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"Avoiding my emotions and beating myself up for having them"

A sociological exploration into why some men become incels

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“Avoiding my emotions and beating myself up for having them”: A sociological exploration into why some men become incels

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I find that my very formation implicates the other in me, that my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others.

— Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*

Abstract

This thesis explores the process of becoming an incel. Applying Axel Honneth's theory of recognition and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, this thesis critically analyzes the existing literature on the topic. The findings include the notions of denial of manhood, lack of support systems, and the effects of physical appearance as important facets in the process of becoming an incel. This analysis highlights the need of a recognition based framework when researching the sensitive topic of incels and their communities, and advocates for the re-centering of men and their lived experiences. The analysis concludes that the framework of recognition is underused in the research of incels, and argues that it provides a useful and novel look at the issue. Using gender performance as a foundation to understand the social relations of gender, the analysis highlights how important the performative nature of gender is for men, even when they might reject the notion of performativity entirely. Due to the emergent, contemporary nature of the topic, more research is needed to get a full picture of this process and the overall societal aspects of the topic.

Preface

This thesis started its journey already in my first year as an undergraduate. While the theme and topic for the thesis changed through the years, I still thought about it and how I wanted to present it. It has been a challenging journey from start to finish, and I am very much happy to be done.

I would like to thank my supervisor prof. Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen for invaluable guidance through this process, and dr. Ozan Sousbois who provided incredibly helpful tips and advice that helped in my process of writing this thesis.

A special thanks to Charlotte and Leiv Arild for being there in times of need; both for emotional and professional help.

On to the next adventure!

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In the last decade, more and more people have begun identifying as incels and with that more instances of misogyny and violent attacks have occurred (Sparks et al., 2024, p. 392). Figures like Andrew Tate attract adolescents with his ideas of masculine superiority, reinforcing traditional masculine ideologies. While much of the academic attention has been aimed at analyzing the incel movement and communities themselves, little academic research has been done into the nature of why men adhere to these ideologies in the first place (McDermott et al., 2022). Applying theories from Axel Honneth and Judith Butler to engage in a critical literature review and analysis of select existing research, this thesis explores the questions of why men are drawn, and stay committed to these ideas and communities.

1.1 Background

Men and masculinities is a field that is interdisciplinary and is researched from the fields of anthropology, sociology, psychology, and others. The study of incels is a fairly recent one, just gaining entry into the mainstream in the last decade or so. This phenomenon has grown and evolved all over the world, with a particular focus on the western societies (Blake & Brooks, 2023). While the core ideas of men's movements have existed for a long time, an important turning point happened in 2014 with GamerGate. This online harassment campaign against a female video game developer, organized on platforms such as Reddit and 4chan, featured an ideology of hyper-masculinity and brought out the more hidden features of the "manosphere" into the mainstream (Ging, 2019; Mortensen, 2018). This ideology also has violent parts to it. Also in 2014, the incel Elliot Roger killed 6 people in a misogynistic rage because of his anger towards women and the fact that

they denied him a sexual relationship (Sparks et al., 2024). Since that moment, violent misogynistic rhetoric has become more used in the incel spaces (Gheorghe & Clement, 2023, p. 11).

In Norway this topic has been very relevant in 2024, with the leader of the right-wing Progress Party's Youth party saying in a news article that "a small number of men have access to a big portion of all women" (Prestegård, 2021, my translation), which is language associated with incels and the incel community. The public debate around men's mental health and suicidality is ongoing, and with the the Men's Equality Commission (Mannsutvalget) delivering their report on the status of men's equality in April 2024, the topic is more relevant than ever.

1.2 Definitions

What are these masculine ideologies that are emerging, with terms such as "incel" and "red pill"? There are essentially two different definitions of incel; the clear-cut, simple idea of being involuntary celibate, and the more complicated definition using the ideology of the red pill as a way to understand ones own position and situation. Some involuntary celibate people use the incel label while distancing themselves from the ideology (Langeland et al., 2022). In this thesis, the latter definition is the one that is being examined.

The manosphere is the general network of (almost exclusively) online resources, such as websites and blogs, and influencers existing within these resources. These influencers use traditional masculine ideologies to affirm incels, and many others within this space. Men's Right's Activists, Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), and incel communities all exist within this general manosphere (Ging, 2019). The field of evolutionary psychology is also situated in this sphere of influence, as this is being used to legitimize the notions of natural superiority of men (Haslop et al., 2024). The common identity of these groups is their focus on men and men's rights, usually in the form of anti-feminism.

One person who in particular has been central to this development in the last years is Andrew Tate. He popularizes ideas such as the supremacy of men, and that women are asking for more than they deserve when it comes to equality; the framing of equality as a zero-sum game in which women are trying to take rights away from men (Haslop et al., 2024). While Tate himself isn't an incel, he represents what a man can and should do in relationships with women.

1.2.1 The red and black pills

The idea of “taking the pill” is a widely used concept and term within incel communities. Using this kind of language reinforces the idea of a shared community with shared experiences and beliefs (Honneth, 1995, p. 131). “Taking the red pill” is a Matrix reference which within this ideology refers to the “unfair dating system that discriminates against men who are conventionally unattractive” (Gheorghe & Clement, 2023, p. 2). This culminates in the philosophy which wants to “awaken men to feminism’s misandry and brainwashing” (Ging, 2019, p. 640). The other side of the reference, the blue pill in the Matrix, is to continue living in the simulation and not seeing the world as it is (as represented by the red pill). The more extreme version of this is the black pill. This pill refers to the (perceived) fact that it is futile to even try to break through this world as a man. It is usually characterized by hopelessness and apathy, and portrays women as naturally evil and egocentric (O’Malley & Helm, 2023). The black pill also lowers the bar for accepting violent extremism as women, and the system in general, cannot be changed or reformed. There exists other “pills” within these communities that signify the awakening to different parts of the “true” world, but the red and black pills are by far the most commonly used in this discourse.

1.2.2 Incel ideology

It is hard to pinpoint exactly what their ideology is because it is evolving and changing very fast, and is made up by several different groups in different countries and situations. We can however find some points that are consistent across communities and sites. The main ideology is the red pill, the accepting of the unequal dating market and those consequences. Furthermore, the central enemy that appears is almost always women and feminism as a movement. Other central themes of incel ideology is related to the overall manosphere and the space of men’s rights activism, such as child custody and the feminization of education (Ging, 2019, p. 639). When talking about traditional masculine ideologies it is valuable to see them as “a set of interrelated (but somewhat distinct) domains with different outcomes” (McDermott et al., 2022, p. 218), and that these domains are important for incel ideology. The defence of hegemonic masculinity in general is related to these domains, and represents “maintain[ing] men’s power over women and other men, particularly racial and sexual minority men” (p. 218). To produce and reinforce patriarchy and and hegemonic masculinity must be seen as important parts to incel ideology. While there have been finds that indicate links between white

supremacy and male supremacy, most forms of incel ideology is “best understood as [it’s] own form of extremism” (Wilson, 2022, p. 1811).

1.3 Theme choice rationale

After almost falling into a misogynistic rabbit hole as a teenager, I became interested in trying to figure out the reasons why these communities exist and thrive in the seemingly equal society we live in. Continuing with my degree in sociology and courses in gender studies, the ideas of gender and its effect on people and their actions has peaked my interest. As an uncle to a seven year old boy, I hope to gain a better understanding for both myself and others in order to mitigate the conditions that allow for people to fall into these holes and communities, and hopefully create a better world for all of us.

1.4 Research question and hypothesis

The research questions is formulated to direct the research in such as way to limit the scope of the thesis and at the same time trying to find a gap in the literature to contribute original perspectives. An important perspective to have when researching this topic is to recognize that while the world that is created by these traditional masculinity communities, the experiences and emotions felt by these men are very much real.

Research questions:

Why are men drawn and committed to traditional masculine ideologies and their communities?

What role does recognition play in the role of drawing men to these communities?

My hypothesis of this thesis is that shared emotions, brought on by a lacking of recognition, drives people to these communities. These shared emotions comes together as a performance of their lack of masculinity, which functions as recognition and solidarity that affirms their gender.

Chapter 2

Methodology and theory

2.1 Literature review

This thesis is a literature review of relevant, selected research on the subject. A literature review is an independent project reviewing the existing literature on a subject given a particular hypothesis or research question that has not, or rarely, been asked. The goal is to create a synthesis of theories and concepts of existing literature, and do a critical evaluation of their substance (Halvorsen, 2008, p. 241). It is impossible to review the totality of a topic in the existing literature due to the sheer size of it, which is why it needs to be limited and pointed at a specific problem or question. The literature used in this thesis is not representative of all papers in this field, and there exist other papers that could have been included in this thesis. The reason of this limitation is twofold; first, the scope of a bachelor's thesis is limited and some critical judgements have to be made regarding the size of the project, and secondly, the topic of the thesis has not been examined by many researchers.

The aspect of bias must also be addressed. There is a recency bias that excludes much of the historical research done on men and masculinity in general, which could have been relevant to this thesis. To see the evolution of the field and the way we understand this problem could be relevant for another study. The reason that the articles used in this thesis was picked out specifically, is that they are closely related to the research question and the goal of this thesis of answering the questions of why men join these communities. Also, I have experience with the community from outside of the academic context – that is, general curiosity and looking into this on my own over the course of several years – and this experience helped in selecting the articles. Without this experience, the articles

about Andrew Tate might not have been chosen to provide helpful context since the articles of him are so few and far between.

Using Oria, I searched for relevant literature using the keyword searches described below, limited to published journal articles written after 2010, and limited to articles written in English and Norwegian. I used this limitation to get relevant literature from our current situation, both internationally and from Norway specifically.

Keyword searches:

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((masculin* OR incel) AND (alienati* OR identity))
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"Andrew Tate" AND masculin*
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I wanted to include searches that had any forms of the word masculine (masculinity, masculinities) or incel and connected to alienation and identity. These two keywords are important to both narrow the focus of the search to the identity of being an incel. Including Andrew Tate specifically is the result of my previous experience allowing me to identify Tate as an important part of the process of becoming an incel.

This search resulted in many hits where 14 total articles were chosen, one of them Norwegian the rest of them in English. Two of these were about the specifics of leaving the incel communities, which offers interesting insights into why they joined in the first place. Most of the articles are qualitative that is working either directly with incels themselves in interviews, or using qualitative data from online incel sources and resources. Four articles dealt with the theories of incels, masculinities and the manosphere, and provided a helpful insight into definitions and previous research into this topic. All articles about incels themselves and the community directly is from 2018 or later, up to 2024. The data used in these articles were mostly located on the internet, and had as such a heavy western bias with a focus on North America. One article is specifically from Norway and another is from Australia. With no data or articles centering South America, Asia and Africa, there is a big gap in the data in general. This is most likely due to my own biases in choosing articles that centers my own experience in the west, and due to a lack of research in general on the topic in these areas. Please see appendix A for a full list of the selected papers.

One of the most surprising discoveries was the “Andrew Tate” search. This search resulted in four (!) published, peer reviewed articles. Even though Andrew Tate might be a hidden figure for many, he is a hero for many young boys and men. This also shows how the current emergence of these figures and ideologies are happening very fast. Haslop et al.

(2024) and Wescott et al. (2023) writes about the effect of Andrew Tate on young boys, and how his influence has shaped their ideas of women and relationships.

The data shows that these communities are vast and heterogeneous. This is true for both racial/ethnic categories, ages, and physical disabilities (Hintz & Baker, 2021, p. 3049). As shown from the Norwegian paper on incels, people who are involuntary celibate want to distance themselves strategically from incel ideology (Langeland et al., 2022). While they do share the same emotions that is the foundation here, that there is some unfairness in the dating market, these people are not the focus of this thesis.

2.2 Theory

Here, two theories will be presented and used for the analysis part of this paper. To analyze qualitative data is to look for answers to questions in data (Johannessen et al., 2018, p. 22), and the theories used come with many assumptions that is used for this analysis (p. 28). In the case of this thesis, the questions are the research questions that are grounded in the theory presented here. While there are many ways to look at this particular problem, I have chosen Axel Honneth's theory of recognition and Judith Butler's theory of performativity as the theories to build my questions upon and analyze from. While reading both Honneth on its own and about incels in various contexts, I realized both how little the idea of recognition has been explored and how useful it could be to provide a critical perspective on the topic with his framing of recognition in social conflicts. Combining it with the ideas of Butler about gender performance, showing that these conflicts at their core is a break of the expected performance of gender, the theories complete each other and provide this critical new perspective.

2.2.1 Axel Honneth's theory of recognition

The central theory used to explain the topic will be Axel Hoenneth's theory of recognition. This theory outlines the struggle of recognition of our own subjectivity; who we are and who we want to be. There are three forms of recognition that Honneth writes about: love, rights, and solidarity. Honneth uses the dialectics of Hegel and the social psychology of Mead to constitute his new critical social theory of recognition, and applies this to moral social conflicts related to identity and connection in the wider society (Honneth, 1995, p. 144).

Love is used in an broader sense than just romantic love, referring to it as "primary relationships insofar as they [...] are constituted by strong emotional attachments among

a small number of people” (Honneth, 1995, p. 95). This will include both family and friends, and the social conditions that those forms of emotional bonds require.

Rights is very different from love in that it is judicial and impersonal. While it is a part of the constitution of one's own subjectivity as a whole – in ensuring an idea of *freedom* – the more important part is the constitution of one's subjectivity as a citizen in a society. Being recognized with rights is a core part of the rule of law in ensuring every citizen the same rights. Because it also is vital in the constitution of subjectivity and identity, perceived rights are important in this regard as well.

Solidarity is another universal form of recognition, although it is different from the judicial form just described. As Honneth explains this form “demands a social medium that must be able to express the characteristic differences among human subjects in a universal and, more specifically, intersubjectively obligatory way” (Honneth, 1995, p. 122). The medium is a dynamic framework comprising “the cultural self-understanding of a society.” (p. 122).

Honneth (1995) argues that “... motives for social resistance and rebellion are formed in the context of moral experiences stemming from the violation of deeply rooted expectations regarding recognition” (p. 163), which is the central idea of why recognition is a useful framework when looking at why some men become incels.

2.2.2 Judith Butler's theory of performativity

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity will be important to this paper as well. Being a philosopher schooled in the dialects of Hegel and the psychoanalysis of Lacan, Butler wanted to situate gender as central to our conception of self and the social relations between us. In 1993, they published their book called *Gender Trouble* that outlined the theory of performativity and what it means. For Butler gender is performance, and that is this reality we are experiencing in everyday life. When we see someone what we know constitutes a man, we do so based on learned ideas of what a man is by what he is doing and wearing. The argument is that gender is something one does rather than something one has. For example, the idea that women wears dresses or should act subservient to men is the performance of gender we are taught from the socialization process from an early age (Butler, 2020b).

The idea of gender is a normative one as well. The gender norms are used frequently to impose the notion of hegemonic heterosexuality, that the good, moral and normal way of being is following the cultural expectations of the performance of one's assigned gender

at birth. Butler (1999) argues for the intelligibility of gender, as they describe as genders “... which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire” (p. 23). In this sense, an important way of understanding ones own identity is formed within these relations of coherence and continuity, and those who break from these expectations, such as transgender individuals or non-heterosexuals, are violating the normative aspect of gender and identity. They are performing gender and identity “wrong” according to the established hegemonic norms. With the rise of the anti-gender movement across the globe, it is important to recognize these norms and how they are used to defend and justify hegemonic heterosexuality and cis-normativity.

Using this theory, the goal is to situate the performance of gender as central to the fight for recognition of being a man. The interplay of getting recognition based on performances of what men and masculinity entails. From childhood we are taught both explicitly and implicitly how ones own gender behaves and acts in social contexts. This is the performative aspect of gender.

Chapter 3

Data

The searches, as described earlier, and the selection of the relevant literature yielded ten published articles related to incel ideologies and communities. These articles include research on who the members of the community are, and why these people leave the communities. Across these articles, some themes became apparent. The themes that emerge from the literature tells us something about who joins these communities and why. All articles talked about the inherent traditional masculine ideology that is foundational to begin the process of joining these communities. Three important themes came up as central: the denial of manhood as the overall experience of these men, the lack of support systems and friendship to effectively navigate those experiences, and physical appearance.

The concept of shared emotions is a red thread that lines all the articles used. This is most aptly put by Thorburn (2023) who found a user who described that “his attachment to an incel group was a vessel for ‘avoiding my emotions and beating myself up for having them’” (p. 466). These shared emotions relates to the experiences that draws them into incel communities, where these experiences are re-framed using the rhetoric of the incels in order to create those shared emotions that strengthen the emotional bonds between the participants (Hintz & Baker, 2021).

3.1 Denial of manhood

The idea of the denial of manhood is rooted in the idea that one “becomes” a man after a certain threshold or performance. In this case, for most incels having a sexual encounter or getting into a romantic and sexual relationship is this requirement in order to become

a man. Gheorghe and Clement (2023) found that the idea that “hegemonic masculinity is unjustly challenged by society” (p. 4) is popular with incel communities. This challenge is what denies men their masculinity because it wants women to be more independent, and since it is feminism that is the main challenger of hegemonic masculinity, feminists, and women in general, are seen as their main enemy. McDermott et al. (2022) argues that the men who are captured by these ideologies are individuals with a “foreclosed identity ... committed to an identity without critically thinking about it” (p. 212), and that these ideologies may be most prevalent among men who uncritically accepts the “traditional gender role expectations of men” (p. 212). O’Malley and Helm (2023) writes about these perceived injustices, or the denial of manhood, as a critical step to join incel communities. They also write about entries to manhood, and that being sexually active and having a conventionally attractive girlfriend is a necessary part of accessing masculinity. Not being given access to manhood is externalised and blame is given on the women who are in effect denying them this access.

Here, Andrew Tate plays a major role in creating the ideal image of manhood and what that implies. Young boys reported seeing Tate as a role model, which ultimately shapes their view of both men and women, and the expectations placed on both (Haslop et al., 2024).

O’Malley and Helm (2023) found that the shared experience of “missing out on a girlfriend” is reframed as traumatic in incel forums (p. 1035), continuing with a post saying that “[w]e lost our teenage years, our youth, our prime. That is something that will haunt us for the rest of our lives” (p. 1035).

3.2 Lack of support system and loneliness

In the articles that collected data from people who left the incel community, they found that many of them cited a lack of support system in their lives as a reason for their radicalisation into inceldom (Gheorghe & Clement, 2023; Thorburn, 2023). After traumatic experiences of rejection, they turned to like-minded people online due to a lack of these support systems to handle these experiences (Sparks et al., 2024). This matches with Gheorghe and Clement (2023) and their findings that several incels reported coming from dysfunctional households. When joining these communities, they reported feeling validated and seen (Gheorghe & Clement, 2023; O’Malley & Helm, 2023). Sparks et al. (2024) found that “negative romantic interactions are the result of an interaction between

insecure attachment and poor peer support”, underlining the importance of these support systems.

The idea of loneliness is prevalent in incel communities. It is one of the most used keywords in threads and posts to incel forums (Sparks et al., 2024), and many incels reported wanting to have a “genuine emotional bond” (p. 393) with both women and men. Not having a sense of belonging, a friend group to do things with, is an important factor for why men become incels (O’Malley & Helm, 2023). This is very closely related to the lack of support systems that also was reported. Within these communities, these men find the friendships they feel like they lack in their “offline” lives and bond over this fact. Loneliness is also linked to depression and anxiety in general, and these mental conditions in turn make it harder to seek out and find these friendships and create strong emotional bonds with people in their lives (Sparks et al., 2024).

3.3 Physical appearance

Hintz and Baker (2021) writes that physical appearance was a key factor in the development of an incel identity, with incels citing being overweight, low height, a certain ethnicity, or a disability as key to why they are incels (p. 3054). Gheorghe and Clement (2023) found that “red pill incels” believe that they can better their chances on the dating market by “changing their physical appearance through exercise, grooming, and fashion” (p. 2), and that this is something an incel should be investing in (Thorburn, 2023, p. 467) – also known as “looksmaxxing”.

O’Malley and Helm (2023) also found a connection between the denial of manhood and physical appearance, writing “incels commented on height, weight, and their own perceived ugliness as a major reason why they are unable to attain romantic relationships and thus feel unable to access manhood” (p. 1035).

Chapter 4

Analysis and discussion

4.1 Love, rights and solidarity

A common theme of all the articles is the idea of emotions and the emotional distress of being rejected or traumatized in some way. Having these notions of “deeply rooted expectations regarding recognition” (Honneth, 1995, p. 163) and then being rejected, one is effectively being denied from accessing the essential part of what being a man entails. As the data suggests, these men will already have preconceived ideas of misogyny that unquestionably is much of the source of the expectations of recognition, no doubt having picked up these ideas from their dysfunctional homes or from people like Andrew Tate. Accessing masculinity is not the end goal either; this access is used in the hierarchical competition within masculinity of being the best man one can possibly be. Losing this competition is seen as failing as a man, and these intense emotions (shame, embarrassment, anger) are externalized toward their perceived enemy, namely women. They construct a phantasm of women and feminism as the cause of their emotional distress.

Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) write about how “masculinity is about power relations among men, not only between women and men” (p. 278), but are we seeing a re-orientation of the focus of power relations between women and men? It seems like the power relations among men were only a real focus when women were dominated; with the progressive policy of gender equality, this inherent domination is degrading and must be reinforced. The authors continue that “manhood acts imply a claim to membership in the privileged gender group” (p. 248), and that this claim is largely used to justify their place in the masculine hierarchy. With the data naming women as their primary

targets and enemies for their position (Gheorghe & Clement, 2023; McDermott et al., 2022; O'Malley & Helm, 2023), it does seem like the use of masculinity in incel ideology is to explicitly oppress or subdue women rather than necessarily claim a position in the internal masculine hierarchy. Even so, the internal conflicts of masculinity still prevails, with hierarchies such as alphas and betas being important to these communities (Ging, 2019).

When it comes to the effects of Andrew Tate, the research has primarily focused on school-age boys and his effect on them. While the long-term effects are hard to determine because of the contemporary nature of the phenomenon, one particle dives into this and identifies Tate as a problem within schools, and in particular for teacher who are women (Wescott et al., 2023). The content that Tate produces for his young audience is a key part in the production and reproduction of hegemonic masculinity, and it lays the foundation for these children to harbour these misogynistic views as they age, and continue the spiral of violence and abuse. With teachers themselves saying that they have abruptly noticed the effect over a short period of time, it is clear that Tate and other such influencers have a detrimental effect on the children of today. Further long-term studies will be required to fully understand the consequences of this.

It is worth noting that this is a largely digital phenomenon. With the technological advances and social media spreading worldwide, anti-feminist ideas in general have increased and have been more widespread (Ging, 2019, p. 644). In the later years, this has changed a little, with more and more of these ideas gaining entry into the mainstream. It is also relevant to look at the connections between the incel community and other forms of extremism that is growing, such as the anti-trans movement. The general consensus of social conservative ideas related to gender and sex, and the interplay between them, makes them allies.

Looking back at Honneth (1995) and his notion of “deeply rooted expectations regarding recognition” (p. 163) is central to the creation of incels. They experience personal rejection and transform this subjective experience into a shared emotional framework. These experiences may start in early childhood with trauma of various kinds (dysfunctional households, bullying). Seeing that their bully has a girlfriend and talks about having sex all the time might be central in creating these expectations of recognition, in cementing the idea of overcoming ones bully by becoming one themselves. These perceived rights of sex then form the basis of the road to incelism. Entering into these communities is not a linear process, and involves all of these kinds of experiences that is outlined in this thesis.

Using the three parts of recognition that were mentioned earlier in this thesis, we can see how they all come into play in the research. The lack of love, both from parental figures in the example of dysfunctional households, and from friends in general is a major factor as to why people become incels. There isn't much talk about formal, judicial rights in the incel community, other than the specific situation regarding custody of children in court. The argument here is that men is unjustly discriminated against in favor of women who get to keep custody of children at a much higher rate than men. More relevant is the informal rights of bodily autonomy, where women have seized the means of re-production, effectively withholding sex from men. With rhetoric such as the natural subservience of women by men, they see their right to access a sexual partner as naturally given. Solidarity is both what is perceived as lacking within society as a whole, and the central part in creating the communities of incels. The lack of solidarity within the wider society happens because they hold marginalized and outdated views on women in particular. These views become reinforced and is supplemented by other, more radical beliefs within the sphere of solidarity that is the incel communities. Their experiences are validated and they feel a connection with their fellow human beings.

This clearly shows the importance of social cohesion and solidarity. The lived experience of these people shows that there is a disconnect between how they are expecting to be treated (and be included) in the wider society and the actual experience. This experience is then found in solidarity with other people with the same shared emotions and experiences. It also shows the importance of validating the lived experiencing of these men, rather than dismissing it as constructed. These are very real emotions and experienced that has an adverse effect on these men, and that is the reality we have to grapple with. We cannot say that their experiences aren't real, we have to convince them that they are made on the wrong premise.

4.2 Performativity

With the findings of McDermott et al. (2022), where men who adhere to traditional masculine ideologies have a "forclosed identity", we can see the creation of these identities within the performative framework of Butler. They perform their masculinity uncritically because they don't challenge it and accepts it as the true and real (p. 212), and in the process produce the expectation of gender performance in others as well. As these deeply rooted expectations are central to the creation of incels, we turn to the performative aspect of this process. The socialization process into the role of boy and then man in this

context will provide a useful framework to understand where these expectations come from. As multiple papers mentioned, childhood trauma and dysfunctional households of various kinds is a determining factor in this regard (Gheorghe & Clement, 2023; Stanaland et al., 2023), and it is in these years that an important part of the gender socialization happens.

In particular we can see the effects of gender performativity with personalities like Andrew Tate. The way he presents the ideal man is textbook gender performance. When Tate argues for a return to a natural state where men are superior to women (Haslop et al., 2024) he presents the performance that we should expect from men and women. This, in turn, both creates and reinforces the expectations that are held in some men. When these men then get rejected, and experience a break of the reality of their performance of gender, they see women as the breakers of this expected performance. Women should have acted according to the way the male ideal (e.g. Tate) says and shows that they do. Tate becomes the beacon of gender performance and reinforces the expected norms placed on both men and women. When Wescott et al. (2023) write about how teachers deal with increasing misogyny in the classroom, they found that these behaviors have “proliferated, performed with a growing sense of brazen, remorseless entitlement” (p. 7).

When it comes to the finding of the denial of manhood, the performative aspect of this is highly relevant. It is the act of having a girlfriend that is seen as the most important entry into masculinity and manhood. It is seen as an injustice because women are effectively denying them this performance of gaining entry into manhood. O'Malley and Helm (2023) found some posts saying they experienced “feelings of being “subhuman” and socially rejected from society” (p. 1028) when meeting these barriers to masculinity.

Physical violence is also a vital part of the masculine performance of gender. By being, in general, stronger and more muscular than their counterparts, the physical domination over women is seen as important. This is why working out and achieving a perfect body is so desired within these communities. Butler talks about bodily coalitions that embodies gender, in this sense that physical bodies are an important factor in the coalition of masculinity (Butler, 2020a). Exuding masculinity and manhood by using bodies to become the gender expectation in an exaggerated way. This can include both using violence or the threat of violence.

With the data suggesting that physical appearance playing an important role in the creation of the incel identity, it is interesting to see the performativity of gender play a large role. Within these communities, they are producing the expectations that ultimately

leads other people to their community with ideas of how one should look and act in order to get a girlfriend. Here we see the effects of the socialization process that happens at all times. The ideas of how to be a man is shaped by experiences in childhood, in watching influencers like Tate, in experiencing rejection and not knowing how to handle it. While ethnicity is unexplored in this thesis, it offers an interesting insight into the minds of incels when they write that “you weren’t attractive to the girls if you weren’t White or Black” (Hintz & Baker, 2021, p. 3049). Every part of your body becomes the obstacle of gaining manhood in some way; a justification for why you are in the position you are in. An interesting parallel to compare with here would be the intense pressure on women to perform femininity, and how those same feelings about physical appearance may be similar.

We also see the importance of gender norms in these communities. Incels are defending the traditional masculine ideologies that have clear normative structure. When some people view the norm-breakers, they are themselves confronted with a foreignness within them that challenges what identity means and what it means for them. It is this foreignness, as Butler (2005) wrote, that is the source of their ethical connection with others. Trying then to find the ethical connection with other people who has this similar feeling of foreignness to try to understand what is happening, they turn to incel communities. This also ties into the lack of support systems that I found, and that this emotional distress of some kind is unable to be guided with friends and loved ones.

4.3 Summary

With the synthesis of Honneth and Butler’s theories, a pattern seems to emerge. There seem to exist a sort of pipeline of incels, where they are shaped by their experience in early childhood, either from dysfunctional households or from consuming media from influencers like Andrew Tate, to having these expectations rejected and broken in their teenage years.

This break of expectation functions as a world-shattering event that reinforces their widely held beliefs even further. The fake world shatters and the real world peaks through, allowing the rhetoric of the red pill to be easily accepted. The true ideal of what the world should have been is taken away from them, and with it their identity of being a man. This is the experience that is the emotional bond created between incels and their community. Using Butler (2005), the foreignness to themselves in this, for them, new

world is the source of their ethical connection to others (p. 84). Yearning for recognition from a world that doesn't exist, they find and validate each other.

The summary here aligns with the hypothesis of this thesis about the role of recognition in the process of drawing men to these communities. The effects described and analysed here cannot be understated and is important to understand why this process goes the way it goes. Using this framework for future research into this topic will provide a novel and critical lens that will expand existing and provide new perspectives for understanding this contemporary problem we are facing.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

In this thesis I have presented a critical analysis of the existing literature of incels in order to shed light on the conditions that make men join incel communities. I have argued that there are in particular three core themes that shape this for men; denial of manhood, lack of support systems, and loneliness. Using the theories of Honneth and Butler, I have produced a critical analysis of a select part of existing literature on this topic. I've outlined how important recognition is in social relations, and how a (perceived) lack of recognition can reproduce/multiply/enhance existing, deeply rooted expectation of gender normativity. An interesting observation here as well is that recognition is performative, and performance is recognition. The performance of masculinity is what drives the recognition within incel communities, which illustrates how connected these concepts are.

So why are some men drawn and committed to these ideologies and communities? From this exploration, it is clear that one piece of the puzzle is the break of deeply rooted expectations of social relations with their immediate community, and that this draws them into communities that adhere to these expectations. The role of the lack of recognition in pushing these men into these communities, and the role of recognition in them finding their way out, is very important to acknowledge. To experience these breaks, or rejections, and be met with even more rejection of the experience from the immediate communities is an important factor in explaining why incel communities thrive. In addition, not having a support system of friends and family contributes to the desire to find other, like-minded people that have experienced similar breaks. This is maybe the most important factor in making sure people don't end up "having emotions and hating themselves for having them" (Thorburn, 2023, p. 466), as the quote from one former incel put it. Figuring

out the path forward to enable the teaching of men that having emotions isn't wrong or feminine, and instead embracing them as part of our lived human lives will be pivotal in reversing the trend of incels and other such communities and ideologies. Without having these other support systems, and with the idea of the foreclosed identity described by McDermott et al. (2022), staying committed to these communities and identities is the most natural path for these men. As some users wrote about, the process of leaving incel communities is tough and requires a lot of internalization and introspection at the same time as one goes out of their way to go against the teachings of the community (Gheorghe & Clement, 2023; Thorburn, 2023). Staying committed is easier and it validates their identity and worldview, even though it may be emotionally harmful and won't lead them to the place they want to be.

This contents of this field is rapidly changing and transforming. These communities exist largely online and they are thus prone to the fast-paced changes that occur on that medium. The effects of people like Andrew Tate and other "manfluencers" on the minds and emotions of young boys and men will be felt for many years to come, not to mention the incredible adverse effects of this behavior on women in general. More research is required to understand the intricacies of why people join these communities, and what we as a society can do to give the recognition that these men sorely need.

Seeing the expansion of the incel community as part of the bigger reactionary backlash on LGBTQ+ rights is an important piece of the puzzle. In particular, the anti-gender movement and its followers across the globe represents a dangerous threat to democracy with their ties to the extreme right-wing and fascism (Butler, 2024; Engebretsen, 2022). Hintz and Baker (2021) found that some incels used their hatred of themselves because they were gay/bisexual or transgender as a way to hate these same minorities (p. 3055). The effect of hegemonic heterosexuality and cis-normativity is then directly manifested in the form of incels. In my own experience with incels, they generally exuded a hatred of trans women in particular due to an intense fear of being called gay. When "gay" becomes a slur used against those you don't like, realizing you might be gay can be truly traumatic. What role sexual and gender identities play within incel communities, and for the creation of them, is something that should be researched more as well. The same goes for the link between incel communities and white supremacy, as mentioned in the introduction. Ethnicity plays a role here in some capacity, with some incels using their anger towards white women who procreate with non-white men, and argue for a white genocide (Wilson, 2022). These are very dangerous ideas that might drive some people to commit extremist violent acts to oppose.

This topic is difficult because of the complexities that exist within it. While we must accept the reality of these men's situation and their experiences, it is hard to actually understand it when you have an understanding of social relations and material conditions.

The exponential technological advance we are experiencing is causing us to deal more and more with pieces of technology rather than with ourselves. As a result, I believe that we are becoming more disconnected from our own bodies and our own emotions. We do not know ourselves because we are constantly distracting ourselves from *feeling* with unlimited entertainment right at our fingertips. Helpful people are offering help to finally become who we are meant to be, whatever that means, and that furthers the disconnect, alienation, of ourselves. Introspection and reflection, learning to feel feelings, might be a lost art in the age of information. We have to rectify this in some way, and encourage these concepts already in early childhood – but it is hard to incorporate this when children turn around and learn something completely different at home versus at school.

It is important that all men who want to help incels and other people who are radicalized in this way to help recognize each other. To give space and allow for education and development in order for each of us to feel welcome and connected. At the same time, we cannot solve this individually. With the report from the Men's Equality Commission outlining some systemic issues, it is also important that we are able to rectify these and allow for a solution to our problem and not just a treatment of the symptoms.

The report from the Men's Equality Commission briefly mentions incels as a group of people relevant to their report (NOU 2024: 8, p. 219), but does not include any specific suggestions to combat this phenomenon. Still, the report does highlight the need of support systems and mental health for men, and that this is a societal problem we have to solve together. While incels are individuals, the problem is societal and must be treated as such.

Appendix A

Full list of articles

Here is the full list of all articles found by the search and selected to be used in this thesis.

- Langeland, F., Prøitz, L., Steinnes, K. K., & Mainsah, H. (2022). I de sosiale ytterkantene. konstruksjoner av kjønn og maskuliniteter hos norske menn i ufrivillig sølibat. *Tidsskrift for kjønnsforskning*, 46(3-4), 208–221. <https://doi.org/10.18261/tfk.46.3.8>
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