2024) important work exploring slippages in the use of HM is pertinent here. As discussed in the introduction of this work, *slippages* in applications of HM are not a recent phenomenon, having been identified in numerous interdisciplinary works since the early 1990s (for an overview, see Adams 2019). We have taken care within our analysis to prevent conflations of Connell's HM theory by avoiding mistakenly aligning dominant or "perceived-as-negative" social or ideological practices as either inherently *masculine* or networked to Connell's depiction of HM, without sufficient proof of these cultural attitudes exerting subordination or domination over women and "perceived-lesser-masculine-males." Validating this perspective within the research is critical and we believe it was achieved. This presents a novel amplification of Connell's theory. Men perceiving themselves as belonging to a subordinated and dominated tier of masculine identity rejecting HM, but also performing praxis that could also be typed as HM per Connell's descriptors; exuding subordination over women and other "marginalised males" as well as unsuccessful attempts to subordinate "hegemonic males" by mechanisms of delegitimisation and othering of these performances of identity as contextually "invalid."

Some aspects of the findings align with Daly and Reed (2022) and O'Donnell and Shor (2022), who emphasize shared perceptions of frustration and alienation within incel communities. Our uncovered narratives of loneliness, rejection, and dissatisfaction with traditional social norms resonate with participant experiences uncovered in these studies. However, this research extends such perspectives by highlighting how radicalization and *defensive pessimism* function as reactive coping mechanisms, solidifying and upholding a collective incel identity that paradoxically rejects, at times aligns with, and also subverts traditional *hegemonic masculinity*. Linking with scholarship from Byerly (2020), Kelly and Aunspach (2020), Lopes (2023) and others, our study highlights, as others have, that incel communities perpetuate misogynistic beliefs, often attributing romantic failures to perceptions of societal structures and women-centric social processes triggering inversion of "natural" notions of male privilege. Incels delegitimise such progress as antithetical to the realities of society and human nature more broadly. Integrations of misogyny, hypergamy, and anti-feminism into incel ideology underscore their communities' complex relationship with HM. Most crucially, incels simultaneously reject and replicate aspects of HM, seeing themselves as both subordinate and oppositional to revered hyperised masculine praxis and hybridizing rejection and collaboration within their narratives. However, clarifying some positions put forward by the above studies, incel-cultural identity operates at a unique juxtaposition where rejection for HM is prioritized as an overt construct, and support for HM occurs in subversive ways.

Processes of incel identity reformation uncovered within this research partially support findings by Brown (2023) and Maier (2022), as well as Bridges (2014) work evidencing the complexities of masculine performances and how efforts to seemingly reject or perform alternative masculinities to HM can reinforce HM in subtle ways. Like Hintz and Baker's (2021) analysis of an ex-incel forum, some appeared to naturalize the state of being involuntarily celibate as well as some of the avenues out of it. This was best exemplified by **Participants 3 and 10** reaffirming their distance from the incel tropes that would otherwise doom them, e.g., being overweight, nerdy, or having poor hygiene. However, sexual activity was not necessarily the catalyst for undoing inceldom, since eight of the participants were still virgins at the time of their interview. Instead, participants emphasized the importance of a growth mind-set and a belief in their own autonomy as avenues out of incel despair. The notion that ex-incels begin to partially subscribe to *hegemonic masculinity* while seeking societal integration and personal betterment adds depth to existing understandings of masculinity negotiation, with acceptance and subscription, or more accurately, "rejection of rejection regarding HM" intensifying as incels question and dismiss previously concrete subscription to foundational incel ideas and ideologies in their transition to ex-incels. Brown's (2023) critique of media portrayals and Maier's (2022) analysis of bias in incel research are also relevant in contextualizing this study's findings. By centering the voices of ex-incels, this research addresses the gaps they identified, providing a more nuanced, person-led perspective and providing evidence-led justifications for understanding incel-linked radicalizations and spotlighting pathways by which incels left incel communities and reformulated their identities.

Perhaps most salient is the linkages between our findings and that of Halpin's (2022). Returning to Halpin's theory of *weaponised subordination* offers an interesting lens for conceptualizing the nature of active incel masculinities within this research. Although ex-incels in our study viewed themselves as marginalized by HM, they paradoxically and increasingly begin to reinforce the same gender hierarchies that they highlighted previously excluded them. Our analysis reveals that while ex-incels distance themselves from the unreachable standards of HM, seen to be frequently exemplified by the "Chad" archetype's links with HM praxis, they still engage in subversive behaviors that align with Halpin's descriptions of hybridized masculinity. Through at times participating in marginalization and antifeminist rhetoric, ex-incels enduringly perpetuate some patriarchal norms, asserting dominance over women and other marginalized men, thereby replicating the same structures of subordination found in HM, but via different patterns of support to their former incel identities. Findings support Halpin's contention that marginalized male identities can weaponize their own subordination to uphold, as opposed to deconstruct, gender hierarchies. The shift from incel to ex-incel marks a novel formulation of hybrid masculinity, where former incels reconfigure identities yet remain enduringly influenced by aspects of HM. They pivot their relationship to HM to alter personal sense-making, yet HM now constructs has direct vs indirect influence over their ideological thinking. Even as ex-incels distance themselves from incel beliefs, they reveal hierarchical views that resonate with Halpin's framework, illustrating how HM's core structures continue to shape even those masculinities that exist on the fringes. This locates ex-incels, and their transformation, within a broader context of how hybrid masculinities adapt while sustaining unequal gender relations. Figure 1 (below) represents a *hybridised ex-incel masculinities* network diagram summarizing the discussion of findings, with all aspects of process labeled for tractability and highlighting the enduring role of HM in shaping both incel and ex-incel identities via different pathways.

Conclusion

This research bolsters the current discourse on incels and masculinities, providing a detailed examination of how incels engage a journey to become ex-incels by navigating shifting identities within and against perceived notions and expectations of "traditional masculinity" (including dominant not non-hegemonic forms) and *hegemonic masculinity*. Findings reveal complex relationships between evolving and hybrid identities and HM, spotlighting ex-incel experiences and identity reformations uncommon in other research. We have centered the
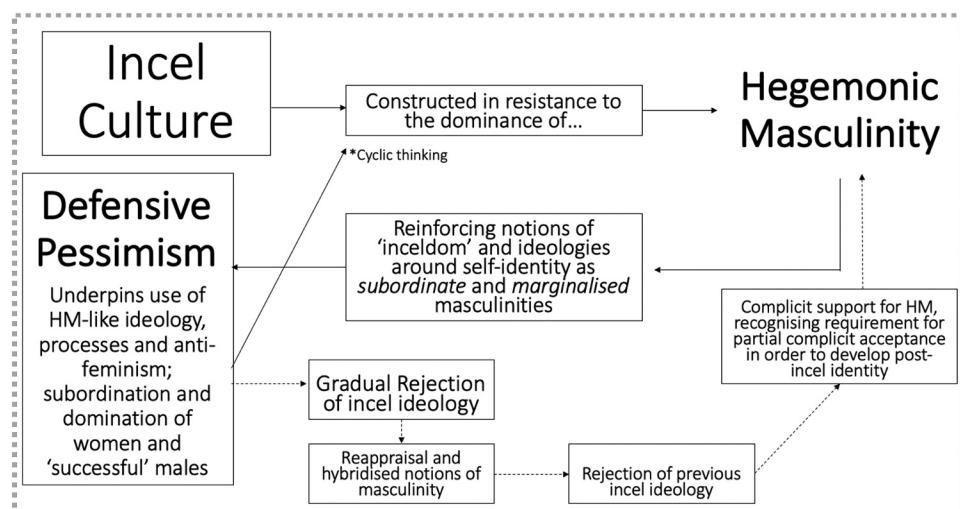

Figure 1. *Hybridised ex-incel masculinities* network diagram.

voices of ex-incel community members to enhance our discoveries' authenticity and legitimization. The emergence of hybrid masculinities among ex-incels blends rigid ideals with more flexible identities, bringing together purported juxtaposed notions of masculinities into unique, blended constructs that react to and incorporate influence from *hegemonic masculinity* as a core structuring principle.

Incel communities appear to be underpinned by defensive pessimism-like thinking, motifs of radicalization toward anti-feminine thinking and sense-making regarding mental health, loneliness and isolation. Defensive-pessimism represents a coping mechanism executed as a form of functional social cohesion. Incels are connected by collective sense-making propagated by sharing of similar experiences, motifs and ideological supports. Despite this, fragmentation in ideological thinking appears common. Notably, this occurs when the echo-chamber effect of negativity within incel forums becomes concentrated, with some members withdrawing due to this and seeking personal growth, and departing, leaving only the most "hardcore" members present. This process further consolidates the echo-chamber effect and its intensity for remaining members. Over time, identity reappraisal within communities appears common, and participants begin to "question" and "reject" foundational components of incel ideology. This represents rejections of notions of helplessness, inevitability and self-defeat, with incel mind-sets reorienting toward self-actualization and desire for growth. Paradoxical to this, however, these processes also appear to weaken participants' rejections toward HM, with some ex-incels developing new identity sense-making and trending toward more complicit support of HM, as opposed to complete rejection. This appeared to suggest that recognizing and embracing HM is – at least partially – required to "leave" inceldom and to engage in pro-social growth and personal development. Changes in identity reflect a journey from strict adherence to incel ideologies and resistance toward masculine praxis, and seemingly legitimizing components of HM, to partial acceptance and recognition of Connell's notions of a hegemonic masculine hierarchy. Ex-incels embrace the development of nuanced and complex new masculinities while performing some behaviors supporting HM's dominance.

Future research

Future research should focus on longitudinally tracking the progression of individuals from incel to ex-incel status to understand the long-term effects of rejecting and reproducing hegemonic traits. Examining how race, class, sexuality, and other social categories intersect with incel identities will provide a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics. Comparing incels with other marginalized masculine groups can identify commonalities and differences in how they navigate their relationship with HM frameworks.

Research limitations

This research offers valuable insights into ex-incels and novel amplifications of *hegemonic masculinity* theory. However, we also acknowledge some limitations. Findings are partially limited by the small sample size and reliance on self-reported participant data, which may introduce hindsight bias. The focus on former incels who have successfully left the community also excludes those who remain. Despite possible limitations, findings highlight the importance of further empirical validation and broader, more diverse research focussed on ex-incel community members. Future research should make use of the qualitative approach in this study to generate first-hand empirical data that centers former incels voices as a valid mechanism of understanding adherence toward incel ideology and how masculinities under incel-culture shift and change over time. Findings contribute to the wider body of literature examining hybrid masculinities in incel and ex-incel communities, yet grow these perspectives with rich first-hand perspectives afforded by the qualitative approach to investigation.

Statement on linked publications

A subset of this dataset has been previously linked to one publication (Smith, Butler-Warke, and Stevens 2024, in references). The subject matter of this publication differs from the first, exploring perspectives on masculinities and changed identity and theoretical implications of findings upon gender theorizing.

Notes

1. There exist cultures of female-identifying individuals who consider themselves "incels." For example, cultures in online spaces identifying as "Femcels:" communities that articulate female-centered perspectives on "involuntary celibacy" reactive to the male-domination of "incel" cultural narratives online. However, most incel spaces are gender-segregated (Evans and Lankford 2024; Kay 2021).
2. Female hypergamy is used to explain perceived trends in contemporary dating, suggesting that women prefer partners of higher status (i.e. class, financial, social and intellectual capital). Critics highlight that this view oversimplifies gender dynamics, misinterprets individual behaviors, and fosters harmful stereotypes.
3. Elliot Rodger, a former college student of English-American descent, committed the 2014 Isla Vista massacre. On May 23, 2014, in proximity to the University of California, Santa Barbara. Rodger killed six people and injured fourteen other. After murdering two victims, Rodger uploaded a video claiming his motivations were to "punish" women for their lack of romantic and sexual interest in him and other men.
4. In incel forums, "red pill" thinking or "taking the red pill" represents an awakening to perceived harsh realities about dating and societal biases against men, alleged to underpin emphasis on traditional gender roles and self-improvement. Conversely, the "black pill" ideology takes this into a fatalistic perspective, suggesting immutable factors like physical appearance and socioeconomic status directly shape male dating success, generating a sense of inevitability and hopelessness since these factors cannot be countered through self-development. Both ideologies have been criticized for fostering defeatist thinking among men.
5. The notion that some men operate performances of identity inverse to "Alpha" i.e. acting in ways perceived as mild-mannered, unconfident, submissive and "weak" in the presence of so-called "Alpha" men. Conversely Alpha's are perceived to be strong, confident, successful and leaders; in charge of other men. It should be noted that the use of the term "beta masculinity" refers to a singular construct: *masculinity* not *masculinities*, thus ignoring the multiplus nature of complicit and subordinate and marginalized masculinities Connell describes as non-conforming to HM. Thus, this thinking may itself be reductive toward understanding the multiplus nature of identities typed "beta masculinity."
6. The incel philosophy of LDAR stands for "Lie Down and Rot." LDAR represents a pessimistic mind-set embraced by some in the incel community, suggesting that those who perceive themselves hopelessly unattractive or incapable of forming romantic relationships should end efforts to try and better their circumstances. Instead, they believe they should accept their perceived fate and passively let life pass them by, withdrawing from social interactions, activities and self-improvement efforts. This philosophy reflects a profound sense of despair and resignation within the incel community (see Price and Pratten 2021).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research received no funding to declare.

Notes on contributors

Nicholas Norman Adams is a Chartered Psychologist; a member and Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society and a Science Council Registered Scientist. His academic interests are interdisciplinary and draw from applied psychology, sociology and poststructural feminist theory, predominantly studying *men and masculinities*, men's mental health, and safe and risk behaviours. He is interested in pathways towards positive human growth. He is a Permanent Research Fellow at Robert Gordon University.

David S. Smith is a Chartered Psychologist; a member and Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society, and a lecturer in psychology at Robert Gordon University. His research interests include the manosphere, human sexuality, culture war discourses, political identities and online communications.

ORCID

Nicholas Norman Adams ⬚ http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1999-1134
David S. Smith ⬚ http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8997-575X

Ethics approval statement

Institutional ethical approval was sought and secured from the School of Applied Social Studies, Robert Gordon University, Reference: 212202.

Data availability statement

Data unavailable; confidentiality preserved for participants.

References

Abrams, L. S. 2010. "Sampling 'Hard to reach' Populations in Qualitative Research: The Case of Incarcerated Youth." *Qualitative Social Work* 9(4):536–50. doi: 10.1177/1473325010367821.

Adams, N. N. 2019. "A Case for Multiple Dominant Cultures of Masculinity: Exploring the Link Between oilmen's Masculinities, and Safety and Risk-Taking Practices on a Remote North Sea Oilfield Drilling Platform." Doctoral dissertation, University of Aberdeen.

Adams, N. N. 2022. "Examining oilmen's Notions of 'Fatherhood masculinity' as a Pathway to Understand Increased Offshore Oilfield Safety Behaviours." *Safety Science* 145:105501. doi: 10.1016/j.ssci.2021.105501.

Adams, N. N. 2023a. "Four Distinct Cultures of Oilfield Masculinity, but Absent Hegemonic Masculinity: Some Multiple Masculinities Perspectives from a Remote UK Offshore Drilling Platform." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 52 (3):344–78. doi: 10.1177/08912416221116658.

Adams, N. N. 2023b. "A Triad of Physical Masculinities: Examining Multiple 'Hegemonic' Bodybuilding Identities in Anabolic-Androgenic Steroid (AAS) Online Discussion Groups." *Deviant Behavior* 44(10):1498–516. doi: 10.1080/01639625.2023.2211209.

Adams, N. N. 2023c. "Defensive Pessimism-Like Thinking in Practice: The (Dys) Functional Strategy for Coping with Risk Uncertainty in the Offshore Oilfield?" *Journal of Risk Research* 26(5):547–62. doi: 10.1080/13669877.2023.2187433.

Andersen, J. C. 2023. "The Symbolic Boundary Work of Incels: Subcultural Negotiation of Meaning and Identity Online." *Deviant Behavior* 44(7):1081–101. doi: 10.1080/01639625.2022.2142864.

Baele, S., L. Brace, and D. Ging. 2024. "A Diachronic Cross-Platforms Analysis of Violent Extremist Language in the Incel Online Ecosystem." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 36(3):382–405. doi: 10.1080/09546553.2022.2161373.

Beasley, C. 2008. "Rethinking Hegemonic Masculinity in a Globalizing World." *Men and Masculinities* 11(1):86–103. doi: 10.1177/1097184X08315102.

Blake, K. R. and R. C. Brooks. 2023. "Societies Should Not Ignore Their Incel Problem." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 27 (2):111–13. doi: 10.1016/j.tics.2022.11.007.

Bratich, J. and S. Banet-Weiser. 2019. "From Pick-Up Artists to Incels: Con (Fidence) Games, Networked Misogyny, and the Failure of Neoliberalism." *International Journal of Communication* 13:25.

Braun, V. and V. Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2):77–101.

Braun, V., V. Clarke, and P. Weate. 2016. "Using Thematic Analysis in Sport and Exercise Research." Pp. 213–27 in *Routledge Handbook of Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise*, edited by Brett Smith and Sparkes Andrew. London: Routledge.

Bridges, T. 2014. "A Very 'Gay' Straight? Hybrid Masculinities, Sexual Aesthetics, and the Changing Relationship Between Masculinity and Homophobia." *Gender & Society* 28(1):58–82. doi: 10.1177/0891243213503901.

Bridges, T. and K. Ota. 2019. "Sprinkle Some Gay on My Straight": Hybrid Hegemonic Masculinities in a Post-Gay Era." Pp. 274–85 in *Routledge International Handbook of Heterosexualities Studies*, London: Routledge.

Bridges, T. and C. J. Pascoe. 2014. "Hybrid Masculinities: New Directions in the Sociology of Men and Masculinities." *Sociology Compass* 8(3):246–58. doi: 10.1111/soc4.12134.

Brooks, R. C., D. Russo-Batterham, and K. R. Blake. 2022. "Incel Activity on Social Media Linked to Local Mating Ecology." *Psychological Science* 33(2):249–58. doi: 10.1177/09567976211036065.

Brown, C. 2023. "*(Mis) Perceptions of Gender-Based Violence: The Framing of Incels in News Media.*" (Doctoral dissertation, Université d'Ottawa/University of Ottawa)

Byerly, C. M. 2020. "Incels Online Reframing Sexual Violence." *Communication Review* 23(4):290–308. doi: 10.1080/10714421.2020.1829305.

Cantor, N. and J. K. Norem. 1989. "Defensive Pessimism and Stress and Coping." *Social Cognition* 7(2):92–112. doi: 10.1521/soco.1989.7.2.92.

Carian, E. K., A. DiBranco, and M. Kelly. 2024. "Intervening in Problematic Research Approaches to Incel Violence." *Men and Masculinities* 27(5):533–42.

Ciocca, G., J. Martinelli, E. Limoncin, A. Sansone, E. A. Jannini, and L. Fontanesi. 2022. "Psychopathology of Incel (Involuntary Celibate): The Predictive Role of Depression, Paranoia, and Fearful Attachment Style." *The Journal of Sexual Medicine* 19(Supplement_4):S112–13. doi: 10.1016/j.jsxm.2022.10.100.

Connell, R. W. 2005. *Masculinities.* 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Connell, R. W. 2020. *Masculinities.* 2020th ed. London: Routledge.

Connell, R. W. and J. W. Messerschmidt. 2005. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender & Society* 19 (6):829–59. doi: 10.1177/0891243205278639.

Costello, W., V. Rolon, A. G. Thomas, and D. Schmitt. 2022. "Levels of Well-Being Among Men Who are Incel (Involuntarily Celibate)." *Evolutionary Psychological Science* 8(4):375–90. doi: 10.1007/s40806-022-00336-x.

Costello, W., V. Rolon, A. G. Thomas, and D. P. Schmitt. 2024. "The Mating Psychology of Incels (Involuntary Celibates): Misfortunes, Misperceptions, and Misrepresentations." *Journal of Sex Research* 1–12.

Daly, S. E. and A. Laskovtsov. 2021. "Goodbye, My Friendcels: An Analysis of Incel Suicide Posts." *Journal of Qualitative Criminal Justice and Criminology* 11(1):1–33. doi: 10.21428/88de04a1.b7b8b295.

Daly, S. E. and S. M. Reed. 2022. "'I Think Most of Society Hates Us': A Qualitative Thematic Analysis of Interviews with Incels." *Sex Roles* 86(1–2):14–33. doi: 10.1007/s11199-021-01250-5.

DeCook, J. R. and M. Kelly. 2023. "Interrogating the 'Incel Menace': Assessing the Threat of Male Supremacy in Terrorism Studies." Pp. 206–26 in *Gender and the Governance of Terrorism and Violent Extremism.* London: Routledge.

Evans, H. R. and A. Lankford. 2024. "Femcel Discussions of Sex, Frustration, Power, and Revenge." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 53(3):917–30. doi: 10.1007/s10508-023-02796-z.

Fontanesi, L., D. Marchetti, G. Cosi, E. Limoncin, E. A. Jannini, M. C. Verrocchio, G. Ciocca, and X. Liu. 2024. "What Does it Take to Make an Incel: The Role of Paranoid Thinking, Depression, Anxiety, and Attachment Patterns." *Depression and Anxiety* 2024(1):5512878. doi: 10.1155/2024/5512878.

Fowler, K. 2022. "From Chads to Blackpills, a Discursive Analysis of the incel's Gendered Spectrum of Political Agency." *Deviant Behavior* 43(11):1406–19.

Furl, K. 2022. "Denigrating Women, Venerating 'Chad': Ingroup and Outgroup Evaluations Among Male Supremacists on Reddit." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 85(3):279–99. doi: 10.1177/01902725221090907.

Gheorghe, R. M. 2024. "'Just Be White (JBW)': Incels, Race and the Violence of Whiteness." *Affilia* 39(1):59–77. doi: 10.1177/08861099221144275.

Gill, P., C. Clemmow, F. Hetzel, B. Rottweiler, N. Salman, I. Van Der Vegt, and E. Corner. 2021. "Systematic Review of Mental Health Problems and Violent Extremism." *Violent Extremism* 24–51.

Ging, D. 2019. "Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere." *Men and Masculinities* 22 (4):638–57. doi: 10.1177/1097184X17706401.

Glace, A. M., T. L. Dover, and J. G. Zatkin. 2021. "Taking the Black Pill: An Empirical Analysis of the 'Incel'." *Psychology of Men & Masculinities* 22(2):288. doi: 10.1037/men0000328.

Gramsci, A. 2011. *Prison Notebooks.* US: Columbia University Press.

Halpin, M. 2022. "Weaponized Subordination: How Incels Discredit Themselves to Degrade Women." *Gender & Society* 36(6):813–37. doi: 10.1177/08912432221128545.

Halpin, M., K. Preston, D. Lockyer, and F. Maguire. 2022. "A Solider and a Victim: Masculinity, Violence, and Incels Celebration of Marc Lépine." https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/cseun

Halpin, M., K. Preston, D. Lockyer, and F. Maguire. 2022. *A Solider and a Victim: Masculinity, Violence, and Incels Celebration of Marc Lépine.*

Hart, G. and A. R. Huber. 2023. "Five Things We Need to Learn About Incel Extremism: Issues, Challenges and Avenues for Fresh Research." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* :1–17. doi: 10.1080/1057610X.2023.2195067.

Hennink, M. and B. N. Kaiser. 2022. "Sample Sizes for Saturation in Qualitative Research: A Systematic Review of Empirical Tests." *Social Science & Medicine* 292:114523. doi: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114523.

Hintz, E. A. and J. T. Baker. 2021. "A Performative Face Theory Analysis of Online Facework by the Formerly Involuntarily Celibate." *International Journal of Communication* 15:3047–3066.1932–8036/20210005.

Jaki, S., T. De Smedt, M. Gwóźdź, R. Panchal, A. Rossa, and G. De Pauw. 2019. "Online Hatred of women<? br? > in the Incels. Me Forum: Linguistic Analysis and Automatic Detection." *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict* 7(2):240–68.

Jensen, K. E. 2024. "Cultural Categorizations of Men in a Notorious Online Community." Pp. 355–82 in *The Handbook of Cultural Linguistics*. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.

Johanssen, J. 2021. *Fantasy, Online Misogyny and the Manosphere: Male Bodies of Dis/Inhibition*. London: Routledge.

Kalish, R. and M. Kimmel. 2010. "Suicide by Mass Murder: Masculinity, Aggrieved Entitlement, and Rampage School Shootings." *Health Sociology Review* 19(4):451–64.

Kay, J. B. 2021. "Abject Desires in the Age of Anger: Incels, Femcels and the Gender Politics of Unfuckability." Pp. 29–46 in *Imagining"we" in the Age Of"i"*. London: Routledge.

Kelly, C. R. and C. Aunspach. 2020. "Incels, compulsory sexuality, and fascist masculinity." *Feminist Formations* 32 (3):145–72. doi: 10.1353/ff.2020.0044.

Kimmel, M. 2017. *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era*. London, UK: Hachette UK.

Krumm, S., C. Checchia, M. Koesters, R. Kilian, and T. Becker. 2017. "Men's Views on Depression: A Systematic Review and Metasynthesis of Qualitative Research." *Psychopathology* 50(2):107–24. doi: 10.1159/000455256query.

Leidig, E. 2021. *The Radical Right During Crisis*. BoD–Books on Demand.

Lindsay, A. 2022. "Swallowing the Black Pill: Involuntary Celibates' (Incels) Anti Feminism within Digital Society." *International Journal for Crime, Justice & Social Democracy* 11(1):210–24. doi: 10.5204/ijcjsd.2138.

Lopes, F. M. 2023. "What Do Incels Want? Explaining Incel Violence Using Beauvoirian Otherness." *Hypatia* 38 (1):134–56. doi: 10.1017/hyp.2023.3.

Lucy, S. 2024. "Slippages in the Application of Hegemonic Masculinity: A Case Study of Incels." *Men and Masculinities* 27(2):127–48. doi: 10.1177/1097184X241240415.

Maier, G. H. 2022. "*Attitudes Towards Incels-A Meta Study on Negatives Attitudes in Research*." (Master's thesis, University of South-Eastern Norway)

Maryn, A., J. Keough, C. McConnell, and D. Exner-Cortens. 2024. "Identifying Pathways to the Incel Community and Where to Intervene: A Qualitative Study with Former Incels." *Sex Roles* 90(7):910–22. doi: 10.1007/s11199-024-01478-x.

Maxwell, D., S. R. Robinson, J. R. Williams, and C. Keaton. 2020. "'A Short Story of a Lonely Guy': A Qualitative Thematic Analysis of Involuntary Celibacy Using Reddit." *Sexuality & Culture* 24(6):1852–74. doi: 10.1007/s12119-020-09724-6.

Menzie, L. 2022. "Stacys, Beckys, and Chads: The Construction of Femininity and Hegemonic Masculinity within Incel Rhetoric." Pp. 69–85 in *Critical Femininities*. London: Routledge.

Messerschmidt, J. W. 2019. "The Salience of 'Hegemonic Masculinity'." *Men and Masculinities* 22(1):85–91. doi: 10.1177/1097184X18805555.

Moskalenko, S., J. F. G. González, N. Kates, and J. Morton. 2022. "Incel Ideology, Radicalization and Mental Health: A Survey Study." *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare* 4(3):1–29. doi: 10.21810/jicw.v4i3.3817.

O'Donnell, C. and E. Shor. 2022. "'This is a Political Movement, Friend': Why 'Incels' Support Violence." *The British Journal of Sociology* 73(2):336–51. doi: 10.1111/1468-4446.12923.

Price, H. and E. Pratten. 2021. "Lay Down and Rot: Incels and Lost Futures." *Alluvium: 21st-Century Writing, 21st-Century Approaches* 9(3). doi: 10.7766/alluvium.v9.3.08.

Scaptura, M. N. and K. M. Boyle. 2020. "Masculinity threat,"incel" Traits, and Violent Fantasies Among Heterosexual Men in the United States." *Feminist Criminology* 15(3):278–98. doi: 10.1177/1557085119896415.

Scheuerman, J. 2021. "The Anatomy of Inceldom: An Analysis of Incels Through the Lens of Gender." *Themis: Research Journal of Justice Studies and Forensic Science* 9(1):3. doi: 10.31979/THEMIS.2021.0903.

Schlaerth, C. A., A. Puhrmann, E. Bossard, and R. Setting. 2024. "Subcultural Hierarchy and Policing Amongst Incels in Online Forums." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 20(2):6–28. doi: 10.18778/1733-8077.20.2.01.

Smith, D. S. 2023. "Members in Good Standing? The Relationship Between NoFap/Reboot Communities and the Manosphere." *International Journal of Communication* 18:14.

Smith, D. S., A. Butler-Warke, and G. Stevens. 2024. ""Even Though I'm Not an Incel, I'm Still an Involuntary Celibate": A Journey in and Out of Inceldom." *Communication Review* :1–25. doi: 10.1080/10714421.2024.2383814.

Sparks, B., A. M. Zidenberg, and M. E. Olver. 2024. "An Exploratory Study of incels' Dating App Experiences, Mental Health, and Relational Well-Being." *Journal of Sex Research* 61(7):1001–12. doi: 10.1080/00224499.2023.2249775.

Speckhard, A. and M. Ellenberg. 2022. "Self-Reported Psychiatric Disorder and Perceived Psychological Symptom Rates Among Involuntary Celibates (Incels) and Their Perceptions of Mental Health Treatment." *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* :1–18. doi: 10.1080/19434472.2022.2029933.

Stijelja, S. and B. L. Mishara. 2023. "Psychosocial Characteristics of Involuntary Celibates (Incels): A Review of Empirical Research and Assessment of the Potential Implications of Research on Adult Virginity and Late Sexual Onset." *Sexuality & Culture* 27(2):715–34. doi: 10.1007/s12119-022-10031-5.

Thorburn, J., A. Powell, and P. Chambers. 2023. "A World Alone: Masculinities, Humiliation and Aggrieved Entitlement on an Incel Forum." *The British Journal of Criminology* 63(1):238–54. doi: 10.1093/bjc/azac020.

Valkonen, J. and V. Hänninen. 2013. "Narratives of Masculinity and Depression." *Men and Masculinities* 16(2):160–80. doi: 10.1177/1097184X12464377.

Vallerga, M. and E. L. Zurbriggen. 2022. "Hegemonic Masculinities in the 'Manosphere': A Thematic Analysis of Beliefs About Men and Women on the Red Pill and Incel." *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 22(2):602–25. doi: 10.1111/asap.12308.

Whittaker, J., W. Costello, and A. G. Thomas. 2024. "Independent Report Predicting Harm Among Incels (Involuntary Celibates): The Roles of Mental Health, Ideological Belief and Social Networking." *Commission for Countering Extremism.*

Witt, T. 2020. "'If I Cannot Have It, I Will Do Everything I Can to Destroy It.' the Canonization of Elliot Rodger: 'Incel' Masculinities, Secular Sainthood, and Justifications of Ideological Violence." *Social Identities* 26(5):675–89. doi: 10. 1080/13504630.2020.1787132.

Zhou, Z. B. 2022. "Compulsory Interracial Intimacy: Why Does Removing the Ethnicity Filter on Dating Apps Not Benefit Racial Minorities?" *Media Culture & Society* 44(5):1034–43. doi: 10.1177/01634437221104712.

Appendix

Table A1. *Hybrid Masculinities* oscillating between juxtaposed rejections and complicit subscription to HM.

Participant Number	Evidencing a changed mind-set, linking with acknowledging HM; now positioning masculine relations in tandem with recognizing this. Codes: shift in thinking, rejection of inceldom and ideology, leaving-behind, growth-mind-set	Trending toward complicit support for HM (since leaving inceldom) Codes: Distancing, competition, integrating into masculine hierarchy, suggested domination	Drifting to partial-or-active-complicit HM support but *Juxtaposed* Pro-Codes: Masculine competition, Recognition of hierarchical placement, Domination and subordination. Evidence of identity juxtapositions. Forming Hybrid Resistant-Codes: hybrid masculinities, alternative masculinities, non-traditional-masculinities, rejection of physical masculine traditions.
3	*The red pill is like the step you take before you get to the black pill. The red pill, you're still kind of optimistic, but you just think that you need to be muscular and rich but you have a certain attitude when you're interacting with women in order to attract them. Then the black pill is what you might get when that all fails, and you start thinking that it's really just it's outside of your control. And I did subscribe to both of those a little bit like I thought that what was holding me back was ... Well it's actually difficult to say honestly because I was very insecure about my perceived lack of traditional masculinity I think. Just being really short and small. Not really short honestly – about 172 centimetres. So, that was like the only thing I had where I felt like my masculinity was an issue. But there were also aspects of the black pill, just like the feeling that it was outside my control and that certain people were damned to be losers. It's weird because I developed a mindset that still kind of sticks with me today – that even if I improve my own situation, if I become one of the winners, there's still tons of other users out there. And that contributed to me just feeling helpless, because it was like, well there's nothing I can do – if it's not me it will be somebody else. So why shouldn't it just be me then? that I don't have any control over.*	*The main thing that happened was ... I was thinking a lot about status during this time – and thinking about me being low status. And I guess I went more towards the idea that status is not permanent. I started thinking more like "well I might be a loser now, but I actually can change things." I would say the main thing that I outgrew was the anger. I would say, this would be a hard question for me to answer because the way I understand the world is pretty complicated. So, the shift from identifying as an incel to being past that wasn't a sudden decisive change – it was more a gradual shift so I would say there's still some little residue of the incel ideology in the way that I think. But the other main thing is I feel helpless less often. I feel more optimistic that both I can make things better for myself, and for other people. And that is a really big change. [...] I would still say I haven't been completely great though at avoiding incel content.*	*So I would say the most vocal people that are associated with incels, the most visible ones, like those ones that fit the stereotypes right: they're the ones that, you know, they're living with their mom when they're 32 years old or something like that, they're playing video games 18 hours a day, have anime body pillows and overweight and have terrible body odour. And there's just all these stereotypes associated with them, but I'd say like in some in small measures, that hopelessness and the nihilism and depression spreads to other people that don't associate with that. And it's kind of difficult. Like it's still a phenomena that I think needs to be analysed more because it's a complicated issue that doesn't go away. It goes far beyond just the dynamics of sexual relationships – it has to do with like how the Internet has affected people. It has to do with how maybe things like feminism has affected people's self-image. So, it's a really complicated issue, I think. But my point is that what we call incel ideology is mainly an extreme manifestation of things that are happening in milder forms in a lot people and I think I'm a pretty good example of that because – I'll be frank here. I don't think my looks are a problem really. I don't look very masculine – my body isn't that masculine but I actually . . . I mean, I was able to have girls interested me, but I just would behave stupidly and have them end in bad ways when I would try to form relationships. And like pretty much anybody . . . I think a lot of people that know me would never guess this thing about me because I don't really fit the stereotype. So, I also . . . I'm a musician and I've been really successful, and a lot of people consider me to be a really talented musician who was in bands – which is almost like the exact opposite. Like the stereotype is that those guys get all the girls and that actually maybe contributed to me a little bit being more angry, because I'm a guitar player, I played, and all these bands and great musician – like I thought it was supposed to be easy for me, but I was lied to. I'm still an incel, even though I have all these things that are supposed to get all the girls excited for me. So yeah, I'm an example of somebody that just . . . And I don't play video games, I've never watched anime or anything like that. I'm just like ... My main hobbies are playing music and reading philosophy or things like that, so I just don't fit the stereotype at all.*

(Continued)

Table A1. (Continued).

Participant Number	Evidencing a changed mind-set, linking with acknowledging HM; now positioning masculine relations in tandem with recognizing this. Codes: shift in thinking, rejection of inceldom and ideology, leaving-behind, growth-mind-set	Trending toward complicit support for HM (since leaving inceldom) Codes: Distancing, competition, integrating into masculine hierarchy, suggested domination (marginalized men or women). Forming Hybrid Masculinities.	Drifting to partial-or-active-complicit HM support but *Juxtaposed* Pro-Codes: Masculine competition, Recognition of hierarchical placement. Domination and subordination. Evidence of identity juxtapositions. Resistant-Codes: hybrid masculinities, alternative masculinities, non-traditional-masculinities, rejection of physical masculine traditions.
5	*[Leaving] was definitely gradual. Over time I realised I'm really not getting anything out of this – so less and less I would browse. Occasionally, on your darkest days you would just look it up – I have no idea why. But it was definitely a gradual process. For me, it's probably the opposite of what you normally hear ... Like generally you'll hear like, I think we just talked about this, how people first get red pilled and then they get black pilled right? Generally. For me it was kind of like the opposite – first you know you get black pilled. And then I got introduced to the red pill, and that's when I became like very serious about working out, improving my financial net worth, being more social, putting myself out there and making more connections networking. Taking risks. Putting myself in situations that made me uncomfortable. [...] you know, get out, get off your computer, go outside ...* "There were things I did agree with, like I do think it's very important as a man, and not just as a man, - but everyone should be working out, exercising, being ambitious, reaching goals."	*I definitely take a lot more responsibility – like the situation I was in is my responsibility to do something about it. And the way the world works, or the way I perceive the world works, is those who take the risks, have courage, are the ones that are going to make an impact. Or even if just you just want to improve your life right you're gonna have to do something that you weren't doing before and. I still think that the world is cruel, in the sense that it's not fair. But I don't think that, like the unfairness should stop you from doing what you want to do.* *[...]* *I don't have any contact with anyone [in incel communities now]. However, I do ... If I do see ... Like during these Covid lockdowns, if I ever saw like any younger male and I could kind of tell that they were going through what I was going through – that sort of dry spell or whatever. I would definitely try to help them out in some ways: encouraging them to, you know, go to a mall go start talking to women. You can't just like you know mope around and expect women to come to you because I feel like ... And I'm not trying to sound sexist. But I feel like as a man you have to kind of move – like you're the one that has to create that forward momentum for progress. You're the one that has to approach, you have to escalate or ... You have to obviously develop a friendship, but you're the one that has to escalate it to the next level right. The onus is on you right, and that's just the way our society is set up.*	*I'll be honest with you, if you were to see me in real life, you would never associate me, or even think that I would be ever associated, with them because I'm pretty tall, I'm muscular, I don't think I'm too bad looking. I was just very fixated on my hair loss. So I guess male like pattern balding. And I guess that one sort of feature made me think that I was screwed, I was doomed. Right going into those forums didn't help at all, because they are all about like finding you what you're insecure about and then blowing it up to you know proportions that are really not realistic.* *[...]* *I've never even been on any NoFap forum in years but ... I still do it [NoFap] because I like the way I feel – like I have this sort of like aggressive edge in the gym right, or in any sport that I play. At the same time, I feel like I'm less socially shy so I'm a lot more willing to stand up for myself and if I see an attractive woman, I feel much more motivated to talk to her had I been not on it ... I didn't know NoFap was considered part of the manosphere because I thought women were also capable of being part of it.*

Table A1. (Continued).

Participant Number	Evidencing a changed mind-set, linking with acknowledging HM; now positioning masculine relations in tandem with recognizing this. Codes: shift in thinking, rejection of inceldom and ideology, leaving-behind, growth-mind-set	Trending toward complicit support for HM (since leaving inceldom) Pro-Codes: Masculine competition, integrating into masculine hierarchy, suggested domination (marginalized men or women). Forming Hybrid Masculinities.	Drifting to partial-or-active-complicit HM support but *Juxtaposed* Pro-Codes: Masculine competition, Recognition of hierarchical placement, Domination and subordination. Evidence of identity juxtapositions. Resistant-Codes: hybrid masculinities, alternative masculinities, non-traditional-masculinities, rejection of physical masculine traditions.
7	*So the way that I view the world now is more through – especially after overcoming my borderline personality disorder – is everything is a grey area. And in order to understand something you need to understand it as best you can, as fully as you can. So the whole nice guy/bad boy thing, when you look down into it more, it's actually broken attached people tend to correlate highly with broken attached people. And those type of people tend to not want long term mating – so they tend to view more short term mating strategies. And when you look at short term trading strategies, the traits that both men and women want are very different than long term meaning strategies. So women tend to want personality over looks in the long term,*	*There's more to life than just fornication. You know, and the studies even show that older versions male virgins after they've had sex, the first time, tend to be quite depressed and sometimes even suicidal because they've hyped it up to be this amazing thing that solves all their issues and the reality is it doesn't. You know, when I first lost my virginity I thought it would be special, but it was a one night stand. It was a memorable moment, but after that it was like that's it that's I put all this emphasis on this one thing and that's really all it was. [. . .] It was like a fun moment with some release of dopamine, and it happened multiple times – which was great because another thing I did to cope was like well whatever happens, I want to make sure I'm one of the best, even though I [have] never done it. So I researched female anatomy I got myself a sex toy and stuff like that now, if you tell these guys to do these things, they would call you a simp, they would say you're ridiculous you're crazy. But really it's just like practice – and that's what I tell guys. It's literally just you're just practicing – it's like going to the gym. . . .*	*There are guys, the popular guys, they went through a woman a day almost and, in some cases, they're very empty and they're very lonely. Because it's not a meaningful connection, and I think, deep down, everybody in the world, even the psychopath narcissists, they all want meaningful connections.*

(Continued)

Table A1. (Continued).

Participant Number	Evidencing a changed mind-set, linking with acknowledging HM; now positioning masculine relations in tandem with recognizing this. Codes: shift in thinking, rejection of inceldom and ideology, leaving-behind, growth-mind-set	Trending toward complicit support for HM (since leaving inceldom) Codes: Distancing, competition, integrating into masculine hierarchy, suggested domination Masculinities.	Drifting to partial-or-active-complicit HM support but *Juxtaposed* Pro-Codes: Masculine competition, Recognition of hierarchical placement, Domination and subordination. Evidence of identity juxtapositions. (marginalized men or women). Forming Hybrid Resistant-Codes: hybrid masculinities, alternative masculinities, non-traditional-masculinities, rejection of physical masculine traditions.
8	*Before, I felt like men and women are these caricatural figures – very different. I saw things very back and white. Now I can see more nuance. I can see the women have their struggles. Well, even before I felt women struggle. It's hard, I think, because I don't think that the incels affected my view of people in general, just my view of romantic and sexual relationships. It affected my view of myself. I feel more attractive now than before.* *I think incels are a problem but not how people make you believe. I don't have a positive opinion on those attacks because they make our talking points less strong. It makes you less able to be an open incel to people and it has only negative effects on the community, and of course on the victims. So if I wanted to make a comparison, I feel like incels are almost like a political group. If a member of your political group commits a terrorist attacks you are not happy about it because it makes you lose votes at election, and it also is a human tragedy*	*I really find it distressing when people deny completely what black pillars and red pillars say because there are some things that are very, very true to me. And now I see incel talking points becoming mainstream. It's not something that I'm against, because some of the things they say are true, but they have to be contextualized and also understand that in reality it's not that black and white.* *As I said, I'm not an incel – I'm a purple pill – so I think that some incel beliefs are true, some redpill beliefs are true, and some of the extreme beliefs are true. I don't think you can say incels are completely wrong, neither are red pillars, so I wish people had a more nuanced view.*	*I also feel that I'll probably end up getting plastic surgery in the future because this insecurity is still with me. Even if my ideas are changed, even if they don't trigger a lot of the same anxiety as before, I want peace of mind – when I am finally sure about my attractiveness, I think I will be at complete peace.* *I think that black pill is not a framework with which I interpret dating, rationally – I've changed. I know that that's not true, but those insecurities ... basically all my life. I've had those insecurities – during my formative years, and it's not like I know anything about women. I can only say that incels are wrong on some stuff, but I cannot say for certain what is the truth.*

(Continued)

Table A1. (Continued).

Participant Number	Evidencing a changed mind-set, linking with acknowledging HM; now positioning masculine relations in tandem with recognizing this. Codes: shift in thinking, rejection of inceldom and ideology, leaving-behind, growth-mind-set	Trending toward complicit support for HM (since leaving inceldom) Codes: Distancing, competition, integrating into masculine hierarchy, suggested domination (marginalized men or women). Forming Hybrid Resistant-Masculinities.	Drifting to partial-or-active-complicit HM support but *Juxtaposed* Pro-Codes: Masculine competition, Recognition of hierarchical placement, Domination and subordination. Evidence of identity juxtapositions. Codes: hybrid masculinities, alternative masculinities, non-traditional-masculinities, rejection of physical masculine traditions.
9	*[Learning a school shooting was planned on incel imageboard he used] That's when I started to think that the movement was evil even though I kinda had felt the same feelings myself. Of jealousy, envy and entitlement to a romantic relationship. There was also the whole Elliot Rodger saga. When piecing together those things, it started to feel like something really was wrong with me frequenting the same place as those people. I put a lot of effort into being more social, leaving my bedroom and talking to people. I became a teacher too, and started to deal with different points of view and backgrounds. I guess I feel much more human now. I can feel other's pain and distress and try to contribute in a positive way . . . I try to go out of my way to talk to students who I see have those same types of views I once held too. I feel a lot of compassion for these people, as I feel for my younger self. The descent into these communities was the result of many small cumulative things getting together and becoming a big snowball. I try to work through these feelings in therapy now and become a better, stronger person.*	*"I still believe that discussing emotional matters or showing too much weakness as a man can be detrimental to a relationship, and that having a couple of friends and a therapist to discuss those problems is the best course of action. It is what it is, and it's useless trying to change it. . . I dabbled into some lookism talk too, but nowadays I don't think that's exactly the correct way to be. Despite whatever I've seen and heard, I guess what have formulated from all these experiences is a motto that I try to follow every day: Be strong, be kind, be grateful, be humble."*	*I regret the way I became addicted to bad things through it; like pornography and the misogyny that I propagated too. I'm in no way a feminist man, but I think I have a more nuanced and balanced view of the problems women also face in this world, in contrast to the black and white view that life for them is peachy keen.*

(Continued)

Table A1. (Continued).

Participant Number	Evidencing a changed mind-set, linking with acknowledging HM; now positioning masculine relations in tandem with recognizing this. Codes: shift in thinking, rejection of inceldom and ideology, leaving-behind, growth-mind-set	Trending toward complicit support for HM (since leaving inceldom) Codes: Distancing, competition, integrating into masculine hierarchy, suggested domination (marginalized men or women). Forming Hybrid Masculinities.	Drifting to partial-or-active-complicit HM support but Juxtaposed Pro-Codes: Masculine competition. Recognition of hierarchical placement. Domination and subordination. Evidence of identity juxtapositions. Resistant-Codes: hybrid masculinities, alternative masculinities, non-traditional-masculinities, rejection of physical masculine traditions.
10	*It was gradual [the move away], like I had some negative sexual experiences, and I consistently struggled with attracting women because that. Truth be told, I think this kind of comes into my privilege. I don't want to overstep, but I have the impression that I am more attractive than the average individual: just baseline hair, skin, quality, symmetry. And I was a member of the powerlifting team, so I was training and exercising a lot. So, despite having no social skills, like sometimes I would stumble into situations but, like there was a lot of awkwardness and cluelessness so it was a gradual process. Where the more of these I saw, I encountered, the more of these experiences I had. I was like "this kind of online incel stuff is not helping me – it's not really helping." [. . .] by the time I was about 21 I had fully disintegrated from any of that sort of ideology or message board. It was no longer browsing or anything. I actually had a very positive romantic experience, and that was a major catalyst for just abandoning this sort of stuff.*	*I had this positive experience during university, I had some casual relationships and dating, but then afterwards I began struggling much more again because . . . You know, it's very common. So I'll lose connection, social cohesion after leaving university or schooling environments. So during that, I started kind of picking back up red pill stuff and deliberately practicing socialization is particularly attracting women. Especially with, like the advent of dating apps, the process became very, very . . . Human beings will just optimize the joy and beauty out of everything! That's just what our species does like. We took like the experience of attracting a mate and pair bonding, and we just optimized all the beauty and joy out of it. [. . .]* *I'll still browse some message boards or see some YouTube videos about like social dynamics here and there and like, you know, maybe give an affirmatory comment of like "yeah, that makes sense, but you know, you could still pro go for self-improvement" like I'll give that kind of stuff. But it's all anonymous. I don't know anyone personally from any of that.* *[. . .] I feel like I'm not a misogynist, but I am a misanthropist. So I feel like a lot of these social dynamics are very cynical, very cynical, but true. But it's not like "grr, bitches be gold diggers" kind of thing. But it's like "dude you're a guy – your brain can get hacked into by a positive waist to hip ratio. Like you're way simpler, get over yourself."* *The issue is a lot of times the manosphere stuff is only partially correct. Like they're correct in that yes you have to play the status game – you do not get to opt out. Opting out relegates you to low status. Low status is unattractive. Like that's real. . . . But there are other ways to achieve status than necessarily being like square jaw, 6 pack or whatever.*	*They're [incel communities] fucking right in a lot of ways. Like a lot of the analysis of social dynamics, particularly male-female interactions, especially accentuated by current atomization and app-based dating, the red pill sellers are fucking right in a lot of ways. They go overboard with the misogyny, because, like a lot of times, they feel like the person rejecting them hurts them, so they rage at that and they go overboard. But in my personal view, like their analysis of human dynamics, is pretty [. . .] accurate.* *[. . .] They're [Red-Pill-Communities] right in a lot of ways – it's not just about being yourself and being a cool guy and being a nice person, you need to exhibit proper status demonstrators for the social context that you're in. You have to put your eyebrows in the right spot and initiate contact. I wanna . . . Oh, man. This is kind of my latest phase of social development – like after university, before meeting my current partner while being frustrated, trying to date through apps, Covid pandemic, all that stuff – I had a realization. Because I would go on maybe one date every 2 months, maybe and I would get all the time "Oh, you seem great – I just didn't feel any chemistry" over and over and over again, and I realized it was because I was not initiating physical contact. Because I'm not very comfortable with that. I need to feel safe with someone before I do that.* *But girls don't have the fucking patience for that, especially not within the current social context of app-based dating and superficial sort of ways of meeting, and not having communities so that . . . I literally broke down crying when I got home realising like "Oh, my God! I have to just force myself – I have to violate my own physical autonomy with someone I'm not very comfortable with to have a chance at being wanted." And that's just how it is – that was a big hang-up for me. For other people a big hang-up might be showing dominant body language, because showing submissive body language as a heterosexual male trying to attract a woman is ineffective. It just doesn't work. [. . .]* *For a lot of people, for most people, it truly, absolutely does feel hopeless. It probably isn't. You probably have some attributes that you can leverage and utilize. But there are some people for whom it truly is hopeless. I don't have a good answer. I do not have a good answer that just fucking sucks, and like I'm not gonna pretend like it's your fault, or whatever.*