Literature Review Exploring Relationship Between Media Representations of Men, Masculinities, and Incels on Incel Discourse

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Abstract

In 2014, Elliot Rodger, a self-proclaimed incel (involuntary celibate), murdered six people and injured 14 in Isla Vista, California, as retribution for his experiences in romantic and sexual rejection. Incels generally believe women are at fault for men's celibacy. Misogynistic gender beliefs, such as incel ideology, often develop in adolescence under the influence of social environment and media exposure. This literature review explores the formation of gender beliefs through gender socialization and masculinity performances. It also looks into how incels internalize a distorted perspective of normative masculinities and what they expect conformance to these masculinities should bring. Readers will be presented with a brief history of incels and multiple examples of incel discourse from internet forums. Discussions surround incel discourse and how it may be shaped by representations of men, masculinities, and incels in the media.

Misogynistic violence is not a new phenomenon. Violence specifically attributed to women refusing men's sexual advances, however, has become more prevalent since Elliot Rodger's Isla Vista, California, attack in 2014 wherein Rodger murdered six people and injured 14 more (Anti-Defamation League, 2018; Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). Described as his "Day of Retribution," Rodger's violence aimed to avenge "a lifetime of romantic and sexual rejection" (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020, p. 279), which aligns his beliefs with the incel community. Short for "involuntary celibates," most incels believe women owe them sex, so women are to blame for men's celibacy (Ging, 2017; Romano, 2018). Incels sometimes respond to this predicament with online forum posts that document their experiences of rejection and the ways in which they lack the privileging attributes found in the "hegemonic ideal" man (Witt, 2020, p. 678). Their varying levels of whiteness, physical prowess, and class standing pull incels away from socially constructed normative masculinities (Palma, 2019; Witt, 2020). Some incels go on to express their frustrations through acts of offline violence (Wright, 2018). Rodger's attack is one of many incidences of incel-related violence (Anti-Defamation League, 2018).

Studies of incel misogyny are numerous (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Casey, 2019; Ging, 2017), but few delve into what influences incel gender beliefs in the first place (Doyle, 2018). There is evidence that gender beliefs develop throughout adolescence, influenced by one's social environment and the media (Epstein & Ward, 2011; Hanke, 1998; Kim et al., 2007; Rousseau et al., 2018), but we do not yet fully understand how these various influences shape incel ideology. Exploring the relationship between the media representations of men, masculinities, and incels and the beliefs incels publish online could fill this gap in knowledge. Thus, the purpose of this literature review is to explore the history of incels, incel discourse, and how incel discourse could be influenced by media representations of men, masculinities, and incels. This paper will also examine when and how gender beliefs are formed and attempt to identify the point at which incels both internalized and pushed back on the standards (and expected outcomes) of performing normative masculinities.

Role of Researcher

Before proceeding with the goal of this review, it is important to understand how my identity and role as the researcher influence my research. Sandra Harding (1987) suggests that feminist researchers should be visible in their work in order to recognize how one's personally held beliefs can impact the results and analyses of a study. By revealing the potential impacts of a researcher's beliefs, the study becomes more objective; it does not attempt to hide evidence of subjectivity (Harding, 1987). My interest in this topic emerged from my fascination with online radicalization. "Radicalization" has many neg-

ative connotations, so it can be easy to associate all of incel culture with acts of violence. To challenge this bias, the current literature review attempts to "study up," which "shifts the way we see who is 'the problem' from those who are the victims of power to those who wield it disproportionately" (Sprague, 2016, p. 203).

It may be difficult to see incels as an oppressed group, but I chose to research this topic from the standpoint of the disadvantaged. Articles and comments written by members of incel communities indicate that they truly feel the pain associated with their victimhood, which, they argue, is one of a lower power position. While acknowledging there are other issues of power inequality at play in gender relations, romantic rejection and loneliness caused by one's inability to live up to some standard of masculinity can be distressing (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). Entitlement to women's bodies is prescribed in normative masculinity (Hanke, 1998). Incels feel, however, a sense of aggrieved entitlement; a system of hypergamous women and successful "alpha" males oppresses them (Kimmel, 2017). This is likely a result of gender beliefs that, at some point in development, skewed their perception of normative masculinities (as well as the expected outcomes of performing them). Understanding their perceived plight has the potential to help boys and men who may be susceptible to incel ideology, which is ostensibly self-harming, and the potential to prevent gender-based violence.

I cannot, however, purport to understand everything incels say or do. As a white, cisgender, heterosexual, serially monogamous woman who usually avoids social media, I cannot relate to incels' predicament in any way. This could have influenced the articles I chose to reference or the discussions I chose to read online, as well as how I interpreted their relationship to the research question. This furthers the necessity to continue research in this area, though. As related academic literature increases and improves, future researchers will be able to lessen the impact of their personal biases. Technology will also influence the current literature review.

The incel community is largely online (Ging, 2017), which allows for review of their publicized gender beliefs. Online discourse can be very difficult to study as it is rarely permanent or static. Some forums are removed by their platform for violating codes of conduct (Hauser, 2017), concealing data and impacting the replicability of any study. For the sake of consistency, I have chosen to pull most incel quotes from Incels, a forum website dedicated to incel topics.

Review of Literature

Theoretical Framing

The expression "boys will be boys" conjures an image of the inevitable, and therefore acceptable, behavioral conduct of boys and men (Roberts, 2012). Speaking this

phrase potentially normalizes the actions or attitudes it is referencing (Hlavka, 2014). A patriarchal and dichotomous culture organizes the world in absolutes, so, for every dominant concept, there is a subordinate, binary opposite (Popan, 2020; Scott, 1988). Thus, there are more meanings to "boys will be boys," such as "boys will not be girls" and "girls will not be boys." These utterances are a form of discourse, or "a historically, socially, and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories, and beliefs" (Scott, 1988, p. 34).

Feminist poststructuralist theory is concerned with how descriptions of gendered behavior reveal how "gender is being performed in that particular text and context" (Gannon & Davies, 2005, p. 312). The words we use can shape reality, and reality can then influence our words (Gannon & Davies, 2005; Popan, 2020; Scott, 1988). Grounding the current literature review in poststructuralism affords the opportunity for future researchers to deconstruct language to reveal how incel discourse might be influencing and *influenced by* incel reality (Gannon & Davies, 2005; Popan, 2020; Scott, 1988). For the purposes of this literature review, discourse refers to communication among incels on the internet via forums, websites, and social media, as well as how masculinities are conveyed in other media representations (e.g., movies, television, and magazines).

Gender Socialization and Performing Masculinities

Masculinities can be thought of as identity performances traditionally attributed to men and the male body, "but not women" (Milani, 2015, p. 23) or the female body (Butler, 1993). Gender studies scholars tend to pluralize masculinities to indicate that there is no universally normative masculinity and to highlight how gender performances vary among individuals (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Jandt & Hundley, 2007; Milani, 2015). However, hegemonic masculinities are the commonly accepted and rarely questioned beliefs surrounding the social expectations of men, and in a patriarchal society, that men are expected to socially dominate women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Groff, 2020; Hanke, 1998).

In Western cultures, hegemonic masculinities afford white, heterosexual, cisgender men institutional privileges via social dominance over women (Groff, 2020; Hanke, 1998). American culture tends to conflate and dichotomize gender and sexuality, meaning that when individuals do not follow the societal rules for their gender, they could be perceived as homosexual (McCormack & Anderson, 2014). Hegemonic masculinity can lead to homohysteria, whereby men fear being perceived as homosexual if they fail to conform to the dominant masculine norms, because being mis-identified as gay threatens their masculinity (and all its privileges) (McCormack & Anderson, 2014). Homohysteria can limit the range of possibilities for men's gender performances (McCormack &

Anderson, 2014), making normative masculinities more restrictive. However, according to McCormack and Anderson (2014), homophobia, and thus homohysteria, have declined in the United States, allowing men to include characteristics once thought to be "gay" or "feminine" in their performance of masculinities.

McCormack and Anderson's (2014) inclusive masculinity theory is criticized for glossing over sexual politics (power dynamics in gender relations) (O'Neill, 2015). By eradicating hegemonic masculinities, inclusive masculinity theory can ignore the ways that masculinities are defined in relation to women, thus negating the need for (and previous work of) feminism (O'Neill, 2015). Technological advances have brought about hybrid masculinities, which allow one to choose which masculine characteristics to embody without losing social dominance (Ging, 2017). Incels are thought to embody hybrid masculinities because they act as victims of feminism in order to "strategically distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity" while they reinforce "existing hierarchies of power and inequality online" (Ging, 2017, p. 651). For example, they can establish homosociality in online spaces, even if they do not meet hegemonic standards of masculinity offline (Ging, 2017).

Poststructuralist theory allows one to consider that masculinities may be constructed via discourse (and vice versa) (Butler, 2006; Hanke, 1998; Jandt & Hundley, 2007; Kimmel, 2017). Men and boys use discourse to police each other's behaviors via an intra-masculine stratification of men (Morris & Anderson, 2015). For example, a YouTube video of a man dressing like a woman could elicit public commentary from other men about how that man is "misperforming" masculinities. The question is, when and where does that discourse originate? Adolescents likely learn normative gender behaviors through gender socialization, a process in which gendered behaviors are observed and internalized (Epstein & Ward, 2011; Kim et al., 2007; Rousseau et al., 2018). Behaviors modeled by media and one's social environment serve as a script by which one is to perform one's identity (Kim et al., 2007; Milani, 2015; Rousseau et al., 2018). Sex role theory purports that men are to play a specific role and women are to play the complementary role (Ging, 2017; Messner, 1998).

As evidenced by the long history of women's and men's liberation movements, some people internalize the script differently (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Casey, 2019). One such group of people are men's rights activists (MRAs), who not only believe they are as equally, if not more, oppressed than women, but they also blame women and feminism for their plight (Anti-Defamation League, 2018; Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Ging, 2017; Messner, 1998; Palma, 2019; Phillips & Milner, 2017). Like any loose-knit online community, the MRA subscriber base is ideologically diverse and frequently

splinters into smaller, niche communities such as incels (Anti-Defamation League, 2018; Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Caffrey, 2020).

Incels

The term "incel" was first published online in 1993 on a website for a Canadian student, Alana, to document her struggles to have sexual experiences (Caffrey, 2020). Sexism on the website became more prominent with an influx of male users, so Alana gave up her administrator role in 2000 (Caffrey, 2020). Incels continued to converse in forum-style websites like 4chan and Reddit where the blame for incel status shifted to women and feminism (Caffrey, 2020) and the tone shifted from supportive to self-loathing (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Romano, 2018). Many incels believe in genetic predispositions and place themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy as "beta" males (Ging, 2017). These incels contend that women are genetically inferior and prefer men of superior genes (alpha males) (Ging, 2017; Hines, 2019; Scaptura & Boyle, 2020), "and thus deny lesser males sexual access to their bodies" (Palma, 2019, p. 320). This aggrieved entitlement, or sense of having something deserved (e.g., sex from women) taken away by an "other" (e.g., women and alpha males), is often expressed through anger and violence (Kimmel, 2005; Romano, 2018).

Aggrieved entitlement to sex may have its roots in the tenets of hegemonic masculinity. As Witt (2020) explains, "the ideal hegemonic masculine subject embodies sexual ability and prowess," which results in the commodification of women's bodies in a way that builds "social and masculine capital for men" (p. 4). In other words, having sex with women is a defining feature of hegemonic masculinity; men who have sex with more women are more masculine and men who have less sex (or no sex) with women are perceived as less masculine (Witt, 2020). Aggrieved entitlement is likely the result of acceptance threat, or the feeling that one is not meeting hegemonically masculine standards (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). This can lead to felt powerlessness from believing that one's sexuality and masculinity are controlled by women (Bordo, 1994). Somewhere along the way, incels internalized a script where their role is to achieve masculinity (Bordo, 1994) through sexual encounters with women, but the women in the story are not performing their role correctly (Palma, 2019). If most people are exposed to similar messages about gender socialization, then one would expect most boys to latch onto the same beliefs. Indeed, the pressure on a man to perform hegemonic masculinities is high (Witt, 2020), but it does not always lead to the extremely polarized views on gender found in incel forums. This points to an additional influence in the process of gender socialization that leads a segment of boys to feel entitled to women's bodies, to the point of explosive rage and violence when it is denied.

Incel Discourse

Subjects are thought to become gendered through the repetition of behaviors categorized as gendered (Butler, 2006). For example, many attribute muscularity to masculinity because discourse has repeatedly made that connection. Incel discourse tends to frame masculinity in terms of what physical characteristics incels *lack* and why that makes them unsuccessful (Ging, 2017; Hines, 2019). Incel communities are often isolated from the rest of the internet, sometimes due to social media restrictions and bans (Hauser, 2017). This isolation lends itself to tribalism, or the "growth of insulated communities" that share common beliefs (Kte'pi, 2019, para. 8), which can foster an echo chamber effect. In an echo chamber, one's "beliefs, views, and assumptions are reinforced as the result of the stimuli to which the reader/viewer is exposed" (Kte'pi, 2019, para. 1). Incel discourse can become increasingly polarized (Kuhn et al., 2019) as the echo chamber reverberates and reinforces the beliefs of the community (Kte'pi, 2019).

The cyber location of incel discourse plays a significant role in its perpetuation as well. Many online platforms use algorithms to filter content based on what a user has shown interest in, creating the sense of a larger community sharing the same beliefs (Ging, 2017). In addition, memes—easily shareable ideas associated with images (Cooper, 2019)—provide a rapid delivery system to present new, and reify old, incel beliefs (Ging, 2017). Given that the primary location of incel discourse is online, media culture likely informs its development.

Masculinity and Media

As Michael Kimmel (2017) aptly explains, "American films are among the most gendered in the world" (p. 59). Whether it be an action movie with explosions and a muscular male hero, a mob movie glorifying guns, drugs, and sex, or a romantic "chick flick" with a scrawny male fawning for the attention of a pretty woman, the cinema can instruct consumers on how (and how not) to be a man (Consalvo, 2003; Hanke, 1998). Magazines are often categorized as men's or women's subjects (e.g., *Popular Mechanics* is a men's magazine, and *Bon Appetit* is a women's magazine), implying that men should be interested in mechanical work and not cooking (Milani, 2015). Television themes follow a heterosexual script in which men are consumed by fantasies and urges and are posited as sexual initiators (Kim et al., 2007).

Outrage media (e.g., *Infowars*) takes input from its majority white, male audiences and puts out content that affirms or exacerbates their beliefs (Kimmel, 2017). For instance, a consumer might call the host of a show to complain about how feminism has ruined his life. The host might respond with how angry it makes him, then present an antifeminist diatribe to his listeners, solidifying the audience's antifeminist sentiments

(Kimmel, 2017). When one observes incel discourse, there is evidence that these media representations influence incel definitions of masculinity.

While media consumption may be a passive experience of discourse, incels engage in active forms of discourse as well. Online incel communities facilitate public discussions about various aspects of performing masculinities. The following are responses on a forum post (from the "Bluepill forum" where non-incels can engage in "constructive" discourse with incels) asking if any incels had tried to improve their physical appearance: "You'd be surprise [sic] how many of us actually have good haircuts and a good weight. How many of us actually care more about our hygiene than most Chads. Of course, I guess your little brain can't process that" (TheUnworthy, 2019); "I cut my long hippie hair that I loved and took me over 3 years to grow. I've been going to the gym for 4 months and I'm actually starting to get jacked. Hasn't helped me with women at all" (kaumak, 2019); "I've gotten a car and gotten promoted at my job and tried to BE POSITIVE AND CONFIDENT MAAAAAN [sic] but none of those things have helped me in any meaningful way" (Kolibri, 2019, emphasis original). These users are describing how they have tried and failed to meet the specific standards of masculinity (i.e., physical attractiveness and financial status) that they believe should lead to sexual experiences with women.

Incels are represented in the media in a limited capacity. For example, television shows portray them as oafs (Wilkinson, 2018), and the news media often calls them sad, sexless, pathetic, insular cult members (CBC News, 2018; Wright, 2018). It should be noted that "black pilled" incels (the terms "red pill," "blue pill," and "black pill" are references to a paradox in the film *The Matrix*) (Ging, 2017) would likely agree with some of these sentiments. Black pilled incels believe that, as beta males, they are physically unattractive and unworthy of love (Palma, 2019; Romano, 2018). One can find examples of incel responses to their media presence. Some are frustrated with the lack of incel representation in the media (humancentipede, 2020) and Hollywood's refusal to use "normies and ugly dudes" in action or romance movies (Wasteman, 2020). Other incels claim that some movies are about incels (e.g., *Joker*, *Falling Down*, and *Taxi Driver*) (ElephantMan12, 2020), even though the characters in these films are never explicitly named as incels. These points establish that incels do pay attention to how the media portrays them, to the point that it enters their discourse. The following is an example of how media representations can enter discourse and shape (or be shaped by) reality.

In 2014, a self-identified incel named Elliot Rodger killed six people, largely because, as his manifesto purported, he had been rejected by women (Caffrey, 2020). The *New York Times* published his 141-page manifesto detailing his life as an incel as well as his YouTube video announcing his "day of retribution" (Lovett & Nagourney, 2014).

Following all this infamy, Rodger was canonized by the incel community as "Saint Elliot" (Witt, 2020). His initials are still used to describe violence (e.g., "Going ER" or "Doing an ER") (Wright, 2018). His initials also appear in words on incel forums to establish a relationship between incel violence and something else (e.g., *Taxi Driver*, a movie about an insane, lonely, violent taxi driver, is stylized as "*Taxi DrivER*") (vanSavage, 2020). The widespread glorification of Rodger's violence likely inspired Alek Minassian's 2018 Toronto van attack (killing ten), which was preceded by a social media post hailing the "Supreme Gentleman Elliott Rodger!" (CBC News, 2018). This may be evidence of reality (Rodger's attack) shaping discourse ("Going ER" and "Supreme Gentleman") and discourse ("Supreme Gentleman") influencing reality (Minassian's attack).

Conclusion

Although many online communities celebrate violence, the act and glorification of violence is rampant in the incel community (Anti-Defamation League, 2018). While there is an ongoing debate among scholars as to whether one's internet persona reflects one's true beliefs or offline intentions (Aricak et al., 2011; Phillips & Milner, 2017), the prevalence of incel violence is indicative of some connection between discourse and reality. As Palma (2019) explains, "understanding the narrative underpinnings of entitled beliefs may yield insight into gender-based violence" (p. 325). The gender identity incels perform is likely based on a script they internalized in adolescence (Kim et al., 2007; Milani, 2015; Rousseau et al., 2018). Incel culture and its potential for violence has received ample attention (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Casey, 2019; Ging, 2017), but there is a lack of research identifying if, or how media representations of men, masculinities, and incels are affecting incel discourse. According to poststructuralist theory, it is possible for discourse and reality to influence each other (Gannon & Davies, 2005; Popan, 2020; Scott, 1988). When that reality is destruction of one's self or others, then the discourse and all its influences should be examined.

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