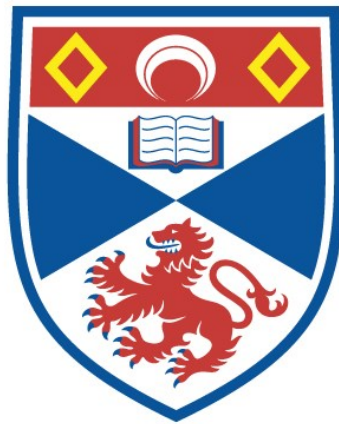


"TOO MUCH INTERNET AND NOT ENOUGH REAL LIFE  
MAKES JACK A PARANOID BOY": THE AFFECTIVE  
ATTRACTION OF THE MANOSPHERE

Jack William Bonnamy

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St Andrews



2023

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## Abstract

This thesis explores why certain men are drawn to three specific Manosphere forums: /r/TheRedPill, /r/MGTOW, and Incels.co. I begin by acknowledging that the men on these forums are genuinely suffering as a result of the pressures of performing masculinity in neoliberal societies. The confluence of these two factors drives certain men to seek alternative discourses to both explain their situation and offer solutions to it.

To explore this, I construct a theoretical framework that synthesises the work of Ty Solomon and Sara Ahmed, that outlines the relationship between discourse, affect, and emotion. This framework allows me to understand how the discourses on all three groups translate men's affect into recognisable emotional signifiers and, in doing so, construct men's affective experiences as experiences of loss – specifically a loss control, masculine identity, and meaning. At the same time, each discourse offers these men an encounter with control over their lives and women, masculine identity, and a sense of meaning which allows them to understand their circumstances and the world around them. Each discourse therefore becomes a site of strong affective investment, both attracting men to the forums and keeping them there.

None of these discourses, however, successfully delivers on their promises of wholeness. Instead, these men are left to oscillate between wholeness and lack, striving to regain control, identity, and meaning but never quite getting there. But herein lies hope. This oscillation means these men are not securely held within the logic of these discourses. Instead, there is a chance they might divest from them, and seek another alternative. The promotion of alternative discourses that do not work on a violent and misogynistic basis and are instead founded on positive feminist values can thus offer a more sustainable and less harmful alternative to these men.

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# Acknowledgements

It is difficult to know where to draw the line when thanking those who helped in the process of research and writing this thesis. Four years is a long time, and over that time I have benefitted from the friendship, guidance, and support of numerous people in both big and small ways.

First, my profound gratitude to my parents, without whom (it goes without saying) I would not be here. Thank you for your support during my thesis, and for acknowledging the importance of learning and curiosity and instilling that value in me from such a young age. And thank you to my grandparents and to our weekly phone calls which kept me feeling connected to home and provided a sanctuary especially when the going was tough. To Nana Brenda in particular, thank you for your unwavering support. Sorry for choosing to study somewhere so far away...

Secondly, to my friends in Scotland. Tegg, Camilla, Lina, and Natalie, I feel very fortunate to have met you early on in my time at St Andrews and to have enjoyed many walks around Fife, days with puffins, games nights, and vegan food. To Mara, thank you for your friendship and guidance throughout this time, and for the many walks down West Sands and Lade Braes to either talk about the loftier things or share favourite moments from Community.

To Jess, thank you for your love, patience, and support during the toughest days of this project. Thank you for putting up with me, for listening to me talk about the same things over and over, and for providing a cat when it was needed most.

Thank you also to friends outside of St Andrews and those I have sadly fallen out of touch with during my research. Four years is a long time, and relationships flourish and wither, but I am grateful for your listening and your support.

Thank you to Professor Caron Gentry who encouraged me to apply to St Andrews for my PhD in the first place and who offered guidance and support for the first three years of my research. I am so grateful for your help over the last four years and for giving me the opportunity to study in such a stunning place. Thank you to Dr Alison Duncan Kerr for your early guidance and for encouraging me to look into affect theory and the philosophy of emotions. The influence of our long discussions is evident throughout this thesis. Thank you also to Dr Laura Mills for your guidance and help during the final stages of this thesis. And, last but certainly not least, thank you to Dr Roxani Krystalli for stepping in during the final stages of this project and for the unwavering and tireless support. I am deeply grateful for all the time and effort you put in to helping me get the thesis finished and ready for submission, and for the encouragement and help in finding balance.

This work was supported by the AD Links Foundation for the first three years. Without this funding it would have been impossible for me to study at St Andrews, and so I am deeply grateful. Thank you also for the University of St Andrews's generosity in providing funding throughout my time here. Particular thanks are owed to Joyce Lamprey whose advice and help in applying for funding was invaluable. And finally, thank you also to Nioma for listening.

## List of Acronyms

PUA – Pick Up Artists

GFC – Global Financial Crisis

MGTOW – Men Going Their Own Way

EP/B – Evolutionary Psychology/Biology

MRA – Men's Rights Activist

OP – Original poster

## Introduction

*Welcome to the Internet  
What would you prefer?  
Would you like to fight for civil rights or tweet a racial slur?  
Be happy  
Be horny  
Be bursting with rage  
We got a million different ways to engage*

(Burnham, 2021)

Below is an extract from the fieldnotes I took on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2019, the first day of my autoethnographic research. I remember feeling uncertainty and trepidation upon first opening OneNote and starting a new notebook.

*I start by opening up r/theredpill. It seems as good a place to start as any. It's not a completely random choice though. As the subreddit that looms largest in my mind, and the community which started my interest in online misogyny, it also seems fitting to start here. Opening the board, I am instantly faced with a testimonial which contains a lot of the language I've come to associate with r/theredpill. Phrases like "kissless virgin". I was also faced with a lot of terms I had never heard of before, RSD bootcamp being one of them. Some quick Googling revealed that an RSD stands for Real Social Dynamics. It seems that RSD is all about teaching men how to date and learn the art of picking up women.*

The two extracts below come from a summary I wrote about /r/MGTOW and Incels.co, respectively, seven weeks into my research. By this point, I had started to get more of feel for how to keep fieldnotes, but I still felt trepidation.

*The emotional tone of /r/MGTOW is fairly similar to r/theredpill in that it has a lot of pride, specifically masculine pride. It's probably the most overall positive sub as well. A lot of it is just posts of landscapes and people doing stuff with their spare time. Comments on these posts are mostly people complimenting people's photography/other skills and supporting their decision to go their own way. There is, however, a lot of negatively*



*[sic] to be found in the posts which are trying to ridicule women/feminism or the posts which are trying to show why women are a negative force in your life. These tend to be outright vulgar, violent, and vitriolic.*

*It's clear to see how, like with r/theredpill, incels.co is very sticky in terms of the sense of community it creates, especially from the perspective that it becomes a place where people feel they can confide in other users and get advice. Although, quite a lot of the time, advice is met with sarcasm and derision. Either way, the community brings together like-minded and like-feeling people who users clearly think will give sound advice when asked. Beyond this, they think these people will understand/want to hear about their problems. This is especially the case with incels.co because a lot of their grievances wouldn't be accepted in other forums in the form that they express them. There's a real sense of us vs them, which compounds this.*

All three of the forums I chose to research – /r/TheRedPill, /r/MGTOW, and Incels.co – are part of what is more broadly known as the ‘Manosphere’. It is difficult to define quite what the Manosphere is. Some scholars and journalists have defined it as a “loose confederacy” of interest groups that are connected by their interest in men’s rights (Ging, 2019, p.2). This is partly correct, but they are not *just* interested in men’s rights. In fact, many of these groups lack the coherent political platform or cause associated with the more recognisable men’s rights movement, such as rights for divorced fathers, or the prevention of suicide in men.

What actually underpins these groups is a belief that “men and boys are victimized; that feminists in particular are the perpetrators of such attacks” (Marwick and Lewis, 2015, p.15). This covers anti-feminist groups, father’s rights groups, incels, paelomasculinists (men who think male domination is natural), and many other groups besides (Ibid). It is also important not to view these groups as distinct from one another, but rather as “interconnected nodes in a mediate network of misogynistic discourses and practices” (Bratich and Banet-weiser, 2019, p.5008). Of these many groups, I chose to focus on The Red Pill, MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way), and incels specifically because they each offer a distinct perspective on and solution to men’s victimisation.

## **A brief introduction to Incels.co, MGTOW, and The Red Pill**

### **Incels.co: “If she isn’t a virgin, she is a slut”**

Incels.wiki, a site run by incels consisting of various articles about this subculture, defines ‘incel’ as “an academic sociological term that is short for involuntary celibate or involuntary celibacy” (incels.wiki, n.d.). It refers to people who are in “a state of lifelong incelhood” (Ibid). It states, however, that there is a lot of disagreement among self-identified incels over the exact definition of what an incel is (Ibid). But there is some common ground. Incels believe they have flaws and defects which cannot be changed, and which mean they are destined to live a life of isolation devoid of love and affection. They believe women to be self-interested and focused only on finding the most attractive men to have sex with – wealthy men might also be successful with women, but only because they provide financial support which women exploit. Incels, meanwhile, believe there is nothing they can do to improve their situation. All they can do is share their experiences of loneliness, pain, and yearning, whilst targeting women with misogynistic invective and violence.

In its most extreme form, incel violence manifests as mass shootings, and there have been several attacks to date with links to incel subculture. Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian, to name but two, were both members of incel-related forums and stated that their motivation for murdering multiple people was, in part at least, their hatred of women and their anguish at the lack of attention they received from them (Cecco, 2019; Freeman, 2014). They are, therefore, a dangerous group, and the potential for their misogynistic and hate-filled discourse to make the leap from words to action is not to be underestimated. It is not unusual, for instance, to see users encourage each other to “go ER [Elliot Rodger]” and seek revenge on women.

But I was conflicted about this forum throughout my research. Despite reading abhorrent posts and disagreeing fundamentally with their anti-feminist and violent worldview, I also felt a great deal of empathy of the users on this forum. Early on I noticed that there was more going on

here than simply a coalescing of misogynistic men who felt they were being denied sex. Spending time on Incels.co reveals a complex mix of mental illness, self-loathing, low self-esteem, pain, rage, and, to use Kimmel's term, aggrieved entitlement which all comes together in a forum that is deeply negative and toxic (2013, p.8). Running through all of this, however, is deep vein of irreverent dark humour. It was certainly the funniest forum I spent time on, with its frequent use of irony and amusing jargon to describe situations in an exaggerated way for comic effect. There were, of course, moments on this forum that shocked me and posts which I found abhorrent, but there were also posts that I empathised with. In between the misogynistic invective, there are posts from users genuinely seeking help and advice for dealing with mental illnesses. My own experience with mental illness meant I felt as if I understood at least part of what these men were conveying. Like my response, therefore, the forum is conflicted and contains a multitude of different themes and tones.

Like the other forums I researched, the future of Incels.co always felt at risk. Incels.co had existed in previous iterations – as Incels.me and Incels.is – but each time had been shut down by the company hosting the domain. The company that owns the domain .co has since suspended Incels.co and so the forum has returned to its Incels.is address. This is undoubtedly not the last time that the forum will change address. Each time the forum is reincarnated, however, it retains its layout, aesthetic, and userbase. Incels.co did, however, undergo an aesthetic update whilst I was researching it. It began as a simple website with little in the way of complex design or stylistic flourishes. The best way of summarising it would be to say that it was functional. It had a simple blue and white colour scheme with a menu bar across the top listing several options. I feel this older design suited the Incels.co userbase better. This is a forum that exudes apathy and a dismissive attitude towards aesthetics as well as life more generally.

**/r/MGTOW: “Women can be addictive. Just remember it all ends up in the divorce court...”**

The /r/ in /r/MGTOW denotes that it was a forum hosted on the news and content aggregation site Reddit. Reddit is composed of many forums, known as subreddits, which pertain to different interests. There are, for instance, subreddits for knitting, bikes, and some slightly more unusual ones such as /r/birdwitharms in which people share pictures of, well, birds with arms drawn on them. I say “was” because /r/MGTOW was banned by Reddit on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2021, after my research on the forum had ended. The forum had been quarantined for the duration of my time spent on it, meaning a registered Reddit account was required to view it and it would not appear either in Google search results or searches on Reddit itself. Quarantine is often viewed as the first step towards an outright ban, although /r/TheRedPill has also been under quarantine for several years without being formally removed from Reddit. Since then, users from /r/MGTOW have moved to other MGTOW forums.

/r/MGTOW was the forum I knew least about as I started my research. All I had seen from this forum was one post that featured a coffee mug set in front of a view of vast mountain range. Initially, there were aspects of this forum that appealed to me. At a glance, men seemed to predominantly share pictures of beautiful vistas, and as someone who enjoys being in nature it struck me that maybe /r/MGTOW was mainly about finding respite from a frantic urban lifestyle. I was half right. Men on /r/MGTOW did aspire to a form of male separatism and seek to remove themselves from society, but they did so because they believe women have a negative influence on their ability to achieve their goals and lead fulfilling lives. Thus, the image of the coffee and the mountain range represents a desire to escape contemporary society and its allegedly feminising influence. In a way, /r/MGTOW’s belief that men should separate themselves from women and

their influence makes more sense than /r/TheRedPill's position that women are to be held in contempt but also seduced.

Prior to the ban, /r/MGTOW was an active forum which featured mostly memes and screenshots designed to prove that women are stupid, inferior, and self-interested. Beyond that, the ideology of /r/MGTOW's was not really discussed or that well developed when compared to Incels.co or /r/TheRedPill. Although ideologies of all three groups contain contradictions and are, at times, incoherent, /r/MGTOW did not have a strict guiding ethos. There is also very little discussion of what it takes to 'go your own way' and no codified set of rules or principles. Unlike /r/TheRedPill which features extensive and explicit discussion of the ideology underpinning the group, /r/MGTOW's ideology was mostly deduced from the memes posted on the forum and reading the comments posted beneath them.

Over time, /r/MGTOW became an incredibly repetitive and frustrating forum to research. Most of the memes recycled various stereotypes about women with ex-wives and -girlfriends being targeted in particular. The memes were designed to paint women as dangerous, vicious, and vengeful and to convey the idea that men are far better off without women. The memes on /r/MGTOW portrayed women in a way that was often exaggerated or purely fabricated. The 'gotcha' moments where men pointed out how a woman was being ridiculous were also contrived and at times didn't follow. After several weeks on the forum, I was growing impatient. It felt, at times, as if just a few days on the forum would have yielded enough data to give a good picture of what /r/MGTOW was about. But I persisted and there were, at times, posts which broke the mould and provided new perspectives on what men found so attractive about the MGTOW worldview.

## **/r/TheRedPill: “Feminism is a rejection of biological nature”**

‘Taking the Red Pill’ is a term with far wider usage on the Internet, particularly among the alt-right and conspiracy theorist forums more generally. It refers to the Matrix films and the process of waking up to the truth (Baele et al., 2021, p.1675; Van Valkenburgh, 2018, p.5). But in the context of /r/TheRedPill specifically, the term refers to a forum that focuses on the discussion of seduction techniques, women’s behaviour, and masculine identity. These are men who have ‘taken the red pill’ and have thus been awoken to the reality that women control society (Van Valkenburgh, 2018, p.6). Feminism is viewed as a sexual strategy that women have used to upset a delicate natural balance (Ibid). Men therefore need to learn a counterstrategy to regain dominance in the dating world and society more generally (Ibid). Posts on this forum are lengthy, often over 500 words, and debates over terms and concepts are frequent. Compared to both Incels.co and /r/MGTOW, therefore, there is a much deeper engagement with theories, techniques, and the overall ideology of the group.

/r/TheRedPill exudes a pride similar to that of /r/MGTOW. It revels in all things hyper-masculine including fast cars, financial success, and boasting about sexual exploits. There is also something about the way in which posts are written on /r/TheRedPill that is difficult to either quantify or explain. They are written in a matter of fact, black and white way which radiates certainty and self-assuredness. This leads to a forum with a punchy and forceful tone that draws readers in with its ability to cut through small talk and pleasantries. The posts are also diverse compared to /r/MGTOW. They tackle issues ranging from the reason why men are struggling to find a sense of purpose in the modern world to which seduction techniques to use in different circumstances. Comments below these posts were always very lively, with users getting into debates with one another and posting very lengthy replies, regularly over 500 words long. All of this served to give the sense that this forum had a very engaged user base, more so than

/r/MGTOW and Incels.co. Running throughout these discussions is a mixture of neoliberal language and concepts borrowed from evolutionary biology and psychology. For instance, human interactions are seen as taking place within the context of a “sexual marketplace”, and women’s behaviour is seen as predetermined by evolutionary factors (Van Valkenburgh, 2018, p.14). These two seemingly quite separate discourses come together to create a deterministic narrative which is used to explain women’s behaviour and justify men’s behaviour.

There is a strong emphasis on posts being of a high quality on /r/TheRedPill. Posting memes is forbidden by the forum’s policies and low-effort posts aren’t tolerated. Users must proofread and format their posts and think carefully about their opinions. For the most part this is enforced indirectly by other users attacking ideas deemed incompatible with /r/TheRedPill’s core principles. /r/TheRedPill’s rules against low-effort posts also means the moderators remove posts that aren’t deemed to be of a high enough quality. On /r/TheRedPill, therefore, I was wary that I was only seeing posts that had gone through a vetting process beforehand. The fact that some posts don’t get past the vetting process means it is difficult to know how many were judged unworthy. The only way in which the process is visible is through the relatively low number of new posts on /r/TheRedPill compared to the other two forums. Sometimes there would only be a couple of new posts a day, compared to Incels.co and /r/MGTOW which had easily more than 30 a day. /r/MGTOW and Incels.co also have moderators, but they appeared to be far less interventionist.

During my time researching /r/TheRedPill there was a decline in the rate at which new posts were submitted. The strict rule against low-effort posts means that users also self-censor and do not post frivolously, so this was never a forum with a fresh crop of new submissions for me to read each day. But there was definitely a reduction in the frequency of new posts towards the end. This is partly down to the quarantined status of /r/TheRedPill and the fact that, even during the

time I spent on the forum, /r/TheRedPill was threatened with a complete ban twice. As a result, the moderators of /r/TheRedPill decided to set up a different site, TRP.red, and many users have decided to make that their Red Pill forum of choice instead. The site was initially set up in 2016 but was not properly active until around 2020 when moderators on /r/TheRedPill started encouraging users to use TRP.red instead, mainly due to the constant threat of an imminent ban. TRP.red is also a forum that allows for the discussion of seduction techniques, politics, and Red Pill theories, but without having to adhere to Reddit's overarching policies on what can and can't be posted. There is also little threat of the forum being shut down. Discussions are divided into "tribes" based on their theme. The growing popularity of this site explains the dwindling engagement with /r/TheRedPill and it is unclear quite how long the subreddit will continue to exist or be active as users leave for TRP.red.

## **Why the Manosphere?**

When I look back at the journey from my undergraduate degree to now, I see a series of hazy half decisions and can't quite put my finger on the moment I decided I wanted to study the Manosphere at PhD level. What I do remember is the first time I came across /r/TheRedPill whilst browsing Reddit one afternoon, back in 2015 during the third year of my undergraduate degree at the University of Warwick. I came across the forum by accident. I had never even heard of the term 'pick up artist' before and was intrigued by the way in which users on the forum discussed seduction techniques and ways of understanding women's behaviour.

At the time, I had been single for quite a while, and was also going through a period of poor mental health. I felt anxious, isolated, and overwhelmed by even small things. Finding /r/TheRedPill, therefore, could have been a real moment of hope and salvation. The message the forum espouses – that it's possible to learn seduction techniques to improve your chances with



women and be more comfortable in social situations more generally – is a particularly potent one if you feel lonely, socially awkward, and as if your experience of university isn't quite what you'd expected. But the forum just confused and intrigued me. I couldn't accept that the world could be reduced to simple rules, or that it was possible to learn the art of seduction. It all seemed a bit ridiculous to me, and I thought that if I were to try any of the techniques they would just come across as awkward and stilted. Maybe these sorts of lines worked in an American bar in films, but there seemed to be very little chances of 'success' in a small town in the midlands. There was also something about the forum that was clearly unethical and, although I didn't quite have this vocabulary at the time, un-feminist.

That year I also took a module on gender and development. It introduced me to feminism and with that came both an analytical lens through which to view the world and a sense of emancipation. It allowed me to reflect on my own position in the world as a man, and how hegemonic masculinity placed pressures on me to act in a certain way. It also led to me deciding to apply for a Masters. Throughout this time, /r/TheRedPill remained in the back of my mind. I was interested in why this group existed in the first place and why men are so attracted to it. What was it about /r/TheRedPill that drew these men in, and why hadn't I been convinced by their message when others had?

The rising prominence of the Manosphere during this period is what encouraged me to make online misogyny the subject of my Masters dissertation. I looked at instances of female journalists receiving abusive messages on Twitter and questioned what effects this would have on women's ability to be heard in cyberspace. My Masters dissertation, therefore, focused on the effects of online misogyny on women. For my PhD, I wanted to look at where this misogyny originated because in order to fully understand why so many women are the subject of misogynistic abuse both online and offline, it is necessary to go to where these attitudes and beliefs are

cultivated. Understanding the Manosphere and why it has only increased in prominence and size over the last decade is, in other words, integral to tackling online and offline misogyny.

The Manosphere does not exist in a vacuum, and so another reason for researching it is to understand other similar groups, both online and offline. The Proud Boys movement, for instance, is adjacent to the Manosphere and played a significant role in the attack on the Capitol in 2021 (Beckett, 2021). But it is difficult to define quite what these groups hold in common. They are all populated by men and are united by a shared misogyny. But the Manosphere is far from homogenous and overlaps significantly with other contemporary groups and movements such as QAnon and the alt-right. It seems to me that running through all of these groups is an anger and a sense of, to use Kimmel's term, aggrieved entitlement, that drives some men to extremist groups and extreme positions (Kimmel, 2013, p.8). My hope is that through exploring the affective draw of three groups from within the Manosphere this research will further understanding of the wider rise of extremist groups that are overwhelmingly populated by men and characterised by violence and misogyny.

## **Understanding the Manosphere**

The main question guiding my research was: Why are some men drawn to these groups, and what is it about them that makes them not only stay in them, but spend significant amounts of time on them? I had some supplementary questions too. I was interested in what differentiated the groups and why, for instance, one man may feel drawn to /r/MGTOW and not /r/TheRedPill. I was also interested in how focusing on emotions could help to explain the attraction of these groups. Emotions, once a neglected subject of International Relations, have increasingly received scholarly attention (Åhäll and Gregory, 2013, p.117; Bleiker et al., 2014, p.490; Hutchison, 2019, p.285). In

this research project, I wanted to look into the way in which these groups not only appealed to certain emotions, but also shaped them.

I argue that a mixture of neoliberalism and hegemonic masculinity is causing a significant portion of men to suffer. I found it hard to decide on a word to describe the situation certain men find themselves in. The word 'suffer' seems quite strong, but when considering the displays of intense emotion I came across on these forums it seems fitting. The mixture of the crisis of neoliberalism and masculinity moral panic has led to a situation in which men view failure as an existential threat to their identity but are simultaneously in an environment where failure is a constant risk. Not only that, but it creates an environment in which a significant portion of men are under enormous pressure to adhere to certain ideals. For instance, men feel at risk of failing to live up to their role as breadwinner, failing to maintain control over relationships, and failing to remain independent, strong, and emotionally stoic. This is happening against a backdrop of gains for gender equality which are interpreted by the men on these forums as attacks on both them and masculinity more generally. In short, there is a growing constituency of men who are experiencing a rising tide of negative emotion.

This drives men to seek alternative discourses which might explain their suffering. The way in which affect, emotions, and discourse interact thus holds the key to understanding why it is these forums are so attractive to certain men. I used Solomon's (2012) Lacanian conceptualisation of affect and discourse to build my own theory to explain the attractiveness of the Manosphere. Solomon argues that discourse translates affect into meaningful emotion signifiers and, in this process, something is lost (Ibid, p.920). Discourses that become sites of strong affective investment are those that offer an encounter with that which has been lost, and thus a return to wholeness (Ibid). I build on Solomon's theory and introduce my own

interpretation of the wholeness discourses offer. In the case of /r/TheRedPill, /r/MGTOW, and Incels.co, discourses primarily offer an encounter with control, identity, and meaning.

Throughout my time spent researching /r/TheRedPill, /r/MGTOW, and Incels.co, I was struck by how frequently the theme of control came up. Whether men were discussing the fear of a lack of control, or how to regain control, it loomed large in discussions on all three forums. On that basis, I argue that the discourses present on these groups are taking men's negative affective experiences, translating them into recognisable emotional signifiers, and in doing so are constructing the subject as lacking control. The same can be said for masculine identity. Each forum has its own particular configuration of the ideal masculine subject. There were also many discussions about what it was to be a man or mocking men who did not fit the masculine ideal on each forum. It is important to note that control is an integral part of masculine identity, and to have lost control, or be lacking in it, is to have failed. Thus, in offering a return to control, these discourses are also offering a return to a masculine identity. This includes the demand that men have control over their lives, their emotions, and their relationships. Control and identity, therefore, are intrinsically linked.

The discourses on these sites also construct men as lacking meaning. Previous discourses that did the job of making sense of the world no longer accurately explain events and men's circumstances. The dominant discourse on masculinity in Western societies leads men to expect a job, a family, sex, and power and of course, many of these men still experience these life milestones without issue. But when they are seen to be consistently denied, men eventually lose confidence in the dominant discourse's logic. In other words, men who are in stable employment, have a family, and are in positions of power are not likely to join groups like /r/MGTOW, /r/TheRedPill and certainly not Incels.co. It is men who feel they have been denied these things that seek alternative discourses on the Manosphere. Meaning is linked to control in that, without meaning,

there is no ability to predict or understand why something is happening. It is also linked to identity in that having a sense of meaning also provides one with a sense of one's place in the world.

Analysing these discourses and how they offer a return to control, identity, and meaning will constitute the main body of this thesis. I will show, however, how each discourse ultimately fails to deliver on this promised encounter and men are therefore left to oscillate between the continuing to attempt to achieve wholeness, but only ever returning to a position of lack. The result is frustration, anger, and discontent which is then redirected towards women. Women, in other words, are constructed as the barrier that stands between men and wholeness. I will also argue, however, that within this dynamic lies hope. Although men might oscillate between wholeness and lack, it is possible that they might begin to divest from the logic of these discourses. When that happens, it is possible that another alternative discourse might attract them, one that is not based on misogyny, violence, and aggrieved entitlement.

## **Thesis Structure**

This thesis is divided into six chapters. Chapter one sets up the theoretical framework I used to analyse the material gathered during my research. This framework consists of three parts: poststructural feminism, masculinity and, as mentioned above, Solomon's (2012) Lacanian conceptualisation of affect, emotions, and discourse. I will explain each of these areas in detail and discuss how they interact and how they will inform my analysis.

Chapter two outlines the 'problem' my thesis is attempting to address. The use of the word 'problem' here is deliberate. As with any thesis, there is an issue or concept that requires further exploration, and in this chapter I will explore and sketch the boundaries of this problem giving my thoughts on its causes. No thesis exists in a vacuum, so I will begin by summarising existing literature on the Manosphere and the contributions made thus far. In the second half of this

chapter, I will outline what I believe has caused the rise of the Manosphere over the last decade, namely neoliberalism and the masculinity moral panic.

The methodology chapter will outline the way in which I went about researching /r/TheRedPill, /r/MGTOW, and Incels.co. I chose to conduct an autoethnographic study and the reasons for this are discussed here. As I was completely new to this methodology, there is also a lengthy discussion of how I went about learning what autoethnography offered, and how I decided how to conduct my own. I also discuss the ethical considerations my project entailed and show how I came to the decisions I did.

Chapter four, the first empirical chapter, discusses the feminism-as-problem discourse. This discourse is the thread that ties all three forums together and can be thought of as the diagnosis they offer for men's suffering. It provides an explanation for why these men feel they are not getting what they believe they are entitled to. To use the language of my theoretical framework, this discourse takes the negative affect these men are feeling and translates it into recognisable emotional signifiers. In doing so it shapes men's affective experiences as experiences of loss. They have lost control over society and their lives, lost a sense of positive masculine identity, and as a result have lost a sense of meaning. This loss is then blamed on femininity and feminism, both of which are seen as the cause of men's problems. Feminism, according to the feminism-as-problem discourse, has upset a delicate 'natural' balance and this is causing men to suffer as a result.

Chapter five brings together both /r/MGTOW and /r/TheRedPill to discuss the solutions they offer to the feminism-as-problem discourse. The discourses on both forums promise men an encounter with identity and control albeit in slightly different ways. Both forums have discourses of independence and self-sufficiency which are designed to give men an encounter with control and identity. Where they vary is in their orientation to women. /r/MGTOW argues

that men need to separate themselves from the feminising effect of society, but /r/TheRedPill argues that men should turn their efforts towards improving their sexual strategy. I will go on to demonstrate how each discourse fails to deliver on its promise of an encounter with identity and control and how, within this, lies hope that these men might be attracted to other, less misogynistic, discourses.

Finally, chapter six focuses on Incels.co. This forum is distinct from /r/MGTOW and /r/TheRedPill in a number of ways. The main difference comes in the form of how incels view agency, or rather a lack thereof. In contrast to /r/MGTOW and /r/TheRedPill, incels view everything as pre-determined and unchangeable. They feel, in essence, that they are unable to improve their situation and therefore can only wallow in their misfortune. In this chapter, I explore this discourse of fatalism why anyone would choose to be a member of a forum which has such a pessimistic outlook. I will argue that incel fatalism offers wholeness by providing an antidote to the responsabilism that pervades neoliberal capitalist society. On top of this, Incels.co offers both a sense of belonging and emotional support, and an encounter with control and identity via a form of vicarious victory not too dissimilar from that found on /r/MGTOW. As with /r/MGTOW and /r/TheRedPill, I will show how the discourses present on Incels.co also fail to deliver on their promise of an encounter with wholeness, and how within this lies hope.

## **Chapter One: Theory**

Theory is an important foundation for this project, but I do not want the existence of a chapter specifically on theory to imply that there is a strict distinction between theory and practice. My theoretical framework developed throughout my research. During that time, there were radical revisions and changes, with a lot of difficult decisions about whether or not to steer away from areas I had spent a lot of time researching and thinking about. This chapter, in other words, represents only the theory that survived a number of sharp changes of direction. I will begin by discussing poststructural feminism as a means of providing a foundation on which the rest of my theoretical framework will be built. Following this, I will discuss masculinity and the particular concepts I will be borrowing from men and masculinities studies in order to substantiate my analysis of /r/TheRedPill, /r/MGTOW, and Incels.co. Finally, I will bring in emotions and discuss how they are integral to understanding the attraction of these groups to the men that join them.

### **Poststructural Feminism**

Often placed in the last weeks of a module on political theory, poststructuralism is situated as the end point of a theoretical journey. Liberalism and Realism have been covered; Constructivism, the English School and Marxism explained; and, finally, one arrives at feminism, the aesthetic turn, postcolonialism, and poststructuralism. During the first year of my undergraduate degree, I remember feeling the weeks getting progressively more abstract and difficult to get my head around. But there was something in those last few weeks that grabbed me. The critical angle that feminism, postcolonialism, and poststructuralism offered was exciting and provided the prospect of viewing the world in a radically different way. After reading more poststructuralist theory, I realised that realism and liberalism made sense to me precisely because they were built upon



assumptions that I was already familiar with. In fact, they were assumptions I had grown up around as a white, heterosexual, straight, cisgendered male in the context of liberal humanism. Poststructuralism, feminism, and other critical approaches, on the other hand, involve highlighting the assumptions that underpin your beliefs, deconstructing them, and imagining alternatives. In this section, I want to outline poststructural feminism by first discussing the two terms individually.

When I think of poststructuralism, first and foremost, I think of an abstract, fuzzy, but illuminating collection of theories and ideas. I think of theories that reject of the possibility of absolute truth and objectivity, placing far more emphasis on the socially constructed nature of our beliefs and behaviours. I also think of a bus journey I took back from campus during my undergraduate degree, just after a lecture on poststructuralism. Robert Macfarlane writes that “occasionally – once or twice in a lifetime if you are lucky – you encounter an idea so powerful in its implications that it unsettles the ground you walk on” (2019, p.87). Here Macfarlane is talking about the “wood wide web”, the fungal network that forms an “underground social network” and facilitates the transferal of biochemicals between trees in a non-hierarchical way (Ibid, p.89-90). In my case, this unsettling was the result of being shown, through a lecture on Foucault, the contingent nature of things. The idea that just because something is, does not mean it was inevitable, and that reality does not exhaust possibility. As I took the bus journey back from campus, I looked down from the top deck at various things and wondered how they came to be as they were. I went past a hospital, cars, numerous coffee shops. All of these things that had initially seemed self-evident and banal, were suddenly the result of a chain of contingent developments and decisions.

As mentioned in the introduction, learning about feminism had similarly life-changing effects. It provided the tools to reflect on both the expectations placed on me by patriarchy and my own ignorance and internalised misogyny. Feminism’s focus on challenging power dynamics

and social hierarchies and how these manifest as binary distinctions between masculine and feminine traits is particularly relevant to my own work. Public/private, reason/emotion, order/disorder are examples of such binaries, with the first term in each being the privileged category associated with masculinity and the former the subordinated category associated with femininity (Wooldridge, 2015, p.3). Uncovering and problematising these binaries both reveals and challenges patriarchy and allows for the possibility of change and resistance.

Feminist scholars have long been interested in binaries and the ways in which they are the result of, and reinforce, gender inequality. Elshtain (1981) discusses the history and implications of the public/private dichotomy, arguing that it has shaped Western political thought for millennia. As such, public and private are embedded in a complex web of associations and therefore linked to other binaries like culture/nature, male/female and rational/emotional (Ibid, p.5). Women's association with the private and men's with the public explains why women have been silenced and omitted from political speech for centuries. Pateman explores the dichotomy of order/disorder in a similar way, arguing that women are seen as unable to develop the capacities for civil life, and are therefore a source of disorder in the public sphere (Ibid, p.22). They are irrational, emotional, and associated with nature. Men, on the other hand, are rational, ordered, and associated with civil life. Recognising such binaries and how they operate played an important role in understanding the ideologies of the three groups I chose to study.

To speak of feminism as a homogenous discipline would be mistaken. Feminism is a broad church with a vast number of different vestries, naves, and alcoves. Elizabeth Adams St Pierre states that "feminism is a highly contested term, as is poststructuralism, so it is impossible to produce a comfortable synthesis from those vertiginous locations, a new foundation on which to situate poststructural feminism" (2000, p.477). In other words, defining and configuring poststructural feminism is not easy. It is something that is always being reconfigured and is thus,

by definition, insecure. Weedon argues that poststructuralism offers a conceptual foundation for feminist practice, and feminism can draw from “poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and identify strategies for change” (1987, pp.40–41). At the same time, poststructuralism is often accused of omitting gender, and this can be rectified by incorporating feminist theory. The two theories, therefore, have a lot to offer one another.

Both poststructuralism and feminism have a similar approach to knowledge. For feminist theorists, dominant conceptions of reality and truth in patriarchal Western society are mainly male constructions which seek to perpetuate male domination (Gavey, 1997, p.52). Similarly, for poststructuralists, “power and knowledge directly imply one another” (Foucault, 1991, p.27). As a result, they both doubt the possibility of absolute truth and objectivity, and see the construction of truth as the result of dominant discourses rather than any external, measurable values (Gavey, 1997, p.52). Poststructuralists and feminists also both highlight and challenge the particular kind of rationality that underpins humanist knowledge creation (Pierre, 2000, p.486). For humanists, reason is seen as the one and only basis upon which knowledge can be created and judged. This sets up a binary distinction between reason and unreason, or reason/emotion. A feminist analysis reveals that reason is associated with masculinity and emotion with femininity, and thus the former is privileged, and latter subordinated. Similarly, poststructuralism problematises the humanist conception of reason, noting that it, like all other concepts, is “produced within discourses in which certain statements are privileged and others are silenced or excluded” (Ibid). Women and women’s experiences are one example of a group that have been silenced, something feminist scholars and practitioners have been seeking to highlight and challenge for decades. The result, as was highlighted above, is a discourse that is overwhelmingly masculine in its construction and where Reason is not only privileged but seen as something only men inherently possess.

Identifying binary distinctions, such as reason/emotion, and how they relate to one another, and reinforce gender inequality was a key part of my own analysis. Binaries operate throughout the discourses on all three forums, so acknowledging them and unpacking them was integral to understanding the assumptions they are based on. Gendered binaries create hierarchies which relegate women to the private sphere to protect the state from the disorder they ostensibly create (Pateman, 1980, p.28). Poststructuralism picks up on these points, highlighting how these binaries need to be identified and challenged in order to open up space to recreate and rethink key concepts like rationality, order, and the public sphere (Lather in Pierre, 2000, p. 487). The aim is not to discard the dominant aspect of the binary, or simply to privilege the previously subordinated aspect over the dominant one, but to instead rethink the possibilities of each term and consider how they maintain unequal gendered power structures (Pierre, 2000, p.482).

Behind the shared interest in the deconstruction of binaries is the view that language is ontologically significant (Wooldridge, 2015, p.2). Both poststructuralism and feminism conceive of language as the means through which ‘things’ are given meaning (Gavey, 1997, p.53). The Humanist conception of language sees it as an objective tool used for categorising things in a value neutral way, whereas poststructuralists see it as inherently political. There is, in short, no objective meaning beyond linguistic representation, and meaning is therefore in a constant state of flux (Gavey, 1997, p.53; Wooldridge, 2015, p.2). Language is therefore the site of contest. For poststructural feminists, this means questioning who gets to define certain terms and how binaries help to construct and uphold gendered, racial, ableist, and heteronormative inequalities. Language is also social, meaning it is based on a number of conventions that individuals are socialised into. This how we come to associate particular words and sounds with particular objects, emotions, and ideas. When grouped together these objects, emotions, and ideas form discourses (Wooldridge, 2015, p.7). Discourses are “historically constituted bodies of knowledge and practice that *shape*

people, giving positions of power to some and not others” (Mary Talbot, 2010, p.121). Discourses are always plural in that there are many discourses offering different, competing, and sometimes contradictory ways of constructing meaning (Gavey, 1997, p.54). Certain discourses become dominant over others and can become hegemonic, meaning they appear natural and are difficult to think outside of (Pierre, 2000, p.485). Discourses become dominant through a number of different means, and often serve to shore up the position of dominant social groups, and exploring *why* certain discourses become dominant over others was central to my analysis.

Linked to the idea of discourse is the concept of subjectivity. Subjectivity is constructed through discourse and refers to “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of self and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (Weedon, 1987, p.32). Humanism, for example, conceives of the self as unitary, rational, stable, coherent, autonomous and ahistorical (Pierre, 2000, p.500). This individual is “endowed with a will, a freedom, an intentionality” which they then express through language and action (Butler in Pierre, 2000, p. 500). The poststructuralist subject, contra the humanist subject, is accepting of their own messiness, non-unitary, and contradictory (Davies et al., 2006, p.90). They are aware that reason is produced through discourses in which certain statements and beliefs are privileged over others.

Poststructuralists also critique the humanist conception of agency as inherent to the subject. The poststructuralist subject acknowledges the tension between structure and agency and sees agency as contingent on the discursive context and our position within this context (Gannon and Davies, 2005, p.36). Agency lies in the ability of the individual to view things as discursively and historically specific and therefore contingent (Ibid). This had ramifications for my methodology in particular. During my research, I attempted to unsettle these humanist assumptions by bringing in uncertainty and unsettling the idea of a stable coherent self. It also had implications for the way in which I understood the discourses on each group. They too exist within

a liberal humanist context and therefore share the same assumptions about what it is to be a subject in this paradigm.

Poststructuralism also looks at the ways in which discourses create different subject positions for individuals to occupy. I was particularly interested in the construction of the neoliberal subject, a subject that has internalised the central tenets of neoliberalism and is therefore “inscribed with economic discourses of survival/success”, responsabilised and individualised (Davies et al., 2006, p.88). But I was also interested in the way in which the discourses on each group created a particular subject position for men to aspire to. In some ways, the subject position on each group had similarities, but in others they were strongly contrasting. The construction of a subject position also helps to explain the affective investment men put into these discourses, as shall be explained further in the final section of this chapter. It is important to remember that discourses also create different subject positions and this in turn creates a hierarchy. Different subject positions are dominant over others and this results in the creation and reinforcement of gendered hierarchies as well as other aspects of the kyriarchy<sup>1</sup> (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1992, pp.115–117, 122–125).

## **Masculinity**

Given these groups are populated almost exclusively by men it may seem obvious to say that masculinity is a big part of my theoretical framework. Discussions around masculinity have taken place in academia for just over 100 years, but Men and Masculinity Studies (MMS) itself came into

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<sup>1</sup> Kyriarchy is a term coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza which refers to the multiple intersecting and interacting structures of power and domination.

existence in the 1980s (Connell, 2003, pp.249–250). MMS arose from the critique of the limits of sex-role theory, the dominant paradigm at the time. Sex-role theory tended to be monolithic, with only one sex-role for men and one for women. The sex-role was also seen as something the individual owned. MMS, on the other hand, conceptualises masculinities as multiple, and, most importantly, as relational, not only between but within the genders (Brod, 2013, pp.53–54). Talking about gender in this way means talking about power and hierarchies that exist both within and across genders (Ibid, p.56). Out of this fledgling discipline came hegemonic masculinity, a concept which has had a significant impact on the way masculinity is theorised both within and outside academia. However, this theory has its critics and a number of alternatives have been posited since hegemonic masculinity theory's inception in 1982 (Connell, 1987). In this section, I will discuss hegemonic masculinity before offering a critique of this theory and an alternative that builds upon it.

### **Hegemonic Masculinity**

The concept of hegemonic masculinity was first introduced in 1982 by Raewyn Connell who went on to further outline her theory in *Gender and Power* (1987). Hegemonic masculinity is “understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men’s dominance over women to continue” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p.832). It “embodie[s] the currently most honored way of being a man,” and “require[s] all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men” (Ibid). This creates a hierarchy between masculinity and femininity, with the former privileged over the latter. Connell theorised that “men adhere to, or reject/resist, hegemonic masculinity in their own formulation of a masculine identity, and such actions enable access to particular levels of power, status, and prestige in society” (Waling, 2019, p.93). Hegemonic masculinity, therefore, also creates a hierarchy *within* masculinity as men have differing

abilities and opportunities to engage with hegemonic masculinity. So hegemonic masculinity maintains itself by subordinating other forms of masculinity and femininity.

Since the introduction of hegemonic masculinity theory, there has been debate over the theory's efficacy and limitations. In the context of the Manosphere specifically, Nagle (2016) argues that hegemonic masculinity is outmoded because it cannot help us understand formulations of masculinity that characterise themselves as subordinate and feature "gender-bending pornography, discussions about bisexual curiosity, and a male My Little Pony fandom." Ging, however, argues that to reject the concept of hegemonic masculinity in its entirety would be unwise (2019, p.4). And Nagel's argument has not stopped a number of scholars using hegemonic masculinity and other, adjacent theories to explore the different configurations of masculinity on the Manosphere (Jones et al., 2019; Kendall, 2000; Van Valkenburgh, 2018; Vito et al., 2018).

This debate is representative of a much wider discussion about hegemonic masculinity theory's inability to account for contemporary configurations of masculinity which include more 'positive' and fewer 'toxic' elements as well as aspects of "beta masculinity" (Ging, 2017, p. 4). This debate has generated several offshoot theories which seek to rectify the perceived shortcomings of hegemonic masculinity. One such theory, hybrid masculinities theory, argues that previous studies into hegemonic masculinity have ignored the dialectical nature of internal hegemony (Ibid, p.5). In other words, they have not taken into account the ways in which hegemonic masculinity borrows features from other, subordinate forms of masculinity in order to shore up its own dominance (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014, p.249). This dialectical process forms not a monolithic and coherent form of hegemonic masculinity, but rather a "strategically woven together hybridity of patterns" (Ging, 2019, p.5). Hybrid masculinities theory therefore allows us to understand how men symbolically distance themselves from hegemonic masculinities whilst simultaneously reinforcing their dominance (Ibid).



The concept of hybrid masculinities, therefore, can be summarised as men’s “selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalized and subordinated masculinities and – at times – femininities into privileged men’s gender performances and identities” (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014, p.246). Returning to Nagle’s criticism of hegemonic masculinity theory and its inability to explain contemporary online configurations of masculinity, hybrid masculinities theory overcomes this weakness precisely by acknowledging the way in which dominant configurations of masculinity borrow from subordinate forms of masculinity. It has thus already been used to explore masculinity on the Manosphere to great effect. Most notably, Ging explores the different forms masculinity takes on the Manosphere, and reveals the ways these assemblages are different in their adoption of tropes of victimhood and “beta masculinity” (2019, p.13). Høiland (2019) also uses the concept of hybrid masculinities to explore the incel configuration of masculinity specifically. In doing so, she undertakes a narrative analysis to reveal how incels both align and distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity in various ways (Ibid, p.30).

### **Criticisms of Hegemonic Masculinity and its Offshoots**

Despite a number of hegemonic masculinity-adjacent theories attempting to rectify the theory’s shortcomings, such as hybrid masculinities, Waling argues that neither hegemonic and post-hegemonic theories sufficiently account for agency or emotional reflexivity (2019, p.90). This is mainly because MMS has strayed from feminism, despite the field claiming to still be broadly sympathetic to feminist ideas and aims (Ibid, p.91). A poststructural feminist analysis of hegemonic masculinity theory and its offshoots reveals a paradigm that is deeply structural, and that does not adequately account for men’s agency. Blame is shifted onto an abstract social construct, coding men as the victims of masculinity whilst benefiting from their privileged position (McCarry, 2007, p.410). In other words, blame is removed from men and placed on a rendering of masculinity that

is seen as an all-powerful governing force in men's lives (Ibid). Hegemonic masculinity is also based on humanist assumptions about the masculine self as unitary, coherent, and endowed with an assumed agency. As a result, agency does not feature much in discussions about hegemonic masculinity theory. Although Connell and Messerschmidt mention the importance of agency, it is never theorised fully (Waling, 2019, p.94). Considering agency is important in my own work as I was conscious of explaining away the actions and beliefs of members of these forums simply with reference to deterministic structures. This would leave little room for condemnation or judgement and might have led to me making excuses for their behaviour. It would also mean denying the men on each forum agency and therefore not treating them as full people.

Another criticism of hegemonic masculinity and its affiliated theories is that they create a typology of masculinities which is entirely at odds with how femininity is discussed within feminist and gender studies literature (Waling, 2019, p.94). In an attempt to rectify the shortcomings of hegemonic masculinity theory, a number of other 'types' of masculinity have sprung up. These models of masculinity are used to describe and explain the behaviour of a man or group of men. One example would be the category of "metrosexual" which emerged in the mid-90s and refers to a form of 'new' masculinity that engages in "feminised practices while reaffirming a masculine, and heterosexual self" (Ibid. p.96). Other 'types' of masculinity which men perform are denoted by adding a verb or adjective before the word "masculinity". Examples include 'heroic', 'caring', 'hyper', 'hybrid', 'beta', and 'toxic' masculinity (Ibid, p.97). It is important to note here that this is not just the case within academic circles. The typology of masculinities is also prevalent on the very forums I studied. They refer to 'alpha', 'beta', and 'sigma' masculinities and rail against terms such as 'toxic masculinity'. It is thus necessary not to simply reject this typology but ask why it arises and what different typologies say about underlying assumptions about masculinity.

Despite these criticisms, it would be unwise to completely reject hegemonic masculinity theory and its offshoots outright. Hegemonic masculinity does provide a firm basis from which it is possible to highlight and analyse power relations and to take individual actions and theorise them in relation to broader discourses (Waling, 2019, p.94). As such, it will have a place in my analysis of the configurations of masculinity that make up the Manosphere. Hybrid masculinities will also provide a useful way of understanding why certain configurations of masculinity take on seemingly counterintuitive traits. However, I will also be taking the above criticisms into account, making sure to emphasise the role of agency in my analysis of masculinity and to not simply label different ‘types’ of masculinity as they arise.

### **Alternatives**

Waling (2019) helpfully provides an alternative way of theorising masculinity that accounts for agency and emotional reflexivity. The main point of this approach is that “although we know from a variety of research how men might “do” masculinity in various cultures and social situations, we have very little that actively explores how men actively reflect on such engagements” (Ibid. p.97). As previously noted, this leads to men being disembodied from masculinity, one consequence of which is to absolve men of blame for their harmful behaviours. But it also removes any possibility for men to exercise agency and, as such, does not adequately account for change and is, at times, condescending.

Waling uses the work of Christine Beasley to outline what a theory of masculinity that takes account of agency might look like. Beasley states that it is important not to assume that men either have or lack agency (2012, p.759). This is another example of how femininity and masculinity are theorised very differently within gender studies. Women’s agency is a big topic in feminist theory. There are questions around the capacity for women and girls to make agentive choices,

particularly when it comes to sexual agency and the way in which they engage with practices of femininity (Waling, 2019, p.99). Men, on the other hand, are assumed to be rational agents who can effectively exercise their will to instigate change. This is the case both for wider society and for much of mainstream feminist theory. A poststructural feminist perspective, however, disrupts this by viewing agency as contingent on the discursive context.

Waling argues that not taking agency in men for granted provides MMS scholars with an ability to understand the complex relationship between men's lived experience and "structural and systemic forces of gendered power relations" (2019, p.102). Theorising agency is a thorny and complex process, but a necessary one for this project. In observing the users on these forums, I wanted to ensure that I did not fall into the same trap of explaining their behaviours using theories which absolved them from blame or were too deterministic. Furthermore, allowing space for agency is integral if there is to be any hope for change or improvement. In order to explore the connection between the agency and structure, Waling cites Rosalind Gill's (2007) personal exploration of agency. Gill argues, through the example of a dress she initially dislikes but comes to like, how we are not in possession of full agentive choice, but neither are we entirely beholden to systemic and cultural forces (2007, p.73). As Waling clarifies "agency is a conditional possibility for negotiating discourse and subjectivity. It is produced through encounters with body discourse and subjectivity; it is not pre-existing, but rather made possible as individuals interact with the social world" (2019, p.100). Waling, however, adds that Gill's conceptualisation of agency still does not take emotional reflexivity into account, the addition of which is necessary if the aim is to understand agency not as rational, whole, coherent, and stable, but as fragmented and complex (Waling, 2019, p.101). We should be careful, however, not to recreate the rational/emotional binary in doing so. Instead, it is important to see reflexivity as emotional and embodied (Ibid, p.102).

The argument being made in this section is not that we need to discard hegemonic masculinity in its entirety. Instead, it is necessary to accept that hegemonic masculinity does not provide the whole picture. Masculinity is not a pre-existing force that structures and determines men's lives, it is instead made up of competing discourses that men negotiate, adopting and dropping different configurations as time and context changes. Gender is a relational process which is constantly being renegotiated and changing based on contextual factors. When working outside or adjacent to a dominant theory such as hegemonic masculinity, it can be difficult to conceive of alternative ways of applying the new theory. With my own research, I wanted to be considerate of agency and emotional reflexivity when analysing my data. This involved not simply explaining the behaviour and beliefs of users on the forums by using hegemonic masculinity theory as if it explained things entirely, or by categorising behaviours into different 'types' of masculinity. Instead, I considered how the users navigate different discourses of masculinity and make choices based on their discursive contexts. In doing so, I hoped to ensure that I do not fall back on the rational/emotional binary. The agentive choices men make in navigating their experiences are not simply the result of rational considerations but involve a blend of emotional and cognitive reflections.

## **Emotions**

During my autoethnographic study of /r/MGTOW, /r/TheRedPill and Incels.co I became interested in the ways in which emotions are expressed on these forums. As this interest grew, I began to read more about emotions from a philosophical, psychological, and political perspective. Over time, my idea of how emotions fit into these groups developed and changed. I shifted from initially focusing on the expression of emotions to questioning what these emotional expressions told us about the men on these groups and why they had joined them. Before I read poststructural

feminist theory, therefore, I was beginning to question why affect had been left out of academic inquiry for so long, especially given how central to understanding the Manosphere it appeared.

Despite emotions playing a significant role in world politics, it is only within the last two decades that they have started to receive due attention (Åhäll and Gregory, 2013, p.117; Bleiker and Hutchison, 2008, p.119; Crawford, 2000, pp.116–117; Hutchison, 2019, pp.284–285; Hutchison and Bleiker, 2014, p.494). The exclusion of affect is in part based on the rational/emotion dichotomy explained previously in this chapter. Rationality and emotion have long been theorised as mutually exclusive with the former being privileged over the latter, the result being that, until recently, emotions remained under-theorised and under-used as a means of analysis. Historically linked with women's uncontrollable and chaotic desires, emotions are seen as distorting the ability to think rationally and objectively about the world (Bleiker and Hutchison, 2008, pp.119–120). Therefore, not only have emotions been ignored for much of the history of IR, but they have also actively been viewed with suspicion and even hostility. Emotions have also been excluded based on methodological concerns. They are perceived as ephemeral and internal making them difficult to measure and assess, and it is also difficult to judge how genuine they are (Ibid).

Despite these fears and a great deal of reluctance, the study of emotions in International Relations does now constitute a well-established subdiscipline and many accept its place within understanding world politics (Hutchison, 2019, p.285). The incorporation of affect was initially intended to critique the privileging of reason over emotion and, in some cases, question this binary altogether (Hutchison and Bleiker, 2014, p.492). This had widespread ramifications including undoing a number of assumptions that underpin the study of international relations (Crawford, 2000, p.119). Introducing emotion highlights how 'mainstream' IR theory is the product of masculine discourses which constructs valid knowledge based on 'objective reason'. The

problematization of the rational/emotional binary has led to a realization that emotions do matter. It also showed how the emotions that were deemed relevant to scholars (such as fear) remained unproblematised and appeared as part of the background of world politics (Crawford, 2000, p.118).

The conversation has therefore shifted away from justifying the place of emotions in IR and toward asking how emotions matter and quite how they should be theorised and studied (Hutchison, 2019, p.287). A more recent addition to the affective turn in IR is situated both in the debate about how we theorise emotions in IR and how to practically apply emotion theory. This body of work is concerned with the relationship between affect and discourse. Within this field, Solomon (Solomon, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2018), Koschut (2014, 2018; 2017), and Hutchison and Bleiker (both individually and in collaboration) (2014; 2010, 2013, 2019; 2008, 2014) are particularly prominent.

### **What are emotions?**

Defining emotion is a difficult thing to do, so much so that to state this has become a cliché across emotion-related literature (Ben-Ze'ev, 2010; Coan, 2010, p.292; Dixon, 2012, p.338; Gendron, 2010, p.371; Gross, 2014, p.498). Philosophy, neuroscience, psychology, International Relations, sociology, and anthropology are just a few of the disciplines in which have explored and attempted to define emotion and its related concepts. To make matters more complicated the words we use to describe affective phenomena also vary over time as well as culture. The terms used to describe affective phenomena now are not the same as they were in, say, the 1500s (Dixon, 2012, p.339; Essary, 2017). We also use affective words differently and interchangeably in everyday life. In IR, the word 'emotion' is used loosely, but for the purposes of this project it is necessary to define the

difference between different terms like affect, feeling, and emotions (Hutchison and Bleiker, 2014, p.501).

Defining affective terms and deciding on quite what I think emotions are and how they can be interpreted – particularly in cyberspace – was one of the most difficult parts of my PhD. Aside from there being no consensus on the subject, there is also very little in the way of straightforward discussion of definitions within IR or emotion scholarship more generally. There are a number of papers which discuss emotions, but do not define terms early on. This sidesteps the difficulty of defining these terms but does sometimes lead to confusion. When reading these articles and books, I was often left wondering quite what the author’s definition of emotions was, and how they distinguished emotions from other terms like affect and feeling. When you add to this the fact that, in line with my poststructuralist perspective, there is an imperative to view dominant conceptualisations of emotion with suspicion, it is clear why I agonised over this section in particular. It was the desire to question my own assumptions about emotions that led me to the work of Sara Ahmed.

One of Ahmed’s main aims is to challenge the popular notion that emotions are internal and therefore something we possess (Ahmed, 2007, p.8). According to this view, emotions are seen as something *inside* of us that move *outwards* (Ibid, p.9). Ahmed refers to this as the ‘inside out’ model. This model has been critiqued before, particularly in the realm of sociology and anthropology where emotions are instead seen as social and cultural practices. Thus, emotions are conceptualised as being something *outside* of us working their way *inwards* (Ibid). As Ahmed points out, however, this merely reverses the model rather than providing a substantially new way of understanding emotion (Ibid). Instead, for Ahmed, emotions are fundamentally relational and the very things that “create the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish between an inside



and outside in the first place” (Ibid, p.10). Emotions, therefore, create the boundaries that “allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they were objects” (Ibid).

All of this is to say that Ahmed is not particularly interested in what emotions *are*, but more in what emotions *do*. In fact, Ahmed explicitly states that she is not offering a singular theory of emotion but is instead “track[ing] how emotions circulate between bodies, examining how they ‘stick’ as well as move” (Ibid, p.4). I too was more interested in what emotions *do* rather than what they *are*. I wanted to explore the role emotions play in motivating men to join and remain on the forums I chose to look at. Ahmed’s application of this model to understanding the construction of the ‘other’ really grabbed me as a means of explaining how groups on the Manosphere create a sense of identity for their users. In essence, emotions align an individual with the collective by constructing the ‘other’ as the source of feeling (Ahmed, 2007, p.1). Ahmed provides the example of a British National Front poster which aligns the ‘you’ with the ‘we’ of the national body (Ibid). This is done by constructing the ‘other’ as the source of threat and injury which the subject is meant to be angry towards (Ibid). As a result, the individual becomes aligned with the nation which is threatened by the ‘other’ (in this case immigrants). A similar process takes place on the Manosphere, but the collective identity is instead a masculine brotherhood of sorts, and the ‘other’ is feminism.

### **Affect, Emotions, and Discourse**

Ahmed acknowledges in the introduction to *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* that, for a book that argues that emotions cannot be separated from bodily sensations, there is a strong emphasis on texts (2007, pp.12–13). Focusing on metonym and metaphor, Ahmed argues, is crucial to understanding the emotionality of texts (Ibid). A lot of how we convey emotion through discourse is done indirectly through figures of speech, rather than more direct labelling, e.g. “I am sad”.

Through close readings of various texts, Ahmed seeks to “[track] how words for feeling, and objects of feeling, circulate and generate effects” (Ibid, p.14). Furthermore, through analysing texts, we can uncover how emotion words become linked to one another (Ibid). For instance, pain can be replaced by hate and thus the object that caused our pain can become hated. This creates a narrative, one that we can unpick by moving back through these word replacements.

The relationship between affect, emotion, and discourse has become the subject of extensive discussions since *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* was published in 2004 (Åhäll and Gregory, 2013; Fattah and Fierke, 2009; Hall and Ross, 2015; Koschut, 2014, 2018; Van Rythoven, 2015; Solomon, 2012, 2014). Emotions have clearly always been present in the discourses that make up world politics, but recent political developments, such as the election of populists that harness and generate fear and anger, have shown the importance of reflecting on the relationship between affect and discourse. There are now a variety of approaches to theorising this relationship which disagree on a number of things, but have a shared interest in how emotions “seep into everyday discourse...and become part of the taken-for-granted assumptions that underpin the decisions of agents” (Fierke, 2013, p.209; Koschut et al., 2017, p.482). It is important to note here that this viewpoint collapses the rational/emotional binary by seeing emotions as fundamental to, rather than separate from or counter to, the decisions subjects make.

Solomon’s (2012) work on discourse, affect, and emotion is particularly insightful. It offers a comprehensive look at the relationship between these three phenomena and how theorising this relationship can help us understand why some discourses become dominant over others. There are two main elements of Solomon’s theorising I want to reiterate here. The first is to do with the relationship between affect and discourse and what this means for my understanding of emotions. The second is related to this and concerns the Lacanian concept of *enjoyment*.

In terms of the former, Solomon (2012) notes that a lot of approaches see discourse as all-encompassing of the human experience. In other words, nothing exists outside of discourse. Importantly, for my own aims, this limits explanations of how certain discourses become dominant over others to tracing linguistic structures, ignoring the role affect plays (Ibid, p.911). Solomon instead posits the notion that affect is extra-discursive. This conceptualisation is based on Lacanian theory which proposes that there are some aspects of the subject which cannot be represented in discourse (Ibid, p.914). According to this theory, emotions are the result of affect being translated into discourse by recognisable emotional signifiers (Ibid, p.919). This conceptualisation is important because it allows for a delineation between affect and discourse, rather than seeing them as one and the same, and thus enables an exploration of why some discourses become sites of strong affective investment and others don't.

Building on the idea that discourse translates affect into recognisable emotional signifiers, Solomon notes that this act of translation is imperfect due to the limitations of language (2012, p.920). In other words, to use an analogy from critical approaches to discourse analysis, the very act of translating changes the original 'text', 'text' here being the original affective experience (Ibid). Affect and discourse, therefore, are not one and the same and so affect has effects within discourse (Ibid). Discourse, in turn, shapes affect by translating it through signifiers we refer to as emotions (Ibid). The subject *must* join the symbolic order (the realm of discourse) but doing so also requires a loss because the process of translation is imperfect. As a result, the affective experience is left diminished once the subject is socialised into language (Ibid, p.914). In simple terms, the words we use to describe our affective experiences do not fully encompass those experiences. Something is therefore lost, and this loss is experienced as affect, in a form Lacan calls *jouissance* or *enjoyment* (Ibid). It is impossible to recover what has been lost through discourse because discourse itself is the cause of the loss in the first place (Ibid).

But certain discourses do promise an encounter with what the subject believes has been lost, and this is where they gain their affective potency and therefore dominance over other discourses (Solomon, 2012, pp.920-921). In order to demonstrate this, Solomon provides an analysis of the discourses around 9/11. Following 9/11 there was a 'void of meaning' which is indicative of the inexpressible affective experiences people were having (Ibid, p.923). People lacked the language to convey what they had experienced in words. Solomon notes that the events of 9/11 were so disruptive that the "discursive resources available to most Americans were initially useless in 'making sense' of what had happened" (Ibid, p.925). Soon after, however, different discourses rushed to fill this void and offer competing explanations of the events (Ibid). Within these competing discourses, themes of nationalism were particularly strong (Ibid). Solomon notes that these different discourses were not only vying for dominance in terms of social meaning but were also shaping the affective experiences of the American people (Ibid). "Conventional emotional signifiers," Solomon writes, "were not up to the task of giving contour to the experience. Only *after* the spread of official and other cultural discourses did emotional responses begin to take shape" (Ibid). The recognisable emotional responses that emerged centred on themes of revenge and narcissism (Ibid, p.926).

Discourses that become sites of strong affective investment, therefore, promise the subject an encounter with that which has been lost or is lacking. Acknowledging this is integral to understanding why some discourses become sites of strong affective investment over others. Solomon also points out, however, that no discourse can make good on the promise of an encounter with what has been lost or is lacking (Solomon, 2012, p.921). It is, in other words, impossible to fully occupy the subjective positions discourses provide. As Solomon puts it:

"When an individual subject, for instance, identifies with a discourse that promises 'the Solution' to one's life which offers the reclaiming of that which the subject feels is missing

from its subjectivity, s/he will feel both a kind of satisfaction and frustration in identifying and not being able to fully identify with 'it.'" (Solomon, 2012, p.921)

To return to the concept of *enjoyment*, Solomon notes that "the 'little bits of *jouissance*' that the subject can experience indeed point towards affective variations in the subject's pulsations between wholeness and lack." (Ibid).

The fact that discourses lead to "pulsations between wholeness and lack" means that in order to remain dominant, the discourse must construct obstacles to wholeness and divert blame towards them (Solomon, 2012, p.921). In the nationalism example this often manifests as the presence of immigrants and minorities (Ibid). Thus, not only do nationalistic discourses create a love of the nation, but they also create a hatred of that which threatens the nation. As Ahmed points out, individuals are aligned with the collective by attributing the 'other' as the sources of feelings (2007, p. 1). As an example, the 'War on Terror' discourse, which eventually became the dominant means of understanding the events of 9/11 and those that followed, reoriented the search for national enjoyment (*jouissance*) around the idea of a 'wounded' national subject (Solomon, 2012, p.926). This wounded subject was therefore constructed as lacking something, something which had been taken by the 'other' (in this case Islamic extremists), and wholeness could therefore only be achieved by committing to the War on Terror (Ibid). The 'other' therefore becomes the object of ire and discontent, something to be removed or eradicated if the nation is to heal and return to wholeness.

### **Control, identity, and meaning**

I built on this amalgamation of Solomon's and Ahmed's affect theories in order to integrate what I saw as three key themes on the forums I researched: control, identity, and meaning. It became clear to me early on that these were the three aspects that men on /r/TheRedPill, /r/MGTOW,

and Incels.co felt they had lost or were lacking. Thus, they are also what the discourses on these groups promise men an encounter with. Meaning is returned to these men by the act of a discourse explaining their situation and translating their affective experience into something understandable and conveyable through language. These are all men for whom the current dominant discourse of masculine entitlement is not working. They have been raised to expect a job, a family, and power, and when these things are repeatedly denied they begin to question and lose confidence in this dominant discourse. They therefore begin to slip out of its rationality and seek alternative discourses to make sense of their circumstances. They feel, in other words, as if they have lost a sense of meaning and wish to rediscover it. This loss of meaning manifests as its own affective experience, one which a new discourse might translate into recognisable emotional signifiers. The very act of translation provides new meaning through explaining both the situation these men find themselves in and the world around them, in much the same way as the 'War on Terror' discourse filled a void of meaning for American citizens following 9/11.

The same can be said of control and identity. Both of these two concepts underpin the majority of the grievances I found on all three forums. These men feel as if they have lost control of their lives and of society. Feminism has usurped their dominance and men are now an oppressed and victimised group. According to /r/TheRedPill and /r/MGTOW this can be rectified, and this is done by men taking back control of their lives and their environment. Feminism has also undermined masculine identity and users on both /r/MGTOW and /r/TheRedPill feel as if there is no longer a place in society for 'manly' men. Men have both been emasculated and public displays of masculinity are criticised or forbidden. Both forums, therefore, offer men an encounter with a masculine identity which they feel has been lost. This means the construction of a hybrid masculinity which draws on hegemonic masculine values such as strength, independence, control, and emotional stoicism, whilst also positioning itself as victimised and vulnerable.

On Incels.co, things are slightly different. Incels do not believe that feminism's dominance can be overcome but do still offer control and identity in slightly different ways. Control is offered through misogynistic invective and fantasising about punishing women. Incel masculine identity is also a complex mix of traits often associated with hegemonic masculinity and others which would be considered its antithesis. But there are also things that Incels.co offers that fall outside of the categories of meaning and control.

It is important to note that meaning, control, and identity overlap in complex ways. This has been alluded to already with the discussion of how the masculine identity offered on /r/MGTOW and /r/TheRedPill values being in control. Control and identity are both fundamentally linked. To be out of control is to have failed, and failure is distinctly un-masculine. Similarly, meaning can be seen as providing feelings of control. Once meaning has been provided, the world and one's position in it is understandable and events are explained within the context of a worldview. This means events – past, present, and future – are rendered controllable. Meaning also contains within it an understanding of one's position in the world, and thus is intrinsically linked to identity too. The way in which these three concepts overlap will be central to my analysis throughout this thesis.

The above development of Solomon's and Ahmed's affect theory underpinned my analysis of the posts on each forum. What I am proposing here is essentially a two-tiered analysis. At the initial level, there is the way in which discourses translate affective experiences into coherent and expressible emotions. During this process, the discourse is also doing the work of regulating the emotion, first by the very act of translating something that is amorphous and intense into something more coherent and conveyable, but also by positing a solution to the affective experience. This solution can broadly be referred to as the promise of wholeness or an encounter with that which has been lost. This helps to explore and explain why it is that certain discourses

become dominant over others. At the second tier of analysis, there is the realisation that no discourse can provide the wholeness it promises. The result is the perpetuation of different forms of negative affect and the direction of negative emotions towards a constructed 'other'. This level helps us to understand how discourses maintain their affective investment and resolve their internal contradictions, at least temporarily.



## Chapter Two: The ‘Problem’

*I mean, when you look at the lives men are really living, it's sad, Marianne says. They control the whole social system and this is the best they can come up with for themselves? They're not even having fun.*

(Rooney, 2019, p.77)

In this chapter I will provide an account of existing work on the Manosphere and then discuss the two main phenomena I think are driving men towards it. At times, whilst writing my thesis, I flippantly referred to this chapter as the ‘problem’ chapter. By this I did not mean that the chapter was particularly difficult to write. Instead, I am using ‘problem’ in the sense of something that is as yet not understood, something that needs to be solved. There are also many ways in which the Manosphere, and the forces driving its popularity and expansion, is a problem in the normative sense. Members of the groups that make up the Manosphere have murdered men and women, sometimes in large numbers, and their existence affects women’s safety and security, both online and offline (Cecco, 2019; Freeman, 2014). Finally, the impact of the Manosphere on politics and society at large, cannot be understated either. Links between the Manosphere and election of Donald Trump, for instance, have been made by several scholars (Dignam and Rohlinger, 2019; Kelly, 2017; Nagle, 2017).

It is important to note, however, that those who make the Manosphere and its various subcultures their home do not think this is a problem, either in the normative sense or the problem-solving sense. To them, their membership of these groups is not problematic, or even something which needs explaining. To me, however, the Manosphere is a site of research. It is something to be problematised and understood. It is also important to note that there is nothing intrinsically problematic about men coming together to share their grievances. But the Manosphere

is more than just a place for men to collectivise their suffering, it is also riddled with misogyny, violence, and unrealistic masculine ideals.

In this chapter, I want to posit that the Manosphere does not exist in a vacuum and is in fact a symptom of a far deeper and more widespread malaise. Using the feminist theoretical framework discussed in the previous chapter, I posit that in order to understand the Manosphere it is necessary to explore the way in which neoliberalism and masculinity interact. More specifically, it is necessary to look at how the crisis of these two phenomena interact. The crisis of neoliberalism and masculinity moral panic are deeply interrelated, and I believe that this interrelation is a significant factor in explaining why men are drawn to Manosphere groups in the first place. Before that, however, I will provide an outline of existing literature on the Manosphere and highlight how it informs my own project.

## **The Manosphere**

### **In the Media**

The number of articles written about the Manosphere in newspapers, magazines, and online media outlets is testament to the extent to which this phenomenon has entered public discourse. Early discussions involved reporting on specific attacks and centred exclusively on incels, as it is the only online misogynist subculture to have killings directly associated with it. Elliot Rodger, the Isla Vista killer, received particular attention. Dewey (2014) and Freeman's (2014) articles both discuss the shooting Rodger carried out and then go into a wider discussion of incel subculture and what characterises it. Other attacks by perpetrators allegedly related to incel subculture have been reported, including Alek Minassian, the Toronto van attacker in 2019, (Cecco, 2019) and the 2020 shooting in Hanau, Germany (Bostock, 2020). These early articles show that it was major news events that raised the public profile of incels and, by extension, the Manosphere, and they contain

little in the way of wider explanation or exploration of what had been driving men to carry out these attacks.

Since 2014, however, articles on the Manosphere have shifted from simply reporting news events to being so-called explainer pieces. The aim of these articles is to educate their reader on the Manosphere or a particular group within it. Marche's (2016) article, "Swallowing the Red Pill", goes into the origins of The Red Pill and their core beliefs, before detailing an interview with one of /r/TheRedPill's moderators. Other articles draw links between wider pickup culture which began in the 2000s and the concepts used on Red Pill forums (Doyle, 2018). Explainer articles also exist for other parts of the manosphere, including MGTOW (Bates, 2020a) and incels (Tolentino, 2018). A BBC article from 2018 interviews Alana, the founder of Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project, a support group for people struggling with romantic and sexual relationships that invented the term 'incel' (Taylor, 2018). This etymology is corroborated by many other articles on incels (Hoffman et al., 2020, p.566; Høiland, 2019, p.1; Labbaf, 2020, p.17; Palma, 2019, pp.329–330). The shift towards explainer articles was indicative of the discourse around the Manosphere becoming more nuanced.

There are now a number of mainstream books written on the Manosphere too. *Kill All Normies* (Nagle, 2017) was the first book to provide an overview of the online culture wars that have been raging for years but have only just drawn widespread attention. In this wide-ranging book, Nagle covers both the Manosphere and what she terms "the Tumblr liberals and identitarian privilege-checking left" (Nagle, 2017, loc.1087). The second, and more recent, exploration of the Manosphere is Laura Bates's *Men Who Hate Women* (2020b) which focuses purely on the Manosphere and goes through the different sections of it and their ideologies. Similar to Nagle's book, the aim of Bates's work is to provide an overview of the various groups that make up the

Manosphere. Each chapter is on a different subgroup and provides a description of their beliefs and an explanation of how they arrived at them.

There are also documentaries on the Manosphere. *The Red Pill* (Jaye, 2016) explores the men's rights movement and was particularly controversial because the director, Cassie Jaye, underwent a transformation from critic to sympathiser. However, despite being titled *The Red Pill* this film does not focus on that particular forum or subculture. Instead, it focuses on the more traditional issues of men's rights activists (MRAs), such as divorce and child custody, men's lack of reproductive rights, and educational inequality. There is an important differentiation between the Manosphere more broadly and MRAs specifically. The former could be seen as part of the Manosphere, but not representative of its overall values and ideology. MRAs tend to cluster around specific policy issues and seek to affect political change. The latter represents a more recent phenomenon that focuses mainly on the existence of a 'gynocentric order' that threatens masculinity. It is difficult to call the Manosphere a movement in the same way that MRAs are, mainly because they do not seem to be as politically motivated. They do not call for any political change or try and further men's rights. Instead, the Manosphere appears like more of a space for men to collectivise their grievances.

As in the written media, incel subculture has received particular attention. *Inside the Secret World of Incels* (Rawles, 2019) is a documentary that explores the incel mindset and subculture and features interviews with those who self-identify as incels. It also shows some of the more disturbing practices of those who claim affiliation with this subculture. For instance, Catfishman, (the pseudonym one incel goes by, derived from the practice of catfishing, whereby someone pretends to be someone they are not online) sets up fake profiles on dating apps, using pictures of male models, in order to trick women into going on dates with him. He then shows up to the date and films the woman's reaction when they realise he is not the man in his profile's pictures (Ibid).

Catfishman then posts the video online as ‘evidence’ that women only want to date men who look like models and that they are disgusted by unattractive men, when in fact the woman’s reaction is more likely to be down to the realisation that she has been deceived (Ibid).

Incel subculture has also appeared in a feature film, showing the extent to which the Manosphere has entered popular culture. The title of 2019 film *Cuck* (Lambert, 2019) directly refers to a term that is frequently used on the Internet. The original term, ‘cuckold’, refers to a man whose wife is unfaithful, but online it is used to denote any man who is subservient and naïve, or just does not live up to a preconceived masculine ideal. The film follows the journey of one man into the world of online extremist movements and portrays how vulnerable men can be lured into alternative belief systems on the Internet. The protagonist is drawn in by a particularly charismatic figure who provides an explanation as to why life is not turning out how it was expected to. In that sense, it is very relevant to my own work and explores some of the same themes that will be discussed in this thesis.

All of the above indicates the extent to which the manosphere has entered mainstream discourse on violence against women and patriarchy. Beginning with reports on specific events, it is now a topic of discussion separate from the mass killings that brought it to the public eye. Perhaps most tellingly, incel subculture in particular has entered into other areas of the media, like film. Public discourse on the Manosphere mostly revolves around exploring the groups and understanding how they operate. This is undoubtedly valuable work as it both raises awareness and allows for a deeper understanding of what it is that motivates these groups and what their key beliefs are. However, there is little work in the media that goes into what motivates men to join these groups and what contextual factors might be pushing men towards them.

## **In Numbers**

Another significant body of literature on the Manosphere aims to give a more sweeping overview of this relatively new phenomenon by using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. These articles tend to involve gathering a large number of posts and comments and then analysing the data to reveal wider themes and trends present on the Manosphere.

Ribeiro et al. take 38 million posts from seven forums and 57 subreddits to provide an overview of the Manosphere using “computational social science methods” (2020, p.1). The analysis reveals three core findings: that the Manosphere has “evolved into a diverse ecosystem of Web communities with various interests/ideologies”; that the Manosphere is characterised by an above average amount of hate speech; and that there is significant evidence of migration from milder communities, such as MRAs and pick up artists (PUAs), to more extreme ones (incels, MGTOW) (Ribeiro et al., 2020, p.2). In other words, two of the groups I am studying, /r/MGTOW and Incels.co, are becoming more popular, whereas /r/TheRedPill (a PUA forum) is waning. These findings are corroborated by Farrell et al. (2019), who also take a very wide range of posts (six million in total created from 2011 to 2018 from seven different subreddits) and note a shift from milder discourse that primarily focuses on men’s rights, towards more violent, misogynistic, racist, and homophobic rhetoric (2019, p.87). Understanding these wider trends is important when it comes to placing the groups I am studying in context.

Papadamou et al. (2020) and Maxwell et al. (2020) take a more particular view, focusing specifically on incel subculture. The former study uses Reddit as its data source, whereas the latter uses YouTube. Papadamou et al. (2020) took 18,000 random videos shared on incel-related subreddits and built a lexicon of 200 incel-related words. They then used this lexicon to label videos as incel-related based on whether these words came up in the title, tags, description, or comments on said videos. This was then compared to a control group of 18,000 random videos

from YouTube (Ibid, p.1). Their findings, in line with Riberio et al. (2020) and Farrell et al. (2019), show a growth in incel-related activity on YouTube over the past few years; associations with topics expressing racism, misogyny, and anti-feminism; and finally, and perhaps most importantly, a non-negligible chance that a user watching a non-incel-related video will end up watching an incel-related video due to YouTube's recommendation algorithm (Papadamou et al., 2020, pp.9–10). This last finding highlights how there is no one way of being initiated into the Manosphere, and that this process can happen as a result of algorithms and influences beyond the individual's awareness or control. What it does not explain, however, is what draws users into these videos and prompts them to continue down the algorithmic rabbit hole. I believe that affect plays a big role in this and can help us understand what it is about these videos and the worldview they espouse that appeals to men's emotions.

Some of this more statistical work engages explicitly with gender theory to inform its analysis. Maxwell et al.'s (2020) approach, for instance, is rooted in gender theory which informs their thematic content analysis. Maxwell et al. (Ibid) uses a gendered lens to illustrate how incel radicalisation stems from an inability to adhere to hegemonic masculine norms. Using the concepts of toxic and hegemonic masculinity, they uncover four key themes on the incel forums they selected: a constructed stereotypical woman (Stacy); a constructed male ideal (Chad); hypocritical ideas about gender; and the fact that incels feel they are misunderstood and lead particularly marginalised and oppressed lives (Ibid, pp.1857-1866). As a result of these themes, Maxwell et al. conclude that incels experience a mixture of “social rejection, pain, hopelessness, and anger,” causing them to “undergo a process of cyclical thought patterns that are based on the pressures of societal-imposed patriarchal standards of masculinity” (Ibid, p.1867).

But although these articles provide an insight into the fluctuations in membership of these groups and the main themes that appear on them, they are asking a very different question to the

one I am asking. Whereas they are seeking to map and model the Manosphere by uncovering broad themes, I am more interested in learning why men are drawn to the groups that make up the Manosphere. Thus, their conceptualisation of the ‘problem’ of the Manosphere is more to do with trends. Farrell et al. (2019) and Ribeiro et al. (2020) both note that the Manosphere is becoming more extreme, with users shifting from ‘milder’ sites to those more characterised by extreme misogynistic attitudes. Similarly, Papadamou et al. (2020) note an increase in incel activity, highlighting how the ‘problem’, as these papers see it, is to do with an increase in both numbers and extremity. Maxwell et al. (2020) engage with a gendered analysis which frames the ‘problem’ more as one relating to the expectations of hegemonic masculinity, an assessment which is much closer to my own.

## **Ideologies**

A broader view of the trends and themes across the Manosphere is helpful for understanding the evolution and direction of these groups, but it is also important to explore the ideologies that underpin each group. A significant body of literature on the various Manosphere ideologies already exists and will inform my own work greatly. I believe the ideology of each group, and the related discourses that articulate these ideologies, is one of the main reasons why men are drawn to them. As writing on the Manosphere has progressed, so has the understanding that although these groups have some similarities, there are stark divisions between them too. In this section, I am going to outline existing work on each of the three groups I have chosen to study: Incels, The Red Pill, and MGTOW.

### *Incels*

Hoiland (2019) draws on theories of masculinity, including hegemonic and hybrid masculinities, in order to conduct a mediated narrative analysis of a now defunct incel forum called /r/braIncels.



The aim is to understand the representation of characters in incel narratives, what the norms and rights associated with these narrative interactions are, and who these narratives serve (2019, p.8). The result is the identification of five main narratives: “1) The narrative of sex is what decides a man’s worth, 2) The narrative of “looks are everything; personality is nothing”, 3) The narrative of women being subordinate to men, 4) The narrative of feminism suppresses men, 5) The narrative of loneliness” (2019, pp.v–vi).

Høiland connects these five main narratives to the ways in which incels see themselves and position themselves in relation to hybrid masculinity. In short, incels do not always adhere to hegemonic masculine norms. Instead, their behaviours borrow from subordinate forms of masculinity to form a hybrid masculinity. For example, the second narrative Høiland identifies – that looks are everything and personality means nothing – positions incels as subordinate to hegemonic masculinity (Høiland, 2019, p.97). The character ‘Chad’ becomes the signifier for physical attractiveness as per the hegemonic ideal, and therefore is positioned as superior to incels (Ibid). On the contrary, the third narrative – women are subordinate – positions women as beneath hegemonic masculinity within a gendered hierarchy, and associates incels with hegemonic masculinity and therefore as superior to women (Ibid). Incels therefore construct a form of masculinity that is not entirely characterised by features associated with hegemonic masculinity, but nevertheless allows them to maintain a dominant position within a gendered hierarchy. Høiland’s work demonstrates how incorporating hybrid masculinities theory allows for a deeper understanding of the way in which incels relate to hegemonic masculinity.

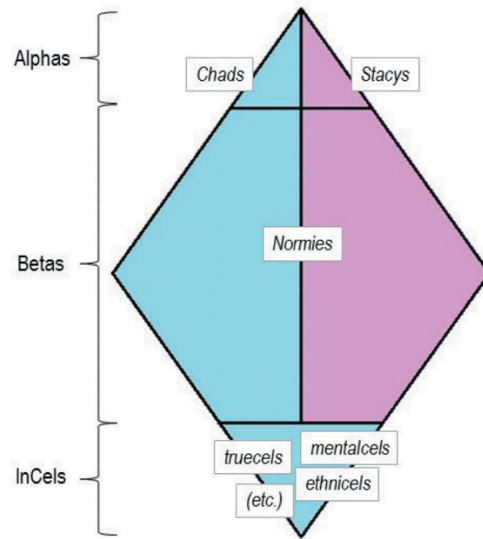


Figure 3.1

Incel ideology is also explored in IR literature. Baele et al. examine the red pill and the black pill, arguing they both produce rigid social hierarchies which are a feature of worldviews that provoke and support violence (2021, pp.3–4). In the case of incels, the black pill produces an ideology, referred to by Baele et al. (Ibid) and incels themselves as “lookism”. Baele et al. note that lookism creates a hierarchy based on people’s attractiveness both physically and mentally (Ibid). This hierarchy is shown visually in the diagram above (fig. 3.1) (Ibid, p.8). Here we see ‘Chads’ and ‘Stacys’ at the top of the hierarchy, with incels at the bottom. This reveals the “radical dualism” inherent in black pill ideology which defines outgroups (women and Alpha men) as inferior to the ingroup (incels) (Ibid, p.4). This is evident in the range of derogatory and dehumanising terms used on incel forums to describe ‘alpha’ men and women – terms such as ‘roastie’, ‘Chad’, and ‘foids’. From this foundation, the social categories created by lookism go on to inform the incel narrative which begins with a ‘natural’ patriarchal monogamy that becomes degraded by feminists imposing ‘female hypergamy’ upon a previously stable system (Baele et al., 2021, p.13). ‘Hypergamy’, a concept that is common across the Manosphere, is borrowed from evolutionary psychology and describes women’s perceived innate biological drive to leave men for ever more

attractive men (Ibid). Incels believe society has now reached an end state where feminism and hypergamy have gained such a strong foothold within society that it is irredeemably corrupted and in a state of terminal decline (Ibid, p.14).

Bringing in a gendered analysis here facilitates a deeper exploration of the binaries that are created by incel ideology. The radical dualisms created by black pill ideology layer over one another. The us/other binary inherent in incel ideology, for instance, maps onto enlightened/unenlightened, rational/emotional, and order/chaos to name but a few. A poststructural feminist analysis allows for connections to be drawn between these dichotomies and see how they both created hierarchies and relate to the masculine/feminine binary. This in turn explains the hierarchies incel ideology produces and reproduces. The first word in the binary is privileged over the other, creating a hierarchy in which anything feminine is viewed as lesser and/or lacking. Furthermore, engaging with hybrid masculinities theory, as in Høiland's (2019) work, means that the relationship between incel identity and hegemonic masculinity remains under theorised. As noted in the previous chapter, incorporating the concept of hybrid masculinities shows how, despite often identifying in opposition to hegemonic masculine traits, incels are still seeking to uphold the same gendered hierarchy that privileges the masculine over the feminine.

Sticking within the realm of IR, there is a tendency for some articles compare incels and jihadists (CASIS, 2019; Crimando, 2019; Hoffman et al., 2020; Hoffman and Ware, 2020; Tomkinson et al., 2020). The proposed similarities include the observation that most of their communication takes place covertly online, that they both have a culture of martyrdom, that there are parallels in the radicalisation process, and that incels have “shown a willingness to adopt Islamic State tactics” (Hoffman et al., 2020, pp.575–576). These articles also often provide a series of policy recommendations for tackling incel violent extremism. Tomkinson et al. (2020), Crimando (2019), and CASIS (2019) explore the incel threat in a similar way to Hoffman et al. (2020),

concluding that incels should be considered terrorists and that incel ideology is a form of violent extremism.

All three articles go on to use information gathered from attempts to counter other forms of violent extremism to theorise a means of intervening in the process of incel radicalisation, creating a dos and don'ts list of ways to deal with this phenomenon. Recommendations include contacting legitimate men's advocacy groups in order to prevent them being infiltrated by incel groups (CASIS, 2019, p.7), dark web surveillance to understand the extent of incel presence (Ibid, p.8), campus counselling and emotional support programs (Crimando, 2019; Tomkinson et al., 2020, p.162), and primary level programs that "foster intervention in the conduct of public political discourse." (Tomkinson et al., 2020, p.160).

The use of the concept of radicalisation to understand incels also takes place in the media. Two articles, both from the New Statesman, deploy the language of radicalisation in order to explore how men get drawn into these groups (Peake, 2020; Tait, 2017). One interviews former members of The Red Pill, revealing how the ideas espoused by this particular group prey on vulnerable men (Tait, 2017). Another looks at the link between Tinder data and the idea of a sexual marketplace (Peake, 2020). Incels and PUAs see dating as a marketplace in which women will only date men who are "8/10 or above" (referring to an attractiveness scale where everyone is given a score out of 10). Incels see this as a sign that they are destined to be single, whereas PUAs see it as a reality that can be overcome through self-optimisation and the manipulation of women.

This literature is in some ways interested in answering the same question I am asking in my own work, namely why it is some men are drawn into these groups. However, it is necessary to question what is being lost in simply applying the concept of radicalisation wholesale and making comparisons to Islamic extremism. This work sees the 'problem' of incels to be one of extremism and radicalisation and, in mainstream discourse in particular, these terms can be

deployed laxly, with no attempt to define what ‘radicalisation’ is. It is a term used in discussions around any group which appears to have been politicised in a way which is deemed overly ‘passionate’ or ‘toxic’ (Cohen, 2019; Lewis, 2019). In academia, the danger is that adjustments are not made to account for the difference between incels and Islamic extremism (the main focus of radicalisation literature). For instance, only Hoffman et al. mentions the gendered element of incel violence (Hoffman et al., 2020, pp.579–580). Other articles tend to gloss over this despite the fact that the violence committed by members of Manosphere groups is, almost by definition, perpetrated by men against women. This is a blind spot that affects much of terrorism studies in IR, with a few notable exceptions (Gentry, 2015, 2018, 2020; Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007, 2011). The lack of a gendered analysis here, therefore, in some cases leads to unsatisfactory explanations.

### *MGTOW*

Articles on *MGTOW* are more recent additions to literature on the Manosphere. This reflects the rising prominence of this subculture, and the increasing acknowledgement that the Manosphere is not a monolithic entity but a heterogenous phenomenon made up of various different groups. Two articles in particular – both by Jones, Trott, and Wright – assess *MGTOW*’s ideology with a particular emphasis on the way it normalises and propagates misogynistic beliefs and practices (Jones et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2020).

Turning to their 2019 article first, the discussion centres mainly on the ways in which *MGTOW* ideology manifests on Twitter as harassment which comes in a number of different forms. This harassment serves to normalise and spread *MGTOW* ideology and misogyny (Jones et al., 2019, p.3). Jones et al. (Ibid) use the concepts of hegemonic and toxic masculinity to understand the ways in which this harassment operates and its effects. In short, online harassment by *MGTOW* affiliated users, whilst not always extreme in nature, is deeply misogynistic and polices the boundaries of heterosexual, hegemonic masculinity (Ibid, p.3). This shows that these groups

not only identify against women, but also against men who do not fit their masculine ideals. Jones et al. state that “in the same way as MGTOW members demonstrate their membership to the group by rejecting women, they demonstrate their masculinity by rejecting non-masculine men” (Ibid, p.4). This explains the slew of derogatory terms used to describe men who do not adhere to MGTOW ideology including ‘Cucks’, ‘soy boys’, ‘manginas’, ‘blue-pills’, ‘white knights’, ‘gimps’, ‘betas’, ‘sims’, ‘pussies’, ‘bitches’ and ‘faggots’ (Ibid, p.14).

The second article focuses on an MGTOW forum rather than Twitter users (although not the same MGTOW forum I researched) (Wright et al., 2020). The aim is to understand the structure and content of the discussions that take place on this forum. The article goes into the ideology of MGTOW, outlining the concept of a ‘gynocentric order’ which is common across the Manosphere. This refers to a social system that consistently favours women, placing them in a dominant position over men (Ibid p.922). Primarily a separatist group, members of the MGTOW believe the only solution to the perceived ‘gynocentricity’ of society remove themselves from it entirely, in order to regain independence and pursue their own goals unhindered by women’s influence (Ibid. p.910). This takes many different forms, from avoiding committed relationships to going ‘monk mode’, whereby individuals become celibate and try to cut off all contact with society entirely.

The findings of this article support those of the previous, revealing that 33% of all posts analysed were about women (Wright et al., 2020, p.920). This highlights an inherent contradiction in the MGTOW discourse which Wright et al. refer to in their previous article as “woman-obsessed separatism” (2019, p.13). The reason suggested for this is that members of MGTOW need to have a way of demonstrating their allegiance to the group, and one way of doing this is discussing their dislike of women and/or misogynistic tropes. This explanation also explains why they are derogatory about men who do not adhere to their masculine ideals (8% of all posts) (Wright et al.,

2020, p.920). Like Høiland's (2019) work, Wright, Trott, and Jones demonstrate how engaging with gender theory can help to illuminate the beliefs that underpin these groups. Discussion of wider contextual factors which might explain the existence and increasing popularity of a group like MGTOW fall outside of the remit of this article. Instead, both these articles approach MGTOW as a 'problem' that needs to be mapped out and explored. This is undoubtedly valuable as understanding the beliefs and workings of this forum is an essential basis on which later research can be built.

### *The Red Pill*

Although 'red pill' ideology is discussed in various articles, there is very little written about the forum that takes this name, /r/TheRedPill. One article about a website with a similar ideology/subject matter is Mountford's (2018) topic modelling of a prominent PUA website, returnofkings.com. But crucially, this website is not a forum. Instead, it is made up of articles on PUA topics. This is significant because it means there is no interactive element to the website. In other words, men cannot communicate with one another on returnofkings.com, but can on a forum like /r/TheRedPill. Thus, although Mountford's (Ibid) thematic analysis of returnofkings.com is undoubtedly interesting and useful, the aim of this project is to understand why men are drawn to these groups. It is therefore necessary to observe their communication with one another on forums.

So far, the only article that provides an in depth exploration of a Red Pill forum is Dignam and Rohlinger's (2019) which analyses two different types of thread commonly found on /r/TheRedPill: Field Reports and Men's Rights. /r/TheRedPill allows you to tag posts based on their topic and the Field Report tag refers to a post that ostensibly describes a 'real life' encounter with a woman or women in which the user learned something or deployed PUA techniques. The Men's Rights tag is used to denote any post that refers to a discussion about men's rights. By

conducting a content analysis on 1,762 comments from the most popular Field Report and Men's Rights threads in 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016, Dignam and Rohlinger are able to chart the change in Red Pill discourse over this time (Ibid, p.591). These dates are chosen specifically because they coincide with Donald Trump's rise to political prominence and subsequent election to the White House, with the aim being to show how forums like /r/TheRedPill link to wider political events.

Dignam and Rohlinger's (2019) framing of the 'problem' of /r/TheRedPill, therefore, is around whether or not it has an effect on national politics, particularly in the USA. If this forum is found to be politicised and coordinated and to have a link to the election of Donald Trump, then this is a cause of concern in future elections. In analysing this data, Dignam and Rohlinger observed that /r/TheRedPill went from being a personal philosophy focused on self-improvement to becoming politicised in 2016 (Ibid, p.602), but that this phase was short lived. According to their research, /r/TheRedPill soon returned to being about personal improvement and was broadly apolitical. Their conclusion, however, seems to overlook the fact that this depoliticization could have mainly been down to the election being over. In other words, it could simply be a natural waning of interest in politics that occurs outside of election years. This is substantiated by the re-politicization of /r/TheRedPill in 2020. In that election year, /r/TheRedPill featured a post linking users to a thread on another Red Pill forum, TRP.red, suggesting a more long-term process of politicisation. TRP.red is more overtly politicised and, as it is not hosted on Reddit, has more relaxed moderation and guidelines. The site is organised into groups called 'tribes' which are focused on specific topics. The 'tribe' that was linked on /r/TheRedPill, called "Election Day 2020", was described as a place for "uncensored discussion of the upcoming abortion of an election day" and featured conspiracy theories about how the election was fixed ("Election Day 2020", 2020).



Existing literature on the Manosphere, therefore, now covers a broad range of topics and has gone from simply focusing on specific events to discussing the ideology and appeal of these groups more broadly. What this brief review of the literature on the Manosphere shows is that there are many different ways of framing it as a ‘problem’. In the following section, I will outline how I built on this literature to build my own idea of the ‘problem’ of /r/TheRedPill, /r/MGTOW, and Incels.co, and therefore the Manosphere more generally.

## **Neoliberalism and Masculinity**

In essence, I believe the ‘problem’ of the Manosphere to be caused, in part at least, by the overlap of the crisis of neoliberalism and masculinity moral panic. Neoliberalism and masculinity have what Steve Garlick refers to as certain “affinities” (2020, p.550), and these affinities are particularly significant when it comes to understanding the popularity and attraction of the Manosphere in the last decade. In this section, I will outline both the crisis of neoliberalism and current moral panic around masculinity before discussing the interplay between these two phenomena. In short, I believe these two phenomena come together to create an environment in which certain groups of men are suffering. It is an environment that is characterised by insecurity, instability, and the constant possibility of failure. Given failure is deemed unmasculine, men find themselves living with an existential fear of failure. The result is a build-up of negative affect which the discourses on these forums both explain and provide a release for, as well as providing solutions. This, section, therefore, will outline the coming together of both my theoretical framework and the context which has led to the rise of the Manosphere. In doing so, I hope to outline what I see as being the main reason men are drawn to these groups before going on to demonstrate my hypothesis in the subsequent chapters.

## Neoliberalism

### *Understanding Neoliberalism*

Neoliberalism is a term widely used across both academic and mainstream discourse to refer to a broad array of phenomena both economic and social. As a concept, neoliberalism is vast, and its definition depends on who is using the term. In a simplistic sense, neoliberalism refers to an economic and political consensus which began in the 1980s as a response to decline of the post-war Keynesian consensus (Mason, 2019, pp.39–40). During this time, stagflation leading up to the Great Recession meant policymakers looked back to liberal free-market ideas to solve the crisis. Neoliberalism sought to radically restructure both the economy and society and was underpinned by a commitment to the free market, individualism, and minimal state intervention (Ibid). But neoliberalism is more than just an economic agenda, it is something that affects aspects of our everyday lived experience too.

Bringing poststructural feminism to an analysis of neoliberalism allows for a multifaceted and wholistic view by considering the ways in which neoliberalism is both gendered and more than simply a logic that informs economic and social policy. It reveals that neoliberalism is more accurately described as a hegemonic order that structures the neoliberal subject's very understanding of the world around them. Not only this, but neoliberal subjects reinforce this paradigm through habitual action. Poststructuralism's emphasis on the political nature of language helps to explain how neoliberal discourses construct the world around us and our understanding of it, and thus gain legitimacy and secure hegemony. One example would be the way in which, under neoliberalism, market logics have infiltrated the intimate corners of our lives (Connell, 2010, p.24). Neoliberalism, therefore, is not only something which is simply enforced upon society from above by policy makers but is something which is reinforced by many of us in our daily lives and interactions. It is even in the language we use – we feel 'invested' in a character on our favourite

television show and undertake journeys of personal ‘growth’. In order to ensure its hegemony and longevity, in other words, an ideology must become commonsensical (Overbeek and Apeldoorn, 2012, p.7) and this explains neoliberalism’s purchase on how we understand the world around us.

Garlick defines neoliberalism in a way that I think best sums up my position:

In speaking of neoliberalism here...I don’t presume to speak of a single coherent project. Neoliberalism may be understood both as a globally dominant set of capitalist economic policies, typically focusing on deregulation, privatization, and competitive markets, as well as a set of political and social practices for governing people’s lives through encouraging them to view themselves as bearers of human capital and individual responsibility (2020, p.550).

As noted in the previous chapter, discourses create subject positions, and the neoliberal subject is one that is defined by its market position. The neoliberal subject’s relentless drive to self-optimize is designed to help them demonstrate that they are efficient and able to work. This can range from the urge to always be productive to more micro-level interventions like ‘breathwork’, a movement that aims to teach people to breathe ‘correctly’ to improve health and ‘wellbeing’ (Saner, 2020). Neoliberal discourses around wellbeing are particularly revealing. The links between exercise and neoliberalism, for instance, reveal the need to demonstrate that we are willing and able to perform work (Seaton, 2021). The aesthetic of modern gyms betray a nostalgia for the factory, and their existence is a monument to the neoliberal subject’s need to self-regulate (Greif, 2017). The infiltration of market forces drives a sense of relentless competition between individuals, and so self-regulation and self-improvement become virtues and necessary for survival under neoliberal capitalism.

Over the last few decades, feminist theorists have provided a comprehensive discussion of neoliberalism as a gendered project that reinforces and reproduces inequality (Fraser, 2019).

Neoliberalism, like other dominant paradigms throughout history, assumes its subject is male which in turn exacerbates existing gender inequalities (Brown, 2015). As such, the policies and social categories that it creates are designed to keep a narrow group of men – specifically white, middle class, and heterosexual – in positions of power and dominance. The outcome of this is that neoliberal leadership is made up mostly of men, the construction of the ‘entrepreneurial’ subject as masculine, and cuts to the welfare state which further redistribute wealth away from women and towards men (Brown, 2015, p.106; Connell, 2010, p.33).

### *The ‘Crisis of Neoliberalism’*

Mark Fisher described (neoliberal) capitalism as “primed to destroy the entire human environment” (Fisher, 2009, loc.284). Here Fisher was referring to environmental degradation and climate change specifically, but the phrase can be broadened out to refer to neoliberal capitalism’s catastrophic impact on both people’s lives as well as the non-human world. Drastic rises in inequality, the underfunding of the public realm, the proliferation of precarious working (zero-hour contracts), and the exposure of the labour force to brutal market forces are all ways in which neoliberal policies have had a direct negative impact on people’s lived experiences. Not only are people exploited for their labour in the traditional sense (through the expansion of work into their non-working lives), but there is also a pressure to commodify their most personal experiences through social media.

Beyond this, neoliberalism’s dominance has been to the detriment of our sense of self. The near ubiquitous imposition of market logics on the everyday lives of people has led to the hollowing out of human potential and seen the reduction of the most intimate aspects of our lives to a competition with others (Mason, 2019, p.45). Fisher also notes the rise in mental illness under (neoliberal) capitalism, asking how it has become acceptable that so many people, especially young people, are so ill (Fisher, 2009, loc.294). Fisher goes on to state that instead of being the only social

system that works, (neoliberal) capitalism is “inherently dysfunctional” (Ibid). Neoliberal capitalism’s “growth fetish” has also led to environmental degradation, showing there is a high environmental as well as human cost (Ibid, loc.284). Writing in 2009, Fisher points out that capitalism is by its very nature opposed to sustainability (Ibid). Now, in 2022, the warnings of scientists being mostly ignored for decades, the effects of climate change and the pressures it places on individuals, groups, and nations, are already being felt.

In many ways, therefore, it is perverse to refer to a ‘crisis of neoliberalism’. For both the human and non-human world, neoliberal capitalism *is* the crisis. It is a system that thrives off and generates insecurity, restricts human potential, and exploits the natural world. I wanted to make sure that this is clear before moving on to discuss the ‘crisis of neoliberalism’, so as not to give the impression that this system was at all stable or beneficial to human flourishing before the 2007/08 global financial crisis (GFC). In spite of this, when using the term ‘crisis of neoliberalism’ scholars are often referring to events of the GFC and period thereafter. At the time, the term was used to denote the idea that the GFC would set neoliberalism’s decline and eventual demise in motion (Dumenil and Levy, 2011, p.1; Fahnbulleh, 2020; Jacques, 2016; Overbeek and Apeldoorn, 2012, p.1; Rugitsky, 2020, p.588; Sitaraman, 2019). Even as early as 2011, however, scholars were noting neoliberalism’s apparent resilience and the fact that, despite the crisis, neoliberal dogma continued to guide the policy of governments across the globe (Fahnbulleh, 2020; Fraser, 2019; Saad Filho, 2011, p.251; Sitaraman, 2019).

The GFC clearly had effects on people’s everyday lives. Job losses, stagnating wages, and austerity all had embodied effects. But I want to focus on the effects the GFC had on the stability of the neoliberal consensus. What we have witnessed since the GFC is a prolonged period of stagnation which has been characterised by a dwindling confidence in, and consent to, the neoliberal project. This is partly down to a very weak economic recovery. Neoliberalism was never

a successful method of capital accumulation, but the 2010s saw particularly weak growth and wage stagnation – especially when compared to the post-war Keynesian settlement (Jacques, 2016; Lapavistas, 2020; Saad Filho, 2011, p.250). So, neoliberalism is in crisis, but it is a slow and drawn-out crisis.

Neoliberalism is in crisis in a much deeper sense too. As Bratich and Banet-Weiser (2019) point out, at the heart of this crisis is a crisis of the neoliberalisation of confidence. Confidence is a key logic in neoliberalism, as the neoliberal subject needs to have confidence in the techniques of self-entrepreneurship. Neoliberalism, therefore, locates confidence in the individual and thus creates an industry of confidence, including self-help gurus, life coaches, and motivational speakers (Ibid, p.5010). Confidence, therefore, has been transformed from a relational attribute based on trust in others, to something which individuals must cultivate within themselves (Ibid). This has direct ramifications for men's position within the neoliberal system. In order to gain confidence, which is seen as integral to the male neoliberal subject, women are used by men as a means of confirming or building confidence. Picking up women in this context thus becomes simply another means of cultivating self-confidence in which women are simply a resource (Ibid, p.5014). Men are therefore stuck in a situation whereby they need to build their self-confidence and cultivate an entrepreneurial spirit. This again places immense pressure on them, whilst simultaneously reinforcing heteronormative gender roles and inequalities. And the reality is that not all attempts at seduction work. The result is that women are viewed as obstacles to men realising self-confidence, and thus become the targets of misogynistic abuse. This process is central to understanding the rise of the Manosphere over the past decade.

As Bratich and Banet-Weiser (2019) point out there is another side to confidence under neoliberalism. The neoliberalisation of confidence means that neoliberalism itself requires confidence if it is to function. Individuals need to have confidence in the techniques of self-

improvement and self-entrepreneurship that neoliberalism espouses, as well as in neoliberalism's credibility as a method of capital accumulation. But over the last decade there has been an erosion of confidence to reveal that neoliberalism is nothing more than a collection of "swindles" and "scams" (Ibid). Viewing neoliberalism and its crisis in this way is essential to explaining why it is that people have lost confidence in neoliberalism and been driven to seek alternative discourses. The loss of confidence in neoliberalism, in other words, is central to understanding the Manosphere and its position within the fragmenting neoliberal paradigm.

The election of Donald Trump and other authoritarian leaders across the globe, as well as other political developments such as Brexit in the UK, can in part be traced back to this dissatisfaction and decline in people's confidence in the neoliberal consensus (Fraser, 2019). To use the language of hegemony, we have entered into the delegitimation phase, where the contradictions in the implementation of the hegemonic project continue to mount, and consent is increasingly enforced by authoritarian means (Overbeek and Apeldoorn, 2012, p.8). We also begin to see the beginnings of alternative projects vying for position as the new hegemon. Trump, Sanders, left-wing movements across Europe, and Brexit can all be seen as offering an alternative to the neoliberal consensus. Themes such as economic nationalism and increased government intervention indicate a clear break with the free-market globalisation settlement that neoliberalism is built on.

### *COVID-19*

This was the situation before COVID-19, and it is unclear how long this interregnum period would have lasted were it not for the social, political, and economic shock the pandemic brought with it. It is also not clear that the pandemic *will* signal the end of the neoliberal project. Neoliberalism's resilience and ability to adapt after the GFC seems to imply that it might again survive and struggle on, or perhaps mutate again to accommodate for mounting dissent. It is notable that the most of

the policies implemented by governments during the COVID-19 crisis, despite initially seeming to go against neoliberal dogma, have aimed primarily to shore up capital (Saad-Filho, 2020, p.480). Furlough schemes and one-off stimulus checks have been designed to cover up this disparity and maintain demand in the economy so companies can remain profitable (Ibid, p.481). The overall aim of these policies, in Western countries at least, has been to maintain the status quo and place the economy in stasis in order to hopefully re-animate it, unchanged, once a vaccine becomes available.

On top of this, rhetoric during the pandemic, from the UK government at least, emphasised the importance of later having to balance the government's budget. Now that the worst of the pandemic seems to be in the past, the UK Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, has announced a budget which shows the resilience of neoliberal ideals. Austerity and the need to lower the government's debt remain central tenets of the UK Conservative Party's policy decisions (Bush, 2021; Findlay, 2021). Furthermore, the idea of limited government intervention persists in spite of a 'cost of living' crisis, the climate crisis, and the long-term ramifications of COVID-19, showing neoliberal dogma is still very much embedded within certain areas of the state (BBC, 2022). On top of this, the discourse and policies around dealing with COVID-19 long-term have focused specifically on personal responsibility, in essence individualising the risk (Pagel, 2022). Neoliberalism's individualising effects, therefore, are still being strongly felt both in policy and in public discourse.

Writing my PhD during this time, I feel both well and poorly placed to comment on the effects of the pandemic on neoliberalism. Well because I have witnessed the changes to our lives first hand – lockdowns, the furlough scheme, government grants to businesses, mass volunteering, solidarity with front line workers – and poorly because no one has yet had the time and perspective to figure out quite what the long-term effects of the pandemic will be. Whether these changes will



indeed spell the end of the neoliberal era, and what will emerge after it, remains to be seen. Regardless of whether there is any change in the neoliberal system COVID-19 will have far reaching ramifications for the situation many men find themselves in. It is clear that the pandemic is adding to what has been a decade of insecurity, instability, and rising inequality. The redundancies, changing patterns of work, and economic recession, and cost of living crisis, for instance, are highly likely to have effects similar to the GFC, in that they will overwhelmingly affect certain groups in society that are already disadvantaged. In short, rather than being transformational, it appears that the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted and accelerated processes that were already present. The emotional fallout of this insecurity, both collectively and individually, will be significant, and yet it remains under-theorised. And although COVID-19 is the most immediate and tangible threat, the effects of climate change will also exacerbate insecurity, inequality, and pre-existing grievances.

### *Loneliness*

Loneliness is another aspect of the crisis of neoliberalism that is receiving increased attention. This topic feels particularly relevant now given successive lockdowns have force people to isolate from their friends and family. Loneliness, however, was increasing long before the pandemic required social distancing, and it is a problem which gets to the heart of my research. One of neoliberalism's key tenets, individualism, has atomised society and undermined collectivism, and the result is an epidemic of loneliness. In *The Lonely Century* (2020), Noreena Hertz defines loneliness broadly, using it to refer not only to feeling bereft of love, company, intimacy, or feeling as if we are ignored or uncared for by those we interact with, but also to mean a sense that we are not supported or cared for by our government, community, employers, or fellow citizens (2020, p.7). This broader definition allows Hertz to explore the multifaceted problem of loneliness in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and its equally numerous consequences.

The rolling back of the state and atomisation of society has caused people to feel increasingly unsupported and alienated, the consequences of which include increased anger, frustration, diminished empathy, as well as an increased propensity to view one's environment as hostile (Hertz, 2020, p.35). These emotions are then co-opted by populist and far-right leaders through promises to return to a world characterised by traditional, respectable jobs and a sense of community and national identity (Ibid, p.45). In the context of my own research, Hertz's definition and exploration of loneliness offers an incredibly insightful exploration into a much ignored but ubiquitous characteristic of neoliberal capitalist societies, especially in the context of the Internet. Hertz's work reminded me of the title of Steven Crimando's (2019) article mentioned in the previous section, *Alone Together and Angry: An Incel Revolution*, which succinctly sums up a significant reason why incels are drawn to these forums and how these forums collectivise their loneliness and channel it into anger and violence. Loneliness, therefore, is one of neoliberalism's under-theorised and under-discussed consequences. Individualism atomises society which in turn drives loneliness, an affective experience which can be a significant factor in directing people towards the Manosphere.

Loneliness exists at a point where the emotional fallout of four decades of neoliberalism and the crisis following the GFC is felt most viscerally. In other words, abandonment is but one of the affective experiences that results from the neoliberal consensus. It is also something that is deeply gendered. Although loneliness is experienced by people regardless of their gender, men's gendered role as provider and as a subject that must remain stoic and in control of their emotions means they are particularly susceptible to it. On top of this, constant exposure to risk, instability, and competition, combined with inequality, a limited sense of self, and the hollowing out of public services have all taken their toll emotionally. As shall be discussed later, however, neoliberalism has neither a solution for this, nor an affective mechanism for dealing with its own effects.

Neoliberalism can only rely on the individual's confidence that returning to the beginning again failing better is a viable option. This, however, results in a cycle which eventually breaks down as the neoliberal subject loses this confidence. This loss of confidence is followed by a loss of meaning. The crisis of neoliberalism, therefore, is not just an abstract concept, but something that is embodied and felt by individuals. It is in the identity crisis caused by realising the con of neoliberalism, in the loneliness felt by millions as a result of the state's negligence, and in the reduction of the human experience to market forces.

Neoliberalism, therefore, provides one part of the backdrop to the rise of the Manosphere. It creates an environment of perpetual instability and colonises people's everyday lives in a multitude of ways. The result is a situation in which men are living in a constant state of insecurity. Jobs are precarious and therefore so is financial stability and social standing. The individualising forces that underpin neoliberalism are also driving a more atomised and lonely society. A significant number of men feel unsupported, disenfranchised, and left behind. At the same time, neoliberalism promises men self-confidence but is, at the same time, predicated on con games and swindles. This is an environment, in other words, that is not well suited to human flourishing and instead generates anxiety, insecurity, and isolation.

### **The Masculinity Moral Panic**

The 'crisis of masculinity' is a term I first heard in a lecture on men and masculinities during my undergraduate degree. It was used to refer to the idea that men were undergoing a crisis because changing social and economic factors were affecting their ability to fulfil the role of breadwinner. The lecturer, however, cautioned that we should be careful not fall into the trap of re-centring the discussion on men. They added that, in many ways, this 'crisis' was a result of men becoming aware of their own privilege and seeing this privilege reduced by increasing gender equality. The growing

number of women in public roles, women's entry into the workforce, and women's financial independence have all been cited as factors in this 'crisis of masculinity'. In other words, the 'crisis of masculinity' could be seen as no more than a moral panic about women claiming more public space (Davis et al., 2006, p.5). We therefore need to be careful when discussing this topic, as doing so runs the risk of being reactionary. But there is definitely *something* happening among a significant number of men. The rise of anger and fear among men has already been discussed within both academia and the wider media, and one of the ways this manifests is the Manosphere (Kimmel, 2013). In this section I want to question whether the term 'crisis of masculinity' is an accurate description of what men are experiencing right now.

Before exploring this further, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by the 'crisis of masculinity'. In the literature, two different terms are used: crisis *of* masculinity and crisis *in* masculinity. The terms, however, seem to be used somewhat interchangeably, with the term crisis *of* masculinity being used far more frequently to describe this phenomenon. Few articles and books explain their decision to use the word 'of' or 'in', leading to a great deal of confusion over whether there is a difference in the two terms at all. The only definition I came across is that the crisis *of* masculinity refers to something more fundamental and difficult to resolve, whereas the crisis *in* masculinity refers to something specific and more capable of resolution (Morgan, 2006, p.110). However, following this, Morgan uses both terms, confusingly using 'in' and 'of' interchangeably throughout the chapter, and cites authors who use both terms as well. The crisis *in* and *of* masculinity also seem to describe the same group of observations, mostly to do with boy's academic attainment, changes in the labour market and patterns of work, changes in the family and patterns of intimate life, and an increase in women's participation in the labour market, public life, and education (Ibid. pp.111-112).

In summary, there seems to be confusion over which term to use before even getting on to whether or not it is right to call this a ‘crisis’. Although there is not the space here to discuss the arguments of all detractors, I do want to focus on the use of the word ‘crisis’. The word is used throughout academia to describe a whole range of different phenomena. Men and masculinity are clearly going through a period of turmoil. And this is not necessarily new either, it has been bubbling beneath the surface for decades (Plank, 2019, p.52). In *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* Faludi (1991) identified and explored the ‘backlash’ against feminism and advances made towards gender equality since 1970s in America. Faludi argues that this backlash is a recurring phenomenon which repeats whenever women make substantial gains in their fight for gender equality. It appears that we are in another period like this, or perhaps that this period never fully ended, with movements such as Me Too and women taking up more visible public roles causing discontent among groups of men.

The contemporary backlash is assessed by a number of academics, with particularly significant contributions by Michael Kimmel. Kimmel’s 2013 book *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era* explores why men are feeling so alienated, threatened, and angry. It is in this book that the concept of aggrieved entitlement is developed. Kimmel defines aggrieved entitlement as “that sense of entitlement that can no longer be assumed and that is unlikely to be fulfilled” (Kimmel, 2013, loc.134) clarifying, in layman’s terms, that “it’s that “God-given right” that seems to be evaporating” (Ibid, loc.475). Kimmel discusses how women and immigrants entering the workforce has no effect on white men so long as new jobs are being created (Ibid, loc.437-447). In the 1990s and early 2000s, therefore, a period of high economic growth and relatively low unemployment meant feelings of aggrieved entitlement were kept at bay. Since the GFC and the stagnation that followed, however, the backlash has returned. This would make sense considering that initially 80% of jobs lost in the GFC were male occupied (Ibid, loc.411). Here we

are already beginning to see hints of how masculinity and neoliberalism intertwine to create a situation that breeds insecurity, uncertainty, and aggrieved entitlement.

Aggrieved entitlement links together everything from far-right talk radio hosts to mass shooters like Elliot Rodger. It is not just about jobs; it encompasses other things men feel entitled to. Indeed, elsewhere Kimmel uses the concept to explain Elliot Rodger's actions (2014). Rodger felt entitled to sexual and romantic relationships with women, and the aggrieved entitlement that resulted from this not being fulfilled caused Rodger to feel emasculated to the extent where he believed the only solution to end this humiliation was retaliatory violence (Ibid). The mass shooting Rodger carried out was on one level a symbolic re-assertion of his manhood in the most extreme way. In this sense, Kimmel believes Rodger was not an outlier, but an over-conformist who followed strictly the notion that men are entitled to certain things – money, sex, power – and therefore felt he was being discriminated against when these things were not readily available to him on demand (Ibid).

Intimately linked to the idea of aggrieved entitlement is the notion of victimhood and the reconfiguration of white masculinity as an oppressed category. To the men on the Manosphere, masculinity is in crisis in a very different way. There is a belief among these men that feminism had gone too far and it was now actively targeting and attacking men, seeking to eradicate them or at the very least undermine what it is to be a man (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016, p.389). Ahmed's discussion of hate and pain helps to explore how white men have been constructed as the victim of feminist gains. Ahmed points out that the "emotion of hate works to animate the ordinary subject, to bring that fantasy to life, precisely by constituting the ordinary as in crisis, and the ordinary person as the real victim" (2007, p.43). White men are in pain because of the invasion of the 'other' (in this case women) into what they perceive to be their space, and thus the body of the 'other' (women) is transformed into something to be hated (Ibid). Bringing in Ahmed's (Ibid)

outlook, therefore, reveals how aggrieved entitlement is reached via an affective process whereby men, specifically white men, claim the position of victim. These men argue that they have been damaged by external forces, and the agents causing the hurt, women, are made into objects of hate.

To understand this victimhood narrative and aggrieved entitlement it is necessary to acknowledge the insecure nature of masculinity. It is the combination of this inherent insecurity with external factors, like increasing gender equality and the breakdown of the male breadwinner role, that leads to the perfect storm taking place on the Manosphere. Gender is something that is constantly performed, and hegemonic masculinity *needs* to be performed because it is something that very few men, if any, actually achieve. The unrealistic nature of hegemonic masculine ideals means that men constantly dread failure, because failure is portrayed as something distinctly unmasculine (Allan, 2018, p.181). Men are therefore trapped in a cycle where they are set up to fail (because hegemonic masculine ideals are impossible to achieve in full), and to fail is to be unmasculine. As a result, men continue to strive to fulfil these masculine ideals and cannot deal with emotional fallout of failing to do so. This is also a particularly lonely process. Given men are socialised into being stoic and to not show vulnerability, they cannot share stories of failure and receive consolation from others. As a result, these failures are internalised and build up over time. The emotional ramifications of this can be many and varied. They can be explosive, in the form of anger, or they can take the form of depression and low self-esteem.

Another term for this, coined by Lauren Berlant, is a “cruel optimism”. For Berlant, cruel optimism “is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object” (2011, p.24). Hegemonic masculinity, in this sense, is the thing men desire but is also precisely the thing that is harming them or preventing them from achieving contentment. All of this is compounded by a number of other hegemonic masculine traits which are held up as desirable.

Not talking about emotions or being able to process them in a healthy way, for instance, only worsens this fear of failure and the shame it brings (Plank, 2019, p.96). It seems, then, that like neoliberalism, masculinity is constantly in a form of crisis because of its dependency on femininity to define itself and men's constant need to re-assert their masculinity. Based on insecurity, it places men in a position where they are constantly living under the fear of failure, and yet failure is inevitable. Speaking of a 'crisis of masculinity' implies that there was a time when this contemporary configuration of hegemonic masculinity was not in crisis but, as with neoliberalism, this is not the case. Although there are certainly times which appear more volatile and during which discourses of victimhood become stronger and more prevalent, this form of masculinity is, in fact, always in a state of crisis.

The term 'crisis of masculinity', therefore, is both problematic and fails to accurately capture the lived experience of men. Instead, I prefer the term 'masculinity moral panic' used by Plank (2019), because this better captures the way in which men are reacting to changing social and economic patterns. Plank uses this term to denote the fear in some parts of society that men are becoming less male. Fox News host Tucker Carlson is a prominent figure in the masculinity moral panic, claiming that men are "pretty close to being destroyed" by women (Newshounds, 2018). More recently, whilst interviewing broadcaster and former politician Nigel Farage, Carlson raised concerns that contracting coronavirus had changed the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson. It had "emasculated him...changed him...feminized him, it weakened him as a man" (Media Matters Staff, 2021). There is a constant fear, therefore, that masculinity is under threat, and that men are always at risk of being feminised. In fact, according to this view, many men have already been feminised and need to reclaim their masculinity. Reclaiming masculinity comes in many forms, but one of the most prominent ways is seeking guidance from authority figures and groups. Jordan Peterson is one such authority figure (Plank, 2019, p.52). Plank concludes, therefore, that



“ultimately, the masculinity moral panic speaks more to the sadness and need for guidance among young men—it offers a simple solution to a complicated problem” (Ibid, p.53). I argue that /r/TheRedPill, /r/MGTOW, and Incels.co are examples of groups and ideologies that offer this guidance.

The term masculinity moral panic is useful in this regard because it shifts the debate away from simply pointing out that men are victims of change and increasing gender equality and instead frames what we are seeing as a result of a lack of guidance, fragile masculinity, and the need to push back against progress in gender equality. The idea of a moral *panic* also speaks to the emotional aspect of this state, highlighting how fear is one of the main underlying drivers of this phenomenon. This, therefore, is the term I will use in my own work to denote the turmoil men are currently in and what is driving them to join online groups like Incels.co, /r/TheRedPill, and /r/MGTOW.

### **The relationship between neoliberalism and masculinity**

The effects of neoliberalism are deeply gendered and understanding the way in which this ideology affects men specifically is a big part of understanding why certain men are attracted or driven to the Manosphere. Some have already been touched on, including the insecurity of the labour market and the pressure this places on men who are socialised into the provider role. But there are many other ways in which neoliberalism, and its crisis, are deeply gendered.

Nancy Fraser notes that the hegemonic version of neoliberalism that arose in the 1990s and early 2000s should more accurately be referred to as progressive neoliberalism (Fraser, 2019, p.8). This particular configuration of neoliberalism combined “an expropriative, plutocratic economic program with a liberal-meritocratic politics of recognition” (Ibid). This hegemonic bloc beat its competitor, reactionary neoliberalism, but at a cost (Ibid, p. 10). The cost, in most Western

economies, was a decline in manufacturing centres. During the 2000s, the only two options available politically speaking were reactionary neoliberalism and progressive neoliberalism, and there was therefore nothing to protect interests working- and middle-class people (Ibid, p.11). As a result, their living standards were decimated, and their situations became far more precarious. On top of this, progressive neoliberalism's push to diversify the existing social hierarchy meant that many men, who had previously relied on manufacturing jobs, were now left in a precarious position, and saw more women and ethnic minorities taking up positions they felt entitled to (Ibid, p.8). Men, in other words, feel that their very identity and way of life is under threat from the 'other', in this case women and ethnic minorities.

Aside from the gendered effects of neoliberalism, there is also a deep connection between this ideology and hegemonic masculinity. Garlick (2020) provides the most comprehensive discussion of this connection, arguing that there are deep affinities binding the two and that this in turn helps to legitimise, sustain, and reproduce dominant forms of neoliberalism (Garlick, 2020, p.550). By "affinity" Garlick means that there are both "structural resemblances and forms of attraction between two things" (Ibid). In analysing a neglected text in the history of neoliberal thought, the 1944 book *Bureaucracy* by Ludwig Von Mises, Garlick outlines how the economic domain is implicitly gendered. The economic is linked with the masculine in opposition to the feminising impact of socialism which threatens to emasculate men by bureaucratising society and bringing it to a point of stasis (note the active/passive binary here and how the active is often associated with masculinity) (Ibid, p.555-556).

In the economic realm, everything is guided by rationality and objectivity, but it relies on the "unpredictableness of human nature as manifested via the desires of a population of (feminized) consumers" (Ibid). The result is that the system is inherently insecure and that it is only possible to obtain security if you occupy the "abstract masculine position in which one is in

control of the market as a whole” (Ibid, p.577). However, this position is foreclosed under neoliberalism as security is available “not to individual men but only at the collective level of the market” (Ibid). Thus, individuals remain in a state of constant uncertainty and instability.

As noted in the previous section, failure is coded as distinctly unmasculine and the insecurity that underpins neoliberal capitalism means men are in an environment where failure is a continuous possibility. One example is the aforementioned provider role men feel they need to occupy. A key part of the provider role is having a job. But, under neoliberal capitalism, jobs can be swept away without a moment’s notice. Having a job is a fundamental part of any neoliberal capitalist subject’s identity, but hegemonic masculinity elevates it to an existential level. In other words, to not be able to provide for the family undermines the very basis of masculine identity. Given neoliberal capitalism is constructed to maintain the dominance of a narrow group of white, middle-class, heterosexual men, the ability for working class, racialised, men to fulfil the breadwinner role is impeded (Radhakrishnan and Solari, 2015; Matlon, 2016; Walker and Roberts, 2018). In short, a large proportion of men are in a situation where to fail to fulfil the role of a provider is unmasculine, but the probability of failing in this role is high and the possibility ever-present. Failure is coded as fundamentally unmasculine, so men will seek to attempt to control everything they can in order to prevent failure. The fundamental aim of this is to protect their sense of identity. The result of all of this is, as Kimmel notes, that men become control freaks (Kimmel, 1996, p.45). In other words, to avoid failure which is constructed as an existential threat, they must constantly seek to control the environment they are in.

This situation is compounded by neoliberalism’s adherence to responsibilism, an ideology which places responsibility on the individual, even when the cause of ‘failure’ is structural (Fisher, 2014). The result is that when men do inevitably fail to fulfil the provider role (in this example), instead of the blame being placed on structural factors (such as the inherently unstable and

exploitative nature of neoliberal capitalism), it is internalised. Men are therefore left with no option but to go back to the beginning and try again, but this time fail better. Neither neoliberalism nor masculinity offer an affective structure for dealing with failure other than to place all the blame on the individual, giving them no option but to go back to the beginning, to fail better, and to keep consuming (Bratich and Banet-weiser, 2019, pp.5012–5013). Men must simply repeat the same process again, even if failure is inevitable. Failure, in fact, often seems to be part of the process itself. Trying countless times in spite of failure, is seen as a stoic and resilient thing to do, even though failure itself is coded as unmasculine. So there is clearly a tension here between a desire to avoid failure, but a sense, given the lack of any alternative, that it is necessary to repeat the process again until one succeeds. Perseverance in the face of failure is coded as very masculine trait.

A large constituency of men have therefore suffered as a result of neoliberal capitalism in its various guises over the last 40 years. On top of this, there has been a dearth of alternative discourses that explain their suffering in a way that does not resort to misogyny and blaming feminism. Acknowledging this is key to understanding why men are attracted to the Manosphere. I argue that the lack of alternative discourses leaves a void that is filled by the discourses on the Manosphere. The discourses on Incels.co, /r/TheRedPill and /r/MGTOW translate men's negative affective experiences that result from the crisis of neoliberalism and masculinity moral panic into experiences of loss. Specifically, they tell men that they are lacking, or have lost, control, identity, and meaning.

The loss of control comes from being exposed to market forces in all areas of their lived experience. As has been demonstrated, the market creates an environment characterised by uncertainty and an ever-present fear of failure. The loss of identity is twofold. It comes from the fear of and potential for failure which is constructed as unmasculine. It also comes from progressive neoliberalism's superficial attempts at egalitarianism and emancipation in the form of

diversity without changing the social structure (Fraser, 2019, p.7). In other words, these men interpret their lack of success as directly resulting from women and ethnic minorities entering the workplace. Finally, the loss of meaning arises from these men not receiving what they feel they are entitled to. These men are socialised into feeling entitled to a job, family, sex, and power. But these things are not always forthcoming. Neoliberalism sells a lifestyle for men that depicts the possibility of being wealthy, having a family, having sex, and always being in a position of power. But for a significant constituency of men, this lifestyle is increasingly unobtainable. These men feel that this discourse does not properly describe or explain their lived experience, and therefore seek alternatives.

My thesis is that /r/TheRedPill, /r/MGTOW, and Incels.co each offer alternative discourses which promise an encounter with this lost control, identity, and meaning. Each group is made up of discourses that take the amorphous, raw, and unconveyable affective experiences these men are having as a result of the amalgamation of neoliberalism and hegemonic masculinity and translate it into something coherent and understandable. This process in and of itself provides an encounter with meaning, control, and identity, but on top of this, they also offer solutions. It is these solutions that differentiate the discourses from one another. But fundamentally, no discourse can deliver on its promise, and the result for the subject is an affective experience characterised by enjoyment and frustration. In order to cover up its failings and internal contradictions, each discourse routes negative affective experiences towards the 'other'. The 'other' is therefore constructed as an object of hate and the source of pain. This argument will underpin all of my substantive chapters as I seek to explore how this mechanism plays out in each of the three forums I have chosen to research.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

### Introduction

In *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (2005), Rebecca Solnit discusses the importance of losing ourselves in order to discover new things. “That thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you” Solnit says, “is usually what you need to find, and finding it is a matter of getting lost” (Ibid, p.6). This sentiment echoes back through time. Solnit cites Thoreau who, in *Walden*, states that “it is a surprising and memorable, as well as valuable, experience to be lost in the woods at any time.” (Thoreau, 2017, p.152). Being lost was certainly something I felt throughout my thesis, from when I first engaged with the Manosphere during my fieldwork, to when I started writing up my findings. Guidance was offered along the way but being lost was also a necessary part of the process of discovery. Traditionally, ethnography involved a researcher travelling somewhere to observe a ‘new’ or ‘unfamiliar’ culture or community. Colonial connotations aside for now, losing yourself in order to discover something new is a fundamental part of this method. Autoethnography turned the spotlight away from the geographically or culturally distant and toward the self. The emphasis therefore changes from getting lost to losing your *self*. It makes the familiar unfamiliar by asking the researcher to reflect on his, her, or their own position both as a researcher and as part of, or apart from, the culture or community he, she, or they are researching. During this inward journey, the researcher often discovers new, previously unknown things about themselves and the social, political, and cultural dynamics in which they are embedded.

For reasons I cannot quite fathom, I had initially shied away from labelling my methodology as an explicitly feminist one. At a late stage in my PhD, however, I read an upcoming chapter by Roxani Krystalli which opened my eyes to both the importance of being open and assertive about the feminist nature of my work, and quite how much of my approach already

aligned with what would be considered feminist methodology (Forthcoming). But what exactly is a feminist methodology? Krystalli outlines four pillars of feminist methodology including feminist curiosity, the importance of reflexivity, the acknowledgement of the relational nature of research, and the “capacity for feminist methodologies to shed light not only on patriarchal violence, but also on the sources of care and joy that exist alongside it” (Ibid). In my research I attempted to cultivate a feminist curiosity where I could, albeit sometimes unknowingly. As Enloe writes, “feminist research asks feminist questions” (Enloe, 2004, p.22) and Krystalli states that feminist research questions “explore the lives of men as gendered subjects”, something that underpins my entire project (Krystalli, Forthcoming). Of the pillars Krystalli outlines, reflexivity also stood out as one which was particularly relevant to my own work (Ibid). As a fundamental part of autoethnography, reflexivity will be a key concept and practice throughout my thesis.

The aim of this chapter is to outline the particular methodological approach I took to my research and to discuss the ethical principles which guided my research throughout. I decided to undertake an autoethnographic study in order to gather my data and immerse myself in the chosen forums. Ellis et al. state that “auto-ethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (2011, p.273). Autoethnography can also be thought of as an umbrella term for a whole range of different ways of doing research, and as such is often discussed using qualifiers. A summary of my chosen methodology can therefore be worded thus: an online, multi-cited, poststructural, autoethnography. Each of these qualifiers will be unpacked, explained, and justified throughout the course of this chapter.

## **Ethnography and the Ethnographic Site**

Autoethnography developed out of ethnography, a methodology that has existed for about 100

years and is well-established in the social sciences (Harrison, 2018, p.1). Hammersley and Atkinson describe ethnography as involving “in its most characteristic form...the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of research.” (1995, p.1). The sites of an ethnography can range from a group local to the researcher, to a community in a country thousands of miles away, to (in the case of my project and others like it) an online community. Online ethnographies and autoethnographies have been performed for at least a couple of decades (McLelland, 2002; Ward, 1999), and there are a number of terms used to describe this sub-methodology. Cyber-(auto)ethnography, virtual (auto)ethnography, and online (auto)ethnography are all terms used to describe the same concept. Another term, auto-netnography, is defined as “an approach to netnography that highlights the role of the netnographer’s own experiences of his or her own online experiences” (Kozinets and Kedzior, 2009, p.8). For the sake of clarity, however, I will be using the term “online autoethnography” from here on.

But why does there need to be a differentiation from (auto)ethnographies on the Internet and those on the non-Internet? At the heart of this question is the online/offline dichotomy and the assumption that there is something fundamentally different about these two realms. In popular culture, daily discourse, and academia the sense that the online and offline world are separate persists. This dichotomy was perpetuated by cyber-theorists and commentators who saw cyberspace as a utopian environment which was free from the prejudices of the physical world (Ward, 1999, p.96). Along with this comes the assumption that the online world is to some extent less important than the offline world. In essence, what happens in the online world is seen to be of less consequence. Examples of this can be seen in the way individuals and the media react to the abuse women receive online. The idea that it is only words on a screen, and that you should



not feel threatened or harmed by them is prevalent, and the lack of action by social media companies shows they too seem to believe that online harassment is not as important as its offline counterpart (Amnesty International, 2018).

But the idea that there is a division between the online and offline world has been challenged for decades now. Writing in 1999, Katie Ward notes that “email infiltrates and impacts on the way in which we fashion and conduct our lives in the physical world.” (1999, p.95). Since then, the notion of an online/offline division has become even harder to defend. The ubiquity of smartphones and social media has led to cyberspace becoming embedded in our everyday lives. What happens in cyberspace, therefore, is inherently interlinked with our ‘offline’ lives. It is important to remember that on the other end of most comments, posts, and tweets (bots notwithstanding) is a human being. As Steinmetz puts it: “When a person is browsing a bulletin board, they are also dealing with their “real” life stresses, relationships, and material reality” (2012, p.29). For my own research, therefore, I needed to ensure that I was not reinforcing this binary. Indeed, challenging it is a fundamental part of my project.

### **Anonymity, lurking, and informed consent**

Although the differences and division between the online and offline worlds are greatly exaggerated, the Internet does have some characteristics that make it a different site of research when compared to ‘offline’ sites. This includes a lack of face-to-face communication, anonymity, and a lack of clear boundaries between research sites (Sade-Beck, 2004, p.46).

The lack of face-to-face interaction is one of the most prominent characteristics that distinguishes online from offline communication and interaction. Although the telephone facilitated long-distance, non-face-to-face communication long before the Internet, the Internet remains distinct because it is a primarily text-based medium. It therefore removes even more of

the information people use to communicate with each other. With the telephone, information such as tone, pitch, and other verbal indicators remained for the recipient to interpret. But the Internet, in its text based form at least, strips a lot of this out leaving users to both come up with inventive ways of expressing themselves and fill in the gaps left by this dearth of information (Walther, 1996, p.18). For me and other ethnographers, this means potentially working with less information than there would otherwise be in an offline situation where facial expressions, tone, and the like are available. This did not, however, mean that there was a lack of material for me to analyse. Users find different ways to express tone and emotion, either using emojis, images, different fonts, or bold and italics. During my project I made sure I was particularly attuned to these subtleties.

Anonymity also posed some challenges during my autoethnography. Even if it has been eroded to some extent by the rise of social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter which encourage users to create profiles and post personal, identifying information, this change has not been universal. The vast majority of sites, the three forums I studied included, still allow users to maintain a large degree of anonymity, and the sites I looked at did not require users to share any identifying information. Accounts can also be created quickly and easily, leading to the possibility that people might have multiple accounts or creating “throwaway” accounts if they are posting something personal, or something they would rather not post from their main account. The combination of anonymity and the ease of making accounts means that users can play with identity (Steinmetz, 2012, p.30). It is important to note, however, that identity play did not start with the Internet and is definitely not unique to it. The Internet might make it easier to adopt new and different identities, but people adopt different identities in their day-to-day lives all the time. The poststructural approach I took throughout my project also addresses this difference by positing that very idea of an “authentic identity” is based on humanist assumptions of a unitary and coherent self.

The consequence of this for my own research was a scepticism around the truthfulness of a user's statements and/or identity. Although in day-to-day scenarios users rarely question whether or not another user's identity or statements are "authentic" (because calling every user's identity into question would take a lot of time), Steinmetz notes that identity should remain an important factor in any online ethnography (Steinmetz, 2012, p.31). Hine notes that we should not focus on whether or not the online identity of a user is the same as their offline identity, but on their "digitally projected identities" and "how their identities are negotiated and judged as being authentic in and of themselves" (Cited in Steinmetz, 2012, p.31). This is linked to the concept Poe's Law which states that "without a clear indication of the author's intent, it is difficult or impossible to tell the difference between an expression of sincere extremism and a parody of extremism" ("Poe's Law", n.d.). In other words, the Internet removes certain interpersonal cues which we would normally use to tell whether someone is being sincere or not. In my own study, I will attempt, where necessary, to interrogate and question whether or not a meme or comment is parody or genuine, but in the knowledge that knowing for certain is impossible. I will be doing so in order to highlight the many layers of irony and parody which make up these sites, and the ways in which they keep out the uninitiated through a culture of in jokes and subtle irony.

Furthermore, I would like to posit the notion that authenticity is not the only measure by which to judge a statement's worth. Lee Ann Fujii discusses this at length, in the context of testimonies of war and violence, and concludes that "the value of oral testimonies research collect in places that have recently suffered violence does not lie solely in the truthfulness of their content" (2010, p.232). Fujii goes on to state that the value also lies in the "meta-data" that accompanies the testimonies (Ibid). In this case, "meta-data" refers to the "spoken and unspoken expressions about people's interior thoughts and feelings, which they do not always articulate in their stories or responses to interview questions" (Ibid). The difference between Fujii's approach and mine,

however, is that I did not carry out interviews and my research was online, removing a lot of the scope for noting such meta-data. However, I was still able to note silences and invented stories, and to exercise judgement when it came to deciding between fact and fiction and whether this distinction mattered in certain contexts. As Fujii notes, embellishments and fictions can be just as telling as the “truth” and, more fundamentally, many statements people make about the world cannot be ruled true or false anyway (Ibid, p.234).

Anonymity also provided a number of benefits to my own research such as the capacity to “lurk” which refers to the ability to observe forums without anyone other users knowing you are doing so. This means the actions of the research subjects are not altered in any way, something which is impossible in offline ethnographies. In an offline context, even if the ethnographer keeps their identity as a researcher secret, their very presence will necessarily alter the interactions of those around them. In the online context of my own research, however, I was completely hidden from members of the groups I was researching. This was interesting to reflect upon as it meant these forums, and the users that make them up, were a big part of my life for four years, but I was completely unknown to them. Of course, this raises a number of ethical considerations.

#### *Informed consent and relational ethics*

I would like to take this opportunity to expand upon the ethical considerations I made when deciding how to approach my ethnographic sites and whether or not I required informed consent. During the course of my research, I came across the concept of relational ethics which ended up guiding a lot of my ethical decisions. Relational ethics “relates to both the ethics of care and the ethics of responsibility, emphasising mutual respect, dignity, connection, and negotiated consent” (Winkler, 2018, p.241). The only point of departure I have with this outlook is around informed consent. A lot of the debate around consent in online research arises from the ambiguity of the public/private divide in cyberspace. Should we consider tweets sent from an open account public

or private? These utterances are as freely available as conversations we overhear in cafés or in the street, but, when asked, the majority of users say that they consider their tweets, comments, and other types of post to be private – even if they have been sent from a public account (Markham and Buchanan, 2012, p.6).

The ambiguity deepens when considering semi-closed networks such as Facebook. Although anyone can access a public Twitter account without even having an account themselves, viewing a Facebook account requires the researcher having a Facebook account themselves and adding users as “friends”. Potential research subjects can choose whether to accept or reject friend requests, creating a semi-closed network in which many believe their posts, comments, and other activities are private and disclosed only to those on their friends lists. Although this is the case for normal users, everything users post and do on Facebook is available both to Meta and other third-parties for the purposes of directed advertising and the harvesting of big data to analyse social trends, target information, etc. (Willis, 2019, p.7). Can we really consider this information private if it is easily available to the highest bidder? Roxana Willis concludes that although informed consent should always be the goal, online research which does not seek informed consent might still be warranted for this very reason alone (Ibid p.13). The alternative is leaving this information entirely to social media giants and data analysis companies who exploit it for profit and barring academics, who may use the data for some social good, from engaging with it (Ibid).

However, normally with ethnography informed consent is required before a researcher begins collecting data on their chosen group, and there is certainly an argument that research in cyberspace is no different – that we should not see any distinction between ethical principles in cyberspace or the offline world. Some argue that people have every right to know that they are participating in a research situation (Sveningsson, 2004, p.49). It is clear to see why this is the case when it comes to online interviews. These one-on-one interactions require informed consent just

as they do in offline situations. As discussed in the previous section, however, my research design does not include interviews or participation of any kind and will be limited purely to observation of forums that are publicly open. In ethnography literature, this is referred to as the “hidden observer” position (Sveningsson, 2004, p.49). In an offline situation, consent would not be required if an ethnographer was sitting in a café and simply listening in to conversations, as long as the requisite steps were taken to ensure those being listened to would not come to any harm and remained anonymous. My research represents an online version of this type of ethnography. The forums I observed had no barriers to entry, so I did not consider them to be private places just as a café is not broadly considered a private place.

As well as not being necessary, obtaining consent in the context of my research was both impractical and potentially risky. In terms of practicality, given my research only involved observation, I would have needed to gain consent from every user in each group I observed. This would have been impossible due to fluid and inconsistent memberships and the fact that there is no guarantee of a reply from every user (all three forums I am researching have tens of thousands of users). One proposed way around this would have been to inform the moderators of each forum that research would be being conducted. But the first issue with this is that it is not clear that the consent of the moderators is the same as the consent of the wider user-base. On top of this, it clashed with my own self-preservation, as it would have meant identifying myself and my purpose to the moderators, which could have led to me coming to harm. On the basis of both the argument outlined in the previous paragraph and those just mentioned, I did not seek informed consent from the users I researched.

However, this does not mean I did not do my utmost to ensure that research participants did not and will not come to any harm and were treated with respect and empathy. As part of ensuring that the subjects of my research come to no harm, I have put in place a number of

measures. Firstly, I have anonymised all users I quote in the thesis. Interestingly, however, a number of books I have read on the Manosphere choose not to anonymise users. They take posts, usually tweets, and quote them directly with the username of the person who sent it. I, however, find this problematic, especially when including the username does not add anything substantial to the research. Although many may see usernames as pseudonyms already, to do so is to misunderstand the nature of identity in cyberspace and deny that a username can be linked to a particular individual (Steinmetz, 2012, p.34). In cyberspace, usernames are no different from our given names, and there is likely to be a person on the other side of that username (bots notwithstanding) (Sveningsson, 2004, p.52). Users can identify other users based on their username, especially in relatively small online communities. It is foreseeable, therefore, that if I had not anonymised the users quoted in my thesis, other users could take retaliatory action against those users. It is my duty as a researcher to ensure the risk of this is as low as possible.

I did decide, however, to quote text directly. The issue is that due to the indexed nature of the Internet it is difficult to render quoted text untraceable. I did initially consider paraphrasing the posts and comments I gathered but decided that this would mean possibly misrepresenting individual users or the forums more generally. So much of what it is that makes these groups interesting and distinctive is in the language they use, and it would not be possible to paraphrase and maintain the same meaning. I also considered anonymising the names of the groups themselves. However, I decided that doing so would be ineffectual as I will providing descriptions of the groups and their respective doctrines, so they will be easy to identify either way. I debated this matter a great deal with myself, as I did not want to make a decision that was potentially unethical if it wouldn't benefit my research. Eventually I decided that anonymising the groups, and paraphrasing instead of quoting, would detract from my ability to portray the groups accurately. It would also mean not allowing these men to speak on their own terms.

It is also worth noting that during my research /r/MGTOW was deleted, /r/TheRedPill was quarantined, and Incels.co moved to Incels.is. Thus, none of these forums will show up on a search engine. This means that all the posts I show in my thesis will be either impossible (in the case of /r/MGTOW and Incels.co) or very difficult (in the case of /r/TheRedPill) to find. All of my fieldnotes were also kept in a password protected OneNote document. This was backed up to a password protected external hard drive as well as my OneDrive which is also password protected. My chapter drafts were also kept on a password protected laptop to which no one but myself has access.

Anonymising posts and ensuring the data I collected was kept secure was all part of my commitment to relational ethics. This commitment also informed my intention to be understanding and not misrepresent these forums or their members. Relational ethics provided the ethical structure which guided both the research and writing of my autoethnography. This meant ensuring I was empathetic and considerate when it came to representing the users on my chosen sites of research. I also needed to reflect on the responsibility I have to treat research subjects with respect and dignity both during and after my research. This, however, raises its own dilemmas. A lot of the posts and comments I read were misogynistic, hate filled, and abhorrent, and portraying this whilst also remaining compassionate is a difficult route to navigate. Fortunately, autoethnography allowed me ample space to reflect on this tension throughout the thesis.

Autoethnography has the ability to allow those who have been deliberately silenced or preferably unheard the chance to express themselves on their terms. This is something I had difficulty reconciling with my belief that these groups are already very vocal and responsible for the abuse of women and other minorities both online and offline. It therefore may appear problematic that my project is giving a platform and a voice to those who are arguably already using their position to harm others and spread vitriol and regressive ideas. However, as the purpose



of my research is to create a more nuanced view of these groups and the individuals who frequent them, it is – as has already been mentioned – necessary to give a voice to them in order to undo the unhelpful stereotypes that are currently used to describe them. I believe that misrepresenting these groups, and not listening to why the men on them have come to hold the beliefs they do, does nothing to prevent more men from joining them. I therefore believe that, although my project does not represent an archetypal example of giving a voice to the voiceless, it nevertheless is allowing people to speak on their own terms in order to undo stereotypes. On top of this, although the views and actions of some members of these groups may be abhorrent, it is important to realise that some of the ways they are represented and spoke of is dehumanising which again does nothing to improve the situation. Throughout my research and writing, I have been very conscious of walking the fine line between representing the groups and users on them in a fair and accurate way, and not making excuses for what is, at times, harmful and unpleasant beliefs and behaviours.

### **Spatial and Temporal Boundaries**

Cyberspace is also characterised by its lack of boundaries, both spatial and temporal. This had important ramifications for my research design because it made deciding the limitations of my ethnographic sites difficult. In terms of spatial considerations, although I chose three sites for my research, they were not entirely discrete. The hyperlinked nature of the Internet means I came across links to other websites during my time on all three forums. As Steinmetz puts it: “the entire phenomenon of the Internet is based on connections. When a group of people are in a chatroom together, they are all joined by signals in what can be called a ‘node’” (2012, p.28). In this context, a node is a “place” where all of these connections join together. The networked nature of the Internet, therefore, makes defining spatial boundaries difficult. For my study, I decided to stick within the chosen field sites as much as possible, although if there were links to other websites or subreddits posted by users I followed these links if they provided useful context and information.

It is important to note, however, that this difficulty is also present in traditional ethnographies. Setting boundaries is always problematic given most communities are porous with a rapidly changing and inconsistent membership.

In terms of temporal considerations, the archived nature of most forums, including the ones I observed, mean that the field sites for online autoethnographies have a greater degree of permanence – or at least longevity – than their offline counterparts. This allowed me to take detailed fieldnotes, screenshots, and quotes easily as they are not time sensitive. It also allowed me to refer back to comments and posts with relative ease. The only exception to this would be if a post, comment, or potentially the entire forum was removed or deleted. I overcame this particular issue by screenshotting the posts as I came across them. The atemporal nature of online forums made it easy to take detailed notes whilst observing the forums. Unlike face-to-face interactions, I had time to read, re-read, and properly process the posts and comments I came across. Taking screenshots of relevant comments and posts, meant I was able to refer back to them in order to reappraise my initial observations. In this context, screenshots can be seen as similar to photographs, a medium that has long had a role within both autobiographies and autoethnographies. For the researcher they can jog memories and for the reader they provide information that the accompanying text cannot quite capture. But this does not mean I excluded memory from my work entirely. Doing so would have been impossible. Even re-reading my fieldnotes brought up memories of how I felt upon first reading that comment or post. Memory can be unreliable but a poststructural autoethnography questions the reliability of the author wholesale.

The atemporal nature of the Internet also means there is a temptation to go back through all the archived posts on a forum. At the time of my research, the sites I selected had already existed for several years, receiving multiple new posts a day, and countless comments on each of

these posts meaning this was simply not feasible. Instead, I only read posts that were posted from the day I started my online autoethnography. I did, however, look back to posts and comments if they were referred to in posts or comments I read during my research. Again, I only did this if I thought doing so was helpful in gaining an understanding of the context in which a comment or post was made.

### **Taking note**

Ensuring my fieldnotes were well organised was important both in terms of my own convenience and ensuring nothing particularly important fell through the cracks. I kept my fieldnotes in a OneNote notebook. I decided to opt for a virtual method of keeping my notes because it allowed me to include screenshots easily and to keep my notes organised. My OneNote notebook was subdivided into weeks and then days. I also had separate tabs for more general notes as well as notes on the readings I had done for my PhD. Having everything in one place made it easy to flick between readings, notes, and screenshots. OneNote also has the ability to allocate tags to either text or images. This was how I started analysing and categorising my fieldnotes. Using a very loose form of thematic analysis, I created tags for different themes I'd noticed whilst observing the forums. For instance, I created a tag for neoliberal language, anxiety, empathy, and depression. These tags are then searchable, allowing me to group together all the posts and comments on that particular theme. OneNote does not have a feature for calculating wordcount, but I estimate the total size of my notebook to be around 500,000 words by the time I finished my research.

A poststructural approach to autoethnography means acknowledging the uncertainty that arises from taking fieldnotes. It may seem surprising that autoethnography is not viewed as inherently poststructural. Its emphasis on “incomplete, interpersonal, embodied lived experience” at first glance seems in line with the partiality and contingency that poststructuralism champions

(Gannon, 2006, p.477). However, autoethnography – emerging as it does from a society and academy dominated by the humanist paradigm – clings on to humanist assumptions from which it derives its authority. Britzman offers a poststructuralist critique which outlines and questions these forms of ethnographic authority. One such form of authority is “the authority of empiricism” (2000, p.28). Britzman notes that ethnography is based on a “simple empiricism” which is “that there is a real out there to narrate and read” (Ibid, p.29). Thus, both ethnography and autoethnography assume that the researcher/author can bestow some truth purely based on his, her, or their experience. However, poststructuralism prompts us to view the experiential authority loaned to autoethnography with some scepticism and undermines the notion that there is a “reality” out there just waiting to be observed and then told to others. In doing this, it questions the ethnographer’s ability to “know” anything for certain, turning participant observation into “a site of doubt” (Ibid, p.32). Failure to acknowledge this means ignoring “questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted...about how one’s vision is structured ...[through] language (or discourse) and history” are ignored (Scott, 1991, p.777).

When it came to my own project, I did not wish to present my findings as unquestionable and certain. My experiences and observations during my research are fundamentally contingent, messy, and prone to human error. That is not to say, however, that my findings are invalid or fundamentally flawed in some way. There is a tension here between offering an account of these groups and the narratives they contain whilst not suggesting that this account is definitive or that these are stable entities in any way. What I intended to do is to outline these groups as I have experienced them – in full acceptance of the fact that this is by no means the only way to experience them – but in the belief that this will be helpful to those also seeking to understand their contours.

## Putting the Auto in Autoethnography

In this section I want to move onto the “auto” aspect of autoethnography and discuss both quite what this prefix denotes and how I will be bringing myself into my research. The “auto” in “autoethnography” evokes autobiography but there are significant differences between the two forms. Autobiography is about writing the self (or selves), whereas autoethnography goes beyond this (Denshire, 2014, p.833). Autoethnography, according to Brodsky, “invites writers to see themselves and everyone else as human subjects constructed in a tangle of cultural, social and historical situations and relations in contact zones.” (1996, p.29). Autoethnography comes out of the broader postmodern movement and, like ethnography, seeks to question the dominance of the positivist paradigm by questioning the possibility of objectivity, eschewing the notion that there is one absolute truth, and suggesting different ways of obtaining and sharing knowledge (Wall, 2006, p.147).

Autoethnography does this is by explicitly including the researcher’s voice and reflections within the piece and making these central to the analysis. Reflexivity is hardly a new concept within academia, and ethnography does allow space for it. Autoethnography, however, makes the researcher’s position integral to the research itself. In other words, although ethnography still views the researcher as separate from the site(s) of research, for autoethnography the researcher is also fundamentally part of the researched. This goes some way towards correcting the colonising nature of ethnography which replicates unequal hierarchies by granting an author unquestioned authority to speak on behalf of others (Gannon, 2006, p.475). If ethnography is characterised by a privileged speaker who seems interested in every culture but their own, autoethnography turns the researcher into a listener who self-interrogates and brings their own privilege into question (Denshire, 2014, p.834).

Part of this involved acknowledging my own positionality, a term which Laura Shepherd

defines as “the position of the researcher in relation to her research environment, her position in the social world: it is a consciousness of self” (2016, p.10). Positionality shapes the research process in a number of ways including “the relationships that arise from it, the knowledge that emerges through it, and the effects of that knowledge and relationships on the researcher, research subjects, and actors engaging with this work” (Krystalli, Forthcoming). I reflected on this during my work and have included these reflections throughout this thesis. It is important to note, however, that meaningful reflexivity is not just a case of acknowledging privilege or naming different identities I happen to embody, it is also a case of asking how these things shape the research and, as Krystalli puts it, asking “what lines of sight does this positioning enable and foreclose” (Forthcoming).

Autoethnography therefore gave me the space to reflect on my own position as a white, middle-class man engaging in this research, and also to consider how the research has affected me. These are all themes which will come out both in the main text and during the interludes which separate the empirical chapters. My fieldnotes did not just contain my observations and comments on the forum posts I had found; they also became a place where I shared more personal reflections. At the start of most days, I treated my fieldnotes as a diary, writing down how I was feeling that day and about personal non-research events (if there is such a distinction). This meant that, even after my fieldwork was over, I still wrote in them, albeit less frequently. They became a place for me to work through ideas, as well as to write down how I was feeling more generally. Even though the vast majority of these notes do not feature in the thesis, the process was invaluable both for my mental wellbeing but also for the development of my ideas and argument.

The dominance of scientific methods and discourse in the social sciences has led to the erasure of the author in the pursuit of “objectivity” (Bleiker and Brigg, 2010, p.780; Denshire, 2014, p.832; Wall, 2006, p.147). By bringing the self and subjectivity back into the research autoethnography questions this narrative. The author is made central to the research with the

intention to enrich it, providing a greater insight than before. Within International Relations specifically, autoethnography has become increasingly popular for this reason. Bleiker and Brigg argues that the assumption that the author can be written out of research completely should be rejected, along with the idea that the author is an objective messenger who simply provides readers with facts (2010, p.780). In the context of my own project, the ability to include reflections and conflicts when undertaking the research proved particularly insightful. I believe that my own proximity to the groups selected, given my position as a straight white male, provided a particularly interesting point of discussion. More importantly, it allowed me to discuss and explore my own misgivings and uncertainties around the project and my approach to it.

Bringing in my emotions, uncertainties, and personal experiences to the project was enriching and brought a whole other level of meaning to the work. My research question was particularly personal and the space for reflexivity that autoethnography creates allowed me to explore both how I came to the project and what my experience of research was. In the chapters that follow, I hope to outline some of the dilemmas, uncertainties, and insecurities I encountered both during my research and the process of writing the thesis. This ranges from asking, as Roxanne Lynn does, “who the hell was I to even try to write about the situation” of those I encountered on these forums (2010, p.1048)? Similarly, Elizabeth Dauphinee asks simply “what expert am I?” (2010, p.803). Throughout my research, I had moments of doubt where I felt I had completely got the wrong end of the stick and did not understand these forums at all. Who was I to try and understand them when I have come from such a different background with such a different view of the world? Autoethnography allows for the exploration of these doubts, out in the open, and makes them a fundamental part of the research process.

Autoethnography is not, however, beyond criticism, and there I certainly considered the criticism that autoethnography is narcissistic, self-indulgent, and introspective at length (Wall,

2006, p.155). Bleiker and Brigg point out that there is a risk of self-indulgence with autoethnography, just as there is with any other type of writing that involves the self so centrally (2010, p.781). Doty builds on this admission to acknowledge that International Relations already “silently screams the words ‘It’s all about us.’” (2010, p.1049). There is, therefore, a risk that the self can dominate the story, and it is one I was all too aware of in the writing of my thesis. On top of this, I was also aware that writing from the position of a heterosexual, white, middle-class man and reflecting on my own behaviour alongside other (mostly) white men on Internet forums was hardly a strong position from which to disrupt the white, neoliberal, heteropatriarchy. Awareness, of course, is not the same as addressing or taking action, and I was therefore careful to ensure that I put this awareness into action wherever I could. This included interrogating my own biases, questioning my conclusions, and ensuring I was inclusive in my language and outlook.

### **Ethical considerations regarding my own safety**

Given autoethnographies place the self at the centre of the research project it was necessary to extend my ethical considerations to my own safety. This is not to say that personal safety and ethics are not relevant to projects that use different methodologies of course. But autoethnography both brings the self into research in a far more explicit way and allowed me space to reflect on and consider acts of self-care and self-protection in a way that was easier than other methodologies. The groups I chose to research are known partly for their propensity for vitriolic attacks on users who disagree with or question them. Although not all online abuse can be linked to groups, there is mounting evidence that a lot of these attacks are coordinated through such groups (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016, p.171). And even if online attacks are not necessarily coordinated by these groups, there is certainly evidence to suggest they are involved in the legitimisation of violence through both cyberspace and in the offline world. This online incivility has now become commonplace across the political spectrum, and one need only spend a few hours on Twitter to



understand the scale of this phenomenon. Some have gone as far as to claim that online incivility has become ubiquitous – the new lingua franca of social media, forums, and comment sections alike (Amnesty International, 2018, chap.6; Jane, 2017, p.16).

For my Masters dissertation, I looked into the ways in which online abuse silences women in multiple ways, from the primary act of causing a user to withdraw from social media out of fear (the so-called chilling effect) to the way in which online abuse deters women from speaking out about certain issues in the future. Since then, online abuse experienced by women and minorities in public positions has only worsened (BBC, 2021; Graham-Harrison, 2021; Ingle, 2021). On top of online abuse, there are more and more examples of offline violence linked to online groups. The Isla Vista shooting perpetrated by Elliot Rodger, the Toronto van attack, and the Hanau shootings in Germany have all been linked to online misogynist subcultures (Bostock, 2020; Cecco, 2019; Freeman, 2014). Although it was important to consider my own safety when conducting my research, I also do not want to imply that I am equally at risk when compared to others who have written on the same subject. My position as a white man means I am very likely placed at less risk than women or minorities when discussing topics like the Manosphere (Gardiner, 2018).

However, all of this serves to show the risk attached to studying these groups online. When considering the ethical framework for my research, I had to think about how I could ensure my own safety from online abuse as well as my potential for ‘radicalisation’. This meant making sure, as far as possible, that I would not become the victim of online abuse and that my identity remained anonymous. This is what informed my decision not to interact with users in any way. As outlined in the previous section, my research involves only observing. This means my identity was completely hidden from users on the forums, and I left no trace on the forums either. Although some might argue that having a username on a forum is essentially the same as anonymity, and that it is very difficult to trace the origins of comments in order to discover the real identity of the

user, I decided it was best to exercise caution. On the Internet, almost everything is traceable with enough effort, and even receiving abusive comments to my account could have a negative effect on my mental health. Instead, I decided it was best to make the most of the fact that it was not necessary to create an account in order to view the sites I chose to study. Limiting my research to simply observation without any participation lowered the risk that I would be the victim of online abuse. However, it should be noted that it also placed limitations on my project and by forfeiting the potential benefits of interviews and being a more active participant in these groups.

Although I built protecting myself from online abuse into my research design, it was still possible that my research would have a negative impact on my mental wellbeing. Any research can take its toll on someone mentally and physically, and it was important to consider the ways in which deadlines, expectations, and other factors might affect my mental health. There was the added factor of the subject matter. I knew I would be spending 18 weeks reading posts and comments on these sites – and much longer thinking and reading about them – and I may find much of what I read upsetting and challenging. Indeed, one of the aims of my research was to expose myself to views I do not hold in an attempt to understand them. Many of these views caused frustration and some made me reflect upon my own position on certain issues. Other more extreme opinions, however, were upsetting, anger-inducing, and abhorrent. In short, my research was at times emotionally intense, and it is important to recognise that this represents a form of labour in itself. In order to look after my mental health, I made sure to engage in self-care by setting aside time to relax and pursue my hobbies. I also ensured I had a strong support network around me – people I could talk to about my research and the effects it was having on me. This included friends, my supervisors, and a counsellor.

## Writing an autoethnography

One interesting aspect of ethnography and autoethnography is that both terms describe the research process and the final written piece (Britzman, 2000, p.27). Autoethnography's inclusion in social science is representative of a movement away from a particular way of writing that attempts to be objective, removed, and impersonal, and towards a closer relationship with creative writing and literature. Autoethnographies can employ emotive language, narratives, and even poetry or performance to convey knowledge. Given that emotions are one of the central themes of my thesis, autoethnography allowed me to express my own feelings and emotions that come up during and after the research process. It also allowed me to be more creative in how I convey information. Angela Blanchard's PhD thesis, *Through Fog: An Autoethnography of Childhood Emotional Neglect*, for instance, uses dramatic interludes in order to help convey her own emotional reactions to her subject matter (2019). I aimed to do the same with my own autoethnography. I decided to include three interludes that feature personal reflections and experiences from throughout my research. Each interlude introduces the key themes that feature in the chapter that follows. I decided to cordon these reflections off into interludes partly to break up the thesis, but also to highlight the importance of these particular reflections and the effect the research had on me.

Returning now to the poststructural element of my autoethnography, Britzman observes that ethnography is based on the humanist assumption that the research subject to provide a non-contradictory and holistic account of their experience, and Gannon takes this further to highlight that autoethnography assumes the author to be a coherent, unitary, and stable (2006, p.474). Poststructuralism counters these humanist assumptions and posits a notion of self that changes constantly both in terms of time and context. In the words of Roland Barthes, "the subject of the speech-act can never be the same as the one who acted yesterday: the I of the discourse can no longer be the site where a previously stored-up person is innocently restored" (Barthes, 1989,

p.17). And as Gannon puts it “knowledge in poststructural autoethnography is sourced from our particular locations in particular bodies with particular feelings, flesh, and thoughts that become possible in particular sociocultural-spatial contexts.” (Gannon, 2006, p.476).

In order to subvert the humanist assumption of a coherent and unitary self, poststructural autoethnography involves “textual practices that represent and trouble the self at the same time”, the inversion of binary categories, and the circling “of truth” with “all kinds of signs, quotation marks, and brackets, to protect it from any form of fixation or conceptualisation” (Cixous, 1993, p.6). Roland Barthes’s work also provides a valuable insight into what poststructural autoethnography involves. For Barthes, memory is “enfolded in the body” but the body as a source of knowledge is unreliable and fragmented (Gannon, 2006, pp.481 & 483). Thus, counter to humanism’s assumption that the self is a continuous and coherent entity and the source of truth, poststructural autoethnography posits that we are instead looking for “traces and unreliable fragments” (Ibid. p.483). Barthes’s anti-autobiography *Roland Barthes* deploys techniques that aim to demonstrate this by using writing that, like the self, is “discontinuous, elliptical, fragmented, sparse.” (Ibid, p.481).

In the context of my own work, this meant both showing my working and showing my uncertainty around particular conclusions or aspects of my research. Often, when reading an academic piece, one is presented with a finished and polished work which does not reveal the many hours of editing that went into it. Although I by no means wanted to submit a thesis which wasn’t properly proofread and edited, I did want to maintain some of the uncertainty and tentativeness that came with the earlier drafts where thoughts were not yet fully formed. I was also careful to include conflicts I had within myself both about how to portray certain aspects of these groups and also my own relationship with them. Curiosity was, of course, a large part of how I related to these groups, but on other days there was also anger, exasperation, boredom, empathy,

and compassion, or a complex mixture of these emotions. Missing out this nuance in favour of a thesis that portrayed a more certain and unequivocal view of these communities would, I think, miss the nuanced and complex way in which they operate. There can be no one way of understanding why these groups have drawn in so many men over the last decade and continue to do so.

As part of the writing of my autoethnography, I was also aware of the humanist assumption that language is fixed and stable. As T.Minh-ha Trinh states, “words empty out with age. Die and rise again, accordingly invested with new meanings, and always equipped with a second hand memory” (1989, p.79). From a poststructuralist perspective, language cannot take reality and represent it in a way that is objective and certain. Instead, language is political and has a part in constructing the world around us. Meaning is therefore contested. It is also important to acknowledge that the subject doing the telling in any ethnography is necessarily “constrained, partial, and determined by the discourses and histories that prefigure, even as they might promise, representation” (Britzman, 2000, p.32). This meant acknowledging that my own telling of my autoethnography and the conclusions I came to were necessarily contingent and did not reflect any absolute and unquestionable truth.

Poststructuralism posits the notion of a contradictory subject whose telling is necessarily partial and informed by their exposure to certain discourses and histories. I believe this applies to my project particularly on the basis the Internet allows individuals to engage in identity play and deceit. It is impossible to know whether the experiences and emotions being shared on the forums I have chosen to look at are genuine, false, or some mixture of the two. With my own work, I decided to take everything that was said at face value, given the impact of their statements are the same regardless of whether they are intended as a joke or not. A post about violent retribution against women, for instance, may have been posted ironically, but this does not change the

potential effects this post has when it comes to normalising violence against women. However, I also chose to discuss potential alternative meanings if they were relevant to my analysis. On Incels.co in particular, irony is used prolifically, and to ignore this and take everything written on that forum as sincere would be to miss a large part of how users communicate on that forum.

Finally, I would like to note Britzman's discussion of ethnography's assumption that there is a "direct relationship between the reader's reading and the text's telling" (2000, p.29). Britzman sites Althusser stating "there is no such thing as an innocent reading, we must ask what reading we are guilty of." (Cited in Rooney, 1989). In other words, not only is there uncertainty and partiality in the writing of ethnography, but there is also uncertainty and partiality in the reading of it. Britzman argues that we must be careful when it comes to reading ethnography and that readers must approach ethnography willing to put in a great deal of work into reading. In this sense, maybe ethnography should be approached like other forms of postmodern fiction. The works of authors such as Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, and Mark Z. Danielewski all require work on behalf of the reader if they are to get the full experience of reading these novels. In the case of these authors, this involves doing extra reading to understand obscure references and, in some cases, moving through dense prose that deliberately obfuscates. In the case of poststructural ethnography, it also means being "willing to construct more complicated reading practices that move them beyond the myth of literal representations and the deceptive promise that "the real" is transparent, stable, and just like the representational" (Britzman, 2000, p.39). Although there is little that can be done in my thesis to alter the way in which readers approach my autoethnography, it is partially up to the author of the ethnography to make it known to the reader that a rigorous engagement is required.

To counter this, however, I also wanted to ensure that my autoethnography is accessible. Language has the ability to shut out the uninitiated, with every discipline possessing its own jargon

and terminology which, although used to convey meaning in a precise and clear way, can also have the effect of excluding certain groups. Throughout my academic career, I have come across articles which seem to use language that is deliberately verbose in order to lend the ideas within it a legitimacy and gravitas. As far as possible, I wanted to avoid this and to ensure that my thesis remains relatively jargon free. This is partly to ensure it is appealing to as wider readership as possible but also because, honestly, the forums themselves provide enough jargon to obfuscate and confuse as it is.

## **Conclusion**

The end of this chapter marks the end of the first half of my thesis. I have outlined my theoretical framework, the work that has already been done on the Manosphere, how I frame the “problem” of the Manosphere, and how I went about gathering data and applying my theory in order to make my argument. The why, what, and how, therefore, have been answered. Why? Because the Manosphere causes harm to both members of it and those are not members of it, and because I believe existing accounts of this phenomenon do not quite capture why it is certain men are so drawn to it. What? The Manosphere – but the Manosphere conceptualised as one symptom of a much broader systemic problem. How? A multi-cited, poststructural, online autoethnography.

Solnit argues that there are two meanings to the word “lost”. “Losing things,” she says, “is about the familiar falling away, getting lost is about the unfamiliar appearing.” (Solnit, 2005, p.22). If you lose something, then you still know where you are. But, if you get lost, “the world has become larger than your knowledge of it” (Ibid). This is the attitude I took with me as I started my autoethnography. In doing so, I wanted to have my assumptions and pre-conceived ideas about these groups to fall away as much as possible. The result, I hope, will be an immersive experience of the forums I have chosen, and a novel perspective on what it is that has made them so attractive

to so many men.



## Interlude One: Finding My Voice

When I was younger, I would spend a lot of my free time writing stories. A child of the 90s, I remember asking my dad to open up Windows (I had mistaken the name of the operating system for the word processing software Word) so I would write stories mostly involving Bionicle, a range of Lego toys I was obsessed with at the time. Fast forward maybe 5 years or so, and every other week in my English lessons we have writing workshop Friday where we work on our stories. If you'd asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up then, I would have said an author.

But since then, I feel as if that creative side of my writing has faded. Although in some ways I have followed my aspirations and become a writer, descriptive prose is no longer something I practise. As a result, whilst writing my thesis, one of the things I struggled with the most was deciding on a writing style. Writing style here clearly means many things. From deciding whether or not to write in the first person to weighing up how much of myself to include in empirical chapters, I had to unlearn a lot of old habits and reconceptualise how I approached the act of writing. Breaking out of these habits was difficult, and it is not a process I see as being complete either. I am still finding new ways of writing and will hopefully continue to do so long after this thesis has been submitted. It is perhaps more accurate to say that I am trying to rediscover and relearn ways of writing which have become rusty after years of neglect.

I wanted to find a way of writing which allowed me to fully and richly convey the experience I had researching these forums. Autoethnography wasn't something I'd even heard of until I started my PhD, and its openness, reflexivity, and flexibility all appealed to me hugely. But choosing autoethnography as a research method was only the start. Quoting my fieldnotes verbatim was an important part of ensuring my voice came through in my thesis. These were written in a far less self-conscious way than any of the other writing I have done for my PhD.

They were typed quickly without much thought as to whether or not they would be read by anyone else. What my fieldnotes do show is precisely what poststructuralism posits, namely a non-unitary self. Each day, when writing my fieldnotes, I was also bringing with me a different attitude and approach to my research. One day I would be impatient, maybe tired, and other days I would feel more positive and focused. My thesis is the product of those fieldnotes, except most of the text read here is more considered and heavily edited. This process necessarily involves the construction of a more fixed and unitary self. Including excerpts from my fieldnotes, therefore, was integral to maintaining the messiness of research and to conveying the development of my ideas.

Including quotes from my fieldnotes, however, was only the start of a more comprehensive rethink about how I approached writing. I wanted to write in a more creative way, but this felt completely alien after years of academic writing. The word “creative” here is a loaded one. What does it mean to write creatively? Surely just the clear conveyance of complex ideas is creative? I decided that, in the context of my thesis, “creative” meant a style of writing that was reflexive, descriptive and not afraid to include emotive language. But I still lacked the confidence to break away from the accepted way of writing and was constantly second guessing myself. Even if I managed to break some of the rules I had been following for years, what if my new way of writing was bad?

Fortunately, I came across a number of other theses during my research which have served as inspiration. Most notably, Angela Blanchard’s (2019) doctoral thesis on childhood emotional neglect was pivotal in opening my eyes to what an autoethnographic thesis can be. Blanchard’s creative approach, in particular incorporating dramatic interludes, showed me what autoethnography can free you to do. Blanchard uses these dramatic interludes as a “way of engaging the emotions as well as the intellect of the reader/audience” (Ibid, p.5). These interludes were “always [written]...at times of heightened emotion” and that “each one represents a moment

in time during the research process” (Ibid, p.6). It is important to note, however, they are not breaks from Blanchard’s overall argument. In fact, she stresses that they are an integral part of it (Ibid, p.5).

Given emotions are a central aspect of my own thesis, I wanted to try and think of a way to do this myself. I therefore decided to include my own interludes between my empirical chapters. But I wanted to include emotions, reflexivity, and personal experiences in my empirical chapters too, rather than relegating them to the bits in between. The main aim of this was to draw out some significant themes that arose during my research. Uncertainty is one of the most significant themes, not only in the forums I am researching, but also throughout my own thinking and approach to this project. In Blanchard’s thesis, *the Fog* is used as a stylistic device to convey confusion, isolation, and a disconnection (2019, p.5). Similar devices are used in literature. Blanchard’s device reminds me first and foremost of *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad which also uses fog as a device to represent ambiguity, uncertainty, and the unknown. Reading Blanchard’s work, therefore, took me right back to English Literature A Level where I first encountered *Heart of Darkness* and where my writing style began to be formed by structures external to myself in order to pass exams. It was necessary to follow marking criteria which prohibited the use of the first person and gave marks for a particular style and way of structuring essays. Whilst I will not be using the imagery of the fog in particular, I will seek to convey my uncertainty by showing, as much as I can, my deliberation process, as well as highlighting my own doubt around certain areas of my PhD.

## Chapter Four: The Feminism Explanation

### Introduction

As I wrote these words in the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, I reflected on how my fieldwork took place in completely different circumstances. When thinking about going into an office with four other PhD students, meeting friends for lunch, and not having to give a second thought to my glasses steaming up because my mask was not on quite right, it strikes me how much things have changed. Although it's been two years since I was in that office, I can still picture the view— not a particularly interesting one, just a few trees and the occasional person walking past — and feel the biting winds as I made my short commute. Each morning I found myself at the same desk in the same office browsing websites I was already very well-versed in. The environment, both physical and virtual, was familiar. Normally carried out by physically travelling to a different, often unfamiliar, location I only had to walk about 15 minutes to an office building. But, although this walk was short, every day my research transported me to distant online communities.

In this chapter, I am going to discuss what I have labelled the feminism-as-problem discourse. There is a lot of slippage between feminism, femininity, and women on /r/TheRedPill, /r/MGTOW, and Incels.co. As a result, it is difficult to know quite what they see as being the main threat. In the end, I have chosen to single out feminism because this is what came up most frequently on these forums and therefore what the men on them seem to feel most threatened by. Feminism is seen by the men on these forums as an ideology designed to oppress men, and which has elevated women to the dominant position in society. So it is seen as a political movement which has organised women and enabled them to usurp the 'natural' gender hierarchy. This does not, however, mean that femininity and women are not also frequently targeted or singled out as

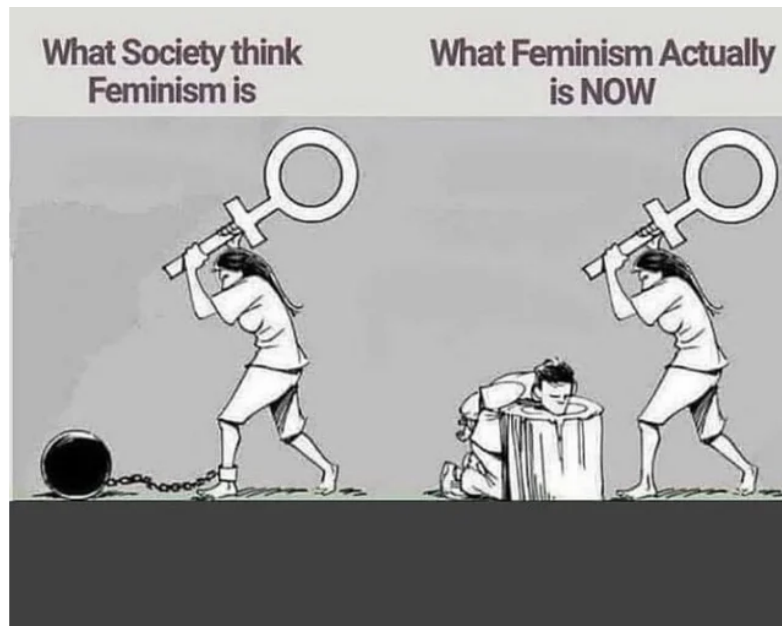
the problem. They are at points, but feminism looms large as the perceived main threat to men on these forums.

The feminism-as-problem discourse is common to all three of the groups I have studied and plays a key role in taking the negative affect men are experiencing as a result of the insecurity created by neoliberalism and the masculinity moral panic, and rendering it comprehensible through recognisable emotional signifiers (Solomon, 2012, p.908). To reiterate, Solomon notes that discourses that become sites of strong affective investment both construct what the subject has lost and simultaneously offer an encounter with that which has been lost (Ibid, p.920). The feminism-as-problem discourse, therefore, takes men's affective experiences and constructs them as a loss, or even potential loss. I argue that this loss can be broadly summarised as a loss of masculine identity, control over women and men's own lives, and meaning.

Specifically, the identity that men fear losing is one that is closely tied to hegemonic masculinity. In other words, women are seen as a threat to men's ability to live up to hegemonic masculine ideals of control, strength, emotional stoicism, and independence. Given control is part of the hegemonic masculine ideal, these two elements overlap significantly. By control here, therefore, I am specifically referring the feeling these men have that they have lost control over women, society, and their lives more generally. Women now occupy more public roles, although the extent of this is exaggerated by these forums. Feminism, according to the Manosphere, has also enabled women to gain an upper hand in dating. Men on the Manosphere believe it has enabled women to choose their partners strategically, based on either genetic or financial factors. Finally, movements such as #MeToo mean men on these forums feel as if women also dominate the political debate. They view such movements as directly victimising men and seeking to harm or eradicate them.

By a loss of meaning, I am referring to the sense these men have that the discursive framework they previously relied on to understand the world and their position within it no longer accounts for their circumstances. The meaning element here is particularly important, as the feminism-as-problem discourse is primarily about explaining to men why their lives are not going as they expected them to. In other words, it bestows meaning upon men's circumstances when the dominant entitlement narrative does not explain them fully. These are men who feel entitled to a job, wife, family, etc., but for whom these things have not been forthcoming. Meaning is intimately linked to identity and control. Identity is a fundamental part of how individuals give meaning to the world around them and understand their place within it, and being able to bestow meaning on events and circumstances also provides a sense of control over them. In other words, control, identity, and meaning are mutually constitutive. The feminism-as-problem discourse offers an encounter with all three of these concepts, and thus becomes a site of strong affective investment.

## “Not Without a Fight”



*Figure 4.1: Meme from /r/MGTOW portraying a woman about to execute a man*

The image above (fig. 4.1) is an example of how the feminism-as-problem discourse manifests in meme form on /r/MGTOW. It succinctly summarises the MGTOw perspective that feminism has gone too far, and men are now oppressed by women. The caption for this meme surprised me as the sentence could quite easily have just read “what feminism actually is”, but the addition of “NOW” implies even men on /r/MGTOW believe there was a time when feminism was a legitimate cause that sought to emancipate women. On the left-hand side, a woman is attempting to free herself from a ball and chain, a metaphor for women’s liberation. On the right, however, the image conveys the idea that women are now coming to take men’s lives away from them. The kneeling man in handcuffs is submissive and completely under the woman’s control. The woman stands poised over the man, about to decapitate him. The message, therefore, if your life is not going the way you expected it to, if you feel like you are not living up to the masculine ideal, or if you just feel generally downtrodden and oppressed, it is because feminists have taken over society

and are actively targeting men. Men are the victims and women are the violent actors seeking to eradicate men.

The most striking visual element of this meme is that the axe raised above the woman's head is shaped like the glyph used to represent female. But in this case the symbol for female is instead being used to represent feminism as shown by the caption which refers to feminism specifically. This demonstrates the extent to which there can be slippage between the terms female, woman, and feminism on /r/MGTOW. Feminism is viewed here as a tool that women once used to liberate themselves, but now use to attack and oppress men. Although it is unlikely many members on /r/MGTOW believe women are actively engaged in the murder of men, they are equating their belief that feminism has tipped the balance in favour of women with the literal death of men. In other words, now that men are not dominant, they are as good as dead, and women, through feminism, are entirely responsible for this. Feminism is depicted as a force that is designed to take men's dominance and control away from them and make them subservient to women. The feminism-as-problem discourse on /r/MGTOW, therefore, takes the negative affect men are experiencing as a result of the joint crisis of neoliberalism and masculinity and tells these men that their suffering is actually caused by feminism. Feminism has allowed women to usurp the 'natural' gender hierarchy, placing men in a subordinate and exploited position.





Figure 4.2: Post from /r/MGTOW depicting a knight facing an army

The meme above portrays the same idea (fig. 4.2). This excerpt from my fieldnotes conveys my initial impressions:

This knight is standing on his own, trying to stem the tide of a massive army. He has no chance of winning, but he is stubborn and stands for values. He will sacrifice himself in order to stand up for what he believes in. The fact he is on his own is interesting too. It fits with the MGTOW ideology perfectly. This guy has literally gone his own way. He is standing alone, isolated, and hasn't conformed to the masses.

This meme is therefore taking an amorphous affective experience and rendering it comprehensible and conveyable through language and imagery. Like the previous image from /r/MGTOW (fig. 4.1), it visually portrays the idea that men are under attack from feminists who are attempting to take something from them. In this case, feminists are Reddit's army, Reddit being the platform that /r/MGTOW was hosted on until being banned and deleted on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2020. Of course, the banning added legitimacy to /r/MGTOW users' belief that Reddit, like society more broadly, is controlled by feminists and feminine interests and is therefore, in their eyes, seeking to eradicate men.

As Ahmed points out, the imagined ‘other’ (in this case feminists) threatens “not only to take something away from the subject (jobs, security, wealth), but to take the place of the subject” (2007, p.43). The symbolic killing of men in both figs. 4.1 and 4.2, therefore, reveals an anxiety men hold about not only losing their dominant position in the gender hierarchy, but also being completely replaced by a rising tide of women/feminists and having their masculine identity stolen. The lone knight in figure 4.2 is standing up against an overwhelming army of feminists, and the title – “Not without a fight” – implies an acceptance of the inevitability of men’s defeat and replacement. The masculine overtones here are stark, with fighting and violence being seen as the only solution to men’s problems, even if both are futile. There is to be no negotiation or compromise in this ‘war’ of men against feminists. This image says that MGTOW users would rather die than see their masculine identity diminished or corrupted in any way because the latter would be tantamount to death anyway.

Ahmed goes on to state that the very presence of the ‘other’ is seen as a threat to the object of love (2007, p.43). In this case, the object of love is a strong, independent masculine identity which is in control of its environment, that women are threatening to take it away or corrupt. By constructing feminists as a threat to masculine identity, members of /r/MGTOW can claim the position of the victim who is harmed by women purely because of their close proximity and sheer numbers. In the image above (fig. 4.2) feminists are depicted as not only physically close to men, but also an overwhelming threat. The size of the army implies an invasion is about to take place, an invasion into men’s masculine identity and male-dominated spaces. In these two images, therefore, the feminism-as-problem discourse is constructing men as having lost, or potentially about to lose, both their masculine identity and control over society.

Women therefore become the object of hatred as they are threatening the object of love (Ahmed, 2007, p.13). The object of love in this case is a masculine identity characterised by control,

independence, and stoicism. Hate, Ahmed adds, works to “animate the ordinary subject...precisely by constituting the ordinary as in crisis, and the ordinary person as the *real victim*” (Ibid). The ordinary, in the context of /r/MGTOW, is the patriarchal status quo. Of course, patriarchy is still very much secure and embedded, but the feminism-as-problem discourse, through generating hatred towards feminism, animates the users on these forums and constructs their very identity as in crisis.

The affective appeal of this discourse relies on its ability to offer an encounter with that which the subject believes they are lacking, and the image shown in figure 4.2 also demonstrates how the feminism-as-problem discourse offers an encounter with identity by aligning the individual with a group. Ahmed notes that, in the case of anti-immigration sentiment based on racism, those who “have a love of Whiteness hate because they love, and hate is what brings them together and aligns them with the imagined nation” (Ahmed, 2007, p.43). In the case of /r/MGTOW, it is the love of masculinity that is causing men to hate feminism, and this aligns them with the MGTOW community. The sword in this image, labelled “MGTOW”, not only shows that this community is a weapon that can be used against the feminist conspiracy, it also has the effect of physically aligning the individual with a collective, and thus providing them with a masculine identity.

As well as offering an encounter with identity, the sense of belonging that comes from being aligned with a collective brings meaning as well by setting up an us vs. them narrative. The individual is affiliated with the injured collective (MGTOW) and is thus under threat of injury themselves. Meaning is therefore given through setting up a grand antagonistic narrative that gives members of /r/MGTOW a cause to fight for. It creates a world which is organised based on a battle between men and feminists. This in turn explains to these men why it is they are suffering. It is not because of neoliberalism, patriarchy, or the expectations of hegemonic masculinity.

Instead, it is because women, through feminism, have become the dominant demographic and are seeking to oppress men.

Ahmed goes on to discuss the idea of a nation being described as a “soft touch” when it comes to immigration (2007, pp.2–3). In this example, Ahmed analyses a British National Front (BNF) poster that accuses Britain of being a “soft touch” when it comes to immigration (Ibid, p. 1). The poster goes on to claim that “swarms of illegal immigrants and bogus asylum seekers invade Britain” in search of “the easy comforts and free benefits of Soft Touch Britain” (Ibid). “All of this,” the poster claims, is funded by “YOU – the British Taxpayer!”. Ahmed points out that the “you” here “implicitly evokes a ‘we’” and that this aligns the individual with the national body (Ibid, p.2). Thus, if Britain is being a soft touch, then this is asking whether the individual will also be a soft touch. To be soft and vulnerable to attacks is to “risk becoming feminine” by allowing the “other” to “penetrate the surface of the body” (Ibid p.2-3). The image shown in figure 4.2 performs a similar role. The knight in the image is heavily armoured, therefore hard and impenetrable in contrast to the ‘softness’ of femininity. Men on /r/MGTOW also need to don this armour if they are to protect themselves from being feminised. Femininity is seen to operate through feminism, which has, according to /r/MGTOW, provided women with the ability to dominate and therefore feminise men. The knight in this image therefore both constructs feminism as an imminent threat to men’s masculine identity whilst simultaneously offering an encounter with a masculine identity that is strong, hard, and invulnerable.



Figure 4.3: Meme from /r/MGTOW featuring Robin Wright in the film *Forrest Gump*

The next meme from /r/MGTOW shows Robin Wright as Jenny Curran in *Forrest Gump* (fig. 4.3). In the film, Forrest falls in love with Jenny, but she leaves to pursue a different life characterised by drug addiction and anti-establishment beliefs. Jenny re-enters Forrest's life several times throughout the film, and the two are eventually married and have a child, Forrest Jr. However, Jenny dies a year later from an unnamed disease. This meme has interpreted this as a Jenny abandoning Forrest until he's wealthy, and then returning to eventually leave him as a "single dad with AIDS". AIDS is not mentioned in the film, so this is speculation. And it is specifically a gendered speculation. At the time the film was released, AIDS was particularly associated with male gay/queer bodies and those using IV drugs and so the assumption that Jenny gives Forrest AIDS is revealing of how women are viewed as deviant and promiscuous. The meme also implies Jenny planned on dying in order to spite Forrest in some way, again something which does not fit with the film's overall narrative. The veracity of the meme's interpretation of the film, however, is less important than its aim. It constructs women as parasitic and self-interested. Jenny only comes back to Forrest because he's a billionaire and because she wants help with parenting.

## Scary facts about fatherless homes

### Science

- 63% of youth suicides are from fatherless homes (US Dept. Of Health/Census) – 5 times the average.
- 90% of all homeless and runaway children are from fatherless homes – 32 times the average.
- 85% of all children who show behavior disorders come from fatherless homes – 20 times the average. (Center for Disease Control) • 80% of rapists with anger problems come from fatherless homes – 14 times the average. (Justice & Behavior, Vol 14, p. 403-26) • 71% of all high school dropouts come from fatherless homes – 9 times the average. (National Principals Association Report) Father Factor in Education – Fatherless children are twice as likely to drop out of school.
- Children with Fathers who are involved are 40% less likely to repeat a grade in school.
- Children with Fathers who are involved are 70% less likely to drop out of school.
- Children with Fathers who are involved are more likely to get A's in school.
- Children with Fathers who are involved are more likely to enjoy school and engage in extracurricular activities.
- 75% of all adolescent patients in chemical abuse centers come from fatherless homes – 10 times the average. Father Factor in Drug and Alcohol Abuse – Researchers at Columbia University found that children living in two-parent household with a poor relationship with their father are 68% more likely to smoke, drink, or use drugs compared to all teens in two-parent households. Teens in single mother households are at a 30% higher risk than those in two-parent households.
- 70% of youths in state-operated institutions come from fatherless homes – 9 times the average. (U.S. Dept. of Justice, Sept. 1988)
- 85% of all youths in prison come from fatherless homes – 20 times the average. (Fulton Co. Georgia, Texas Dept. of Correction) Father Factor in Incarceration – Even after controlling for income, youths in father-absent households still had significantly higher odds of incarceration than those in mother-father families. Youths who never had a father in the household experienced the highest odds. A 2002 Department of Justice survey of 7,000 inmates revealed that 39% of jail inmates lived in mother-only households. Approximately forty-six percent of jail inmates in 2002 had a previously incarcerated family member. One-fifth experienced a father in prison or jail. Father Factor in Crime – A study of 109 juvenile offenders indicated that family structure significantly predicts delinquency. Adolescents, particularly boys, in single-parent families were at higher risk of status, property and person delinquencies. Moreover, students attending schools with a high proportion of children of single parents are also at risk. A study of 13,986 women in prison showed that more than half grew up without their father. Forty-two percent grew up in a single-mother household and sixteen percent lived with neither parent Father Factor in Child Abuse – Compared to living with both parents, living in a single-parent home doubles the risk that a child will suffer physical, emotional, or educational neglect. The overall rate of child abuse and neglect in single-parent households is 27.3 children per 1,000, whereas the rate of overall maltreatment in two-parent households is 15.5 per 1,000. Daughters of single parents without a Father involved are 53% more likely to marry as teenagers, 711% more likely to have children as teenagers, 164% more likely to have a pre-marital birth and 92% more likely to get divorced themselves. Adolescent girls raised in a 2 parent home with involved Fathers are significantly less likely to be sexually active than girls raised without involved Fathers.
- 43% of US children live without their father [US Department of Census]
- 90% of homeless and runaway children are from fatherless homes. [US D.H.H.S., Bureau of the Census] • 80% of rapists motivated with displaced anger come from fatherless homes. [Criminal Justice & Behaviour, Vol 14, pp. 403-26, 1978]
- 71% of pregnant teenagers lack a father. [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services press release, Friday, March 26, 1999] • 63% of youth suicides are from fatherless homes. [US D.H.H.S., Bureau of the Census]
- 85% of children who exhibit behavioral disorders come from fatherless homes. [Center for Disease Control]
- 90% of adolescent repeat arsonists live with only their mother. [Wray Herbert, "Dousing the Kindlers," Psychology Today, January, 1985, p. 28]
- 71% of high school dropouts come from fatherless homes. [National Principals Association Report on the State of High Schools]
- 75% of adolescent patients in chemical abuse centers come from fatherless homes. [Rainbows f for all God's Children]
- 70% of juveniles in state operated institutions have no father. [US Department of Justice, Special Report, Sept. 1988]

- 85% of youths in prisons grew up in a fatherless home. [Fulton County Georgia jail populations, Texas Department of Corrections, 1992]
- Fatherless boys and girls are: twice as likely to drop out of high school; twice as likely to end up in jail; four times more likely to need help for emotional or behavioral problems. [US D.H.H.S. news release, March 26, 1999] Census Fatherhood Statistics
- 64.3 million: Estimated number of fathers across the nation
- 26.5 million: Number of fathers who are part of married-couple families with their own children under the age of 18. Among these fathers – o 22 percent are raising three or more of their own children under 18 years old (among married-couple family households only). o 2 percent live in the home of a relative or a non-relative.
- 2.5 million: Number of single fathers, up from 400,000 in 1970. Currently, among single parents living with their children, 18 percent are men. Among these fathers – o 8 percent are raising three or more of their own children under 18 years old. o 42 percent are divorced, 38 percent have never married, 16 percent are separated and 4 percent are widowed. (The percentages of those divorced and never married are not significantly different from one another.) o 16 percent live in the home of a relative or a non-relative. o 27 percent have an annual family income of \$50,000 or more.
- 85 percent: Among the 30.2 million fathers living with children younger than 18, the percentage who lived with their biological children only. o 11 percent lived with step-children o 4 percent with adopted children o < 1 percent with foster children Recent policies encourage the development of programs designed to improve the economic status of low-income nonresident fathers and the financial and emotional support provided to their children. This brief provides ten key lessons from several important early responsible fatherhood initiatives that were developed and implemented during the 1990s and early 2000s. Formal evaluations of these earlier fatherhood efforts have been completed making this an opportune time to step back and assess what has been learned and how to build on the early programs' successes and challenges. While the following statistics are formidable, the Responsible Fatherhood research literature generally supports the claim that a loving and nurturing father improves outcomes for children, families and communities.
- Children with involved, loving fathers are significantly more likely to do well in school, have healthy self-esteem, exhibit empathy and pro-social behavior, and avoid high-risk behaviors such as drug use, truancy, and criminal activity compared to children who have uninvolved fathers.
- Studies on parent-child relationships and child wellbeing show that father love is an important factor in predicting the social, emotional, and cognitive development and functioning of children and young adults.
- 24 million children (34 percent) live absent their biological father.
- Nearly 20 million children (27 percent) live in single-parent homes.
- 43 percent of first marriages dissolve within fifteen years; about 60 percent of divorcing couples have children; and approximately one million children each year experience the divorce of their parents.
- Fathers who live with their children are more likely to have a close, enduring relationship with their children than those who do not.
- Compared to children born within marriage, children born to cohabiting parents are three times as likely to experience father absence, and children born to unmarried, non-cohabiting parents are four times as likely to live in a father-absent home.
- About 40 percent of children in father-absent homes have not seen their father at all during the past year; 26 percent of absent fathers live in a different state than their children; and 50 percent of children living absent their father have never set foot in their father's home.
- Children who live absent their biological fathers are, on average, at least two to three times more likely to be poor, to use drugs, to experience educational, health, emotional and behavioral problems, to be victims of child abuse, and to engage in criminal behavior than their peers who live with their married, biological (or adoptive) parents.
- From 1995 to 2000, the proportion of children living in single-parent homes slightly declined, while the proportion of children living with two married parents remained stable.

109 Comments Share Save Hide Report

99% Upvoted

Figure 4.4: Post about the apparent dangers of fatherless households

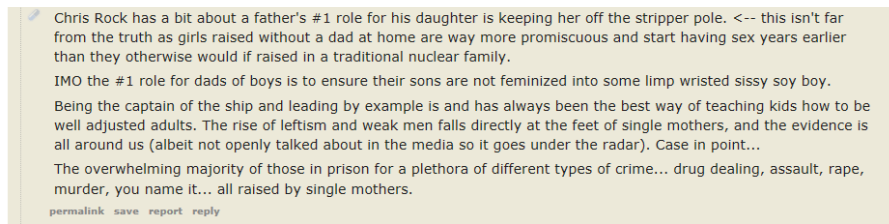


Figure 4.5: Comment from a /r/TheRedPill post about what the role of fathers should be

The subtext in this meme is that, prior to returning to Forrest once he became a billionaire, Jenny was raising his son as a single mother. The vilification of single mothers is a common thread across both /r/MGTOW and /r/TheRedPill. I have included two examples of such discussions above, both from /r/TheRedPill. The first (fig. 4.4) is a list of “scary facts about fatherless homes” which includes the ‘fact’ that children from a home with a father are 70% less likely to drop out of school and more likely to get As in school. Furthermore, it claims that 75% of adolescent patients in chemical abuse centres and 85% of youths in prison grew up in fatherless homes. The implication here is that single mothers are to blame for not raising children correctly, and that fathers are incredibly important to family stability and a child’s future. Single mothers are targeted precisely because they dare to go about the world as an autonomous, independent being. The second (fig. 4.5) is a comment on a thread where a user asks what the role of Red Pill father should be in contemporary society. This user comments that the main aim of a Red Pill father is to keep their daughters “off the stripper pole” and to “ensure their sons are not feminized into some limp wristed sissy boy”. The user goes on to blame the “rise of leftism and weak men” on single mothers. He too cites the overrepresentation of men raised in a single mother household in crimes committed.

Single mothers, therefore, are viewed as a threat to young boys specifically and society more generally. In both of these posts, they are constructed as irresponsible and unable to raise boys or girls in the correct way. What is required is a man’s stabilising influence and the existence



of a nuclear family setup to ensure girls don't grow up to be strippers and boys don't grow up to be criminals. Single mothers are targeted in particular because, according to /r/MGTOW and /r/TheRedPill, women should be dependent and submissive. It is men who are independent and 'go their own way'. Women who break this mould are a "living, breathing offense to those still bound by the strictures of [this] orders" and as a result "sexism judges here" and "misogyny demand she be punished" (Palma, 2019, p.332).

In the case of the Forrest Gump meme from /r/MGTOW (fig. 4.3) the feminism-as-problem discourse constructs women not only as a threat to men's independence and social status, but also to future generations of men. Forrest has been taken for a fool, and humiliated in the process, something distinctly unmasculine. More importantly, however, he has now been left with a child who has been raised, in part, by a single mother. He must undo the 'damage' done by her irresponsible parenting and ensure his son doesn't become a "limp wristed sissy". Thus, the current state of men's supposed feminisation is blamed on women being self-interested and unable raise 'manly' men. Men's suffering, in other words, is again entirely women's fault. They believe that feminism has corrupted society and 'normalised' single-mother households which has thus led to the corruption and feminisation of young men.

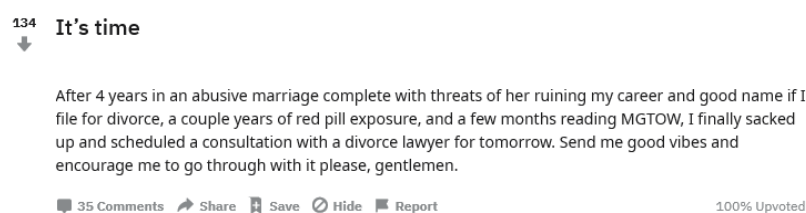


Figure 4.6: Post from /r/MGTOW in which a user shares news of their decision to divorce their wife

/r/MGTOW overwhelmingly consisted of screen shots and memes. In total, I saw three text-based posts, and one of them is reproduced above (fig. 4.6). It features a user sharing news of their decision to divorce their wife. They credit "a couple of years of red pill exposure, and a few

months of reading MGTOW” for influencing their decision to get a consultation with a divorce lawyer. Prior to this, the user says his wife had threatened to “ruin [his] career and good name” if he filed for divorce. It is important to note that it’s a good thing that this user has removed himself from an abusive relationship, but also that this post reproduces the feminism-as-problem discourse. Similar to the previous post (fig. 4.3) women here are constructed as selfish, Machiavellian, and out to diminish men’s masculinity. The user who wrote this post is submissive and emasculated until he decides to “[sack] up”, a reference to male genitalia and variation on the phrase “grow a pair”. In this case, “sack[ing] up”, or developing male reproductive organs, is seen as a prerequisite for breaking out of a submissive state and pushing back against women’s domination.

This post, therefore, shares the same underlying theme as figures 4.1 & 4.2, where a man is viewed as oppressed by women and needing to stand his ground. It shows, in other words, the way in which the feminism-as-problem narrative serves to shape the affective experiences of users on this forum. This man understands his situation through the feminism-as-problem discourse. Essentially, he is suffering at the hands of a woman. On top of this, he is provided an encounter with masculine identity – through “sack[ing] up”) – and control – through re-asserting his agency and seeking a divorce. The feminism-as-problem discourse on /r/MGTOW, therefore, acts to provide men on this forum with an explanation as to why they are experiencing negative affect. In this act of translation, the feminism-as-problem discourse shapes MGTOW users’ affective experiences that have resulted from the joint crisis of neoliberalism and masculinity. It tells them that their suffering is in fact due to women controlling society and using this position to oppress and exploit men. Men used to be on top of the gender hierarchy, but now they are subordinate to women and have lost control. Given how much domination and control play a role in hegemonic masculinity, they have also lost a sense of identity too.

The feminism-as-problem discourse simultaneously offers an encounter with control, identity, and meaning through the very act of translating affective experiences into meaningful emotion signifiers. By explaining men's suffering as the result of women and gains for feminism, the feminism-as-problem discourse offers meaning by giving men a framework within which to understand their circumstances. The message this discourse provides these men is that if their lives aren't going as they expected them to, it's because women, inspired by feminism, are actively oppressing and harming men. Control is offered through the ability to attribute meaning to circumstances and events. In being able to explain why things are as they are, in other words, men on these forums feel more in control of their lives and the world around them. Finally, identity is offered through the re-assertion of a hybrid masculine identity and the alignment of the individual with a collective that are both simultaneously vulnerable and victimised, but also resilient and strong. This apparent contradiction means the masculine identity on offer here is one which positions itself as the victim of feminism, but simultaneously idealises strength, independence, and stoicism.

## “Our culture has become a feminist culture”

Greetings, everybody. Welcome to the red pill. We've got almost a hundred subscribers, in exactly two weeks! This is incredible.

Why have we grown so quickly?

Because there's truth in the red pill. Because men are realizing that the sexual marketplace has shifted away from what we've been taught. Men who grew up over thirty years ago are discovering the world has changed. Men who are still growing up- from the 80s, 90s, and even the last decade, they're starting to realize that what their parents taught them, what television and chick flicks taught them, what church and sunday school taught them... **it's all wrong.**

Our culture has become a feminist culture. A president cannot be elected today without succumbing to the feminist narrative and paying them tribute. How many times has Obama given credit for his manhood to his wife? How many times has the debate hinged on women's pay gap - which is a myth that gets lip service because if you don't you're a misogynist!

I'm not here to parade the concepts of Men's Rights- nor am I here to discuss self-improvement tips that [/r/seduction](#) now purports are to make you a better man, *not get laid more often.*

I am here to say, for better or for worse, the frame around public discourse is a feminist frame, and we've lost our identity because of it.

But this isn't the end of the world. The world is changing, but men are still part of it. We just need to make sure we're changing with it.

**It's too easy to blame feminism for our troubles.**

Men, our happiness is our responsibility. Culture has always shifted, it's dynamic and fluid. It has never and will never stay still.

Feminism was inevitable. Equal rights are something I strongly am in support of. For men and women.

Women have the right to pursue happiness. Nobody should tell them otherwise. **Maximizing happiness is the goal of every living creature on this planet.**

Men, we need to recognize that since women are *rightfully* seeking out happiness, evolutionary psychology is more relevant today than ever in the past century. (and possibly longer). We no longer run the show. And I, for one, don't disagree that marriage had to change if we were to see equal rights.

But now it's time to get serious and realize that our strategy needs to change. **Feminism is a sexual strategy.** It puts women into the best position they can find, to select mates, to determine when they want to switch mates, to locate the best dna possible, and to garner the most resources they can individually achieve.

The Red Pill is men's sexual strategy. Reality is happening, and we need to make sure that we adjust our strategy accordingly.

*Figure 4.7: Excerpt from introductory post on /r/TheRedPill sidebar*

/r/TheRedPill has a sidebar that features a list of resources for those who are new to the forum.

I decided early on in my research to read through the materials it contained in order to get a good

introduction to the key concepts and ideas that underpin the Red Pill ideology. I also wanted to get an idea of what the users on this forum think the forum is about, and what rules and norms govern it. The first is a link titled “Introduction” and it takes you to an archived post from 2012 (fig. 4.7) which briefly outlines /r/TheRedPill’s worldview for all those who are new to the forum. The post states that “our culture has become a feminist culture” and the use of the word “our” reveals a belief that culture rightfully belongs to men but has been taken over by “feminist[s]”. The same can be said of the statement “**feminism is a sexual strategy**” (written in bold for emphasis). Seen previously as the domain of men, users on /r/TheRedPill believe that feminism has allowed women to enter the “sexual marketplace” with their own tactics and agency, and this has thrown it off balance. The result of both of these changes is that men have “lost their identity”. A loss of masculine identity and control over relationships, therefore, is already a strong theme. Feminism’s insurgency means men have lost control of romantic/sexual relationships and, given how central control and virility is to hegemonic masculinity, this also means they’ve lost their masculine identity.

The feminism-as-problem discourse on /r/TheRedPill constructs women as trespassers in male spaces, connecting their identity to that of a thief. Ahmed writes about the same connection being made with immigrants who are seen to be wrongfully taking from the nation (2007, p.48). Through media campaigns and government statements that rely on a narrative of fear, immigrants are framed as invaders who are coming to take what rightfully belongs to citizens of the nation (Ibid, p.43). In this case, it is women who are invading men’s spaces and then wrongfully stealing from men. The feminism-as-problem discourse on /r/TheRedPill, therefore, operates in a similar way to /r/MGTOW in that women are constructed as taking, or threatening to take, something from men, leaving them lacking in some way. The difference here, however, is that there is an emphasis on women denying men access to sex or setting up barriers to sex which need to be

overcome. Given that having (regular) sex is a fundamental part of hegemonic masculine identity, women's position of power, derived from feminism, is a direct and existential threat to the men on /r/TheRedPill. The feminism-as-problem discourse, therefore, sees feminism as creating a problem of restricting access to sex and therefore undermining men's control and identity of this sphere.

147 **Remember, men create, women consume.**

**Intro:** Male and female interaction can all be boiled down to one maxim. Men create, and women consume. If you can understand this concept then you can make sense out of any gender dynamic.

**Body:** I'm going to keep this short and sweet for the sake of digestibility. Pretty much all red pill principles: hypergamy, AF/BB, dread game, shit tests, etc. can all be summarized by the fact that men are the creators and women are the consumers.

Think about it simply. The vast majority of artists, scientists, entrepreneurs, innovators, etc. are men. Then look at consumerism and who the main target is and who is responsible for the vast majority of consumer spending, it's women.

Many people think that society and nature are somehow different, they are not. Society is merely a more evolved version of the jungle. We built society in the image of our mental schema. So the way society is, is really because that's how humans are internally.

Let's think about how this creator/consumer dynamic plays out across red pill principles.

**Hypergamy:** Women will naturally branch swing to the man who can create more for her to consume.

**AF/BB:** Women will find the way to both consume the best genes from the man who can create them, while sticking with the man who can create the other resources that she consumes.

**Dread Game:** Women are terrified of losing their ability to consume.

**Shit Tests:** Women will test men to see who can create the most, or who is a true creator, so that they can consume efficiently.

When I say consumption it can be anything that a woman uses as a resource. Genetic material, a house, a car, her shopping escapades, a fun trip, etc.

Men are the source of all that women use. It is men who create ideas, who create products, who create safety, who create fun, who create entertainment. And all of it is centered around the female consumption.

**Conclusion:** Throughout all of your interactions with women, remember this dynamic. Everything she does with/to you is to feed off of everything that you create as a man. And remember that your value in the animal kingdom is completely based upon your ability to create.

70 Comments Share Save Hide Report 93% Upvoted

Figure 4.8: Post from /r/TheRedPill showing binary gendered categories

/r/TheRedPill's view that feminism has provided women with their own sexual strategy means feminism is viewed as a problem in another sense on this forum. Essentially, feminism has made seducing women a problem that needs to be solved. The post above (fig. 4.8) introduces a lot of concepts commonly found on /r/TheRedPill, namely "hypergamy", "AF/BB", "dread game", and "shit tests". Each term shows the way in which /r/TheRedPill views the 'problem' of seducing women. Hypergamy refers to women's apparent natural tendency to "trade up" to men who have better looks, more money and better status" and to marry the best man she can find

(Høiland, 2019, p.68). According to /r/TheRedPill, this is judged by certain evolutionary traits and the man's financial status. AF/BB stands for Alpha Fucks, Beta Bucks, the idea that Alpha men get to sleep with women whilst beta men are used as a "Dependable Beta Money Dispenser to foot the bill for [women's] IKEA nesting instincts" (Red Pill sidebar quoted in Van Valkenburgh, 2018, p.9).

Dread game sounds particularly ominous, and for good reason. This term refers to the practice of making women feel perpetually insecure, whether these men are in a relationship with them already or seeking to seduce them (Bunch of Wisdom, 2020). This includes men making women believe they have other 'opportunities' and 'options', so are not tied to them in any way. It can also, however, include giving a partner the cold shoulder, texting less, and actively seeking another partner to undermine your current partner's confidence. Concepts like 'dread game' are the point at which /r/TheRedPill tips over from teaching techniques for picking up women into advocating emotional abuse and show the extent to which women are held in contempt by Red Pill users. They are viewed not as full people with emotions and agency, but as objects to be manipulated for men's benefit. Finally, 'shit tests' refer to the tests women apparently give to men to ensure they are a good enough partner. These tests need to be passed or ignored if men are to successfully pick up a woman and/or remain in control of a relationship. On /r/TheRedPill, therefore, the feminism-as-problem discourse is focused more on the fact feminism has created a problem for men, in that it has made it more difficult to obtain sex.

This configuration of feminism-as-problem discourse on /r/TheRedPill is informed by the use and misuse of evolutionary psychology and biology (EP/B). EP/B theories come up frequently on /r/TheRedPill and the Manosphere more generally. In this case, EP/B is used to validate Red Pill ontology with scientific authority (Ibid). It also informs the way in which women are constructed as a problem. Hypergamy, for instance, is used to explain why it is women will

date more attractive or wealthy men. The aim of this is to simplify human behaviour, particularly women's behaviour. According to the way in which EP is used on these forums, women are simply biological robots who are unable to think for themselves. They act on evolutionary impulses which are hardwired into their brains from birth. The use/misuse of EP/B, therefore, reinforces the idea that women have no agency, reducing them to a pure, passive commodity (Van Valkenburgh, 2018, p.15). Seducing women, therefore, is a 'problem' that is easily solved by applying EP/B theories.

Working under the surface here is the women as passive, men as active binary which links to the rational/emotional binary too. The simple, all encompassing, absolutist maxim offered here – “men create, women consume” – is again drawing on the men as active/women as passive binary. As Garlick notes in the context of neoliberal capitalism, men are seen as being able to rise above their biological programming and have become rational agents, whereas women are slaves to their emotional, biological impulses (2020, p.556). This serves to substantiate the feminism-as-problem discourse as it is articulated on /r/TheRedPill. Feminism is not only a 'problem' because it is preventing men from obtaining sex, but it is also irrational and therefore inherently unmasculine. There is an underlying frustration that men have been outwitted by something seemingly irrational, when rationality is held up as an ideal. Men, in other words, are seen as having relinquished control to an ideology that not only seeks to oppress them, but also fundamentally threatens hegemonic masculine values. There is an obvious tension here, of course. On the one hand women/feminists are constructed as an all-powerful enemy that controls society, relationships, and access to sex all to the detriment of all men. On the other, they are biological robots completely incapable of independent thought or agency. This brings to mind a feature of Ur-fascism as defined by Umberto Eco: the enemy is both powerful and weak (Eco, 1995).



Binary oppositions are common on /r/TheRedPill and through the feminism-as-problem discourse offer an encounter with control through reducing the world to simple social categories and explaining how those categories interact. In the case of the post above (fig. 4.8), women are being constructed as a problem in that they simply free-ride off of men's achievements and only want to consume things. Men, on the other hand, are able to exercise agency and create things. In reducing all human interactions down to this simple dynamic, /r/TheRedPill is rendering the world understandable and therefore controllable. Rather than consisting of random events which do not all have a clear explanation, in other words, all human interaction can be understood by applying this one maxim. And if the world can be understood based on one maxim, then interactions can be predicted. And if interactions can be predicted, then these men are in control. Existing literature on extremist ideologies refers to compensatory control theory (CCT) which argues that people will embrace ideologies that emphasise control in order to address and alleviate anxieties they might have about the randomness and disorder in their lives (Kay and Eibach, 2013, p.567). With this control comes meaning, as events are explainable through the application of a simple theory.

Returning to the post above (fig. 4.8) this user posits a binary division between men and women, namely that men create, and women consume. Men have created many things throughout history, OP argues, but women are simply passive consumers of what men create. The extent to which this myopic outlook excludes countless women inventors, scientists, artists, politicians, etc. throughout history, demonstrates the extent to which this ideology reduces reality to simplistic binaries by selecting and excluding information. The feminism-as-problem discourse, therefore, whilst constructing 'irrational' feminism as a threat to rational men, also simplifies social relations in order to render them predictable and therefore controllable. At the same time, it bestows meaning on events and dynamics by providing a simple explanation for them.

229 **Wives: look for an employee not a partner**

Red Pill Theory

Hypergamy means I have to manage her. I know the rules, I abide by them, no baring my soul to her and no assumptions of equality. In some ways we are complimentary, but never equal.

Having my shit together, no woman can be a partner to me. None. They just aren't built like that. And as the relationship manager then, my role is not to look for a partnership but to hire an employee. A high-level one, but someone who will work for me and develop the next generation of employees (children) growing up. That will be her project. Mine is ensuring that the whole system (family) functions.

Finally, things like pre-nups and that sort of thing are contracts signed upon hire, not something I sneak in. I'm up front about it.

Advantages of this mentality:

- I make myself into the best business I can to attract applications and make reception of a business card a big deal.
- See the realities of life. I'm hiring, so will I hire someone who can't perform? If she's hit the wall, has baggage (debt, emotional, high n-count), etc. then I don't hire. Maybe I interview, and maybe I let her buy me a few drinks, but "sorry the position you're looking for isn't available".
- I'm the source of valuation, because I'm hiring. It's not "Oh, look, there goes another angel. I hope she likes me!" No. It's whether I like her. I'm the one with the business here, she's the one with the talent. So I hope.
- Approaches and introductions etc. are easy because I'm the one vetting, not going out to be vetted. Rejection anxiety is low, because I'm just looking to hire, not to find the magic unicorn to complete my broken soul. Flirting is just like a cocktail schmooze.
- I have a goal in the exchange apart from earning her approval (the worst) or even just having fun (which isn't bad at all), unlike the beta mindset where I'm just hoping that whatever routines and clothes and tone of voice I've put together makes her like me. No.
- I am also honest at the outset. No games or tricks. I don't mean that I don't use 'game', but I'm not pretending to be someone I'm not, because my focus is on her and who she is, not on me and how I'm being seen.
- If she wants to move 'to the next stage' then she needs to demonstrate why she should be promoted. Not just the "I'm a woman so therefore pay me more for contributing no personal value to your life".
- It helps establish a reward paradigm for her, so I'm not just thinking "that's what she should do" or "that was nice" and then forget about it.
- Lastly, it helps me get into the mindset that I'm training her. I'm training her to contribute value to my life (her job), not for her to appreciate me contributing value to hers (why would I hire someone to work for them?).

I have made mistakes over and over again with women that the above essentially skirts. Just looking at it from a job POV is so relieving.

58 Comments Share Save Hide Report 94% Upvoted

Figure 4.9: Post from /r/TheRedPill about viewing family members as employees

Whilst reading the post above (fig. 4.9), I was repelled by the idea that a wife should be chosen as if they are an employee and that children are also employees. The application of a business model to the family shows how neoliberal capitalist concepts also inform the feminism-as-problem discourse, constructing women as a ‘problem’ that needs to be “managed”, in the words of this user. This user argues that it is necessary for men, as the “relationship manager”, “not to look for a partnership but to hire an employee”. The man’s role in this situation is not to “develop the next generation of employees (children)” but to “ensure that the whole system (family) functions”. The user then goes on to list the benefits of viewing family in this way. These include the fact that it allows men to be the ones vetting candidates, rather than being vetted themselves, which again shows how users on /r/TheRedPill view women as devoid of agency. The user also claims that it helps men get into the mindset that they are training women. Women, therefore, are constructed needing to be managed and trained by men in order to suit men’s needs.

They are thus simply a problem that requires controlling. This reveals the extent to which neoliberal capitalism has infiltrated the lives of those on /r/TheRedPill. Men, according to this user, should hire, manage, and train their spouses. There is a clear hierarchy here, with decision making and leadership being left entirely up to the ‘rational’ man. The ‘irrational’ women and children are simply subservient employees.

The application of neoliberal concepts to intimate relationships is common on /r/TheRedPill, and has a similar effect to the application of EP/B, namely reducing the world down to simple mechanisms. Again, this helps to render events and dynamics easily explainable and thus predictable and meaningful. In the case of the post above (fig. 4.9), the application of neoliberal capitalist logics to human relationships is taken to its logical conclusion as the family becomes just another economic unit to which business techniques can be applied. Human relationships become quantifiable, and it becomes possible to strategize and go into dating situations with a plan. In doing so, the feminism-as-problem discourse offers men an encounter with control through reducing human relationships to simple market logics which, like the application of EP/B, makes them predictable and therefore controllable.

Thus, the feminism-as-problem discourse on /r/TheRedPill serves to construct feminism as a problem which threatens men’s ability to obtain sex. Given virility is a fundamental part of hegemonic masculine identity, this is an existential threat. Feminism is therefore constructed as a problem in a different sense. Feminism is seen as turning women into a ‘problem’ that needs to be solved. Women need to be managed and their behaviour needs to be understood if men are to regain control and a sense of masculine identity. The application of EP/B theories and neoliberal concepts helps to provide men an encounter with control and identity by reducing women’s behaviour down to simple maxims and dynamics. At the same time, this bestows meaning on

men's experiences and circumstances by explaining why women behave in certain ways and why they might reject them or resist attempts at seduction.

## “Quit my job last night because of a foid”

The feminism-as-problem discourse also operates on Incels.co, but in a slightly different way. On this forum, the feminism-as-problem discourse is expressed through the ‘black pill’ ideology, which, like the ‘red pill’, casts women as responsible for men’s loss of control and identity. And like with /r/TheRedPill, incels primarily feel feminism has had a negative effect on their ability to have sex and be in romantic relationships. The ‘black pill’ argues that women are ‘hypergamous’ and shallow meaning they will disregard any man who is unattractive. Incels are therefore constructed as having lost control over women. Furthermore, they feel they have lost a masculine identity which is based on virility and sexual prowess. Meaning is also lost through the inability of dominant entitlement discourses to explain why sex and romantic relationships are not freely available to incels. Much like on /r/TheRedPill, therefore, the ‘problem’ on Incels.co is that feminism has created barriers to incels being able to have sex and be in romantic relationships. The difference is that this problem is not viewed as something that can be overcome. Instead, incels can only wallow in their despair.

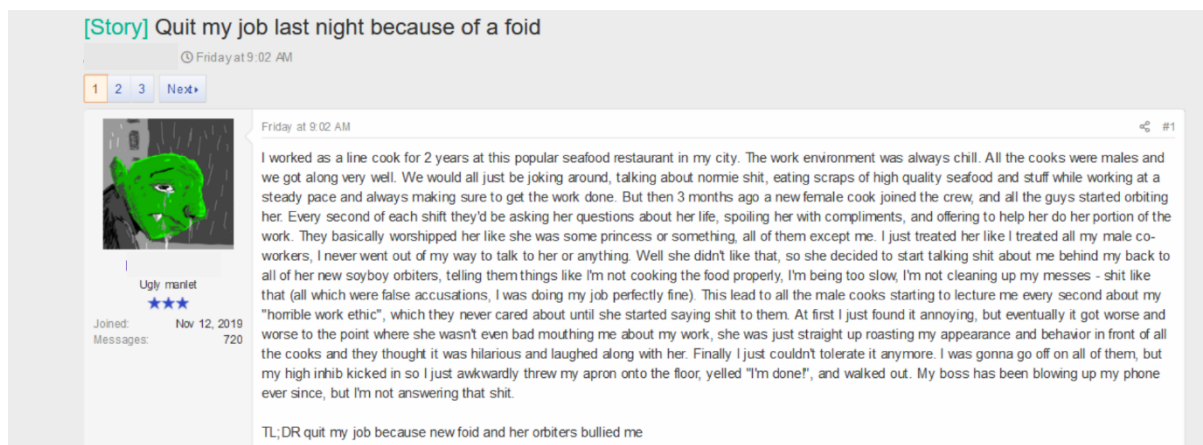


Figure 4.10: Post from Incels.co about a user quitting their job

On Incels.co, the feminism-as-problem discourse is also seen to influence other aspects of incels' lives, such as employment. Figure 4.10 provides an example of this. It features a user giving an account of how a new woman employee at the restaurant he worked at turned all of his colleagues against him. Eventually, he decided to quit his job because he could no longer handle the humiliation. The user describes how before the woman was employed, everything was harmonious, but after her arrival the other employees started to criticise his work ethic. The new woman employee started to talk behind his back and criticise his ability to perform the job correctly, and eventually she was just "straight up roasting [his] appearance and behavior in front of all the cooks and they thought it was hilarious". The 'problem' as incels see it, therefore, is that women hate unattractive men and victimise them. They are constructed as spiteful, self-interested, and as seeking to make unattractive men suffer. In this case the feminism-as-problem discourse is also bestowing meaning on this event by providing this user an explanation for why they had to quit their job.

The feminism-as-problem discourse is also being used here to explain a loss of control and identity on an individual level. The control here is control over a social situation and also employment status. A woman has come along and upset a balanced social dynamic and taken control of the situation to the extent that she is controlling other men to victimise this user. Identity is lost here in the form of losing a job as well as social status. Although work is a part of the identity of all subjects under neoliberal capitalism, work is a particularly fundamental aspect of hegemonic masculine identity. Men are expected not only to work, but to be providers. Being unable to fulfil this role is humiliating and a threat to men's very identity, so losing or quitting a job poses an existential threat. The feminism-as-problem discourse operates, therefore, in a similar way on Incels.co to /r/MGTOW and /r/TheRedPill, in that it constructs men's affective experiences as

the result of feminism (or women) causing men to lose control over their lives and women, a masculine identity, and meaning.

The feminism-as-problem discourse on Incels.co also offers incels an encounter with that which they feel they have lost/are lacking. The in-group slang in the post above (fig. 4.10), which is common on almost all posts on Incel.co, reveals the way in which incels are offered an encounter with a lost masculine identity. Terms like “soyboy orbiters” and “foid” are used to label certain social categories created by the Black Pill. “Foid” is an abbreviation of the word “femoid” which is itself a derogatory term for women designed to imply they are a different species or alien in some way. “Soyboy” is term commonly used to describe men who are effeminate and ‘soft’ because of the connotations of a non-meat diet (Jones et al., 2019, p.14) and the term “orbiter” refers to men who are perceived to be hanging around a woman, or women, because they are attracted to them. Both words are designed to imply that the men who are aligned with the new female employee are soft, dependent, and passive, all of which are traits associated with femininity (Ahmed, 2007, p.2). According to this view, these are men who have already surrendered control to a woman, and they are diminished and emasculated as a result.

The user submitting the post, on the other hand, sees himself as impervious to the woman’s powers of seduction by stating that he treated her no differently to anyone else. The act of quitting his job is also an agentive act, and the final line about not answering his boss’ phone calls is indicative of a kind of stoic independence. But there is a tension here between a construction of a masculine identity that is weak, submissive, and victimised whilst at the same time maintaining a dominant position over other, weaker forms of masculinity which are viewed as having too close a proximity to femininity through their dependency on women. Incels therefore create a particularly stark hybrid masculine identity which incorporates elements of subordinate masculinities, whilst maintaining dominance over those subordinate forms.



Figure 4.11: Post from Incels.co featuring a user sharing their experience of seeing a couple in a café

The post above (fig. 4.11), involves a user recounting an experience they had when in a café. It demonstrates the way in the feminism-as-problem discourse creates strict social categories which are used offer incels an encounter with identity and meaning. This user describes being “mogged...to Neptune and back” by a “megachad” who arrives at the café with a “9/10 foid”. The jargon here is dense, as is typical of the language on Incels.co. “Mogged” is a verb derived from the acronym “AMOG” which stands for “Alpha Male of the Group”. To be “mogged”, therefore, is to feel intimidated and belittled in the presence of a man perceived to be more masculine/stereotypically attractive than you. The concept of being “mogged”, thus bestows meaning on this interaction by providing a theory to explain it. The ‘problem’ here is again that women only pay attention to attractive men (megachad), whilst at the same time seeking to victimise and harm unattractive men (incels).

In this context, the feminism-as-problem discourse is also constructing the incel “beta male” identity as low in the social hierarchy. Other categories are mentioned too. A “9/10 foid” refers to an attractive woman, a “megachad” refers to an attractive man who fits the hypermasculine stereotype, and a “normie” refers to someone in the middle of the social hierarchy. All play a role in both dividing the world up into social categories and therefore helping to render this interaction comprehensible, thus bestowing meaning. Like on /r/TheRedPill, therefore the

feminism-as-problem discourse, working through the Black Pill ideology, creates strict social categories and relations between those categories in order to offer incels an encounter with identity. In constructing the ‘other’ and defining incel identity as counter to it, it provides an incel identity which is mixes elements of hegemonic masculinity and ‘beta’ masculinity. In the case of /r/TheRedPill and /r/MGTOW, masculine identity is associated with strength, independence, stoicism, and control. Incel identity is precisely the opposite of that. It is a form of beta masculinity which is weak, emotional, and lacks sexual prowess.



*Figure 4.12: Image of Chad*

The social category of ‘Chad’ is worth reflecting on briefly. Chad, or Chad Thundercock to refer to him by his full name, has become a widely used meme to refer to the archetypal, attractive, ‘manly’ man who is popular and virile. Chad’s visual representation can be seen in figure 4.12. There are a number of other memes related to the Chad phenomenon, including virgin vs. Chad memes which depict a ‘virgin’ doing things in a less confident and masculine way and Chad doing everything more successfully for comic effect. Some examples have been included below (fig. 4.13). These images illustrate the extent to which this dichotomy is applied to create two distinct categories of man. There are ‘virgins’ who (with whom incels would identify) who are inferior, and Chads who are hypermasculine and successful. It is clear therefore, why incels would victimise and rail against the Chads.





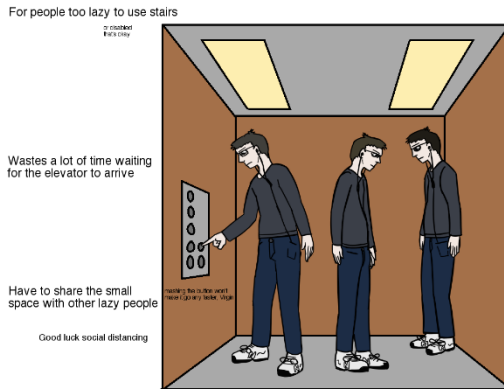
### The Virgin Car Commuter



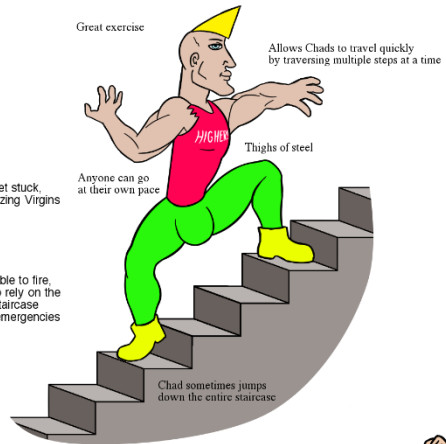
### The Chad Cycling Commuter



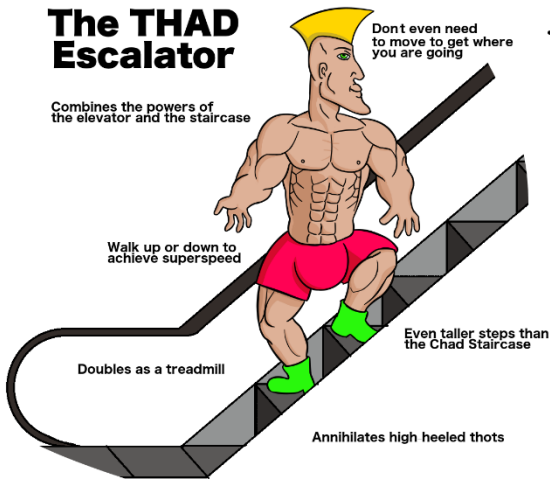
## The Virgin Elevator



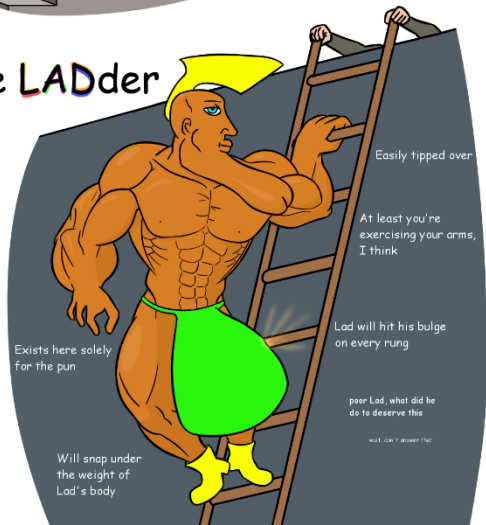
## The Chad Stairs



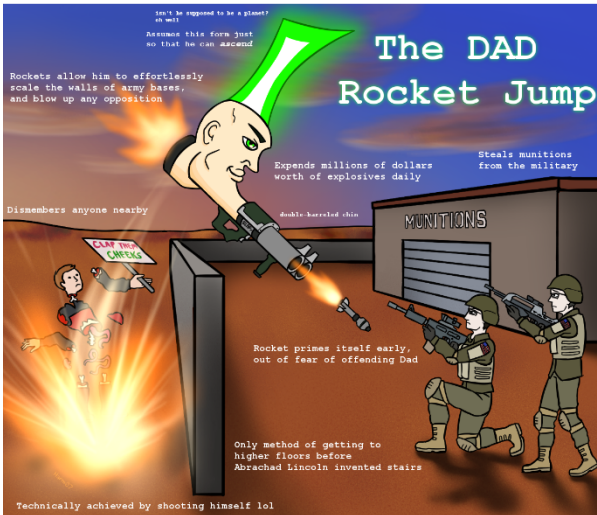
## The THAD Escalator



## The LADder



## The DAD Rocket Jump



## The GAD Ubiquitous Existence

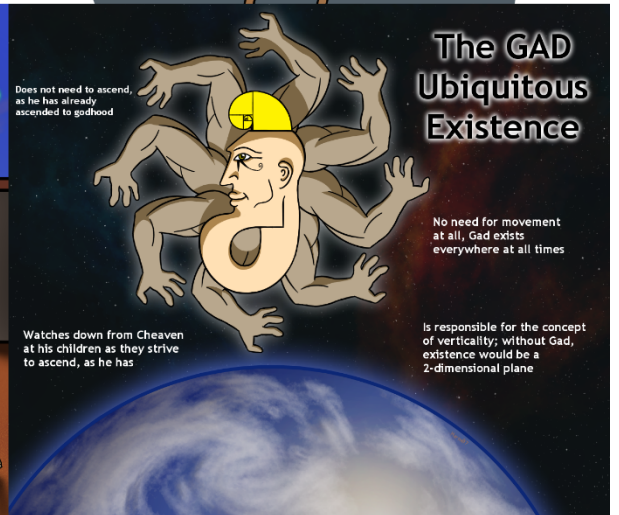


Figure 4.13: Examples of Virgin vs. Chad meme

Incel masculinity, therefore, is a hybrid masculinity that borrows from other, less dominant forms of masculinity in order to both reinforce and also reject hegemonic masculinity (Ging, 2019, p.14). This has the effect of “symbolically distanc[ing] men from hegemonic masculinity, while simultaneously compounding existing social and symbolic boundaries” (Ibid, p.5). It thus “work[s] to conceal systems of power and inequality in historically new ways” (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014, p.248). Incel identity, therefore, has a complex relationship with hegemonic masculinity. Unlike /r/TheRedPill and /r/MGTOW which positions men as victims but still able to break free of women’s oppression, incels see no such hope and instead wallow in victimhood. The effect of this is similar to the way in which /r/MGTOW position the ordinary (patriarchy and male dominance) as in crisis. By being positioned as weak, vulnerable, and oppressed the incel masculine identity is viewed as in crisis, covering up the many ways in which it too upholds existing inequalities.

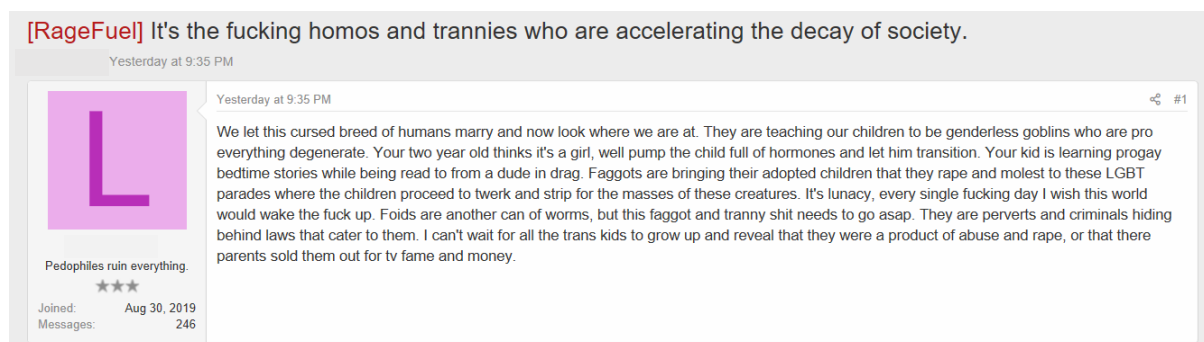


Figure 4.14: Post from /r/Incel.co about how “homos” and “trannies” are causing societal decline

Figure 4.14 shows the way in which the feminism-as-problem discourse on Incels.co is used to explain the decline of society more generally, thus bestowing meaning on the perceived decline of men’s social status and incel’s suffering. Much like the introductory post on /r/TheRedPill (fig. 4.7) men and society are seen as one and the same thing. Men are seen as the rightful dominant group within society, and so the introduction of women has upset a delicate balance leading to society’s decline and men’s suffering. The title of the post blames gay and trans


people for “accelerating the decay of society”, and by extension for stealing incels’ futures. In this case, therefore, it is clear that it is not just femininity that is the ‘problem’ (although this is clearly part of it) but deviation of any kind. The examples this user gives are of a two-year-old that “thinks it’s a girl” and homosexuality which is linked to femininity and being ‘un-masculine’. The issue here, therefore, is that society is being emasculated by an insurgent force.

Ahmed points out that the figure of the asylum seeker is aligned with that of the burglar through the proximity of both categories in the language in government speeches and the media (Ahmed, 2007, pp.47–48). The asylum seeker is constructed as a burglar who is attempting to steal something from the nation (Ibid). The close lexical proximity here between trans and gay people and rape, molestation, abuse, and the “decay of society” show how this user believes those who deviate from patriarchal norms are seeking to destroy society as he knows it. They are, in other words, attempting to steal society away from men and corrupt it in some way. In that sense, Incels.co varies very little from /r/MGTOW and /r/TheRedPill as all three see femininity as a problem which is seeking to take away men’s dominance and control over society and its institutions.

[News] Incel charged with sexual assault for touching a womans arm

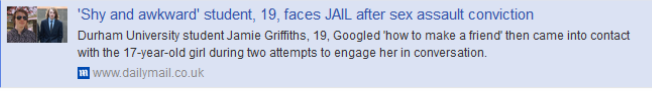
Yesterday at 8:53 AM

1 2 Next




Facel mod  
★★★★★  
Joined: Nov 7, 2017  
Messages: 4,835

Yesterday at 8:53 AM #1



JFL at this clown world, what nightmare society do we live in where you can potentially be imprisoned for lightly touching someones arm


Last edited: Yesterday at 8:58 AM



5'10 retardedcel 2/10 face  
★★★★★  
Joined: Oct 4, 2019  
Messages: 522


Yesterday at 8:56 AM #2

We will be charged with sexual assault just for existing tbh



disabled/sandcel/manlet  
voluntarily incel  
★  
Joined: May 8, 2019  
Messages: 1,545

Yesterday at 8:57 AM #3



JFL at this clown world, what nightmare society do we live in where you can potentially be imprisoned for lightly touching someones arm

This is why I stay away from foid at all costs, don't even look them in the eye. You never when this shit will catch up to you.

Figure 4.15: Post from Incels.co featuring a link to a Daily Mail article about a man who was convicted of sexual assault

Although the users who post on all three of these forums believe the rise of feminism means society has turned against men, the victim narrative on Incels.co is particularly strong. The feminism-as-problem discourse, therefore, is particular potent and constructs incel suffering as the result of feminism informing women to avoid unattractive men. More than this, incels feel uniquely victimised and threatened by this ‘feminised’ society. The post above (fig. 4.15) features an article from the Daily Mail about a 19-year-old student who was found guilty of sexual assault. The article details how the student had allegedly been attempting to make friends with a 17-year-old girl and had touched her arm and waist whilst trying to speak to her. The man convicted of sexual assault claimed to be “shy, anxious, and awkward” and was also found to have googled “how to make a friend”. These two details mean he has been identified as an incel, even though he himself didn’t

use that word. The user who posted this link comments “JFL [just fucking LOL] at this clown world” questioning “what nightmare society” would allow a man who “lightly touch[ed] someone’s arm” to prison. “Clown world” is a term often used on Incels.co to describe the state of society. It refers to the apparent absurdity of the state of the world at the present moment. In this case, the idea of a man being convicted of sexual assault for what they believe is something very minor is evidence that society has lost all sense of proportion or sense.

The next comment, however, reveals the extent to which incels believe society is targeting them specifically. This user flippantly adds that “[incels] will be charged with sexual assault just for existing tbh [to be honest]”. Although the comment is undoubtedly meant ironically, this shows the extent to which incels view themselves as victims. Similar to /r/MGTOW, therefore, the feminism-as-problem discourse on Incels.co constructs the ordinary (patriarchy) as in crisis. According to this narrative, women are now the dominant group in society and are seeking to oppress, punish, and even eradicate men for even the most minor infraction. The final comment on this post again reinforces this idea. This user claims they avoid even making eye contact with women for fear of the consequences. Women, therefore, are constructed as holding ultimate power over incels, with the ability to ruin their lives at any moment. The purpose of this, like on /r/MGTOW, is ultimately to maintain the status quo. In positioning incels as the victims of a feminist conspiracy, the ways in which they still benefit from patriarchy are hidden. Similar to the configuration of hybrid masculinity found on Incels.co, therefore, the aim is to conceal the ways in which incels reinforce and reify existing inequalities and offering incels an encounter with a masculine identity based on victimhood.

In this chapter, I decided to focus less on the ways in which this discourse fails to offer an encounter with control, identity, and meaning because I wanted to fully explore how this discourse translates men’s affective experiences into recognisable emotional responses. This, to me, seemed

more important as it forms the basis of the subsequent chapters which do go on to discuss how each discourse fails to deliver on its promises. Furthermore, many of the ways in which the feminism-as-problem discourse does not deliver on its promise of an encounter with control, identity, and meaning are discussed in the subsequent chapters. But there are, of course, ways in which this discourse does not succeed in bringing men into contact with what they feel they have lost. The main way this happens is through offering a narrative which does not fully or accurately explain the situation men find themselves in. In placing the blame on feminism, this narrative ignores the way in which men are harmed by a combination of (the crisis of) neoliberalism and hegemonic masculine ideals. Thus, instead of acknowledging the problem and possibly finding a solution, men on these forums are told to double down on their existing worldview. They are told to be strong and stoic whilst at the same time reducing human interactions to market dynamics. Thus, this discourse does not succeed in providing men an encounter with meaning which is stable or which accurately represents the world around them.

## Interlude Two: Accidental Exposure

One afternoon, during the first national lockdown in the UK in March 2020, I was about to watch a yoga tutorial on YouTube when I was presented with a pre-roll advert. Normally I would skip the pre-roll after the compulsory five seconds of viewing. But this time I was compelled to watch the whole 2 minutes 30 seconds because the ad presented to me was for a PUA course. I was initially surprised by this coincidence, but then I remembered Google’s targeted advertising. Clearly searching for PUA related content via Google and YouTube means I have been profiled as someone interested in this content. It was a strange instance of my research bleeding out into my ‘non-research life’ – albeit definitely not the first or the last time this would happen.



*Figure A.1: Screenshot of Christian*

The advert consisted of a man standing on a balcony overlooking a suburban scene with lots of palm trees (Fig. A.1). He spoke about dating mistakes others often make during lockdown, including being too clingy with texting and not giving women enough space. Overall, the video was surprisingly innocuous and did not seem to have a lot of the toxic PUA baggage you find on sites like /r/TheRedPill. There was very little in the way of overt misogyny and both the tone and the backdrop for the video had an unexpectedly soothing quality. Although it used terms common to PUA sites and viewed dating as a strategy game in which you can learn “hacks” to get around



women's pre-programmed biological tendencies, the video had quite a positive feeling to it overall. It was also filmed entirely using the selfie camera of a phone which loaned it a sort of home-video, low-fi quality that was almost endearing. At the end of the video, the presenter, Christian, provided a link in order find out more about giving women space and how to use it to your advantage.



Figure A.2: Tom Cruise as Frank T.J. Mackey in *Magnolia*

I decided to follow the link to Christian's website in what was to be my first experience of a PUA course. It may have meant postponing yoga, but my sense of curiosity and urgency overrode my plans. My only previous exposure to this world, apart from my research, was through Paul Thomas Anderson's epic *Magnolia* (1999). In *Magnolia* Tom Cruise plays Frank T.J. Mackey (fig. A.2), a motivational speaker and pick up artist whose performance provides a cliché that is intensely abhorrent, worryingly believable, and disturbingly captivating. I've watched clips of Cruise as Frank Mackey several times throughout my research and each time I am fascinated by how charismatic the character is. Mackey's first line upon taking to the stage – to Thus Spake Zarathustra by Strauss – sums up the character perfectly:

Respect the cock. And tame the cunt! Tame it! Take it on headfirst with the skills that I will teach you at work and say no! You will not control me! No! You will not take my soul!

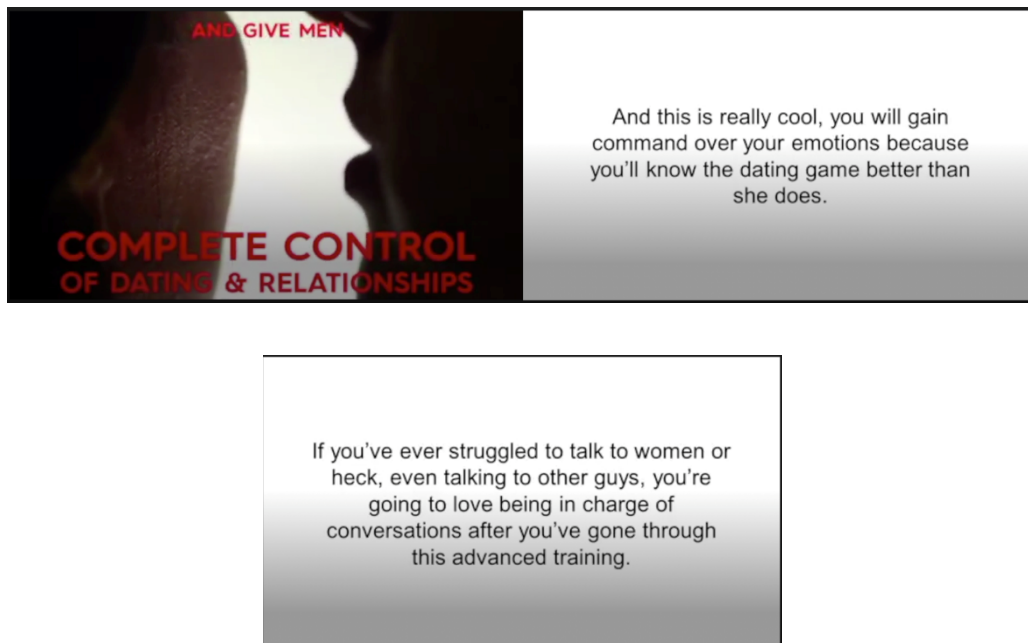
No! You will not win this game! Because it's a game, guys. You want to think it's not? Go back to the schoolyard...

The theme of control, the notion that women need to be “tamed”, and that seduction is a “game” come through clearly in Cruise’s caricature of the PUA guru. I expected to see similar themes on Christian’s PUA course. And although Christian’s YouTube ad had been very subdued compared to Frank Mackey’s performance, I was also preparing myself for a more Mackey-esque experience on his website. With this in the back of my mind, I started watch the introductory video on the website, not quite knowing what I was getting myself into.

An hour or so later, I had finished the video and was in a state of mild shock and exhaustion, so quite different from if I had spent 30 minutes doing some relaxing yoga. Early on in the course introduction I decided to take notes and they ended up extensive and frenzied. There was just so much to notice and so many parallels with things I had already observed on /r/TheRedPill. The video’s aesthetic itself was interesting. Its grainy graphics and a voiceover at the beginning were indicative of its overall low production value when compared to other contemporary videos you get on YouTube and similar video hosting sites. The barriers to entry when it comes to producing high-quality videos have lowered significantly in the past few years, allowing individuals to create videos with a slick and professional feel that was previously the reserve of large studios. When viewed in 2020, the early-2000s vibe of this video, therefore, seemed to veil its sinister nature and make it seem almost quaint, like a relic from a bygone era.

Although the aesthetic was jarring, the language used in the video chimed with observations I had already made on /r/TheRedPill. In a way, this was a relief. During my research I found myself doubting the patterns I thought I’d seen and worried that maybe they were isolated to the one group. Or maybe I’d thought myself into a position where I could not see the wood for the trees. Seeing them played out in such stark and explicit ways in this introductory video

confirmed some of the things I'd been thinking about the broader motivations behind the PUA mindset. The main theme is control. This word was repeated several times throughout the video, along with close synonyms like “command” and “being in charge”.

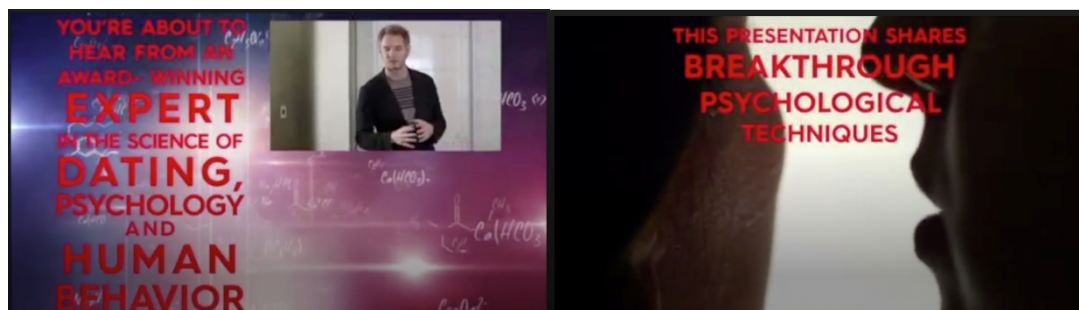


*Figure A.3: Screenshots from video on PUA Website*

I have included a few screenshots above to show the context in which the word “control” was used (fig. A.3). Just as with the above quotes from Frank T. J. Mackie, the frequency at which the word “control” came up made it even more clear to me that it is one of the primary motivators behind engagement in PUA material. They claim to offer quick and easy strategies which will immediately give you a better grasp of your dating life. Everything is about learning one or two simple principles in order to instantly improve your ability to get women in bed. In the case of this course, that panacea is labelled the “obsession story”. According to Christian, the “obsession story” is something pre-programmed into women at birth and is the result of thousands of years of evolution. The contents of the “obsession story” are vague, but it seems to essentially be a sexual fantasy that women keep secret. The video informs us that Christian spent a long time researching “literotica” (books in the same vein as 50 Shades of Grey), and this is what led him to

discover the “obsession story” all women are born with. If you can tap into this, you can control women.

The video had an interesting effect on me whilst watching it. For part of it, I was incredulous, and at times laughing at how oversimplified and ridiculous the methods being suggested seemed to me, particularly in the case of the steps to knowing whether a woman will sleep with you on the first date or not. The steps include giving you exact phrases to say and actions to take (including not wearing shoes and holding a glass of wine when you open the door to your date, and telling her that you’re busy finishing an email but she should come in). These phrases were often stunted and awkward, and the idea of people saying them verbatim struck me as surreal. But, I also noted was that I had an underlying hope throughout. There was a small part of me which hoped I might get something from watching this video. Maybe there was some sort of tip or strategy I would actually think sounded helpful for future dates, or maybe it would point out something I have done in the past and I’d suddenly understand why a particular date went badly or a relationship did not work out. Having this hope sat uncomfortably with me, something I think is partly down to an internalised feeling that the researcher is meant to be separate from what they are researching. In this case, however, my research had burst into my ‘non-research life’ and caught me unawares. At the time, I was also the target demographic for the ad: young, male, single, and feeling the effects of lockdown on my social life and contact with others.



*Figure A.4: More screenshots from PUA website's video*

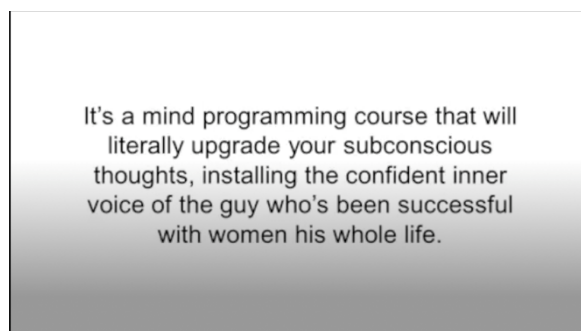


Figure A.5: Screenshot taken from PUA website introductory video

Watching this video was helpful in terms of solidifying my understanding of the PUA industry more generally and /r/TheRedPill specifically. There were so many ways in which this video drew together different themes I've noticed in my research that it started to seem a bit too convenient, in that it fit so neatly with my understanding of the groups up to that point. As mentioned above, there were references to EP/B to substantiate claims and paint women as these biologically pre-determined entities who can easily be controlled if you just grasp their very simple inner workings. On top of this, the theories in the video are backed up with apparent references to science. These two screenshots above show this most clearly (fig. A.4). In the first screenshot here, which is from the very start of the video, Christian is referring to himself as an expert in the "science of dating, psychology, and human behaviour", a statement which aims to lend credibility to what is to follow. All of this serves to create a sense that you can trust what you are about to hear because it has been backed up by rigorous scientific research. At one point, Christian says that his system works because it operates on an "evolutionary level". This sort of language that draws from evolutionary theory is seen frequently on /r/TheRedPill, as well /r/MGTOW and Incels.co albeit to different effect. On top of this, even the language used seems to be trying to signal that this programme is rigorous, scientific, and effective. The course itself is called *The Girlfriend Activation System*. The word "activation" here implies this unidentified girlfriend is already there, she just needs to be activated (turned on?). On top of this, the quote below (fig. A.5) shows

how this understanding of the body as some sort of machine which can be upgraded and modified pervades this discourse. This is unsurprising given the concept of self-optimisation which is so prevalent not only on forums like /r/TheRedPill but also wider contemporary culture.

The video also featured a rags-to-riches story which, again, are very common on /r/TheRedPill and will be explored more comprehensively in the following chapter. In this case, Christian outlines how he was financially stable, had a car, but was still unsuccessful with women. He describes one instance where he thought he was getting somewhere with a woman and made a lot of effort to “woo” her, only to discover that she was sleeping with someone else. Following this, he moved to New York and began his PUA journey by trying out different tactics and researching intensely in order to unlock the secret to success with women. This very much speaks to the idea that dating is a strategy game which you need to study hard for if you are to be successful, and it also reveals the deeper assumptions about women at play across the PUA universe. Women are not multi-dimensional people with their own wants, desires, and agency. Instead, they are simply these antagonistic entities which will put up barriers so you cannot obtain them. At one point in the video, Christian refers to dating as a “minefield” and women are the ones laying the mines for you to step on. At another point, women are described as main thing preventing you from sleeping with women. This configuration of dating makes me wonder what it is that PUAs want, fundamentally. If they really do view women as these antagonists attempting to withhold sex at every turn, what is it they get out of relationships exactly? Why do they want to pursue women so tenaciously? This is a question I asked myself a lot whilst on /r/TheRedPill, especially given that there is no talk about making sex more enjoyable at all.

By the end of the video, my hope that it might reveal some useful information was, perhaps predictably, unfulfilled. I was unsure about whether I should be relieved or disappointed by this. Relieved because it meant that I had not been drawn in by the videos attractive narrative, but

disappointed because there is something reassuring about feeling as if areas of life that causes stress can be solved through learning and practice. To me, this is the most attractive element of the PUA outlook. When interactions are boiled down to simple steps and women portrayed as one-dimensional and predictable, it is easy to see how interactions will pan out. And it is easy to see how this is reassuring to men who have previously had no success with women but seen their peers go about dating with apparent ease. In the end, postponing yoga to watch Christian's introductory video had proven fruitful. It helped me to feel more confident in my findings and showed that /r/TheRedPill's discourse of seduction techniques manifested in other places too. It was also a reminder of the role that coincidence and accident play in the research process, and how important it is to seize upon happenstance in the pursuit of understanding.

## Chapter Five: Seduction or Separatism?

*You are not here for the fucking food. You are here for me to enlighten you, edify you...to send you off into the now not-so-unknown future. So come along with me.*

(Anderson, 1999)

### Introduction

In this chapter, I am looking at the actionable solutions both /r/TheRedPill and /r/MGTOW offer to the ‘feminism-as-problem’ discourse. I have chosen to put these groups together because they share discourses of independence, self-sufficiency, and individualism. There are, however, some stark differences between the two groups as well. /r/MGTOW describes itself as a “subreddit for men going their own way, forging their own identities and paths to self-defined success” (“/r/MGTOW”, 2020). It is ostensibly a place for men to discuss ways in which removing women from their lives allows them to focus on self-improvement. The rejection of women is demonstrated through a discourse I have labelled ‘vicarious victory’. /r/TheRedPill, on the other hand, describes itself as a forum for the “discussion of sexual strategy in a culture increasingly lacking a positive identity for men” (“The Red Pill”, 2020). Discourses of seduction pervade this group and aim to teach men how to ‘pick up’ women. Each group, therefore, seems to be offering different orientations in relation to women: one demands men turn away from them and distance themselves, the other that men turn towards them (or, perhaps more accurately, *draw* women towards them).

Similar to the previous chapter, my concern here is how and why these discourses become such strong sites of affective investment. I will argue that, as with the feminism-as-problem discourse, this affective investment comes down to how the discourses on both /r/MGTOW and /r/TheRedPill offer of control over women and a masculine identity that aligns closely with



hegemonic masculine ideals. I have decided not to discuss meaning here as this is mainly offered by the feminism-as-problem discourse as discussed in the previous chapter. This will allow me to focus in on the two main themes that arose on both /r/TheRedPill and /r/MGTOW: masculine identity and control.

Before moving on, it is important to reiterate what I mean by an encounter with control over women and a particular masculine identity and how these two concepts relate to each other and to agency. I see the two concepts as being intrinsically linked. Control in the context of /r/TheRedPill and /r/MGTOW can be seen in both a particular and general way. In particular, it is self-control and control over women. Thus, it is about men's ability to dominate and dictate both their own behaviour and women's. In a more general sense, there is the "control freak" element, as Kimmel puts it. This is where men seek to control anything and everything in order to reduce the risk of failure which, as discussed, is perceived as an existential threat (Kimmel, 1996, p.45).

Identity in this context is closely linked to hegemonic masculine ideals. Given failure is seen as an existential threat to masculine identity, control is seen as a masculine virtue. But the masculine identity offered by /r/MGTOW and /r/TheRedPill also includes other virtues like independence, self-sufficiency, emotional stoicism, and remaining strong. I will also introduce another concept to this mix: agency. I see agency as closely linked to both control and identity. The ability to exercise agency, to act, is another integral aspect of the masculine identity revered by these groups. Furthermore, in order to feel in control of something, it is necessary to also feel able to exercise agency over it.

In the first section of this chapter, I will discuss how a discourse of natural imagery is used to offer men on /r/MGTOW an encounter with control over the self and a masculine identity that values independence, self-sufficiency, and stoicism through constructing an imagined

wilderness for them to inhabit. The next section will discuss how /r/TheRedPill has a similar discourse that is conveyed through posts that demand men choose their own direction in life and exercise agency in order to overcome their problems.



Following this, I will discuss how /r/MGTOW and /r/TheRedPill diverge to offer two different solutions: separatism or seduction. The term separatism is used by Wright, Trott, and Jones (2020) to refer to /r/MGTOW's belief that men should separate themselves from women and society in order to regain control over their lives and a positive sense of masculine identity. Separatism is demonstrated by users on /r/MGTOW through a discourse I have called 'vicarious victory'. /r/TheRedPill, on the other hand, has a discourse of seduction techniques. Throughout these sections – in line with Solomon's (2012) theory of affect, emotion, and discourse outlined in chapter two – I will show how none of these discourses actually deliver on their promise of an encounter with control and identity.

The result is that users on these forums are left in a state of frustration, unable to fully identify with the subject positions created by the discourses on each group. But there is also hope to be found here. The fact that none of these discourses deliver on what they promise means that those who are affectively invested in them might begin to slip out of their rationality. In other words, once individuals are affectively invested in a particular discourse, they are by no means stuck there forever. Instead, there are opportunities, when an individual is becoming less invested in one discourse and seeking others, for a dramatic shift in direction.

## “Self-sufficient and strong”: Agency on /r/TheRedPill and /r/MGTOW

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**BUILDING POWER**

★ 540  As a man, you do not get sympathy, but you can get respect.  
(self:TheRedPill) submitted 2 days ago \* by 

Thought I'd share a quick story and a few profound lessons learnt along the way.

So recently I had a court date for a traffic violation, and it so happened that I somehow lost my speaking voice (mostly to due being outdoors quite a bit and apparently developing acute laryngitis) right before the day of the set hearing. "Like what were the odds Goddamit?" I kept asking myself, but having long promised to not allow any excuses (no matter how legitamate or grave they might seem) to derail me from doing what I have to do in any given circumstance, I picked some tea, clinched my teeth and on the way I was.

Now this is where things got interesting and eye opening. All the way from every single initial interaction with the court clerks, to the prosecutors and the judge, I could not help but feel this lurking subtle contempt and disdain from pretty much everyone I encountered or engaged with, one similar to what a lion would feel for a wounded gazelle. I was perplexed. Even one of the clerks I have always spoken and friendly chit chatted with before, this time, without making any eye contact, just quietly passed me the papers with a patronizing tone I was yet to hear: "I have already told you, your courtroom is upstairs, sir". And it finally hit me.

This time, no matter how trivial, there it was, a glaring weakness, one I could do absolutely nothing about in the moment, and one that everyone could clearly see and almost naturally use as a right to feel superior and more in control. "Screw it, I've made it here, might as well get it done with" - I told myself with the last few notes of what was left of my voice and proceeded to the courtroom. As the dreadful silence took over the room with everyone preparing their case, I stood and politely asked the prosecutor if we could discuss the matter privately. It was apparent now in the midst of this silence, how legitimate my situation and request was, but again, as I now expected, it was blantly denied with the prosecutor asking if I want to go straight to trial.

And at that very moment I knew, the only thing I can do, is really stand up in the face of anything or anyone, even if it meant having to whisper to get my point across in front of 100 smth peers in the courtroom and a myriad of blood thirsty court staff. And so it came my turn to now face the judge.

First hesitantly looking over my case, she probed me with a few questions, as if to see how I would react. But I wasn't going to back down. I kept answering all the questions, as if the numbing pain or the judgemental stares from anyone in the courtroom did not exist, and it was just my truth against her, against the world. The silence continued. I could feel every single part of my body willing to just call it quits, but I knew I couldn't. And suddenly, after what seemed like an eternity, she saw it. She saw my willingness to go on, even with barely being able to speak, willingness to stand and fight my truth. And there it was, this unspoken mutual acknowledgement and regard between us. "Case postponed" she abruptly stated. It was all over, and confused at first, only after I had realized what just happened.

As a man you can't show any weakness, regardless of the circumstance, regardless of how true or trivial it might be. You do not get any sympathy, from pretty much anyone, only judgement. Such is human nature. Behind all the facade and smiles, a lot of times it is a cold world. One, that resembles a soulless jungle more than sometimes we can admit or want it to be. One, where showing any weakness can mean putting yourself in an unfavorable position and at a mercy of the other "lions" of this world. And one, where the only thing you can get as a man is, respect.

Respect for standing up in the face of adversity and doing what you have to, respect for standing up for yourself and your truth, regardless of how you might feel or appear to be. And that I find, is what any man can and frankly, should live for, respect.

It took me a while to fully realize, but inevitably, the answer will always be the same. As a man, you will ultimately be judged and treated based on your will to fight for your place in this jungle called life and only then, maybe then you will be given what you deserve. And it shall not be easy, but it shall be worth it, as long as you keep on. But until then,

Stay strong, my friend.

*A note to self.*

70 comments save hide report

Figure 5.1: Post from /r/TheRedPill about a user's experience in court

78  
↓ Gotta be like this eagle. Self-sufficient and strong.



6 Comments Give Award Share Save Hide Report

95% Upvoted

*Figure 5.2: Post from /r/MGTOW showing an eagle against a scenic backdrop*

The first post above (fig. 5.1) comes from /r/TheRedPill and conveys a user’s experience in court. He starts with the fact that he lost his voice on the day he needed to be in court for a traffic violation. Upon arriving at the court, he could sense that everyone was treating him with contempt, as if he were “a wounded gazelle” and they were lions, and so decided that the only way to get through this experience was to “stand up in the face of anything and anyone”. This attitude arms him as he enters the court room. The judge, who is a woman, sees his “willingness to go on” and to “stand and fight [his] truth” and decides to postpone his case. The intended moral of this story is that, as a man, you are treated based on your “will to fight”. Men, according to this user, need to “stay strong” as no one else is looking out for them. More fundamentally, this post reveals a widespread belief that through determination alone men are able to shape the world around them.

No structural factors are considered; the individual is in total control to the extent that they can warp reality around them.

The second post (fig. 5.2), taken from /r/MGTOW, shows an eagle perched on the end of a branch looking towards a vast wilderness with an imposing mountain rising above. This type of post is characteristic of the nature posts on /r/MGTOW. Just like the previous post's (fig. 5.1) conclusion that men need to "stay strong", the title of this post also contains an imperative, claiming that men on /r/MGTOW "gotta be like this eagle. Self-sufficient and strong" (the eagle's dependence on an interconnected eco-system is conveniently ignored). The eagle stands alone, surveying its surroundings, a signifier for autonomy, independence, and a particular type of stoic masculinity. The backdrop of a vast wilderness and mountain reinforces this with connotations of the untamed. The mountain is imposing and dominates the image, but the eagle, tiny by comparison, remains calm and contemplative.

What both of these posts have in common, therefore, is a discourse which posits the idea independence, strength, and determination are means to recover a positive masculine identity and feel in control of your life. With this comes a particular conception of agency as limitless and something possessed by only men who are independent from external influences. The example of the user in the courtroom shows the deep-seated belief that the individual is able to control everything and shape the world around them if they exercise their agency. In a world which is characterised by uncertainty, insecurity, and where failure for men is constructed as an existential threat, the idea that all of this can be mitigated by maintaining independence and exercising agency is undoubtedly attractive. In this section, I want to explore this further and look at the ways in which /r/MGTOW and /r/TheRedPill are both underpinned by discourses which emphasise the importance of independence and agency as a means of encountering control and masculine identity.

## **Looking for Alaska**

*/r/MGTOW*'s core belief is that its members should engage in a male separatism by rejecting women so that they can rediscover independence and a space for self-improvement and self-preservation (Jones et al., 2019, p.2; Wright et al., 2020, p.910). One of the main ways this idea is expressed is through images of nature and wilderness. Given that *MGTOW* users believe that society is now dominated and controlled by women, it is perhaps unsurprising that images of vast wilderness feature heavily on this forum (Wright et al., 2020, p.920). Society is associated with the urban, the ordered, and the feminine; wilderness, on the other hand, is pre-societal, untamed, and free from feminine influence. In other words, it is seen as one of the few spaces in which men can still be men. In sharing these images, users on */r/MGTOW* are creating an imagined wilderness which they can inhabit – or at least have the potential to inhabit – in order to escape the feminising influences of society. This discourse promises users on */r/MGTOW* an encounter with control over their lives and a masculine identity which values independence, strength, and self-sufficiency.

86 Bremen, Germany.



7 Comments Share Save Hide Report 97% Upvoted

Figure 5.3: Post from /r/MGTOW showing the German town of Bremen

141 Go your own way. Wilson Peak, Colorado.



3 Comments Give Award Share Save Hide Report 94% Upvoted

Figure 5.4: Post from /r/MGTOW showing Wilson Peak, Colorado

121 Amazing Overnighter in the Eldorado National Forest



11 Comments Give Award Share Save Hide Report 97% Upvoted

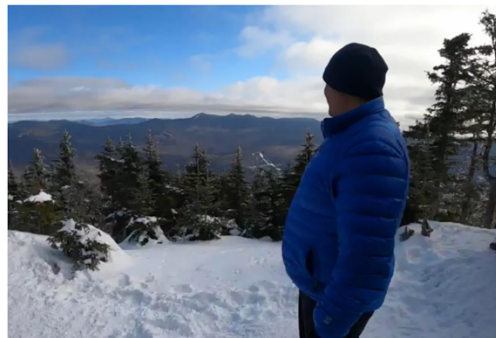
Figure 5.5: Post from /r/MGTOW showing two men camping

111 A view worth dying for. [View](#)  
Reported 16 hours ago by [Franklin, Sr. 8](#) - announcement  
27 comments share save hide give award report crosspost



Figure 5.6: Post from /r/MGTOW showing the view of a mountain through an open tent

100 GYOW lads. There is so much more in this world to feed your soul than what is being marketed towards you.



4 Comments Share Save Hide Report 98% Upvoted

Figure 5.7: Post from /r/MGTOW showing a man looking out over a snowy scene

It is notable that, whilst researching /r/MGTOW, I did not come across any pictures of cities. The only urban scene I saw was of Bremen in Germany which still had a rural, quaint feeling to it (fig. 5.3). “Going your own way” clearly has particular connotations. It does not mean the freedom to wander around cities, take part in night life, or go to the cinema. Instead, it is about returning to the wilderness and experiencing nature. It appears to be diametrically opposed to /r/TheRedPill which directs men towards bars, clubs, and other places where they might attempt to ‘pick up’ women. Figures 5.4 to 5.7 are a selection of some of the nature posts I came across on /r/MGTOW. They remind me of one of the first posts I ever came across on /r/MGTOW, before I had started my research: a picture of a coffee cup in front of a view of the Swiss alps. As someone who loves hiking and rustic scenes the romanticised, serene vista was enticing and evoked a sense of yearning. A yearning to be out in the ‘wilderness’ away from my office. It was for this reason that I felt a slight affinity with /r/MGTOW when I first came across it. Based on this image alone, it seemed like it might be a group of men who just wanted to rediscover a love of nature and slower pace of life. Living under neoliberal capitalism and during a climate crisis and thus experiencing a detachment from both place and time, a yearning for this sort of lifestyle is by no means limited to /r/MGTOW. Nature writing has boomed in recent decades, offering readers the ability to experience a little bit of wilderness in their own lives.

These images (figs. 5.4-5.7) work to construct an imagined wilderness which men can inhabit to get away from the feminising influence of society. The state of Alaska performs a similar job in the American man’s imagination. Kollin, via Hogan and Pursell, argues, “Euro-Americans frequently position Alaska as the nature state, a mythical, yet-to-be-discovered, precultural, pre-discursive, and precommercial space still waiting to be conquered” (Kollin in Hogan and Pursell, 2008, p.70). Alaska is therefore a proving ground for masculinity, far from the feminising influence of society. Figures 5.4, 5.6, and 5.7 are all of mountains and vast forests, scenes often associated



with Alaskan wilderness, and figure 5.5 is of a camping trip again in a forest. Although none of these images are explicitly of Alaska or taken in Alaska (and indeed some are explicitly *not* taken there), they nevertheless construct a mythical Alaska in which men can rediscover masculine identity that is characterised by independence, control, and self-sufficiency. As with the real Alaska, this imagined Alaska-esque wilderness represents the same pre-capitalist, pre-consumerist, untamed space where men can still be men (Hogan and Pursell, 2008, p.78).

There is thus a tension at the heart of these wilderness images between a genuine desire to escape the harms of neoliberal capitalist society and a more insidious misogyny which instead blames women and feminism for these harms. Patriarchy in capitalist societies has constructed the domestic sphere, cultivated by women, as a safe haven from the ravages of neoliberal capitalism (Srinivasan, 2021, p.120). Men, therefore, will usually seek out the domestic sphere as a means of obtaining care and love. Members of /r/MGTOW, however, see the domestic sphere as yet another place where men's ability to fulfil their masculine potential is curtailed. They therefore rely on an imagined wilderness instead. The imagined wilderness provides a place where they can seek refuge both from the harms of neoliberal capitalism, or what they see as the emasculating influence of women. Users on /r/MGTOW, therefore, have correctly acknowledged that something is harming them, but then blame their suffering on women, rather than neoliberal capitalism. They then seek to distance themselves from women by creating an imagined Alaska, when what they are creating is a haven from ravages of neoliberal capitalism.

The sharing of images of wilderness and nature is therefore representative of a genuine desire to escape an exploitative and harmful system. The sharing of images of natural scenes shows a desire to find peace and solace in a system that is inherently febrile, chaotic, and in crisis. This is certainly not limited to /r/MGTOW. A rise in precarious unemployment, the financial crisis, and now the COVID-19 pandemic show that neoliberal capitalism is inherently crisis prone at both a

structural and individual level. Acknowledging the impacts of this on individuals is something /r/MGTOW shares with mainstream discourse about the harms of overworking, living in urban environments that have led a craving for nature writing.

During my own research, I too felt myself yearning for the outdoors and a long hike after a long week of being in an office. I'd often daydream about previous walks I'd done, and plan future ones to experience at least a small portion of the release and enjoyment a good walk brings. There's a growing body of literature on the association between being in nature and good health and wellbeing to the extent that it is now prescribed by some GPs (White et al., 2019). /r/MGTOW, are, on the one hand, therefore correct in their acknowledgement that contemporary neoliberal capitalist society is harmful and that an appreciation of, and being in, nature can bring benefits. But they do not pin the blame for this on neoliberal capitalism. Instead, underpinning their desire to return to nature is the belief that inhabiting this imagined wilderness is a necessary part of escaping women's negative influence and regaining a positive masculine identity and control over their lives. Wilderness, therefore, is constructed as a means to escape women's influence, who, through the feminism-as-problem discourse are constructed as controlling, manipulative, and parasitic. And only once these men have escape to this imagined wilderness can they encounter the masculine ideal of independence and strength.

Underlying /r/MGTOW's rejection of urban living and dreams of the untamed wilderness is the belief that urban environments emasculate men. As Egan points out, a similar moral panic around masculinity was taking place at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as evidenced by the stories of bear wrestling that featured in urban newspapers (Egan, 2006, p.34). These stories were part of a wider discourse around the fear that men were lacking virility and strength. Roosevelt, the archetype of rural American masculinity, stressed the importance of a "strenuous life" if men were to remain manly (Ibid, pp.37 & 38). Wilderness, given its construction as a place where civilisation

was absent and men could return to a more atavistic lifestyle, became the arena in which manliness could be reclaimed (Ibid, p.39). Men had to go forth and subdue wilderness.

Kimmel similarly notes that at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century men began to turn to self-control as a means of rectifying their perceived emasculation (2013, p.63). This meant going to the gym and sculpting the body to suit a masculine ideal. Lifting weights and working out, therefore, became one such method of transforming, in Ahmed's words, the "soft" body of the office worker into the "hard" body of the rugged frontiersman (2007, p.2). Again, we see the occurrence of the soft/hard binary which links this idea that men need to make themselves invulnerable to external influence by hardening their exterior. In a modern context, this binary plays out in exactly the same way. The characteristics of urban living including the desk job, being dependent on others, and also being more likely to be in contact with state-provided utilities like public transport, are all seen as signs of feminisation and, therefore, become the antithesis of MGTOW's drive for a masculine identity based on independence and self-sufficiency. In sharing these images, therefore, MGTOW are engaging in an association of wilderness with masculinity, individualism, and independence that is centuries old (Egan, 2006, p.33). In doing so, this discourse offers men an encounter with identity through constructing an imagined place they can inhabit and embody the masculine ideals of independence, self-sufficiency, and control.

But this imagined wilderness discourse fails to deliver on its promise of an encounter with a masculine identity imbued with independence and self-sufficiency in a fundamental way: It is impossible to completely remove oneself from society and live in the imaged Alaska this discourse conjures up. As Hogen and Pursell point out, even "real" Alaskans prepare extensively before hikes and are known to hitchhike, all of which involves the help of others (2008, p.79). In a similar way, no user on /r/MGTOW is able to fully occupy the subject position of rugged individual completely separated from society. For a start, in order to be a member of the group, it is necessary

to have access to a computer and the Internet. Beyond this, the majority of users are likely to live in an urban environment, far from their imagined Alaska. Much like the eagle in the second post shown in this section (fig 5.2), hidden beneath the façade of independence and self-sufficiency is a reliance and strong interdependency needed for survival. In other words, being independent and strong and existing in the wilderness is impossible to achieve, and so the promise of wholeness offered by this discourse is always out of reach (Solomon, 2012, p.917). But as Hagen and Pursell state, it is enough for many Americans to know that Alaska exists, and that there is the possibility of inhabiting a particular masculine identity somewhere in the US (2008, p.78). For users on /r/MGTOW, the same appears to be the case. However, they are left to oscillate between wholeness (the promise of independence, security, and freedom from feminine influence) and lack (never being able to fully inhabit this subject position).



Figure 5.8: Post from /r/MGTOW showing man riding a motorbike

There is another tension present on /r/MGTOW, this time between wilderness and technology. Although wilderness is offered up as a place where men can achieve wholeness, there is also a desire to tame, conquer, and civilise wilderness too. The image above (fig. 5.8) shows one way that this presents. Men need to explore and be able to turn the raw materials nature provides into something technological. More than this, they need to play their role as consumers in the neoliberal capitalist economy. This user has broken up with his “controlling” girlfriend and now has the freedom to ‘go his own way’. The fact that this user has exercised their newfound independence to buy a motorbike is telling. Not only is it a mode of transport often coded as masculine (despite the fact many women obviously ride motorbikes), but it is also a potent symbol of freedom. This man can now literally “go their own way” and travel quickly across space, albeit limited by roads, traffic, and laws. Motorbikes also, more often than not, have a single occupant, making them the ultimate in individual mobility. In this way, the user in this post is reminiscent of the lone frontiersman, wandering the open plains on horseback. As an enduring image of masculinity, this post is drawing on that long heritage of rugged individualism to provide users on /r/MGTOW an encounter with a masculine identity that values being dominant and controlling and not showing any weakness or dependency (Jones et al., 2019, p.4; O’Sullivan, 2018, p.42). There is, therefore, a consistent message running through both the images of nature and this image of technology, namely that ‘real men’ are independent and self-sufficient.

This post in particular reveals how intertwined encounters with control and identity are. An encounter with control is offered through the articulation of the idea that rejecting women allows you to regain control over your life and pursue your own goals (buying a motorbike, for instance), and this is part of an encounter with a masculine identity which places a lot of emphasis on being in control. Being in control is seen as an inherently masculine trait and to be out of control – to have *failed* to maintain control in other words – is seen as fundamentally un-masculine.

In freeing oneself from a “controlling bitch”, one can occupy a particular subject position – a position that allows for control over one’s life and the freedom to set one’s own goals – which becomes the means of achieving wholeness by encountering control and a configuration of hegemonic masculine identity that prizes independence, rugged individualism, and self-sufficiency (Solomon, 2012, p.917). As with the Alaskan survivalist, however, it is impossible to fully occupy this subject position. It is not possible to completely remove oneself from society and its apparent feminising influence. On top of this, there seems to be some confusion on /r/MGTOW over quite how far men need to go to in their pursuit of independence. Not having long-term relationships with women is a given, but whether or not it also includes not having sex with women, not having friends who are women, or even not speaking to women in the workplace is unclear. The result, as before, is a situation in which users on /r/MGTOW oscillate between wholeness and lack, and between identification and non-identification with the subject position created by this discourse.

### **“Set a course or someone else will set it for you”**

Much like /r/MGTOW, /r/TheRedPill contains discourses of separatism and independence but in a slightly different sense. There are no images of wilderness here, and no desire to separate from society and women. There is a concept referred to as ‘monk mode’ where a man retreats from society for a period of time to engage in self-improvement activities, but this is temporary and separatism does not form the basis of /r/TheRedPill’s ideology by any means. But there are still ideas about cultivating independence, being self-sufficient, and being in control of your surroundings, ideas which are strongly linked to hegemonic masculine identity.

On /r/TheRedPill, this discourse finds a home in the various posts which espouse what Mark Fisher calls “magical voluntarism” (taken from the work of David Smail). This term refers

to “the belief that it is within every individual’s power to make themselves whatever they want to be” (Fisher, 2014). Although users on /r/TheRedPill do not use the term “magical voluntarism” themselves, it is fundamental to their worldview, nonetheless. In this section, I want to take the concept of magical voluntarism and look at why this concept is a site of strong affective investment for users on /r/TheRedPill. In doing so, I will be bringing a gendered lens to this concept to understand why it is such a popular belief. I will argue that this discourse of magical voluntarism ties in neatly with discourses of independence and self-sufficiency to provide men on /r/TheRedPill an opportunity to encounter control over their lives and a masculine identity they feel has otherwise been lost.

The post I used in the introduction to this section (fig. 5.1) is the perfect example of what magical voluntarism looks like on /r/TheRedPill and how it offers an encounter with control and masculine identity. Through sheer determination, this user believes he was able to influence the judge to suit his interests. The message, in short, is that nothing can escape the power of the individual’s will (Bhattacharyya, 2014). The man narrating the story believes himself to have agency over the female judge and is therefore able to ensure he gets the outcome he desires. Agency, therefore, is linked to the ability to control women, something that is seen as an integral part of the masculine identity /r/TheRedPill channels.

## 413 Set a course or someone else will set it for you

### Red Pill Theory

TL;DR - The priorities you set in life directly determine the focus and strength of your frames in all aspects of your life. If you fail to set purposes for yourself, you are open to influence from ones imposed by other people and society.

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I want to talk a bit about aimlessness and agency. Everybody should be well aware by now that being the captain of your own ship by setting your own purpose, holding frame, etc. is extremely important to building a fulfilling life. However, I want to illustrate in just what ways the lack of a purpose on a minor, intermediate, or major scale can be to your detriment. But first off, apart from setting you on the path of the doomer, why is aimlessness so bad?

It's in these two words: "**Why not.**"

Without a well enough defined purpose, your attitude to the majority of the aspects of your life could be limited to "why not". You are basically a soft sponge that just absorbs whatever comes your way. This is exactly why aimlessness is so dangerous – because aimlessness is indifference, and indifference means that without understanding yourself, your needs, and your motivations, you will think that it doesn't matter what your course is – this is the classical beta delusion, believing that the course you take does not matter, because you are in denial of your needs, desires, and drives. If you approach every, or even most aspects of your life with a "why not", you are practically committing psychological suicide. "Why not" is the battle cry of the faceless, mindless drone with all the personality of a wet towel.

The problematic consequences of aimlessness are numerous, but for now I'll limit it to two:

1. Firstly, having a "why not" attitude to all or most things is dangerous, because every single area of your life on which you do not have an informed opinion or standards, is an area in which, for lack of understanding, you assume that "anything goes", and so **you just follow the path of least resistance** (this could be peer pressure, but it could just as easily be a situation where there is no direct influence from people involved).
2. Secondly, if you do not set proper purposes based on the things that really matter to you, what will happen, is that simultaneously **both you and the people around you will lose sense of the value of your time**. This is because, since you do not do anything purposeful or evidently beneficial with your time, the very real subconscious belief arises, that you do not do anything valuable with your time – subsequently, this means that whenever someone else makes you an offer, a proposition, invites you somewhere, you always comply, because "why not", you have nothing better to do with your time. As a result of this, others lose sense of the value of your time as well, because in their minds, the understanding becomes ingrained, that whatever it is you're doing on your own, it's not of value to you either, and so, whatever opportunity or activity they are proposing to you, it's bound to be better 100% of the time. Essentially, you are running the risk of people becoming entitled to your time.

What all this means is not that you have to be a hard ass that has very specific procedures for every single thing you do, but rather that **you need to recognize the areas which are the most important for you to live the life you want, and get really in depth as to why they are important to you**, after which you need to ensure that your life prioritizes these major elements, and you properly set boundaries around them, so that you do not budge when an outside influence introduces itself. Based on this, it becomes pretty clear that boundaries are a necessary part of a man's purposes.

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## FRAMES

I'm fairly certain that everyone on this sub is well aware and informed on the topic of holding frame. However, the only type of holding frame that is talked about generally is holding frame socially, which by no means exhausts the extent of the topic. It's for this reason that I wanted to give a basic outline on the major frames that a person might possess or lack in their everyday and long-term life, and the way that their agency is affected by the presence or lack of said purposes and frames.

What I'm proposing here is that every conflict of purposes is in essence a type of frame battle – I will cover the major types here to illustrate the point and will also try to show **the ways that having a purpose manifests in each of these areas**.

To clarify, I do not think that the list of frames I have made is by any means complete. My goal was only to subdivide them into major categories, not to list every possible frame battle that a person encounters throughout life.

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## EXAMPLES

### SOCIAL FRAMES

This is the typical "holding frame" situation, so I will not elaborate much further beyond illustrating the importance of purpose. These are the frames that relate to interpersonal relationships and social dynamics. In the context of the system of frames, a situation where this type of frame is accounted for would be a situation where a man understands the man-woman dynamic and takes into consideration that: *1. Women are emotionally driven 2. A woman's actions say more than her words 3. A woman's mode of action and thinking is essentially a child's, and etc.*

The woman might hold a different or even opposing frame, and the man will break it with ease, precisely because his frame is purposeful – if the man does not have the understanding of the social context, since he has no idea of the causal relationship between his best interest and what is happening, he would just go "why not", and adopt the woman's frame, as simple as that. He will then go on to whine why the woman does not respect him, why she is constantly bitching, etc. You know how it goes.



## INTERACTION FRAMES

These are frames which unlike social frames relate to a specific interaction on its own.

### • Conversation Topic frames

The first type of conversational frames are topic frames. The way that they work based on the system I introduced is this: As long as you have developed an understanding as to what it is your goal is when talking to people, you will be less tolerant of topics that are negative, are of no interest to you, or are just plain boring.

- If you have standards for your interactions with people, this means that you have the purpose to have fun with the conversation, get to know the other person better, or steer the conversation towards something that you or the other person is passionate about

- On the other hand, if you have no purpose, you will hold no frame, and have no focus, which will allow for the already mentioned scenarios of boring, negative, or uninteresting conversations to occur. "Anything goes", remember?

### • Premise frames

Premise frames are based on the implied medium-to-long-term purpose of a given interaction – the most common way to fuck this one up is when you lack a purposeful approach when approaching women – you will meander, because "anything goes", and so, in the absence of a frame of your own a frame will be set for you – a platonic one.

## PHYSICAL FRAMES

Physical frames are the frames that manifest as your physical presence, action, and body language. These are possibly the most easily overlooked frames, and are also difficult to fake, which is why the cultivation of an inner purpose is so important. Having a purpose in a given situation will mean that your physical movement within the space is motivated by something worthwhile. On the other hand, if you lack purpose, you will be a ready victim for anybody else's frame.

- Let's say that you are at a party, and your purpose is to have an enjoyable experience. Having internalized that purpose, it is likely that you have cultivated certain interests and skills to accompany it, meaning that "you act with a purpose" – you look for people, you talk them up, vibe with them and see if you are compatible, and if they do not contribute to your cultivated enjoyment of the event you move on and continue your purpose – you refuse to bend your frame to match those people's negative one, because you understand that it is important to you.

- On the other hand, if you are at that same party, and you have no purpose whatsoever, what do you do? You sit around with your face buried in your phone, or you aimlessly wander around, looking for someone else's purpose to latch onto. And the moment that someone addresses you – your head whips around like lightning, showing your lack of purpose for all to see, because your attention is on no purpose of your own – there is no such thing – you immediately fall for everyone's physical frame, your reactive body language saying tomes about your lack of internal purpose. For the sake of argument, even if you faked non-reactive body language, but had no purpose, other people would still see a man who does not value his time, since without a purpose, what can you do? Stare at a wall? The lack of frame is plain for all to see.

### ACTIVITY FRAMES (medium-term physical frames)

These are the frames that relate to the activities that you chose to partake in and the ways that you spend the majority of your time.

Imagine you have a friend who invites you to go clubbing about 4-5 times a week. However, you have an important project that is very important to you and your current purpose. If you have cultivated a deep understanding of your purposes, you will understand why your project is important to you and will therefore prioritize your time accordingly (that is your frame). If, however, you are in the "why not" lane, you will inevitably fall into your friend's frame, because you are so out of touch with what you want out of life and why, that you can't determine what is most important to you (and that is vital for a strong and sturdy frame)

## LONG-TERM FRAMES

These are the frames which are determined by the purposes that outline and define your entire life. This is pretty much the difference between the Red Pill and the Blue Pill on a Macro scale.

- A red-pill man makes a goal out of understanding himself and the world around him, cultivating his purpose and interests, integrating his needs and desires, and plotting a path for himself, knowing the best course through life that will bring him optimal fulfillment. He is a man who has set a frame of his own making for the life that he lives. More importantly, that frame has purpose, which means that it will not break at the first sign of resistance.

- On the other hand, the blue-pill "man" is a being without a frame of its own. He will follow whatever frame for his life he is assigned by his parents, social circle, education system, wife, media, or whatever else. This "man" lives to consume, he has no direction, and so, "anything goes". His position with regard to any path that is externally forced on him is "why not". After all, it's a hell of a lot easier than having to think for yourself and facing the tension of pursuing your real passions and purposes, even though it might not be met with approval by your peers or relatives.

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**The most important takeaway here is this: the actions that you take have to feel meaningful and justified towards your purpose in order for that purpose to be resilient in the face of external frames. However, you should not hamster-rationalize your way into thinking that "anything goes", and that your current purposes are just good enough** – usually the people who think this way are people who do not have a lot of experience with true joy, and because of that rationalize that there can't be a potential existence much better than the one they are currently living.

Going with the flow is one of the potentially most destructive paths a man can take – it's destructive not only on a personal level – aimlessness and indifference has the power to bring down societies, so stop going with the flow and set a purpose to discover your needs and wants, or otherwise risk falling for someone else's.

Set your purposes and know the whys behind them. Why? Because what is the alternative?

"Anything goes".

Figure 5.9: A lengthy post from /r/TheRedPill on the importance of setting your own path in life

On /r/TheRedPill, magical voluntarism offers control precisely because it contains the belief that everything is within men's control if only they put in enough effort. This discourse is articulated through posts like the one shown in figure 5.9. The title of this post demands that users on /r/TheRedPill "set a course" otherwise someone else "set it for [them]". This user goes on to state that being aimless and having a "why not" attitude is "practically committing psychological suicide" and is the mentality of "the faceless, mindless drone with all the personality of a wet towel". The two main consequences of this noted by the user are that you end up taking "the path of least resistance" and "both you and the people around you will lose a sense of the value of your time". In essence, therefore, the danger is that you no longer exercise agency and choose which direction your life goes in. Instead, you are simply guided by external factors like a rudderless boat. This goes against /r/TheRedPill's hegemonic masculine ideals because, fundamentally, it means you have no control over either your life or environment, something that is deemed as fundamentally unmasculine. Men's ability to exercise agency, in other words, is viewed as the binary opposite of women's passivity. To be passive and not exercise agency is to be feminised.

The user who submitted this post (fig. 5.9) argues that the way to prevent becoming a "wet towel" is to focus on the different types of "frame" in your life. The concept of "holding frame" is common on /r/TheRedPill and refers to retaining control of a situation and not allowing other people to influence your behaviours or beliefs. This post expands on the idea of "holding frame" by introducing different types of frame (social frames, interaction frames, physical frames, activity frames, and long-term frames). The user argues that men need to ensure they are in control of each of these different frames if they are to be considered men. "Holding frame", therefore, becomes a means of preventing external influence and resisting porousness and penetration in much the same way that separatism is used on /r/MGTOW. Repeated here, therefore, is the idea that an integral part of being a man is being permanently hardened to the outside influence

(Ahmed, 2007, p.2). An encounter with masculine identity is therefore offered through the repeated imperative to remain strong and in control of both the self and the environment around oneself.



Figure 5.10: Post from /r/TheRedPill about the importance of taking action

The post above (fig. 5.10) discusses the importance of action as a means of getting what you want out of life. The title – “Do it: Stop waiting for things to happen to you, and go and take them” – contains a similar message to the previous post, namely that it is necessary to act and not remain passive if you want to get what you want out of life. The post goes on to discuss anxiety, which this user states is one of the biggest problems facing men today precisely because it prevents action. In reality, men’s issues are “easily solved, easily defeated”, all they need to do is overcome anxiety and act. In the final paragraph, the user implores men to “just do it” and discusses how this mantra has helped their career and sex life.

There is a tension on /r/TheRedPill in terms of the conceptualisation of agency that is deployed. On the one hand, vague phrases such as “just do it” and “set a course” are used which implies an open form of agency. These terms advocate action for action’s sake. Given the centrality of agency to the masculine identity /r/TheRedPill promotes, any form of action is seen as better than none. On the other hand, /r/TheRedPill clearly advocates a particular form of agency. Exercising agency to resist the urge to interrupt a woman in a café to attempt to get her number, for instance, is not seen as a valid way to act. Acting in a way that is respectful of women’s autonomy and agency, in short, falls so far outside of /r/TheRedPill’s understanding of agency that to behave in this way is seen as simply being under women’s control. It is to be under women’s control and thus devoid of agency.

Furthermore, initially, it seems that agency, according /r/TheRedPill, is boundless – no structural barrier can stand in its way. But there are limits on *who* can exercise agency in that it is seen as something only certain men possess. Agency is also something exercised by men over women. Thus, although it at first seems as if /r/TheRedPill views agency as unbounded, there are in fact some gendered boundaries to their conceptualisation. There is an irony here too. Given that risk taking is seen as something that is inherently masculine, and yet risks can only be taken with a great deal of preparation and by deploying pre-learned scripts during the event. Looking back on the previous discussion of /r/TheRedPill’s demand that men “just do it”, it seems the message would more accurately be: “Just do it. But before you do, prepare and control for as many factors as possible.”

The conceptualisation of agency present on /r/TheRedPill is gendered in another sense. Hegemonic masculinity and neoliberalism have “deep affinities” (Garlick, 2020) and the ability to exercise agency is a fundamental characteristic of the male neoliberal subject to the extent that not being able to exert free will undermines one’s status both as a human being and, more specifically,

as a man (Bay-Cheng, 2015, p.280). This reveals why there is so much anxiety around having independence constrained in any way. Both of the posts above (figs. 5.9 & 5.10) reveal a deep anxiety about the loss of agency and the effects of either not being able to exercise agency or failing to do so in a particular moment. Not being able to exercise agency, therefore, is elevated to the position of an existential threat both from the perspective of being a neoliberal subject, but also a masculine subject. The discourse of magical voluntarism present in both of these posts, therefore, offers men who fear not being able to exercise agency over something an encounter with a conception of agency that says you can control anything. Given that passivity and failure to control things is seen as fundamentally unmasculine, it is clear to see why such an idea becomes a site of deep affective investment.

## Injustice in your life isn't a conspiracy against you...

Building Power

... Its, simply put, a testament to your weakness and powerlessness.

Our objective in life, should we decide not to abide by the perceived injustices in this world, is to strive to position ourselves into circumstances where our power cannot be easily taken away or nullified.

Which is why lifting and eating right are so crucial to our development: there is no bigger albatross than a lack of good health. It affects your mind, your potential, your ability to be self sufficient, etc.

As the founder of this sub put it, "should be" is a roundabout way of saying "I want." Well, if wishes were fishes, beggars would eat, as the saying goes.

Well, if you want something in life, first you need the wisdom to recognize it, and the strength to seize it.

Waiting for things to happen in your favor, waiting for the girls to come knocking on your door, is like waiting for a cooked duck to fly in your mouth.

Excuses are the bread and butter of weaklings. Excuses may draw beta weaklings to your cause, to assuage your guilt, because you failing validates their own weakness and inaction.

But that will not get you what you claim to want. Your words do not line up with your actions.

Our goal should be to line up our mind, body, and spirit into a single purpose: **to achieve what we want out of life**. Why have it any other way? Its like being in a threelegged race where the other guy is going in the opposite direction: you get nowhere and make of fool of yourself.

You know who wins in a fight? The guy who prepares versus the guy who does not. Spirit is all well and good, but when spirit comes across someone who was tenacious enough to train themselves up, spirit alone will not be enough.

If you want something in life, everyday becomes an opportunity to work towards that goal. There isnt a second to waste, because our objective is to defeat our enemy with overwhelming force. You just don't know how little slack you'll have left when the chips are down and you're at your limit. Why take that chance?

And who is that enemy? Its ourselves: our own clarion call of mediocrity that externally beckons us like the sirens of the sea. You need to recognize it so you aren't drawn in.

Its ok to fail. What is unacceptable is to give up. Because if you fail, you can always try again. But when you give up, you are truly defeated.

Don't wait for the world to hand you what you want.

Dont wait for a super hero to come and right the wrongs in your life.

Dont depend on anyone for anything.

Because everyone's last best hope is themselves.

No one but you will, ultimately, have your best interest at heart.

Don't uselessly lament about the "injustices" you suffer in life. Bite the bullet, and use that anger that you would be busy wastefully using to feed into your own victim complex and *channel* it into improving yourself so that youre better capable of facing the next challenge.

Our anger is a like fuel source: something to be minded and not wasted recklessly, lest we burn ourselves. It's a resource to be utilized wisely: its something you can only accumulate through pain and suffering. So why waste it? Use it. Make it into a constructive force rather than a destructive one. Control it, or it will control you.

Life isn't fair.

All you can do is gain the strength to *make* life a little more fair for you. And then maybe, when youve got your life in order, perhaps you can make life a bit more fair for others.

But it all starts with you: you cannot save anyone if you cannot save yourself.

26 Comments Share Save Hide Report

Figure 5.11: Post from /r/TheRedPill again about how you shouldn't make excuses for not improving your life

834  
“I have no purpose, no job, no friends, am a 25 y-o virgin, play videos games and masturbate compulsively. What should I do?”

Off Topic

We see those pop up once a few times every day. Enters a guy, with nothing to live nor stand for, who after stumbling upon TRP, sees a glimmer of hope appear at the top left corner of his endless array of darkness. For the first time in their lives, they acknowledge this opportunity. This chance that, with no fear of judgment of others guessing who he is, he can get this massive rant of himself off his chest to a community that seems to be able to empathize with him.

He presents himself, *inserts the glory days of high school* before asking TRP how to get himself out of his shithole.

And lo and behold! He gets presented with some solutions.

Only, *those solutions don't apply to him.*

“I'm a special faggot with unique circumstances. You guys can't possibly understand what I'm going through, or what my problems are. *Lift?* Come on. I'm a fat piece of fuck with 8 different fuckable cavities. Or a skeleton. Everyone's gonna bend me over. *Read?* Fuck off. I'm contemplating suicide, I deserve more human attention. *Get out of the house?* I don't know anyone. And besides, fuck people. Fuck society. *And you know what?* Fuck you all too.”

He rationalizes every single suggestion away, believing he's some special kind of snowflake, before taking his cock out and starting to furiously jerk to pictures of his high school crush. That glimmer of light seemed nice in theory, but he decided to look the other way.

*Sigh.*

Let's establish one fact. You're not special. Not your ethnicity, not your height, not even your experiences. You don't deserve special treatment, regardless of your circumstances. More importantly, you don't deserve our sympathy nor our respect.

And no, this ain't personal. No one knows you here. All we know is that you've been a lazy fuck delaying your problems to the point where, for a split moment, even your own indifferent mind couldn't handle it anymore. You've been living your life with the wrong mindset and approaching your issues from the wrong perspective. You're specifically asking because you greatly lack something within yourself.

Either admit it or get the fuck out.

We're on the same page now? Okay, I'm going to use whatever's left of your attention span to give you a crash course on the rationale behind our “out-of-your-paycheck” questions:

#### Foods & Glutes

*You must keep yourself healthy.* Your body is most the immediate component you have control over. While applying for a job and getting an interview might still end in you getting your application rejected, every single food you eat and every single rep you do at the gym has a **direct** contribution to your health. The difference is there, whether you notice it or not. And it compounds. In your current shithole where you don't have any control of your life besides your orgasms, you'll feel a significant bliss of seeing for yourself that you CAN have control over more than just the menial things in your life. If you don't see any results after a 3-month period of doing this consistently, then you can personally come tell me that I spewed bullshit. See you never.

#### The Books

The world can be categorized through two perspectives: a place of meaning and a place of things. Mindless religious bigots will see the world through the 1st lens while scientists who publish endless studies must present them through the 2nd lens. Optimally, a wise person will correctly assess the things within his environment to derive meaning, and to act accordingly.

Your life has no meaning, and on top of that, you don't understand shit. But the more you read, the more you will understand *what is*. Asktrp increasingly harbors a cesspool of faggots who don't understand or can't accept what factually is. That's because they don't read. For starters, here's a neat list of books I highly recommend: TRM – by Tomassi, TSAONGAF – by Manson, NMMNG – by Glover, and EIF – by Manson. Dishing out \$50 is certainly worth the knowledge these books can bring.

Oh and sidebar.

#### GTFO

Get a job flipping burgers. Attend a conference on veganism. Whatever it may be, just get out of your home. There's an unspoken effect of “coupling” things that lead to undesired outcomes.

What this means is: *circumstances and desire are a delinquent duo.* In this case, I'm talking about staying home and wanting to jack off. If you're in front of your computer, and suddenly have an impulse to jerk off for the 5th time today, you'll be able to access porn and fuck your hand in a matter of milliseconds. This same concept applies to consumers who walk into a shop and “impulsively” buy shit. Or that guy who shoots another on whim during an argument because he had a gun in his back pocket. Or even bitches who go to the club and “let shit happen”.

By removing the circumstance, *aka getting out of the house*, you remove one of the two main factors leading to plausibly deniable actions.

“Victims” of plausible deniability are simply little bitches who can't take responsibility.

So, are you going to stay the little bitch you are while thinking you're entitled to billionaires' tax money, believing it will solve anything? Or do you want the Title's labels wiped off of you through a display of your own strength?

102 Comments Share Save Hide Report

95% Upvoted

Figure 5.12: Post from /r/TheRedPill on why there are no real excuses for not improving your situation

The consequence of magical voluntarism, however, is an overburdening of the will (van der Lugt, 2021, pp.402–403). This is demonstrated in the two posts above (figs 5.11 & 5.12) which focus on how structural barriers to success are simply excuses used by the weak. The first post (fig. 5.11) states that “Injustice in your life isn’t a conspiracy against you... Its [sic], simply put, a testament to your weakness and powerlessness”. And the second post (fig. 5.12) argues that your problems are not special and that the solutions to all of them are “food and glutes”, “the books” and “GTFO” (standing for “get the fuck out”). It concludes that ““Victims” of plausible deniability are simply little bitches who can’t take responsibility”. The word “responsibility” here is particularly telling. Fisher points out how magical voluntarism distracts “from structural causes of our diminished agency”, thus any failure results from simply not wanting something enough (Bhattacharyya, 2014). In other words, ignoring structural factors means that responsibility for failure is placed solely on the individual. The first post shown above concludes in a similar way, stating “but it all starts with you”. “Responsibilisation”, as Fisher calls it, means those who are members of a subordinate class are made to feel that their lack of opportunities and success “is their fault and their fault alone” (2014). This leads to what Mark Fisher refers to as a double bind where these users are both told they are good for nothing due to their consistent failure to succeed and simultaneously told that they can achieve anything if they put their minds to it (Ibid).

The result of this, for users on /r/TheRedPill (but also neoliberal subjects more broadly), is that the only solution to failure is to go back to the drawing board repeat the process again. There is, in other words, no affective structure for dealing with failure (Bratich and Banet-weiser, 2019, p.5010). Red Pill men become stuck in a cycle of attempting to achieve the wholeness offered by this discourse but failing to do so. Much like the wilderness discourse offered by /r/MGTOW, in other words, users on /r/TheRedPill find themselves oscillating between wholeness and lack. The magical voluntarism discourse, in other words, promises Red Pill men an encounter with



control through the idea that everything is inherently controllable if they just exercise their agency. Given being in control is an integral part of hegemonic masculine identity, it therefore simultaneously offers an encounter with identity too. This, however, leads to an overburdening of the will and to disregarding structural factors. As a result, any failure is internalised and blamed on the individual, who is then left to restart the process and try again, to fail better. Thus, the promise of success – and an encounter with control and identity – still remain. But this, to use Lauren Berlant's (2011) phrase, is a cruel optimism. The encounter is never delivered on, and pursuing it is to actually erect a barrier to flourishing. Thus, men on /r/TheRedPill are also left in a state of frustration as they continue to attempt to fully embody the subject position created by this magical voluntarist discourse, but consistently fail to do so.

### **Vicarious Victory**

Other than images of nature, one of the most common posts on /r/MGTOW fit in a category I have labelled vicarious victory. These posts are infused with misogynistic stereotypes which serve to construct women as parasitic and unreasonable. The vicarious aspect of vicarious victory comes from the fact it is not the users themselves performing the misogynistic act. Instead, they are looking at examples of other men putting women back in what they consider to be their rightful place. In other words, users on /r/MGTOW are experiencing misogynistic acts through the actions of others in a vicarious sense. On top of this, there is another aspect of indirectness in that women are not directly targeted by these memes. Although in some cases they were originally, the sharing of these memes on /r/MGTOW is unlikely to be seen by many women, if any.

The victory aspect refers to the fact that these memes offer users on /r/MGTOW an opportunity to share in a feeling of domination over women. Each meme displays an instance of a woman being ridiculed, undermined, or seemingly proven wrong by a man. Victory, in this sense,

thus refers to the assertion and reassertion of men's dominance over women. This discourse offers users on /r/MGTOW an encounter with a masculine identity that is dominant and free from female influence by both allowing them to demonstrate their membership of MGTO as a group, and by constructing an 'other' against which they can define themselves. It also offers an encounter with control by allowing men on /r/MGTOW to perform victory over both women and men who do not fit within their definition of masculinity.



Figure 5.13: Post from /r/MGTOW showing a screenshot of a woman giving an opinion on social media and a response from another user



Figure 5.14: A post from /r/MGTOW showing a woman giving an opinion and a man responding.

The two examples of vicarious victory above both feature a woman giving an opinion or requesting something, and then a man responding to show how what she has said is unreasonable (figs. 5.13 & 5.14). In the first example (fig. 5.13), a woman on a social media platform has said that if your husband will not love you after you have had a “sex-change”, then you should leave your marriage. Another user has responded with their interpretation of what the woman is saying. They assert that this is evidence of women wanting a “submissive pet” who will “validate” them. The second example (fig. 5.14) is very similar, instead this time a woman is saying how men being able to wear the same clothes to multiple events is a sign of male privilege. Again, another user responds by saying that men do not care if women wear the same clothes, the problem comes from women being judgemental. In both cases, therefore, a woman is offering an opinion and then being publicly silenced and humiliated by a man. And in both cases these posts are allowing users on MGTOW to witness the subjugation of a woman and therefore, in their eyes, a minor victory against feminism.

One thing worth noting is that these screenshots appear to be edited after the fact. For instance, in figure 5.13 the font varies between the woman's original post and the man's response, and the comment from the man is slightly sharper. In other words, it is impossible to tell whether these images are screenshots of an actual interaction on social media or templates onto which men have written their own comebacks. In some cases, the woman's initial statement might also have been made up by someone else. Although this does not change the effect of these posts, it is important to consider that many of the posts on /r/MGTOW may have been edited slightly or even completely. Even if the text itself has not been altered or completely changed, they may have been cropped to exclude the woman's response, ensuring that a man always has the last word.

By expressing an opinion on social media, these women are entering into the public sphere, something which, due to their dependency, helplessness, and sexuality, they are deemed unsuitable for (Elshtain, 1981, p.15). In order to prevent women from entering the public sphere, those who do step over this threshold are met with humiliation, violent invective, or some combination of the two. Misogyny, in Kate Manne's view, is the policeman of patriarchy (2017, p.79). It exists to put women back in their place whenever they step outside of what is seen to be their 'correct' and 'natural' subordinate role (Ibid). In these examples of vicarious victory, women are stepping outside of their "correct" and "natural" role in the domestic sphere, where they are seen and not heard, and vocalising an opinion in the public sphere. In order to rectify this, it is necessary for a man to point out why their opinion is ridiculous, and therefore to invalidate their contribution to public debate and silence them. These posts, therefore, bring men on /r/MGTOW into contact with a sense of control over women which they feel they have otherwise lost.

In allowing them to act out the disciplining of women, vicarious victory becomes a means of re-asserting dominance and putting women back in their 'rightful place'. It is important to note, however, that vicarious victory posts are inherently very low risk. In other words, they allow users

on /r/MGTOW the ability to experience a misogynistic act of re-asserting dominance by simply viewing a meme or screenshot. There is, therefore, no risk of any ramifications or backlash. There is an irony here as risk taking is coded as masculine and, viewed from this perspective, vicarious victory appears quite cowardly. The fact women are highly unlikely to see the memes adds to this and whilst viewing vicarious victory posts I couldn't help but think the users posting them were shouting into the void, or at the very least preaching to the choir. If the aim isn't to directly silence women, then what is the purpose of vicarious victory posts and why are they so common on /r/MGTOW?



Figure 5.15: Post from /r/MGTOW showing a text conversation between a man and a woman

The answer is that these posts allow men on /r/MGTOW to perform victory over women. They therefore offer an encounter with control through the subordination of women, and identity by allowing men on /r/MGTOW to occupy a dominant position over women. The example above (fig. 5.15) shows another instance of this. This post is not a screenshot from social media, but a screenshot of a private text conversation. Thus, the public sphere element is removed and the focus here is more on women requesting seemingly unreasonable things from men. Again, misogyny is at work here as a woman is being disciplined back into her rightful role as a *caregiver* rather than someone who *takes* from men (Manne, 2017, p.266). This role is an integral part not only of contemporary gender relations but also neoliberal capitalism, as women are expected to

provide a care role for men as compensation for the harms of capitalism (Bratich and Banet-weiser, 2019, p.5014; Hozic and True, 2016, p.6; Srinivasan, 2021, p.120). For MGTOW, feminism is seen to have upended this dynamic, to the detriment of men, and women are now constructed as parasites who simply seek to free ride on men's effort. Women, therefore, are believed to be unreasonable, irrational, and parasitic as a result of feminism's influence. MGTOW users, on the other hand, are constructed as rational, hardworking, and independent. These three traits are traditionally coded as masculine, and thus through engaging in vicarious victory users on /r/MGTOW are also offered an encounter with this masculine identity.

Within the vicarious victory discourse, one particularly common subject is wives and ex-wives. Based on my experience researching /r/MGTOW, quite a few of the men on this forum seem to have been in a long-term relationship which has since ended. This informs both the type of posts that are uploaded and the topics of discussion. The attraction of /r/MGTOW, therefore, seems to be that it provides a means of turning the intense, uncontrollable affect that can arise from the end of a relationship into something more comprehensible. The message /r/MGTOW espouses is, essentially, that if you have been through a difficult divorce or breakup, you should use this opportunity to assert your intention to go your own way and improve your life. In many ways, /r/MGTOW is therefore the embodiment of words of consolation often heard from friends after a breakup: "you are better off without them anyway". This shows the role /r/MGTOW plays in filling an affective gap in these men's lives. These men may be struggling to find support in their offline lives, and therefore seek it out online. This support, however, often comes in the form of encouraging hatred towards ex-partners rather than suggestions of ways to work through difficult emotions.



Figure 5.16: Vicarious victory post from /r/MGTOW about wives

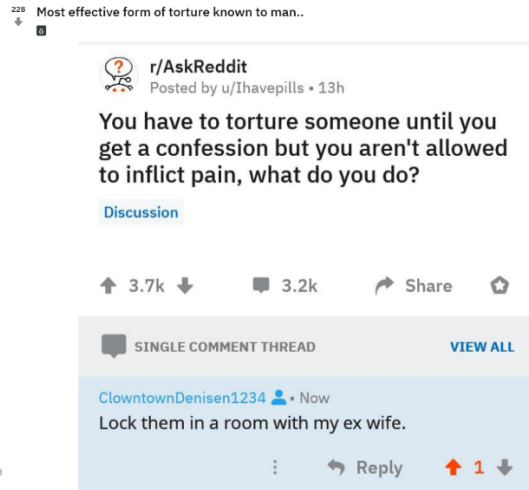


Figure 5.17: Vicarious victory post from /r/MGTOW about ex-wives



Figure 5.18: Post from /r/MGTOW about Roombas as a replacement for a wife



Figure 5.19: Post from /r/MGTOW portraying women as only interested in men's money

The four posts above (figs. 5.16-5.19) show the animosity that is felt towards wives and ex-wives. Figures 5.16 and 5.17 both paint both wives and ex-wives as dangerous. This adds to the notion that women seek to harm men by taking their masculinity from them, dominating them, and making them weak and submissive. Figure 5.18 features a Roomba, an automatic vacuum cleaner. This user claims it can “clean your house”, but without “nag[ging] your ear off”. This plays

on the stereotype of women being a burden on men and asking them repeatedly to do things, thus limiting their agency. Racist stereotypes are present in figure 5.19, which shows an Asian woman holding money accompanied by a racist rhyme. This image also works off stereotypes already seen in this section, namely the idea that women are parasitic and seek to exploit men for financial gain. They are cold, heartless, and Machiavellian. The title of the post – “Women - Starter Pack” – suggests the belief that this attitude is fundamental to all women. These images reinforce the idea that /r/MGTOW is mostly populated by men who have been harmed by relationships in the past and need a place where they can convert those intense emotions into anger, an emotion that is deemed acceptable within the confines of hegemonic masculinity. Men are not supposed to be vulnerable or show emotions which can be interpreted as weakness. Instead, these emotions are channelled into hatred, misogyny, and a renewed sense of purpose. Thus, vicarious victory allows users on /r/MGTOW to process and convert emotions they might be feeling as the result of a breakup or divorce, at the same time as it returns to them a sense of control and a positive masculine identity.

In constructing women as cold, heartless, self-interested, and Machiavellian, these posts also serve to construct an ‘other’ against which MGTOW define themselves. The boundaries of MGTOW’s masculine identity are thus completely reliant on the ‘other’ against which they are defined. The result is a dependency on women and femininity which is at odds with MGTOW’s separatist desires. Despite pledging to reject women and remove them from their lives – to “go their own way” – users on MGTOW practice what Jones et al. refer to as “woman-obsessed separatism” (2019, p.12). In other words, despite MGTOW users claiming an intention to reject women, they spend a lot of time either discussing women or performing this rejection (Ibid, p.13). This is down to the fact that users on /r/MGTOW must perform a rejection of women in order to demonstrate that they belong to the community (Ibid).



Memes about women and their faults constituted the majority of posts I came across during my autoethnography, with the vicarious victory posts discussed in this section being a perfect example of quite how women-obsessed MGTOW is. Crucially, in needing to repeatedly perform the rejection of women and thus unable to fully adhere to the separatist mantra, MGTOW's promise of an encounter with control over their lives and a masculine identity defined by independence, self-sufficiency, and stoicism, is never delivered on. In other words, there is an irony here in that users on /r/MGTOW are in some ways more dependent on women than the members of /r/TheRedPill or Incels.co despite claiming a desire to reject them.

### Vicarious victory over men



Figure 5.20: A meme from /r/MGTOW which portrays "white knight cucks" as women's pets



Figure 5.21: A post from /r/MGTOW showing Prince Harry working at McDonalds after leaving the Royal family



Figure 5.22: Post from /r/MGTOW showing a clown

Not all vicarious victory memes and screenshots have women as their target. In some cases, they focus on other men who do not live up to MGTOW's masculine ideal, as seen in the three examples above (figs. 5.20-5.22). In the first post (fig. 5.20), the archetypal non-MGTOW

member is depicted as submissive and emasculated. They are wearing a nappy, portrayed as a dog attached to a lead, and are begging a women for sex after they have shouted abuse at other men. The man/dog is shouting “INCEL” and “GUAU”. The former word is being shouted at other men presumably to warn the woman that an incel is nearby, like a guard dog might if they could speak. The latter is the word used in Spanish to denote a dog’s bark. In the title, these men are referred to as “white knight cucks”. A “white knight” is a man who defends women in order to win their affections, and “cuck” is a term which historically referred to the husband of an adulterous wife but is now used online as a catch-all term for a man who is seen to be weak and effeminate (“Cuck”, n.d.; Kelly, 2017, pp.74–75; Kelly and Aunspach, 2020, p.161; Wright et al., 2020, p.920). In this case, “white knight cucks” are therefore being depicted as submissive guard dogs who are loyal to women purely so they can get sex. Members of /r/MGTOW, on the other hand, believe they have transcended this and are independent and able set their own goals.

In the second post (fig. 5.21), Prince Harry is shown working in McDonald’s and someone resembling Queen Elizabeth recognises him. This meme was posted in the wake of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle deciding to leave the Royal Family, the implication being that Meghan Markle made the decision for Prince Harry, an idea that was popular in parts of the UK press at the time (Morgan, 2021). This meme implies that, by allowing a woman to make decisions for him, Prince Harry will eventually come to ruin. The final post (fig. 5.22) is of a clown with the caption “I’ll accept her kids as my own”. This is conveying the idea that to be in a relationship with a single mother and accept her children and offer financial support is something no serious man would do. In both cases, therefore, as with the previous post (fig. 5.20), the idea is that if you do anything for a woman you are submissive, foolish, and unmasculine.

The effect of these vicarious victory posts is very similar to those that make women their subject. They are designed to provide members of MGTOW with a sense of identity by

constructing the “other” as emasculated, weak, and unsuccessful all because they have chosen to be dependent on women and have therefore been tainted with femininity themselves. It shows that MGTOW’s issue is not women or feminism per se, but femininity more generally. More specifically, it is the possibility of being feminised that they fear. These posts therefore serve to police the boundaries of MGTOW’s particular configuration of hegemonic masculinity (Jones et al., 2019, p.15). In doing so, they offer users on /r/MGTOW an encounter with a traditional masculine identity that is seen as vastly superior to the forms of masculinity tainted by femininity.

However, as with the contradiction of women-obsessed separatism, this subject position is dependent on what MGTOW users consider to be unmasculine men. Thus, in needing to repeatedly police the boundaries of masculinity by mocking men who do not live up to their masculine ideal, MGTOW users are entirely reliant on the ‘other’. As discussed previously, the fact that men who do not adhere to their standards of masculinity are also the target of vicarious victory posts shows that /r/MGTOW are not necessarily attempting to reject women but reject femininity. Thus, it would be more fitting to describe MGTOW as practising a femininity-obsessed separatism which leads to them being dependent on the very thing they wish to reject.

But the subject position men on /r/MGTOW wish to inhabit – i.e. that of an independent, strong, stoic, and self-sufficient man – is impossible to fully inhabit. And the result of not being able to fully inhabit this subject position is frustration precisely because wholeness is never reached. This frustration, however, is not directed at the discourse itself but at a scapegoat. In the example of nationalism, Solomon discusses how immigrants are seen as a barrier to the national purity which is posited as the solution to the nation’s problems (Solomon, 2012, p.921). In the case of /r/MGTOW, the frustration manifests as anger and hatred towards women in the form of misogynistic invective and memes leading to more vicarious victory posts. Thus, instead of questioning the discourse itself, users on /r/MGTOW remain stuck in a cycle of wholeness and

lacking as they continue to strive for an encounter with control and masculine identity that is always just out of reach.

## **Seduction Techniques**

The Red Pill posits the idea that to encounter control and masculine identity it is necessary to learn seduction techniques which allow men to trick women into having sex with them. The Red Pill views feminism as a “sexual strategy” which has taught women how seek men with the most evolutionarily advantageous traits, and the only solution is to become an expert in a counterstrategy. This involves learning a series of seduction techniques. I will argue, in line with O’Neill, that these techniques offer an encounter with control by rendering human relationships as something to which expertise can be applied (O’Neill, 2018, p.42). And I will show how this discourse also offers men an encounter with a particular configuration of masculine identity that values control, virility, and independence. Ultimately however, much like on /r/MGTOW, neither the seduction nor confidence discourses deliver on their promises of wholeness.

646 **Let's Talk Pillow Talk**



I feel like this isn't talked about enough and I haven't seen any specific mention in the sidebar.

Stop. Talking. After. Sex.

You Mr. Thundercock has slayed Miss Karen after weeks of passing frame and holding shit tests. You've been going into your local gym without swiping your membership because you're alfa AF and been meditating in Tibet to channel your inner Chad.

But the moment you bust your nut and your women lays next to you, you start spouting all your life stories. Now don't get me wrong, good pussy might get you delirious. Feel free to say whatever the fuck you want. But don't start talking about your emotional bitch shit; she doesn't care your daddy spanked you till you were 15.

I apologise if I come across a little feisty, it's just that I had an 8 hour shift with the town thot and she had the nerve to talk shit about this dude who poured out his heart to her. Now here she is the next day telling me how much of a bitch he is and sharing his business with me, shit that he shared with her in confidence and in the confines of his bedroom. But ofcourse this slut doesn't give a fuck because she just thinks her doormat of a pussy was made by God's right hand.

Anyway, this is all to reinforce the importance of frame. Use your "post nut clarity" to plan and execute something productive with your life, not to give validation to some excuse of a female. If you were a rock of a man before the lay but then turn into Kenny the Parrot after, she's going to feed her ego thinking her pussy was so good that she broke you. This is a guarantee that her pussy will remain drier than an Arab's nutsack on Ramadan.

Keep the pillow talk to a minimum. Don't talk about your negatives. Don't talk about your exes. Don't talk about your friends or family. Ofcourse this might be different if she's your LTR but even then what you say must be calculated.

164 Comments Share Save Hide Report

93% Upvoted

*Figure 5.23: Post from /r/TheRedPill in the importance of not engaging in "pillow talk"*

The line “Stop. Talking. After. Sex.” from post above (fig. 5.23), is a perfect example the forceful tone that characterises a lot of posts on /r/TheRedPill. The post goes on to mention a plethora of other Red Pill seduction concepts too. ‘Holding frame’ and ‘passing shit tests’ (seen written here as “passing frame and holding shit tests” for comedic effect), for instance, are frequently referenced on /r/TheRedPill. The concept of ‘holding frame’ has already been explained previously, and “passing shit tests” refers overcoming to the ‘games’ women ostensibly play in order to test men. In other words, adherents to The Red Pill’s ideology believe women deploy “shit tests” in order to see whether a man is a worthy sexual partner. The user goes on to add context to their post by recounting how a woman he works with shared another man’s intimate secrets with him. The misogyny in this post is right on the surface. The woman he works with is referred to as the “town thot”, a term similar to “slut” (Glass, 2018), and this is followed by a series of misogynistic descriptions and exaggerations for comic effect. The advice that follows is

that men need to control themselves after sex and not share their “emotional bitch shit”. Hidden within these seduction techniques, therefore, are ideas of what it means to be a man, and so they work to offer /r/TheRedPill users an encounter with a masculine identity based on control. The central message of this post is that men should remain in control of their emotions both before and after sex, and that to share emotions after sex is lose control and hand women victory.

Thus, the same fears that play out on MGTOW are present here. Women are constructed as potential external threats that are always seeking to penetrate men’s defences and damage or weaken their masculinity. In other words to feminism them. Men therefore need to ensure they remain invulnerable. In Ahmed’s language, they find it necessary to their harden surfaces to prevent penetration by the external threat (2007, p.2). This user states that being a “rock of a man” means nothing if you are still “broke[n]” by a woman’s sexuality. The consequences of being “broke[n]” are a loss of masculinity, which here is signified by a loss of virility and sexual attraction. If you allow yourself to become vulnerable to women, in other words, you will no longer be able to achieve one of the central markers of masculinity: having sex with women. A rejection of emotions, therefore, becomes a necessary foundation on which to build sexual strategy (Van Valkenburgh, 2018, p.13).

The irony that this user is himself using language heavy with emotion despite his own advice appears to go unnoticed. He even apologises if he is coming across as a little “feisty”. It is important to note that hegemonic masculinity does not compel men to suppress all emotions, only certain emotions linked with vulnerability. Anger, annoyance, and frustration are thus often not coded as emotions, especially on /r/TheRedPill. As a result, they are commonly expressed on this forum, along with emotions like pride, joy, and excitement. That certain emotions are permitted, and others aren’t, also reveals the way in which certain emotions are deferred or translated into others. If men are unable to express certain emotions publicly, they may find an outlet in some

other form. Ahmed talks about how certain feeling words become attached to others, with the replacement of one word with another creating a narrative (2007, p.13). The word 'mourn', for instance, can become linked to other words like anger, hatred, and love (Ibid). Working back through this chain can reveal how emotions are translated and directed by discourse. In this case, this man's anger at a woman sharing another man's secrets might in fact be a sign of an acknowledgement of vulnerability. He too might be concerned about women talking about him behind his back. But exhibiting this sort of anxiety would be interpreted as a sign of weakness, and therefore the only acceptable emotional response is one of anger.

#### 745 Learning to speak less, and observe more to build attraction

##### Red Pill Theory

Most people in new social situations feel an obligation to keep speaking, even if it's clear silence would be better. Taking a step back to observe social interactions will make your game much stronger than the guy who vomits words everywhere.

##### Starting out

In almost all social situations involving a sexual dynamic, men overshare. They brag about anything they think will impress a woman. In interviews, men tend to ramble on about logical reasons they're qualified. In these situations, the less you say, the better. It's not about quantity, it's about quality. Think of the times you've been impressed by conversation- these wordsmiths just *know* what to say. It's not drawn out. It's concise and makes you think.

People who say less, but say impactful things, come off as genuine and intelligent. This is incredibly intoxicating for women, and generates interest from men. One of the ways I honed in for daygaming and improving my conversational skills was sitting in coffee shops and just observing. I watched dates that went well, and dates that went up in flames.

The common theme to the dates that went well was the way in which the men would engage their dates. They all had laid back demeanors, open body language, and weren't saying rehearsed lines or themes. They opened with a few probing questions: *"I noticed you have a dog shaped keychain, are animals your passion?" "You're in great shape, do you lead fitness classes?" "I've always gone with a black coffee. Where should I start with cappuccinos?"*

The reason these openers generated success was the fact that it engaged discussion that required thought right off the bat. There was no hidden agenda. Just a curious thought provoking observation. Most guys mess up by using the court jester approach. They use some rehearsed gimmick. The dynamic of the jester approach is reactionary. The jester is looking for instant validation to their routine. They base their entire conversation off of this validation. This prevents the jester from ever really leading the conversation anywhere. It also leads to the jester over-sharing and giving up too much too soon in order to keep his routine going.



#### **Why the simple openers led to a better conversation dynamic**

Take for example the openers I listed above. A girl might respond that yes, they love animals. They've always loved being in shelters, ect. While they're sharing all of this, they're giving you easy ways to keep the conversation flowing without saying much. For example, one might say "where do you see this passion going?" When the woman finishes up answering the probing question. Again, they'll continue sharing. And again, all you need to do is use a simple little conversational bridge to keep things flowing while observing.

Should the script flip, answering with short but direct responses is your best way to keep things in your control. Should they ask you probing questions, such as what's your passion, keep it brief. It's not so much what you say here, it's how you say it. For me, I might say "I love rock climbing," while holding eye contact and imagining myself fucking her. Guaranteed tingle bomb.

#### **Purposeful silences are a great tool**

You don't need to spit out a response right away. Take a second, hold eye contact until she breaks it, then say something. Your non verbal communication is a lot more important when building attraction.

#### **Watch stand-up comics who kill it**

Improvisation is the duct tape of conversational skill. Stand up comics are masters of this. Watch any good routine, and you'll see how adept they are at switching and adapting at the drop of a hat.

#### **You need to practice**

Observe for a while first, like I did, then go practice. Conversation is a skill like anything else. The more you use it, the better you get.

*Figure 5.24: Post from /r/TheRedPill about the importance of speaking less*

The example above (fig. 5.24) introduces another key concept on The Red Pill (and the wider seduction community): the approach. "Approaches" are different methods of communicating with women for the first time. They are often divided into two different types: direct and indirect. In order to learn more about the concept of "approaches" I searched the entirety of /r/TheRedPill for a post explaining the differences between direct and indirect approaches and found the one shown below (fig. 5.25). According to this post, indirect approaches involve "beating about the bush, breaking the ice, getting to know her, and then asking for her number". Direct approaches, on the other hand, involve "walking straight up to a woman, introducing yourself, stating your interest, and asking for her number immediately". There is a lot of debate over which technique has greater efficacy, but the user who wrote the post shown in figure 5.24 argues that it is better to remain silent and use minimal words in your approaches. The danger of not following this advice is that you will "overshare" and, in a similar way to the previous post (fig. 5.23), therefore make yourself vulnerable to feminisation.

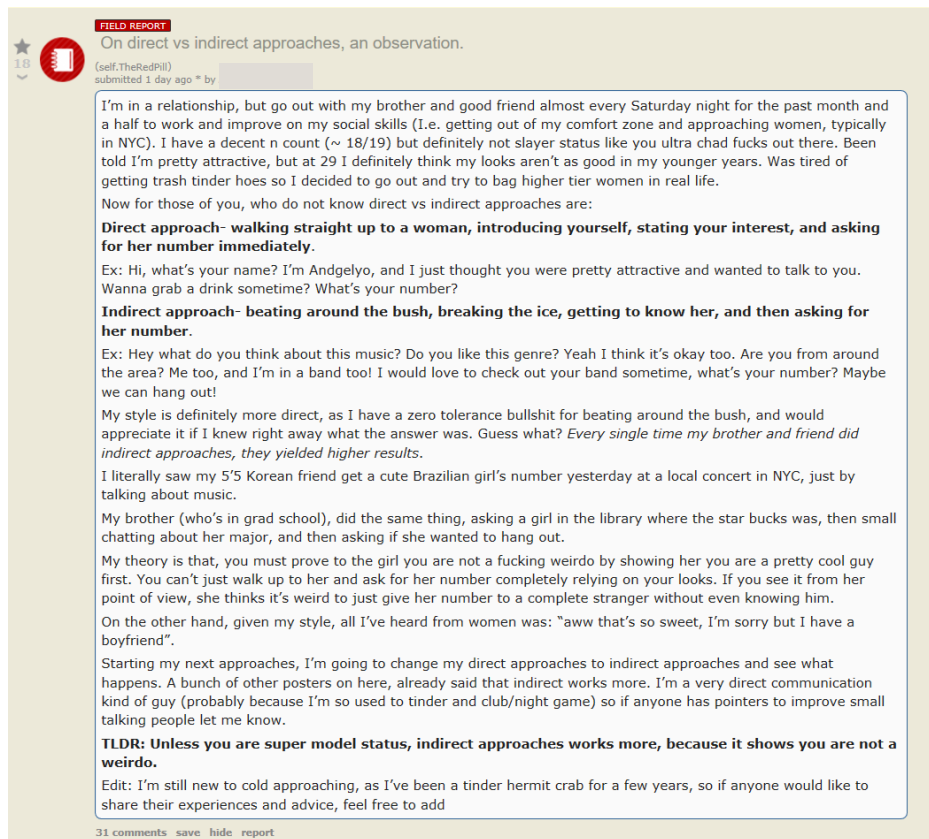


Figure 5.25: Post from /r/TheRedPill on direct versus indirect approaches

This post (fig. 5.25) goes on to provide examples of good conversation prompts, all of which are designed to be short and allow you to “keep things in your control”. “Control” here is again the key word. Oversharing is seen as loss of control and a man who overshares, therefore, is deemed emasculated. Controlling the number of words used and which words are used becomes an integral part of maintaining control of a situation and interaction with a woman. Seduction techniques thus not only offer an encounter with a masculine identity that is strong, resilient, and impervious, but also with control over sexual relationships and therefore women. And control in this sense is intrinsically linked with masculine identity as being in control is seen as something necessary to be considered a man.

On top of this, being in control of sexual relationships is linked to masculine identity because virility and sexual prowess are fundamental to the masculinity /r/TheRedPill constructs.

Seduction techniques do this by framing human relationships as something to which expertise can be applied. Neoliberalism, as a cultural rationality, extends the logic of the market to all areas of human life (O’Neill, 2018, p.37). In this context, the import of market logics into intimate sexual relations means success in this field is seen not as a matter of luck or inheritance, but of skill and expertise. Thus, it is possible to cultivate your competency in this area by learning techniques and by adopting a ‘sexual work ethic’, in Anna Rogers’s words, which means treating the domain of intimate relationships in the same way as the domain of employment (2005, p.186). O’Neill’s research revealed that this framing of intimate relationships brought with it a sense of “relief and reassurance” and this is precisely because it promises control (2018, p.41). Instead of simply being down to luck, these men can now engage in an entrepreneurial subjectivity which will allow them to overcome the perceived barriers to sex and sexual relationships (Ibid, p.45). In other words, acquiring seduction skills, training, and gaining experience all become ways in which men can gain an advantage over other competitors in the sexual marketplace (Ibid).

Given men’s identity and self-confidence is so dependent on success in sexual relationships, it is clear why users on /r/TheRedPill would be relieved to be provided with set examples of phrases which will help in securing women, who become instrumentalised as capital to build men’s self-confidence, thus both commodifying and objectifying them (Bratich and Banetweiser, 2019, p.5012). In other words, these technique-based posts on /r/TheRedPill serve to both instil confidence in men and, in this case, even give men a set script to follow. The imposition of market logics on relationships under neoliberalism means, like any market, relationships are constructed as a site of uncertainty (Rogers, 2005, p.183). This site of uncertainty is also a place where uncertainty can ostensibly be managed by management of the self. Seduction techniques provide the means for this self-management and therefore serve to bring men into contact with control over their relationships by constructing relationships as yet another sphere in which skill

and expertise can be applied to gain a competitive advantage, and then providing men with the means of cultivating this skill and expertise.

In applying the logic of the market to human relationships men, in Kimmel's words, become "control freaks" (1996, p.45). In other words, in order to fully identify with the discourse of control offered by /r/TheRedPill, men feel the need to try and control *everything*. This can be seen in the fact that, during my research, /r/TheRedPill started a new YouTube channel called Finance Red Pill. To users on /r/TheRedPill, having control of their finances is incredibly important and forms the basis of good seduction strategy. This shows how the desire to control relationships spreads out into a desire to be in control of other aspects of life. The aim of controlling both the self and the environment is to reduce risk and the possibility of failure. In practice, this means men who follow /r/TheRedPill's teachings will try and learn more and more about seduction techniques in an attempt to reach a position of total knowledge. The issue is that, as Garlick points out, in a market system it is impossible to occupy the abstract position of the market itself (Garlick, 2020, p.557). When it comes to viewing dating as a market, it is similarly impossible to fully know and predict what is going to happen when you approach a woman. But men still strive to reach this position, always seeking out ways of creating more certainty and more ways of controlling their environment.

#### 90 Endorsed Contributors: Respect The Tag

Meta

It is time to clear the air on the issue of **endorsed contributor status**. For those of you who have participated actively in this community for a while, this will not be news to you. But if you are new to the Red Pill, then pay close attention.

#### Recognizing Quality

If you look at any successful organization of males, you will notice a pattern: the men who have the greatest stake in the success of the enterprise shoulder the most responsibility, receive the most respect, and enjoy the greatest benefits as thanks for their contribution.

Around these parts, these men are known as "endorsed contributors" or ECs.

The Red Pill operates as a patriarchal **meritocracy**. Endorsed contributors are community members who, through careful vetting, have been flaired in order to draw attention to the quality of their writing. Whenever you read posts or comments on TRP, it is the voices of these men that you should pay the most attention to - not votes.

## Endorsement Seniority

The different levels of endorsement are as follows:

- **Endorsed Contributor:** Endorsed contributors are members who have demonstrated a strong grasp of core Red Pill ideas. Their comments and posts are frequently in line with the fundamental ideas necessary to live free of shackles.
- **Senior Endorsed:** Senior endorsed contributors began as endorsed contributors, and have remained active within the community for a long time. In addition to insightful comments, senior contributors often have a colorful posting history of informative and original content that is well worth reading. Because of their long participation and deep investment in the group, they have all but mastered the principles of the Red Pill. Senior contributors have been vetted TWICE, so you know that their words carry serious wisdom.
- **Red Pill Vanguard:** The Vanguard members come from the first generation of ORIGINAL endorsed contributors - these guys are the oldest members and have been here since the beginning. Their contributions comprise a lot of what is now the backbone of this community. Vanguards are not vetted - *they are the ones who do the vetting*. In some cases, they even selected which of us mods would help govern the community. When a Vanguard speaks, what you are reading is pure unfiltered Red Pill.

There are also special community members who wear unique flair related to their Manosphere handles: men like Rollo Tomassi from TheRationalMale, Ian Ironwood from The Red Pill Room, and GayLubeOil. These men should likewise be treated as sages in their own right. The community would not exist without them.

## Point Flair

From time to time, you may also have noticed little numbers next to the names of certain users. These are flair points. Points are awarded to users by ECs for insightful comments and constructive participation. While points do not represent official endorsement, a user with a high point count is well on the road to a full endorsement, so be on the look out for these men on the rise.

## Respect The Tag

One thing you should know is that endorsed members receive no payment from us for being here. Each one volunteers his time out of a genuine desire to help men find freedom and happiness in a culture that lacks a positive identity for them. This is why we grant senior members special privileges for plugging their personal websites, blogs, bitcoin tip jars, etc. It is our way of showing appreciation.

Next time you have an opportunity, be sure to thank an endorsed member for his contributions. From what they tell us, it is the feeling of making a difference that keeps them coming back.

205 Comments Give Award Share Save Hide Report

*Figure 5.26: Post from /r/TheRedPill on the hierarchy of users*

Bratich and Banet-Weiser point out that a significant factor in the cultivation of seduction skills is a reliance on experts (2019, p.5010). Fittingly, of the three forums I researched, /r/TheRedPill is the only one to have a semi-codified hierarchy. This can be seen in the post above (fig. 5.26) which outlines the forum's hierarchy and implores users to treat these endorsed contributors with respect. Certain users are considered "sages in their own right" due to their integral role in the seduction community. These endorsed users bestow expertise upon other users and therefore provide a central role within the neoliberal confidence game. The hierarchy loans these users added legitimacy, and makes their words more significant, powerful, and perceptive than those of standard users on /r/TheRedPill. This post refers to /r/TheRedPill's "patriarchal meritocracy" system where only those who have been through careful vetting can have an

endorsed contributor flair. On Reddit, a flair refers to a banner placed next to a user's username which provides extra information. In a number of subreddits, flairs are used light-heartedly or purely for comedic effect (e.g. on the Lord of the Rings subreddit, users have the ability to edit their flair so it displays the name of a character from the series). On /r/TheRedPill, however, flairs are used to codify the "patriarchal meritocracy" that this group aspires to. There is an irony to the term meritocracy here. A system which is ostensibly based on individual merit is one that is actually constrained by codified hierarchies and vetting.

The result of both the limitations of viewing intimate relationships through the lens of market logics and creating a subject position that is impossible to fully inhabit, means that, like /r/MGTOW, users on /r/TheRedPill are left in a permanent state of frustration (Solomon, 2012, p.917). The discourse offers control and identity in the form of seduction techniques, but neither of these are ever fully delivered on. Instead, users are left to oscillate between identification and frustration, and are stuck in a cycle of needing to get closer to the subject position created by discourses on /r/TheRedPill despite the fact it remains forever out of reach. Again, like /r/MGTOW, women become the scapegoat that is blamed for this frustration. Women who do not succumb to seduction techniques are constructed as the obstacles to wholeness and vilified. In other words, users on /r/TheRedPill demand that women be available to offer affective support and validation in the form of sex, and the minute they refuse they are demonised for not playing "the game" (Bratich and Banet-weiser, 2019, p.5008).

Feminism is blamed for this as it has allegedly taught women how to cheat in the game of sexual relationships. In other words, users on /r/TheRedPill believe that, in the past, women were simply objects that men could obtain easily, but that women's financial independence, the decline of the nuclear family, and feminism mean that this is no longer the case. Thus, instead of being guaranteed a sexual partner, men now need to partake in a sexual marketplace in which women

too have a choice and sexual strategy through feminism. There is a tension here, however, as women are simultaneously viewed as both passive objects for men's sexual gratification, but also as Machiavellian, strategic, and agentive subjects who are able to outsmart men and cheat the rules of the "game". This is a contradiction that plays out across /r/TheRedPill and the pick-up artist industry more generally.

### **"Confidence above all"**

One particularly prominent sub-genre of post on /r/TheRedPill is what I have dubbed the rags-to-riches post. These posts feature users telling a story of how they went from failure to success. In doing so, they show how following the teachings espoused by /r/TheRedPill can lead you out of your current situation and give you what you most desire. These stories are common under neoliberal capitalism. The idea of the "self-made man", underpinned by the idea that anyone can be successful if they put in the effort, is part of the myth of magical voluntarism. These posts, therefore, act as "proof" that magical voluntarism, combined seduction techniques, can bring you success. They are also narratives which offer users on /r/TheRedPill an encounter with what has been lost: control over women and a masculine identity that is strong, in control, and independent. In putting this into a narrative form, these posts can conjure up an image other users can aspire to, becoming sites of strong affective investment. These posts also exist to build confidence in the seduction techniques and worldview of /r/TheRedPill. They thus fit side by side with other posts that aim to cultivate confidence in users on this forum. Confidence is a fundamental aspect of neoliberal subjectification and, as such, plays a significant role in the construction of both the Red Pill identity and in offering users on this forum an encounter with control.

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↓

## My Insane 3 Year Journey - From Short Hardcase Asian to Slayer

### Building Power

Let's start at the very beginning. I was a kissless virgin all throughout High School and College due to doing nothing but playing video games like WoW and League of Legends all day. Once I graduated, I spent about 2 years wasting time playing video games and trying my best to hold down a job before snapping and deciding enough is enough and that I need to make changes in order to not end up a 30 year old kissless virgin or 40 years old and beyond... I started out by losing a massive amount of weight through rigorous diet and exercise. Keto diet combined with stronglifts 5x5 with one cheat day a week was the magic pill for me. The pounds came right off.

To give you an idea of where I stood at the time, here is a brief summary of my advantages and disadvantages when I started to approach girls and trying to apply the pickup stuff I read about online.

**Disadvantages:** Short, Below Average Face, Poor social skills, Asian Race, Overbearing Parents, Lived at home so no pull location

**Advantages:** Decently high paying job, extreme levels of persistence beyond what is mentally healthy (What I mean by this is I feel it's totally normal if someone where to give up after approaching 100 girls and getting blown off by every single one, but to me, it just motivates me and lights a fire in my soul to keep going and going until I get the results I'm looking for)

I started posting on RedPill asking anyone in shouting range for advice because it was clear that whatever I was doing was not working. Looking back at some of these threads, I can now laugh at how stupidly aggressive and retarded I was.

It took me 300 approaches to get my first lay, 300! I set up 10 dates with absolutely no results, the one lay I had came from a random club girl that I pulled home the same night.

After finally moving to my own place, I thought that I would be able to skyrocket my results by having the ability to pull girls back to my place instead of restricting myself to only going to their place. Little did I know that 2000 approaches later, and I would only have 2 more lays. This was getting beyond ridiculous. 2000 approaches to get 3 lays? In what Universe is that remotely a good trade? A normal person would have just accepted that maybe he's just not good looking enough or smooth to succeed but like I stated before, this really didn't bother me too much and I kept digging for solutions wherever I could find, including RedPill, and various other online forums and groups. Year 2 consisted of me struggling hard, approaching girl after girl with extremely low success rates that never got much better. I even paid 3 grand for an RSD bootcamp and while it was great listening to Owen talk and talk, it turned out to be all hype. My game stayed more or less the exact same, while my excitement factor went up 5X. So instead of going out every weekend and failing like normal, I would go out every weekend super pumped up with energy levels way beyond normal and still fail. This was where even I started to get discouraged a bit. Hard not to feel like a loser when you dropped 3 grand on a bootcamp that was supposed to fix your sticking points but didn't actually do shit.



In year 3, I finally had my big breakthrough. Everything I was learning started to come together and I got to a level that I didn't think was possible, even in my wildest imagination. I've fucked hot girls from every race, from gorgeous blonde twitch streamers, to smoking hot latinas, cute Asians, exotic African women. I got to the point that if I decided to go out, no matter what, I would never leave empty handed. I would always go home with a woman. If you look at my growth chart, it would be almost no results in the beginning 2 years followed by an explosion of results in the final 6 months. I finally settled down with a blonde girl that I've been with for over half a year now and couldn't be happier. She cooks mean dishes and I don't think we've even had one verbal argument throughout our relationship, we just click.

Here are my biggest takeaways from my 3 year journey for all you future slayers and pickup artists in the making:

- 1. Do not post your dates or listen to any advice on RedPill** - Occasionally, you will get good comments from people that know what they're doing but let's face it, you're asking for advice because you suck with women and if you suck, you have very little way of distinguishing good advice from shitty advice. There is so much feel good mindset advice out there that sounds amazing but does not deliver results in practice. Don't get me wrong, RedPill is amazing when it comes to personal development advice. Lifting is awesome, Spinning plates is awesome. Just don't post your field reports here and expect to be able to tell what's good advice from an actual slayer from shitty advice from a newbie like yourself.
- 2. Make sure your looks, fashion, hairstyle, and accessories are as maxed out as they possibly can be.** Maybe if you're a naturally tall and handsome white or black guy, you can get away with just putting on a white t shirt and jeans but as a short Asian, trust me, everything adds up and you CANNOT AFFORD to have bad fashion or hairstyle. Maximizing looks is unbelievably important and will help you convert the girls that would normally autoreject you immediately upon approach. Get some blazers and trendy jeans from Zara. Get a fake rolex watch. Get a nice white guy haircut (especially important for Asians. I never see Asians with fobby haircuts doing well with other races. Get a pompadour fade and slay with every race of girls). If you're short, elevator shoes are a must. Even one inch of height makes such a big difference, you have no idea. I would recommend this as the starting point for every aspiring PUA. If you're fat, go on a keto diet and lose the pounds. If you're short, get elevator shoes.
- 3. It's not what you say, it's how you say it and how you look while you're saying it** - This is one of the biggest takeaways from my entire 3 year journey. As a beginner, it's only natural to see Pickup as a game of who can come up with the wittiest lines and comebacks. The newbie often focuses all his efforts on coming up with the perfect line for everything the girl says, which is completely wrong. The vast majority of issues in game would be solved by simply maxing out looks and perfecting TONALITY and BODY LANGUAGE. This is extremely hard to explain on text but the basic idea is that women don't really give a fuck what you say. How they determine if they like you or not is based primarily on what kind of vibe you give off. The vibe you give off is almost completely determined by your vocal TONALITY and BODY LANGUAGE. Some of the biggest mistakes of vocal tonality are not talking loud enough and talking too fast. I can almost guarantee that your results would go up a lot overnight by simply being conscious of talking 2X louder, 2X slower, and with a deeper more masculine pitch. Take your cell phone and record what you say to the girl in the bathroom mirror. Pay close attention to any nervous ticks in your facial expressions. When you first listen to your recordings you will be shocked at how bad they are. You think you sound confident but when you hear the recording, you'll see that you're talking so fast, in such a high pitched voice, and so quietly that the girl can barely understand what you're saying. No wonder you're getting rejected by so many right off the bat! Body language must be as straight as possible. Stand up against a straight wall at home and make sure your back, neck, and the back of your head are perfectly lined up in a straight line with the wall. It will feel awkward at first compared to your hunchback stance that you're used to, but soon it will feel more natural and trust me, it makes a world of difference to women. Girls can also tell if you suddenly straighten up before approaching them. Make sure you have straight and confident posture throughout your entire day, not just right before approaching girls. The easiest way to correct this is with a video camera and tripod stand. Record yourself going up and say what you'd normally say to a girl. Make sure that everything regarding your tonality and body language are perfect. Like I said, maybe if you're a tall good looking guy, you can get away with shitty tonality but as a hardcase short Asian, EVERYTHING has to be perfect.

**4. Practice your eye contact and use indirect observational openers** - It took me a very long time to realize that direct openers do not work unless you are good looking. I get the value of direct openers, they save time and energy on both parties when you go up and say "Hey, I thought you were really adorable and I wanted to say Hi, My name is Loreing". Direct openers are more masculine and establish a man to woman frame from the beginning, if you are conventionally attractive, then by all means stop being a pussy and go direct! The problem is that unless you're conventionally good looking, the girl has NO IDEA who you are. In her head, a random ugly dude just approached her in the street. The natural thing to do is reject you. Of course there are exceptions but the easiest way to go 2000 approaches and only 3 lays is to use Direct Openers. A much better opener is "Excuse me real quick, I have a question. I was on my way to [Starbucks or any other location]. Would you mind helping me out?" When she responds, say "Thanks so much, by the way, I just noticed something about you. You have this [positive and happy vibe / any other fashion or vibe observation]. The important thing is to make sure your eye contact is ABSOLUTELY ON POINT. Focus on one eye and one eye only and make sure your eyes are laser focused on that one eye. The difference between proper laser eye contact and indirect openers and direct "I think you're adorable" openers is night and day. You will get blown out of MUCH LESS SETS, and the girl will at least hear what you have to say. You will still fail with a lot of them because you don't click but at least you won't get autorejected anymore. You will get better and better at making accurate observations and there is nothing like an accurate observation to kick off a conversation on the right foot. As long as your EYE CONTACT, tonality and body language are on point, you don't have to do much crazy game stuff. Just be natural, see if there's a connection. If there is, escalate and try to go for an instadate or grab a number. Not rocket science.

**5. Do not take any courses or even watch any videos from RSD** - It will get you pumped up and hyped up to give them money but in terms of actual results, you'd be far better off buying a video camera with a tripod stand and taping your body language or buying an audio recorder and recording your approaches in field and METICULOUSLY pulling everything apart until it's perfect. Just about the only thing I agree with them on is that using canned pickup lines is not as good as using a more natural style of game. Other than that, it's mostly hype.

**6. You do not have to Go Monk Mode** - There is no reason you cannot advance in your professional career and succeed with women. You do not have to sacrifice game in order to climb in your career or vice versa. There is more than enough time in the day to get good at both and you'll find that they reinforce each other. As you improve you lifestyle, your game goes up and vice versa. As your game goes up, your ability to make social connections with the people at work that matter for your long term career go up. Game and work naturally reinforce each other. No reason to go monk mode and spend years only working on yourself.

These are my observations about game from over 3 years of experience. I started out getting almost no results and constantly getting blown out of every set I approached. I ended up being able to get a girl in bed pretty much whenever I go out. My last recommendation is that you don't use the knowledge I just laid out to hurt women or manipulate them into doing things they don't want to do. Girls are people too. It's incredibly easy to get cynical and jaded after getting rejected by everyone you approach when you go out but if you keep plugging away at your weaknesses, you will solve them one by one until you become good. You will never get good by blaming women. You only get good by criticizing and working on yourself. The first time you hear yourself talk and see the way your body language comes off, I guarantee it will become abundantly clear why women autoreject your creepy ass when you approach.

10 Comments Share Save Hide Report

90% Upvoted

Figure 5.27: A-rags to-riches story from /r/TheRedPill

The post shown above (fig. 5.27) was the first I read as part of my autoethnography. It involves a user describing how they followed /r/TheRedPill's teachings and went from having no success with women to becoming a "slayer". The user starts by outlining their "disadvantages"

and “advantages”. The disadvantages include the user’s race which points to the racism that runs through /r/TheRedPill. The same goes for the other two groups I researched. White men are the default, and any deviation from that is considered to be a disadvantage, with Asian men being seen as particularly low down this racial hierarchy (Baele et al., 2021, p.11; Hoffman et al., 2020, p.573; Jaki, Smedt, et al., 2019, sec.4.2). Height and physical attractiveness are also seen as important on /r/TheRedPill. Following on from this, the user outlines how they overcame their “disadvantages” through sheer perseverance and self-improvement. This is framed as a superhuman effort which involved “digging for solutions” and even paying \$3000 to go on an “RSD [Real Social Dynamics] bootcamp”. RSD is a seduction course run by Julien Blanc, one of the most well-known PUAs (Whitley and Zhou, 2020, p.2).

As discussed in the section on the magical voluntarist discourse on /r/TheRedPill, this group is firmly within the neoliberal consensus. The rags-to-riches discourse identified here represents a confluence of both the magical voluntarist and seduction discourses. They come together in the form of stories, like the one above, which show men that anyone can go from failure to success in their romantic lives. These rags-to-riches tales often involve a lot of perseverance and repeatedly implementing seduction techniques until they are successful. This user talks about how they had to go through 300 approaches before they first had sex and then how it took 2000 more before they had sex two more times. The message here, therefore, is that in order to achieve your goals you need to try hard and keep trying, possibly thousands of times. This again speaks to the magical voluntarist discourse present on /r/TheRedPill and the complete lack of an effective structure for dealing with failure. The only solution is to go back and try again, but this time fail better.

**Field Report****Introduction : Why this is such an achievement to me ? (you can skip this part if you do not care)**

First of all I like to thank each and everyone of you, from our endorsed contributors to those that simply upvoted quality posts. You changed my life and only for the best, for that you have my eternal gratitude.

So, what was I like 6 months ago ? Well, I used to be a true incel, for the 19 first years of my life (I'm almost 20 now), I was a kissless virgin. I did not win the genetic lottery (but I'm not ugly either, I have a pretty decent face, my downsides are that I am not tall (5'7), have acne and no facial hair) so the bluepill had devastating effects on me that I still struggle to remove. Like many of you did, I used to put women on a pedestal, a high one, to the point that I felt uncomfortable making eye contact with random women on the street. Needless to say until I swallowed TRP I had little to no experience with women (i.e I had close to zero female friends)

The bluepill told me that it was all okay though, that I had time, that I'll find a woman who'll like me for who I am, that I did not need to improve, to lift, to be a better person etc. BULLSHIT. My social life wasn't any better, I only had a few friends and almost no close friends, I was just that very nice guy people did not really care about.

So what happened ? I actually only discovered this sub 6 months ago but had been familiar with some of the terminology and teachings. Reading the posts made me realize how wrong my path was and that I needed to change, quickly. So I thought to myself *dude you need to get shit done asap, life won't magically get any better*. So I progressively started to change, I improved little by little. I picked up my true passion : fishkeeping, learned to be more disciplined, started reading about intrusting things, started lifting, bought nicer clothes and tried to get out of my comfort.

And then I started to improve socially, all the changes I'm about list here were made in less than 2 months, when I became disciplined enough : I started to make eye contact with people and progressively learned how to control my emotions (for me holding frame is the most important aspect of TRP), I stopped being insecure about not being accepted into the tribe I finally spoke what was onto my mind at the moment, I learned the basic tricks to keep a conversation going, I made a whole lot of friends, including a lot of female ones !!! I stopped staying at home all the time and started partying with my friends.

I became more confident than ever, more attractive than ever and higher social status than ever. A few ago I did was I never thought I was capable to : I approached a random girl (I only did it because I had a good excuse to make conversation) and you guys were right, it's pretty fucking easy, approach anxiety is such an irrational fear. Anyways I got this girl's snapchat but it didn't work, still, achieving this was already a big victory for me.

**Field Report :**

So 2 days ago we had a halloween party organised by the school, it started pretty late so before I went to a friend's apartment to celebrate his birthday, I had a great time and spoke to so many people. Then I started drinking, not big quantities, but I kept drinking, way more than I should and before I knew it, I was drunk. We went to the halloween party at 0:30 and for the next two hours of the party I barely have any memories.

However what I clearly remember is that things were started between me and a girl slightly taller than me, when I got too close to her, she told me I was too short for her (she's 5'8 and I'm 5'7) but I simply told her that it really did not matter and apparently that was enough to pass the shit test because the next minute we were kissing. We made out a few times over the course of several minutes then we parted ways. A few minutes later, I find myself dancing very closely with another girl, after a moment I went for the kiss and it worked, once again, we made out a few times and then she told that she didn't want things to go any further than this so I told her it was fine and left.

This, gentlemen, is what happens we you aren't hold back by your anxious mind, that you enter the IDGAF mode. Being drunk released my true potential, simply by making me daring. The only limits you have are the ones you set yourself, don't forget about that. Still, even drunk I didn't escalate things with the girls but honestly that wasn't my goal at that time, actually succeeding with girls was already satisfying enough to me.

Anyways now I know my real worth, that I have the potential to do what must be done, I will finally be able to lose my virginity !

The morals of the story are that TRP is life, that the bluepill sucks, that you need to stop holding yourself back.

To all my fellow beginners : you may feel hopeless, or that it's not worth it but the truth is there is hope for each and everyone of you. Just give it time and never fucking give up because the results are always worth the suffering. As for myself, I still have so so so much to learn but I'm glad I made it this far.

Thank you so much for reading, take care bros and please feel free to send a reply.

*Figure 5.28: Another example of a rags-to-riches story from /r/TheRedPill*

In the next post (fig. 5.28) a user also outlines their lack of success with women and how they managed to transform themselves by following teachings on /r/TheRedPill. This is common on /r/TheRedPill, which sees many discussions of how men transform themselves from weak, beta males into strong alpha males (Dignam and Rohlinger, 2019, p.600). These discussions always rely on sexual exploits that mark this transformation, showing the role women play in constructing the Red Pilled male identity (Ibid.). In this particular example, this user discusses how before finding /r/TheRedPill they were a “kissless virgin” and adhered to a “bluepill” mentality which taught him to be complacent and that there was no need to self-improve. As with the previous post, however, finding The Red Pill helped this user to realise that “life won’t magically get better” and that it is instead necessary to change, improve, and start “lifting” (short for weightlifting). Lifting in particular is presented as a panacea on /r/TheRedPill. It becomes a means by which you can improve almost all aspects of your life, from your physical health to your chances of picking up women. As has already been mentioned, going to the gym became a means of men exerting self-control at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Kimmel, 2013, p.63). This trend has continued and been accelerated in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century too.

The second half of this post consists of a “field report”. Posts tagged as “field report” are common on /r/TheRedPill and include a description of a particular encounter with a woman, or women, and then conclude with some simple, actionable lessons. The term ‘field report’ conjures up images of an anthropologist immersing themselves in a community or group in order to research them. It is used here to loan these posts a scientific legitimacy in much the same way /r/TheRedPill borrows and misuses concepts from evolutionary biology and psychology. In this particular ‘field report’ the user describes being at a party and how they kissed two different women. He puts his success down to entering “IDGAF [I don’t give a fuck] mode” meaning he stopped caring about consequences and acted confidently. As discussed in the previous section,

confidence is a key aspect of /r/TheRedPill's neoliberal mentality, and women become the means of confirming and building this confidence (Bratich and Banet-weiser, 2019, p.5012). In this equation, women are essentially resources which men use to validate their self-confidence and therefore secure their own identity (Ibid). Once again, the message here is that not falling into complacency and instead acting and improving yourself is how you achieve your goals and reclaim your masculine identity.

These rags-to-riches narratives are a vehicle for magical voluntarism in that they dramatise this belief by demonstrating how it is possible, through sheer strength of will, to achieve your goals – even if it means repeatedly failing. In this way, rags-to-riches stories reinforce the idea that men on /r/TheRedPill can encounter control over their lives and relationships and a masculine identity that values being independent, self-sufficient, and in control by adhering to the teachings of their respective community and exercising agency. Their aim, in other words, is to provide subjects with the confidence that they can achieve anything, covering up the systemic barriers and biases within the system (Bhattacharyya, 2014). Confidence is a key part of neoliberal subjectification (Bratich and Banet-weiser, 2019, p.5006). Neoliberalism both promises self-confidence and also requires it if subjects are to remain within its political logic (Ibid). Rags-to-riches posts, therefore, are both a display of masculine self-confidence – in that these users believed in themselves enough to continually try in spite of failure and were willing to take risks – and a means of cultivating confidence in other men. Other users reading these posts will see them as proof that having confidence in the seduction techniques offers on /r/TheRedPill will yield results, even if it takes hundreds, or perhaps thousands, of attempts.

★ 484  
META

**META**  
You're backsliding.

(self.TheRedPill)  
submitted 16 hours ago by **1**

My preacher used to say this in all of his sermons. He called it "backsliding" when someone was falling out of typical Christian habits. For example, if someone indulges in the occasional porno video, despite being Christian, they have backslidden.

This is not a religious post. Christians get a lot of things wrong. In the south, a lot of people don't believe in basic, proven scientific principles about nature. This post is solely referring to the concept of backsliding.

If someone thinks their girl wouldn't cheat on them with Tom Brady given the chance, they're backsliding. If someone quits lifting because they have a unique "personality" to compensate, they're backsliding. If you start to consider dating advice that women give you, you're backsliding. Going blue. Objectively a worse person than when you started.

The moment you share a secret with your girl, that's the moment you've fucked up. Female rappers are starting to make fun of guys who tell all their secrets to her after they fuck. At the time, she might have fake sympathy, but they're drying her up.

The only way to stay on path is to read the core tenets of TRP. Not these new guys trying to reinvent the wheel. Not the guys who say you need to be a "little beta" to pull women.

Quit. Being. Soft.

This post does not intend to have any insight, it's just a reminder to always, always, always, have your guard up.

70 comments save hide report

Figure 5.29: Post from /r/TheRedPill on staying strong



## 727 Confidence Above All

Red Pill Example

### Confidence Above All

So I've seen a couple "OMG! I just met the perfect girl! I don't wanna fuck this up! Plz HALP!" type posts, of late, and it's time for a gut check.

### There Are No Unicorns.

Yes, I know, your new girl's special-specialness is way specialer than all the other girls who have ever-lived.

Except she's not, or it isn't or whatever. Now go punch yourself in the dick ten times.

Why? Because if you play it like "Yes, *pookiekins*, you are the sweetest girl ever! I iz in LURVE!" then you won't see the anvil falling out of the sky, and then you'll get flattened. Betafag behavior dries pussies right out. Like the Sahara Desert. Or the Gobi Desert. Whichever one is drier.

What then to do?


### How Betas Fuck Up

This shit is important: write it down.

Guys fuck up by getting married or getting into an LTR and thinking that it's over, and they've "won." They anesthetize themselves with SportsBall and beer, quit lifting/exercising, chub out, and settle into their lives of unknowing desperation, being bitched out at home, and working in a 9 to 5 coffin. Then, one day, they wake up to find that they're getting divorced because "You've changed" or "I've changed" or "I'm not happy anymore" or some shit. So much for "winning". They get kicked out of the house, have their assets strip mined away and get to see their kids whenever the ex feels like it. And she sits around bitching to her friends about what a loser he was while she's living in a house that he's still paying for, wondering when she's going to get her groove back<sup>1</sup> or when she gets to EatPraySlut her way into the bed of some sexy foreign man.<sup>2</sup> He's still trying to figure out "what he did wrong" when really just got the realities of life shoved up his ass, "wif no lube, 'bruv. The BEST CASE scenario is that you stay married, don't hate each other, but wind up dying anyway. Of cancer or some other nasty shit.

### How To Not Fuck Up

You "don't fuck up" by doing what got you there in the first place. Amused Mastery. Abundance Mentality. Being kind of an asshole, but not like a REAL asshole.<sup>3</sup> Like a "funny" asshole. Be mildly subversive. If she says "No guy has ever talked to me the way that you do!" then you're doing it right.


Ex. One of my girls has like 7 orbiters - one actually gets tongue-tied around her, but stalks her on insta and 'likes' all her posts and photos. I told her to tell him that she has an owner, which she did - which I was pretty surprised but hey, good for her - and he just about shat himself at the thought. She enjoys teasing him - women love teasing betas - but there is zero chance he gets anywhere near her quim. Another guy writes poetry for her.<sup>4</sup> PUUUUUKE! He is intellectualizing his desire for her pussy. Me? I just told her I was going to **tie her up and fuck her** . Guess which one of us is Nailing That Tail? Hint: Not Percy Shelley. When she mentions him, I ask if he's written her a sonnet or something. If you are going to write fucking poetry, at least be Lord Byron, or Dylan Thomas, only without the syphilis and alcoholism. "The waste remains and kills" indeed.


Confidence slays. Keep her off-balance, like she's balancing a chair on its back legs, almost tips over, but catches herself. Be cocky - if I am ever at loss for words, I usually go with the most sexist thing I can think of, and it's like catnip for them, because the landscape is such a desert when it comes to masculine men. Oh, and if anyone mentions "toxic masculinity" near me, I correct them with either "traditional masculinity" or "heroic masculinity", as appropriate. Don't let the enemy use your own virtues against you.

### What To Do About It

First, remember that women are never the end goal in and of themselves, but rather a pleasant accompaniment to a man's life, which he pursues how he chooses.<sup>5</sup>

How do you gain confidence? **Become the Prize** .

How do you learn to approach women? You go out and do it. By the 25th approach, you won't be afraid anymore. By the 50th, you won't care how hot she is, by the 75th, you will be thinking, "What is the most fucked up thing I can say to her and still pull?" **Approach Anxiety: Faint Heart Never Fucked Fair Lady** .

Stop thinking whatever girl you are obsessing over is the Last Girl You Will Ever Talk To. **Abundance Mentality - Why It's Good For You** .

Stop being afraid of shit. **Uncle Vasya's Guide to Outcome Independence or Welcome to Level 99 DGAF** .

And never forget: **You Never Stop Competing** .

Now go forth and SLAY!

<sup>1</sup> The male lead in "How Stella Got Her Groove Back" was an obviously gay man using "Stella" for a visa to the US.

<sup>2</sup> The story of that story is pretty sordid.

<sup>3</sup> Never go full asshole, unless it's in a "Total War" scenario.

<sup>4</sup> In fairness, I did this once, also, but it was limerick about the pulchritude of her ass.

<sup>5</sup> "Men are here to DO shit. Women are here to make more men." - Napoleon Bonaparte, only he said it in French.

 79 Comments  Share  Save  Hide  Report

98% Upvoted

Figure 5.30: Post from /r/TheRedPill about the importance of confidence



The final two posts I want to discuss in this section are examples of confidence building in a purer sense (figs. 5.29 & 5.30). These posts show that, in many ways, despite championing rugged individualism, independence, and self-sufficiency, /r/TheRedPill is a type of self-help group. It is a place for men to collectivise their grievances, share solutions, and, most importantly, cultivate self-confidence. As Bratich and Banet-Weiser point out, despite its focus on individualism, neoliberalism has always relied on social relations, and one of the places where this tension is most visible is in the building of self-confidence (2019, p.5007). Cultivating confidence, in other words, relies on social relations. It requires both men to help to build each others confidence and women to act as capital in the cultivation of masculine self-confidence. The motivational posts on /r/TheRedPill represent the former type of collective confidence building and do so in it purest form with their main advice being to “be confident” and “stay strong”.

The first post shown here (fig. 5.29) demands that men not share secrets with women, “Quit. Being. Soft”, and “always, have [their] guard up”. Again, Ahmed’s observations about the hardening of surfaces in order to prevent external influence applies here (2007, p.2). Men need to ensure they are always hardened to protect against external threats. To do anything else is considered “backsliding”, a signifier which here has a multitude of different meanings. It stands in for being weak, not trying hard enough, being feminine, being soft, letting your guard down. It also stands for a regression from a point of manhood back towards a point weakness. All of the hard work that has been done to reach /r/TheRedPill’s masculine ideal, has been undone. This post also serves as a reminder to users that they need to stick to the teachings of /r/TheRedPill and have confidence that they will yield results. Beyond the actual message of this post, therefore, its aim is to provide motivation and confidence boost to those who follow /r/TheRedPill’s teachings.

The second post (fig. 5.30) reads like something a motivational speaker would say. It is at these points that /r/TheRedPill most reminds me of Tom Cruises' character, Frank T. J. Mackie, from Paul Thomas Anderson's film *Magnolia* (1999), mentioned in the previous interlude. Arriving on stage to Strauss's Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Mackie's first words are "respect the cock, and tame the cunt". Following this, Mackie outlines how his course, titled "Seduce and Destroy", will teach the skills men need to say "no! You will not control me! No! You will not take my soul! No! You will not win this game!". The same forcefulness of tone is found in the line "this shit is important: write it down" and the advice that, if you think your girlfriend is perfect, you should "go punch yourself in the dick ten times" in this post. It is assertive, confident, and pithy. This user also advocates a gendered form of punishment to those who fail to act or think in a particular way. The delivery of /r/TheRedPill's messages adds to the reassuring nature of this discourse. Everything is presented in a black-and-white, 'common-sense' way which appeals to those who feel uncertain and insecure. It is not just *what* Red Pill users say that is important, therefore, but also *how* they say it. Most importantly, the title of this post – "Confidence Above All" – strikes to the heart of what it is intending to do: build confidence in other /r/TheRedPill users in much the same way as a motivational speaker does.

Both of these posts are extending the offer of an encounter with control over women by reinforcing the idea that, by having the confidence to exercise agency and implement seduction techniques, women will want to have sex with them. They are, in essence, the online equivalent of a pep talk. The act of seduction and sleeping with women also builds self-confidence in and of itself. Women are expected to act as capital in the building of masculine self-confidence. When women do not adhere to their pre-designated role, they become the object of hate. They are, in essence, seen as a barrier to achieving what men want and what they feel entitled to. Confidence is thus also fundamentally gendered, as it is considered to be something that men need to cultivate

and which women are used as commodities to shore up (Bratich and Banet-weiser, 2019, p.5014). Cultivating confidence, therefore, is mixed up with the promise of an encounter with control over relationships that /r/TheRedPill offers. Women need to be controlled in order to force them to play their part as commodities. Users on /r/TheRedPill believe this used to be the case before feminism taught women their own sexual strategy which allowed them to circumvent this ‘natural’ order. As a result, men need to learn their own counter-techniques in order to re-dominate women and force them back into their role as commodities for building masculine self-confidence.

Neoliberalism, however, has entered a stage where its promises of “economic success, entrepreneurship, and happiness have been revealed as not just miscalculations or poor efforts, but swindles and scams” (Bratich and Banet-weiser, 2019, p.5010). The result of this is not only a crisis in techniques of confidence, but also the interpersonal processes that allow these confidence games to exist in the first place (Ibid, p.5011). In other words, “neoliberalism, designed to manage and feed off precarity, now finds its own techniques and expertise—and trust in them—becoming precarious” (Ibid). Men on /r/TheRedPill, with their focus on cons and swindles to get women to sleep with them, find themselves at the heart of this fracturing of trust and confidence. And what happens when this confidence begins to wane? The seduction techniques /r/TheRedPill teaches are by no means guaranteed to work or even improve the chances of women sleeping with the men who deploy them.

As seen in fig. 5.27 failure is almost baked into the techniques. Failing hundreds or even thousands of times is normal and all part of the process. On top of this, there is a dwindling confidence in experts and entrepreneurship more generally, as neoliberalism’s internal contradictions and cons are exposed. In the context of the PUA industry, Bratich and Banet-Weiser argue, the result is the subjects of pick up artist discourse eventually lose faith in this discourse and turn on it (Ibid, p.5013). They set up websites like PUAHate.com which aimed to

call out the pick up industry's scams and deceptions. Soon after, these ex-PUAs turn on the instruments of self-confidence who have failed, in their eyes, to play their part: women (Ibid). You therefore have the birth of Incel culture, where PUAs, attractive men, and women are all blamed for rigging the system in their favour and denying certain men (incels) the ability to participate in the sexual market place.

Within this fracturing and loss of confidence in PUA discourse, however, lies a kernel of hope. Although it may initially seem like the men on /r/TheRedPill will be lost in this cycle interminably, this is clearly not the case. As shown above, eventually the contradictions in any discourse mean it they can begin to fail to net subjects within their political rationality. In this context, PUAs transition from seduction techniques to Inceldom, as they begin to realise that the discourse they have hitherto adhered to is a con (2019, p.5013). After repeatedly failing, they will begin to question the techniques until, slowly but surely, or perhaps suddenly, the affective investment in this discourse begins to unravel. I would argue, however, that although Bratich and Banet-Weiser's argument is revealing and incredibly incisive this characterisation of what happens once a subject begins to question the PUA discourse is overly deterministic. Instead of inevitably transitioning from PUA to Incel, or MGTOW to Incel, at this moment, anything is possible. Herein lies the possibility that men might be offered an alternative discourse which is empathetic, positive and, above all, not misogynistic and harmful. Discourses that have become affectively invested in can, by their very nature, be divested of too.

There is, of course, no guarantee that as subjects begin to slip from one discourse's political rationality that they will be directed towards more positive ones. Even resistance towards certain discourses can be co-opted and recouped in order to shore up the position of the dominant narrative. What is missing is development and promotion of alternative discourses which seek to counter the assumptions that underpin the Manosphere on the whole. In other words, it is the

current absence of this guidance that creates the vacuum which groups like /r/TheRedPill and /r/MGTOW have rushed to fill, and without them men are likely to transition between these groups because they share the same underlying misogynistic logic. An anti-misogynistic narrative which sought to change the way men view vulnerability, insecurity, and uncertainty would go some way to offering an alternative which did not fall back on constructing femininity as the enemy and the neoliberal mindset as the only option.

## Interlude Three: Am I Really All the Things that are Outside of Me?

I predicted that immersing myself in these communities might have a negative effect on my own mental health before I had started my research. I knew early on, therefore, that should make sure that I had a good support network around me and a means to talk about any feelings that arose from the research. But although both my friends and I made jokes were about the potential of “going native”, I couldn’t have predicted the subtle ways in which spending a lot of time on these forums would influence my thoughts, emotions, and way of viewing the world. The forum that had, and continues to have, the biggest impact on me was undoubtedly Incels.co. The first thing I noticed was the vocabulary of Incels.co sneaking into my own daily internal monologue. I’d see people on the street and wonder whether or not an incel would consider them to be a Chad, Stacey, or a fellow incel.

In her ethnography of the pick-up artist industry, *Seduction: Men, Masculinity and Mediated Intimacy*, Rachel O’Neill reflects on picking up the pick-up artist’s mindset as follows:

“While I did not apply myself to the hard graft of seduction, over time I nevertheless took on aspects of the seduction mindset. Even without realising what I was doing, while observing training sessions I found myself scanning crowds in much the way trainers do, observing interactions with the same appraising eye, calculating odds on eventual outcomes.” (O’Neill, 2018, p.26).

I too felt as if I had a parallel inner monologue that reappraised situations like an incel might. For instance, I wouldn’t think much about seeing a couple walking down the street and holding hands, but then I would reappraise the situation from the ‘incel mindset’ I had cultivated and imagine the rage an incel might feel upon seeing a couple being affectionate in public. An incel might think of

the couple as engaging in some sort of personal attack directed at them, intended to highlight their romantic inadequacy and inability to get a girlfriend.

I also started to reappraise things that happened to me. This initially started out as a mental game I used to amuse myself. Say, for instance, someone cancelled a date. My initial reaction would be one of disappointment, of course, but I would also be understanding. Reappraising this in my ‘incel mindset’, however, I would imagine how an incel might view this as yet more evidence of their undesirability and women’s shallowness. “She’s probably seeing Chad instead,” I would joke to myself. Despite maintaining a detached interest in these thoughts, and often finding them amusing, I could not help but feel that these thoughts were also intrusive. I had not seen the world in this way before, nor had I had this vocabulary with which to understand and appraise certain situations. I had, therefore, become reluctantly fluent in their language. This was no clearer than whenever I met up with a friend who had a similar interest in incels. We would be able to communicate with each other using words and phrases we had picked up on Incels.co, often in a humorous way, but there was also a realisation that we might in some way be perpetuating, endorsing, or somehow reinforcing the incel worldview.

Perhaps the most insidious way in which Incels.co affected me was to do with the obsession with physical appearance. Although almost everyone experiences some degree of self-consciousness in their life, I cannot help but feel that the bout I experienced during my research was related to my time spent on Incels.co. Incels frequently criticise their own appearance in minute detail. Before going on the forum, I was unaware of the myriad ways in which your appearance can be found lacking when held up to contemporary beauty ideals. To a great extent, this shows my privilege as a white man who has been able to go through life relatively unscathed by the pressure to adhere to unrealistic beauty ideals. To incels, one small detail – like your eyes being too far apart – can render you hideous. Sometimes they even use scientific language to

describe the various ways in which their facial structure is lacking in comparison to Chad. I noticed myself become increasingly aware of my facial features, in particular my teeth. Below are a few extracts from my fieldnotes.

22<sup>nd</sup> January 2020

I wanted to write in here briefly though to talk about something which might be related to my research. Having spent a lot of time on the incel forum which is obsessed with looks, I'm concerned that some of that obsession has rubbed off on me a bit. I've been self-conscious about my teeth in the past, but the last couple of days it's been really intense. I keep checking them and wishing they were straighter. I'm even considering getting something done about them.

I think all of this could be a really interesting part of my PhD. It's going native in a sense, although I sort of have that distance from it. That said, this whole teeth thing has given me a slight insight into what these people feel like apparently on a daily basis. They're immersed in a community obsessed with looks which is incredibly critical of them. In some ways, I think a lot of the people on the forum probably aren't bad looking, but they're sort of locked in this collective delusion almost.

10<sup>th</sup> February 2020

I've written extensively about the whole teeth thing I'm having at the minute, but talking to my counsellor actually brought out a few more things and crystallised some thoughts.

A lot of this actually comes off the back of something I thought of in the gym yesterday. There's a line in Taste by Animal Collective which actually sums up what I've been thinking about for the last few weeks: "Am I really all the things that are outside of me?". I think



this really succinctly puts across the idea that we are affected by things around us, be they objects or ideas.

The lyric mentioned above comes from the song 'Taste' by Animal Collective, an experimental pop band from Baltimore, Maryland. At the end of the song, the line repeats over and over, like a mantra and it became a common refrain throughout my research. Hidden within it, I think there is a fundamental question about who we are and what makes us us. For me, it helped to bring into focus a number of thoughts and feelings I had been having both about myself and incels more generally. In this case, the "things...outside of me" include concepts and ideas I had previously not been exposed to. Words like 'Chad' and 'Stacey' which themselves open up entirely new ways of categorising people and seeing the world, and the concept of lookism whereby your worth is defined purely by your physical appearance.

Being exposed to new concepts can be an emancipatory experience. New ways of seeing the world can open up and liberate you. Being able to label experiences and "things" in our world is undoubtedly valuable. But sometimes these new ideas and concepts are entirely welcome. I am reminded of a video by YouTuber Abigail Thorn who runs the Philosophy Tube channel, in which she points out that some ideas we have feel as if they were planted there by others (2019). They are not fundamentally part of us and can be damaging, restrictive, and painful. It is possible to identify and interrogate these ideas though, and to ask ourselves whether we think they are useful or actually reflect our deeper beliefs. Being on Incels.co certainly led to some unwanted ideas being placed in my head, and it took a while to come to terms with them.

As I mentioned in the third paragraph of my entry on January 22<sup>nd</sup> 2020 above, I feel like these self-conscious thoughts also gave me a tiny glimpse into what must be going on inside the minds of some of the users on Incels.co. They are men with already low self-esteem who are then spending significant amounts of time with a community which thrives off pointing out minute

‘defects’ in both their personalities and physical appearances. For them, these ‘defects’ are made worse by being part of a community which constantly confirms your anxieties and insecurities. Whereas a friend might tell you that your teeth are fine, or that it does not matter anyway if they are not perfectly straight, users on Incels.co will confirm that it is indeed incredibly important and that you are doomed to a life of misery as a result. I at least had a sense of distance from this. I felt I knew that a desire to be slim, have perfect teeth, dress in a certain way, etc. is just a product of existing in a context which puts a lot of emphasis on physical attractiveness, and then leverages this pressure to sell products to alleviate the anxiety that arises from not adhering to these beauty standards. But incels are told that this is just a natural and inevitable state of being. And, even though I felt I knew this, it didn’t stop me feeling self-conscious and anxious. This shows that the pressures that incels feel, and the mental anguish that it leads to, are by no means limited to Incels.co. They are symptomatic of much wider forces.

## Chapter Six: Is There No Alternative?

### Introduction

On 12<sup>th</sup> August 2021 news broke that a 22-year-old man from Plymouth, a city on the south coast of England, had shot five people before killing himself (The BBC, 2021). The shooter, later identified as Jake Davison, had links to Reddit forums used by incels and posted an “unscripted rant” (his own words) two weeks before the attack (Weaver and Morris, 2021). Davison’s Internet history also shows links to the UK Libertarian party, anti-gun control movements, and support for Donald Trump, showing that it is rarely as simple as linking these events to a single forum or subculture (Ibid). It was not the first time an attack has been linked to incel subculture. The 2018 Toronto van attack; 2020 machete attack at a Toronto massage parlour; the 2020 Hanau shooting<sup>2</sup>; the 2020 shooting in the Westgate shopping centre in Arizona; and the 2020 Virginia bomb maker who wrote a letter imagining targeting “hot cheerleaders” (New America, 2021) also all took place during my research. There have of course been other attacks which took place before my research. The most prominent was Elliot Rodger who killed four men and two women and uploaded a 107,000 word manifesto in between his attacks (Freeman, 2014).

It is easy when researching an online community to feel removed from the reality of the danger these groups pose to women and those who research them. The Internet can often feel like an imaginary dreamscape, the people on it unreal in some way. The confluence of anonymity, invisibility, and asynchronicity mean that online users need to invent imagined people performing

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<sup>2</sup> The Hanau shooting turned out to be unrelated to incel subculture, despite speculation at the beginning linked to the perpetrator stating in his manifesto that he had not been in a relationship for 18 years (New America, 2021).

the utterances (Suler, 2004, pp.322–323). These imagined people can appear to inhabit an imagined world which is separate from the responsibilities and consequences of the offline world, something that has been linked to the prevalence of online invective and abuse (Ibid, p.323). I certainly felt this way at times during my research, but shocking events like Davison’s shooting and watching Minassian’s police interview brought home the reality and urgency of researching and understanding incel ideology and communities (The Mob Reporter, 2019). Of the three forums I chose to research, Incels.co is the one which poses the biggest threat of direct harm to women but also in terms of the ability for this group to draw in new users. Groups like The Red Pill and MGTOW certainly have links with domestic abuse, harassment, and micro-aggressions but the causation is less clear. Incel subculture, on the other hand, is the only group of those I chose to research to have multiple shootings directly connected to it through police investigations that have looked into browser histories and discovered that perpetrators have been on incel-related forms.

Of the three groups, Incels.co is also the one I found most difficult to understand. Unlike The Red Pill and MGTOW which follow a fairly simple pattern of providing men with solutions to their problems, Incels.co is more complex. Viewing this forum through the lens of my theoretical framework threw up more questions than answers and revealed a number of contradictions and seemingly counter-intuitive conclusions. My research on Incels.co was guided by a fairly simple question: why would men want to join and be part of a community that makes them feel worse? Worse not only about the world around them, but also about themselves. The Red Pill and MGTOW are optimistic groups. By this I mean both that they provide actionable solutions to men’s lives (e.g. going to the gym, eating a certain diet, learning particular pick up techniques, or rejecting women entirely in the case of /r/MGTOW), but also, on a deeper level, that they have expectations about the future along the lines of progress and improvement (van der Lugt, 2021, p.11). This means they believe in self-improvement at that self-improvement can lead

to desirable outcomes. Although they ultimately fail to deliver on the promise of wholeness, as discussed in the previous chapter, there is at least an attempt at self-improvement. Incels.co is devoid of any such efforts.

In this chapter I will argue that although incel ideology is distinct from that of The Red Pill and MGTOW, there are some key similarities. Furthermore, discourses on Incels.co do offer men an encounter with wholeness, albeit in some starkly different ways to /r/TheRedPill and /r/MGTOW. Firstly, I will look at how the fatalism at the heart of incel ideology provides a relief from the responsabilism inherent in neoliberalism. In essence, Incels.co is therefore offering a kind of anti-control, or an escape from responsibility for one's circumstances. Following on from this, I will look at how Incels.co is made up of discourses that offer an encounter with control and identity, but in a slightly different way to /r/MGTOW and /r/TheRedPill. Incels.co offers a both a sense of belonging and emotional support which allows men on this forum an encounter with both a particular masculine identity and a sense of control over their emotions. Finally, I will look at how an incel-specific form of vicarious victory offers men on this forum an encounter with control and identity in a similar way to vicarious victory on /r/MGTOW. As with The Red Pill and MGTOW, however, all three discourses fail to deliver on their promise of wholeness. But, as with the previous chapter, out of this analysis comes hope. Beyond the belief that there are no alternatives to the system currently in place, lies a world of possibility. Different ways of being in the world abound, and here lies the possibility that those embedded in incel discourses might come to see divest in their fatalistic worldview and invest in one which is more optimistic and caring.

## **Incel Fatalism**

In two videos in late July 2021, a month before he shot and killed five adults and a three-year-old girl, Jake Davison, the aforementioned Plymouth shooter, said he felt like he was “fighting an

uphill battle with a big fucking rock on [his back]” and that he did not have “any willpower to do anything any more [sic]” (Weaver and Morris, 2021). Davison’s language alone is indicative of his involvement in incel subculture. The despair and frustration that comes through in these quotes is characteristic of the tone of Incels.co and is fundamentally what distinguishes this forum from /r/TheRedPill or /r/MGTOW. Unlike the those forums, Incels.co is devoid of solutions or hope that you can change your life for the better. In place of magical voluntarism, there is instead a deep-seated fatalism. In this section, I will explore this fatalism and ask why it is certain men are attracted to what, on the face of it, is a despairing and hopeless ideology. Incel fatalism does not fit neatly into my theoretical framework as it is hard to tell how a fatalistic and pessimistic outlook offers these men an encounter with control and identity. I argue instead that this discourse offers a release from the responsabilism that underpins neoliberal society. In other words, it provides incels with a means of escaping the overburdening of the Will that men on both *MGTOW* and *The Red Pill* experience. Whilst initially this might seem like a pessimistic and depressing outlook, therefore, it in fact provides relief through the abdication of responsibility.

### **The Slow Cancellation of the Future**

Incels adhere to what is referred to as the “black pill”. This is similar to the “red pill” ideology in that symbolically swallowing this pill awakens one to the “reality” that women control society and men are now the oppressed group (Baele et al., 2021, p.9). The difference here is that “black pill” ideology sees this hierarchy as inescapable and unchangeable. In other words, “whereas the “red pill” keeps category boundaries permeable and permits hope, the “black pill” closes them and only produces nihilistic despair” (Ibid). Acknowledging this difference is crucial. This aspect of their ideology is fundamentally different not only to /r/TheRedPill and /r/MGTOW, but to neoliberalism more generally. Gone are any notions of self-enhancement, entrepreneurship, and magical voluntarism. In its place there is only self-degradation, despair, and fatalism.

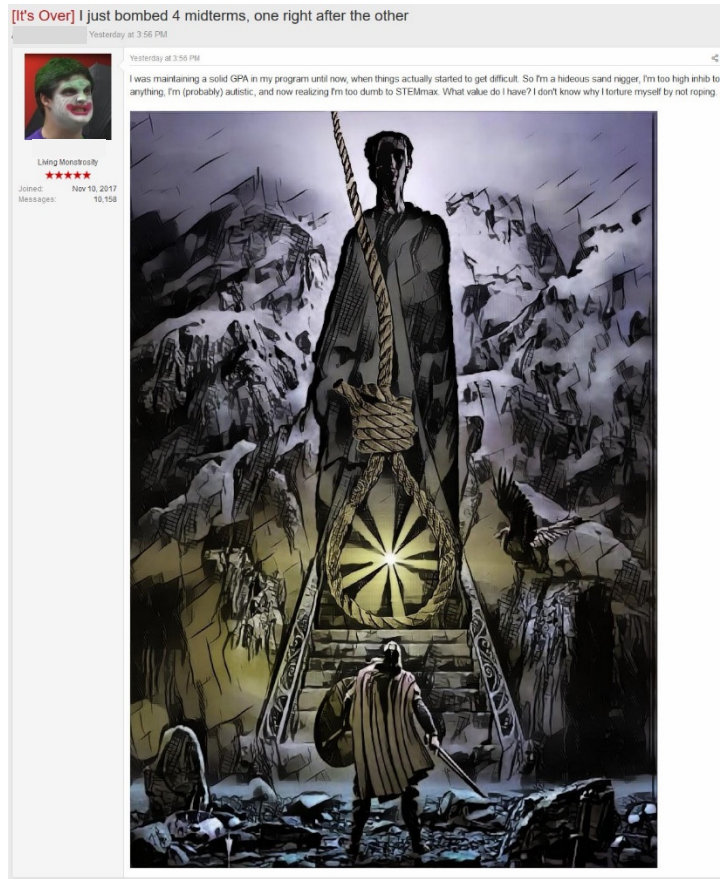


Figure 6.1: Post from Incels.co featuring a graphic depicting suicidal ideation



Figure 6.2: Meme depicting Blackops2cel

The post shown above (figs. 6.1) features a user sharing their experience of having recently done badly in several midterm exams. It is full of terms common to Incels.co such as “roping”, “STEMmax” and “it’s over”. The first of these is a euphemism for suicide. The second term

includes a suffix that is common in incel subculture: “max”. Adding “max” or “maxx” to a word means an attempt to improve in this area with the aim of enhancing your life, sometimes with an aim of getting female attention. For instance, the term ‘moneymax’ means to focus on improving one’s financial status. In this case, “STEMmax” refers to doing well at STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). This post is tagged as “it’s over” which is a common refrain on Incels.co<sup>3</sup>. It essentially means that there is no longer any more hope and that the incel uttering this statement has been defeated. Related to this term is the phrase “it never even began” which takes the idea of “it’s over” one step further. It reflects the idea that the opportunities available to incels, in terms of relationships and other life events, are decided by genetics before they were even born.

The text is accompanied by a large image of a knight facing up to a hangman’s noose behind which stands a shadowed, cloaked figure. I was unable to find the origins of this image, but the figure behind the noose is known as Blackops2cel, a user who posted on the subreddit /r/amiugly and achieved meme status among incels. His image is used by incels in various memes which ironically raise him to a messiah-like status (fig. 6.2). The knight in the foreground appears to be at the end of a long journey. Both this image and accompanying text, therefore, is indicative of the fatalism that runs through Incels.co. This user has failed their midterms, and therefore sees no option but to consider killing themselves.

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<sup>3</sup> Incels.co allows you to tag posts with different categories, in this case the tag (in red) is “It’s Over”. These tags allow you to sort through posts based on a particular theme and give some idea of what the content of the post itself will be, even before reading the body of text.



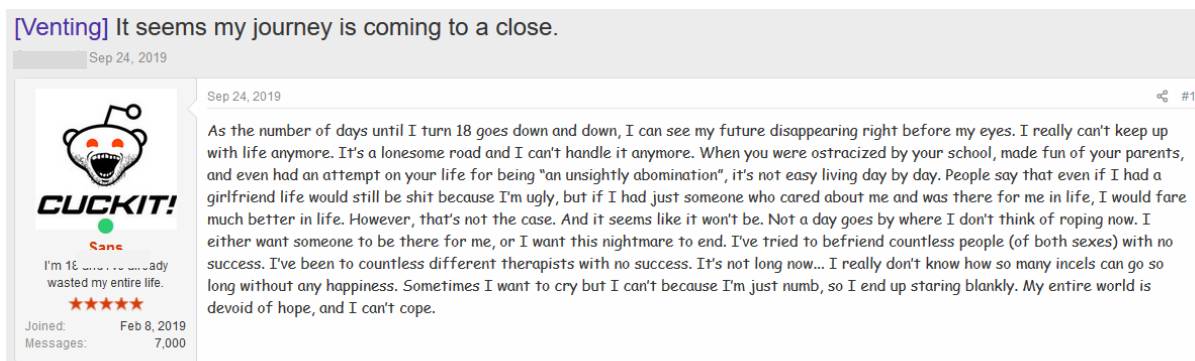


Figure 6.3: Post from Incels.co featuring suicidal ideation and despair

The next post shown above (fig. 6.3), has a similar theme. Again, it contains incel terminology, like “roping”, and it is laden with despair. There is also the idea of coming to the end of a journey which is also reflected in the image seen in figure 6.1. This post is made by a user who has yet to turn 18 and already feels as if his future is “disappearing right before [his] eyes” and that he “can’t keep up with life anymore”. The final line – “My entire world is devoid of hope, and I can’t cope” – is particularly emotive, and posts like this one highlight the fact that users on Incels.co are genuinely suffering. In many cases, mental illness is either explicit or implicit in the posts made by various users and reading this type of post during my time researching Incels.co made me stop and think about the experiences these users were going through. For all the ridicule, disgust, and ire directed at incels – and they undoubtedly have views which justify those responses – it is a reminder that the misogynistic discourses on this forum coexist alongside genuine mental illness and anguish.

Another thing that it is worth noting about this post is the font it is written in. Most posts on Incels.co are written in a standard sans serif font, but this one is in Comic Sans, a font widely ridiculed online for both how it looks and how it is often used in inappropriate contexts by those who are less computer literate (BBC, 2010). Comic Sans is often used to denote playfulness, and so its use here undermines the heavy, emotive content of the post itself. This is characteristic of

the dark humour found on Incels.co, where suicidal ideation, depression, and despair are often discussed with layers of irony. What both of these posts show, therefore, is the fatalistic outlook incels have and their belief that there is no hope for the future. Whilst reading these posts, I was put in mind of Mark Fisher's phrase "the slow cancellation of the future". Although referring to the lack of new cultural developments under neoliberal capitalism, this phrase also applies to incels, who see their future as non-existent. In not being able to engage in sexual or romantic relationships, incels feel they have no future. Life may continue on, but nothing will happen. In short, "it's over".

Price and Pratten refer to this as a "future lost and stolen" (2021). They go on to argue that it is the slow cancellation of the future that underpins the incel worldview more than entitlement to sex or the idea of sexlessness itself (Ibid). In other words, incel fatalism comes not from sexlessness but from their inability to participate in modern neoliberal society. Whereas the ideologies present on both /r/TheRedPill and /r/MGTOW tell their members that they are able to exercise agency, shape the world around them, and be entrepreneurial, incel fatalism precludes any ability to exert free will. Under neoliberalism, the ability to exercise agency is fundamental to the subject's sense of self-worth and value. Thus, "the inability to exert free will denotes...the most profound failure" for the neoliberal subject (Ibid). Price and Pratten's analysis, therefore, highlights how important agency (or a lack thereof) is in explaining the incel worldview. Although they refer to sexlessness in their article, to them, the act of sex is less important than its symbolic meaning: "recognition as a valuable member of modern [neoliberal] society" (Price and Pratten, 2021). This is certainly the case but bringing in gender can help to build upon this conclusion. This means bringing in the gendered expectations and sense of entitlement men have which helps to explain why, even if incels are fundamentally more concerned with the cancellation or theft of their futures, their discussions of fatalism linger mostly on the topic of sexlessness.

Bringing gender to Price and Pratten's (2021) analysis reveals the way in which incels stand at the intersection of both neoliberalism and masculinity goes unnoticed, and when this goes unnoticed, so does the misogyny that underpins this forum. After all who is accused of stealing the incels' future? The result of incels' inability to fit the position of the masculine neoliberal subject is despair and anger directed specifically at women for not providing what (incel) men feel entitled to. Men are socialised into feeling entitled to self-confidence and, as Srinivasan points out, women's social reproductive role in the domestic sphere (2021, p.120). These are both connected, as it is ultimately women's social reproductive labour which provides men with confidence (Bratich and Banet-weiser, 2019, p.5014). When men do not get what they feel they are entitled to, their anger is directed at women for threatening their position both as men and neoliberal subjects. When exercising agency is seen to equal sexual virility, women exercising their own agency and rejecting men is taken as an existential threat to a man's identity.

Bratich and Banet-Weiser – two authors to whom this chapter is heavily indebted – take gender into account in their analysis and argue that incels are essentially failed PUAs (2019, p.5005). Their analysis helps to elaborate on incels' relationship with neoliberalism, pointing out that while neoliberalism promises an encounter with happiness, self-confidence, and success if only individuals try hard enough, it offers no affective structure when subjects fail to achieve these things (Ibid, p.5014). As discussed in the previous chapter in the context of /r/TheRedPill, neoliberalism's only course of action for when the subject fails is to place the blame for failure on the individual and command that they try again and this time fail better (Ibid). Eventually, the subject may see neoliberalism's promise of happiness, confidence, and success for what it really is: a con. In the PUA to incel example, this means male subjects begin to see the system as rigged against them. Incels, therefore, feel they are losing out, not benefitting, from the neoliberal system, even if they do not use the precise language of neoliberalism themselves. Given that neoliberalism

provides no affective structure for dealing with failure, failed PUAs who have realised that the system is a con instead turn to online communities where they collectivise their grievances. Instead of internalising responsibility, as neoliberalism demands, the result is an externalised responsibility which is placed on women and a belief that absolutely nothing can be done to change their situation (Ibid, p.5007).

Bratich and Banet-Weiser therefore provide an understanding of how an inability to exercise agency means you not only fail as a neoliberal subject, but fail as a man too (2019, p.5014). As discussed at length in the previous chapter, the ability to exercise agency, in other words to act, is intrinsically linked with masculine identity. Thus, by feeling both unable to exercise agency and to engage in sexual relationships, incels find themselves at the intersection between masculinity and neoliberalism, losing out from both. Srinivasan describes incels representing the collision of “two pathologies”: neoliberalism and patriarchy (2021, p.120). Neoliberalism pushes the logic of the market to more areas of people’s lives, but incels cannot rely on the domestic sphere and women’s social reproductive role to protect and heal them from the harms of the market (Ibid). In other words, the family is seen as a site of feminine care, and women provide a role which supports capitalism by giving men emotional and sexual compensation for the “coercion of market relations” (Ibid). This helps to explain why, although incels are primarily concerned with the cancellation of their future, their attention rests mostly on sexual and romantic relationships. Women, in other words, are not providing them with either the means to cultivate confidence or their social reproductive role.

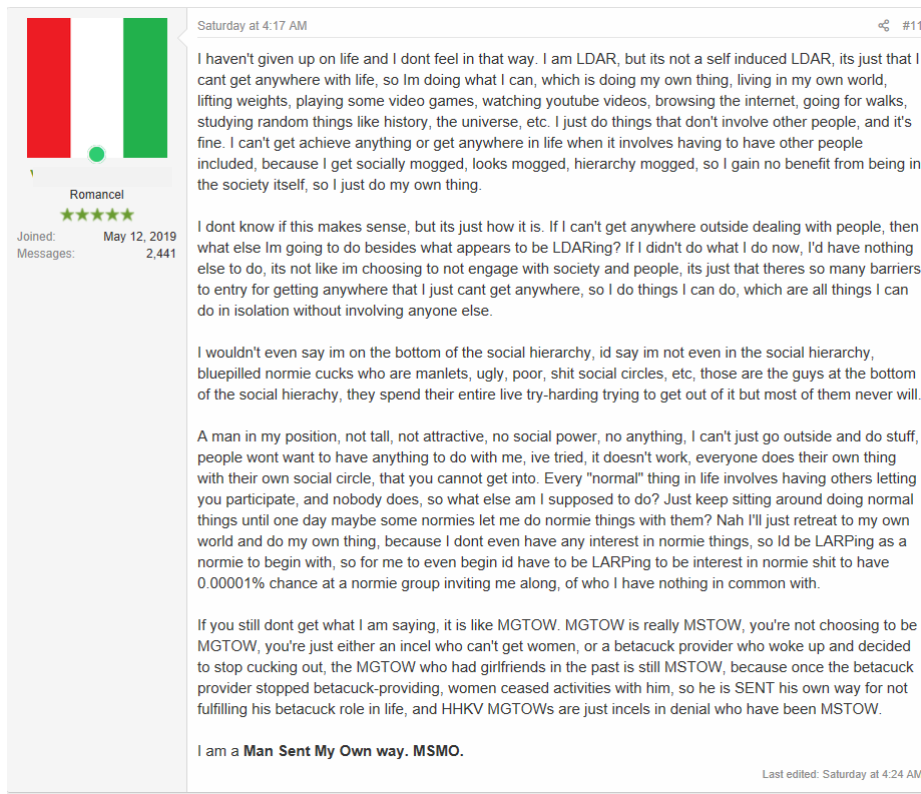


Figure 6.4: Example of term "LDAR" being used in context on Incels.co



Figure 6.5: Another example of term "LDAR" in context on Incels.co

The imagery used to convey the slow cancellation of the future is that of decay, rotting, and collapse, all of which are themes that recur frequently on Incels.co (Price and Pratten, 2021).

Nowhere is this clearer than in the term “LDAR” which features frequently in incel parlance. The term stands for “lay down and rot” and refers to giving up on any hope of improvement to the extent where users cease to care for themselves. I have included two examples of this term in context above (figs. 6.4-6.5). In the first post (fig. 6.4) a user conveys their lack of hope in stark terms, saying that they are “LDAR, but...not self induced LDAR”. This draws a distinction between a state of LDAR that is voluntary and one that is involuntary. This user feels he is suffering from the latter. He feels that no matter how hard he tries, he is swimming against the tide whilst not “get[ting] anywhere with life”. In one particularly emotive moment, this user says they do not feel as if they are “on the bottom of the social hierarchy” but “not even in the social hierarchy”. This conveys the sense of alienation that is so common on Incels.co. Figure 6.5 uses LDAR in a slightly different context. This post features a list of actor and musician Jared Leto’s girlfriends since he was 24. The aim here is to highlight how many girlfriends attractive men get compared to incels who get none. The post ends with the line “meanwhile we just LDAR”. There is a contrast here, therefore, between Jared Leto who is able to exercise agency and get a girlfriend and incels who unable to exercise agency and therefore can only ‘lay down and rot’.

Incel fatalism is also informed by EP/B which melds together with neoliberalism to form what Ging refers to as a form of “turbocharged genetic determinism” (2019, p.13). Theories of evolutionary biology and psychology do exist on /r/MGTOW and /r/TheRedPill, and the rest of the Manosphere, and inform the hierarchies that span across these groups but the deployment is “confused and contradictory” (Ibid). On /r/TheRedPill aspects of EP/B are used and misused to justify men’s predatory behaviours and to construct women as objects devoid of any agency, whilst simultaneously being something that men can overcome and use to their own advantage (Van Valkenburgh, 2018, p.11). Concepts like hypergamy, the idea that women are biologically programmed to trade up in terms of relationships, are used to explain women’s behaviour and

argue that they have an innate need to be dominated by “alpha” men (Ging, 2019, p.12). On Incels.co, on the other hand, evolutionary theories are prescriptive for both men and women and feed into the fatalistic worldview that permeates all incel discussion. Incels draw on very similar concepts and theories, but believe they are completely rigid and doom you to a life of incelhood from which it is impossible to escape. Unless, of course, you are ‘Chad’ and graced with good looks. But if you deviate from society’s beauty standards in any way, then you have lost the genetic lottery and there is no hope of escaping a life of incelhood.

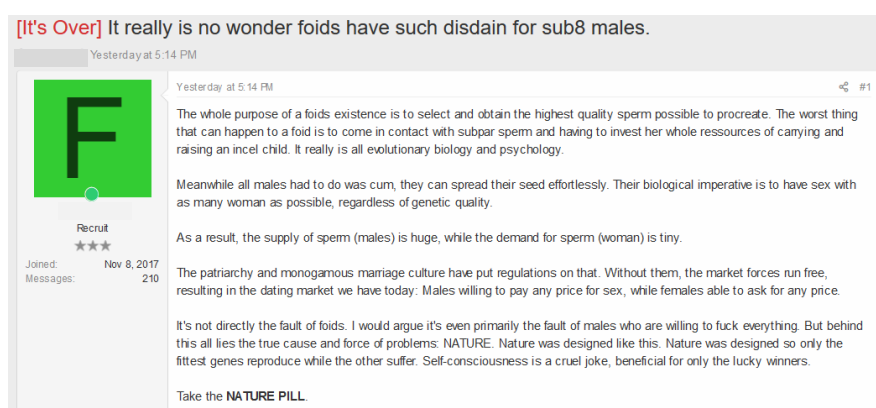


Figure 6.6: Post from Incels.co in which a user explains why they think women hate "sub8" men

The post seen above (fig. 6.6) provides a perfect example of the melding of EP/B and neoliberal economics on Incels.co. Here, a user explains the existence of incels based on a supply and demand theory of procreation and argues that, in the past, patriarchy and monogamy managed to regulate this market. Without either of these structures, however, “market forces run free”. The result is too much demand and not enough supply, and so inevitably some men go without sex. The conclusion is that “nature was designed like this” allowing no room for consideration of the socially constructed aspects of human relationships and hierarchies. Sticking to their logic, it is possible to see incels as a form of market failure, a characterisation which becomes particularly relevant when considering that some incels advocate for the state redistributing women and providing some form of “sexual minimum”, an idea that is found not only on incel forums but

academia and media too (Douthat, 2018; Srinivasan, 2021, pp.116–120). Neoliberal economics and evolutionary theory, therefore, informs incels’ entirely deterministic, and therefore fatalistic, worldview in which there is no escape from the position you were assigned, by your genetics, at birth.

This is a slightly different configuration of EP/B to the one found on /r/TheRedPill. Men on /r/TheRedPill believe the combination of neoliberalism and EP/B can be used to their advantage. Women are pre-programmed it’s easy to predict their actions and men are able to exploit this. When it comes to men, EP/B is used to justify men’s predatory behaviour and their right to sex, whilst at the same time they believe themselves able to transcend their biological programming. This tension does not exist in the same way on Incels.co. On this forum, incels too believe themselves to be slaves to EP/B programming. They believe they have lost out in the genetic lottery and are therefore deficient in any number of physical or mental ways. This characterisation of human relationships along capitalist-economic logic forms women as the “sellers” and men as the “buyers” of sex, and in this system incels are losing out because they lack sexual capital (Van Valkenburgh, 2018, p.15).



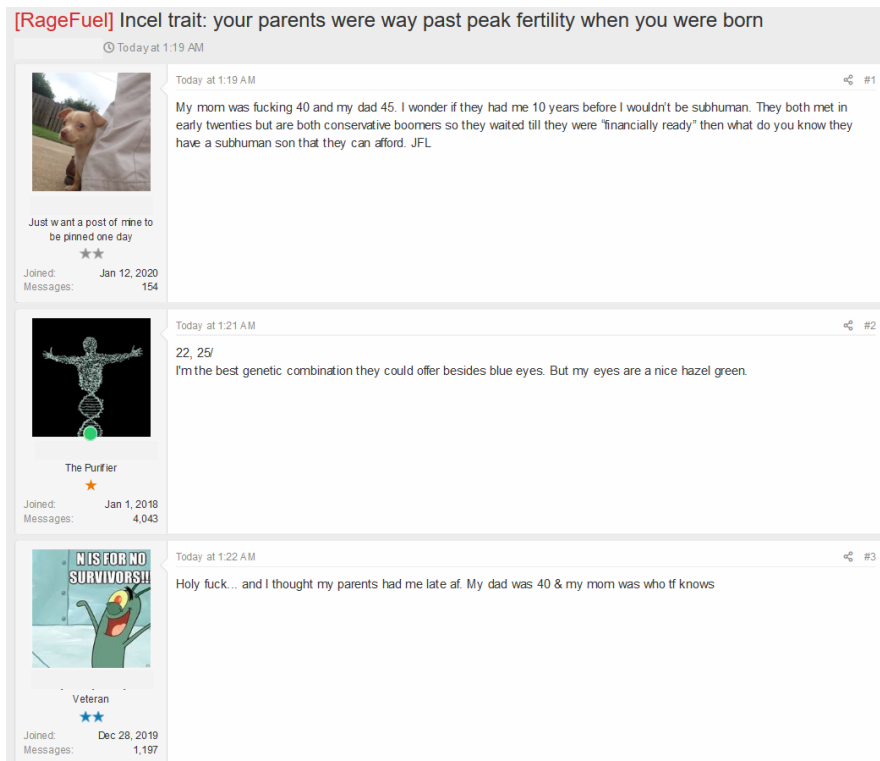


Figure 6.7: Post from Incels.co about biological determinism

The post above (fig. 6.7) demonstrates another example of how EP/B informs incel fatalism. This user claims that your parents being past their “peak fertility” when you were born is an incel trait. This shows the genetic determinism which runs throughout a lot of incel ideology. In a world when all failure is turned back on the individual and made their responsibility, incels’ deterministic ideology removes all responsibility for failure and argues that everything is pre-determined by genetic lottery and other external factors (Bratich and Banet-weiser, 2019, p.5017). Incels, therefore, have moved starkly from one extreme to another. You can moneymax, statusmax, or gymmax all you want, but nothing will change because you have been genetically pre-determined to fail.

## Rejecting Solutions

Given its deterministic outlook and complete lack of hope for the future, Incels.co offers no solutions to men's suffering. In fact, incels actively ridicule and shun any proposed remedies to their situation. In direct contrast to the magical voluntarist outlook that exercising agency can bend the world around to you, incels reject the self-improvement mantra which is so embedded in neoliberal capitalist society (Price and Pratten, 2021). Occasionally, however, some solutions are proffered. The idea of moneymax and STEMmax have already been introduced, but there are many other terms to which the suffix "max" has been added, including looksmax, statusmax, and lowinhibmax. The first two listed here are self-explanatory, and the third refers to becoming someone who has low inhibitions, referring to fact that many users on Incels.co suffer from social anxiety as well as other conditions which make socialising a cause for anxiety.

Many of these 'solutions', however, are accused of being 'copes', a term which appears frequently on Incels.co and refers to any attempt to avoid the harsh reality of life by adopting untrue beliefs which aim to lessen the pain of existence. They can range from distractions to ways of actually trying to make improve circumstances, but in both cases mentioning them draws ridicule (Price and Pratten, 2021). This not only makes incels distinct from /r/TheRedPill and /r/MGTOW, but extremist groups more generally. Whereas most extremist groups consider societal change both possible and desirable, incels see no such hope and instead turn to suicide and distraction based 'copes' as the only possible solutions (Baele et al., 2021, p.17). It is also interesting to note how, in other contexts, finding ways of coping with something difficult or emotionally overwhelming is seen as a positive trait. On Incels.co, however, it is viewed as something wholly negative. To find ways of coping is to try and hide away from the brutal reality that nothing can be done about one's situation.

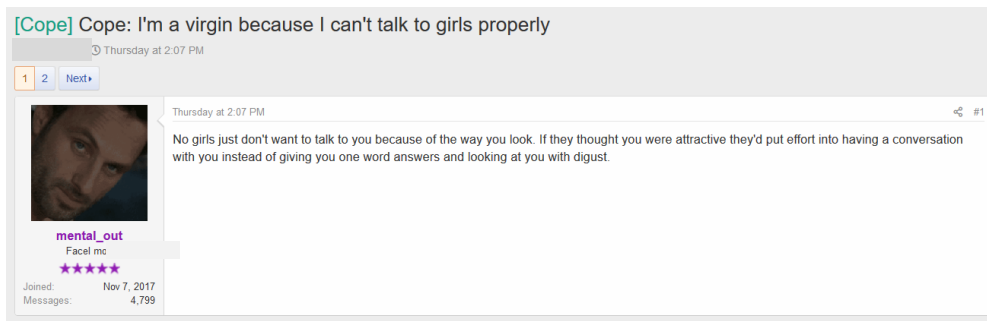


Figure 6.8: Post from Incels.co demonstrating use of the term "cope"

The concept of the 'cope' is so common on Incels.co that it has its own category as seen in the post above (fig 6.8). In this post, a user posits the idea that being a virgin might be based on a man's inability to "talk to women properly", but instantly dismisses it as a "cope" because, in reality, women just "don't want to talk to you because of the way you look". In this case, the term "cope" is being used as a means of labelling an idea as ridiculous or simply a deluded means of dealing with suffering rather than facing it head on. The post is overtly denying the idea that there is any possibility or hope for improvement. Whereas someone might think they are just a virgin because they cannot speak to girls properly, and therefore might be able to improve their chances of having a sexual relationship with a woman through learning seduction techniques, this user is saying that this option is unavailable to incels because they are fundamentally unattractive. Thus, no amount of effort you put into self-enhancement will ever yield results, demonstrating incels' staunchly anti-entrepreneurial outlook.

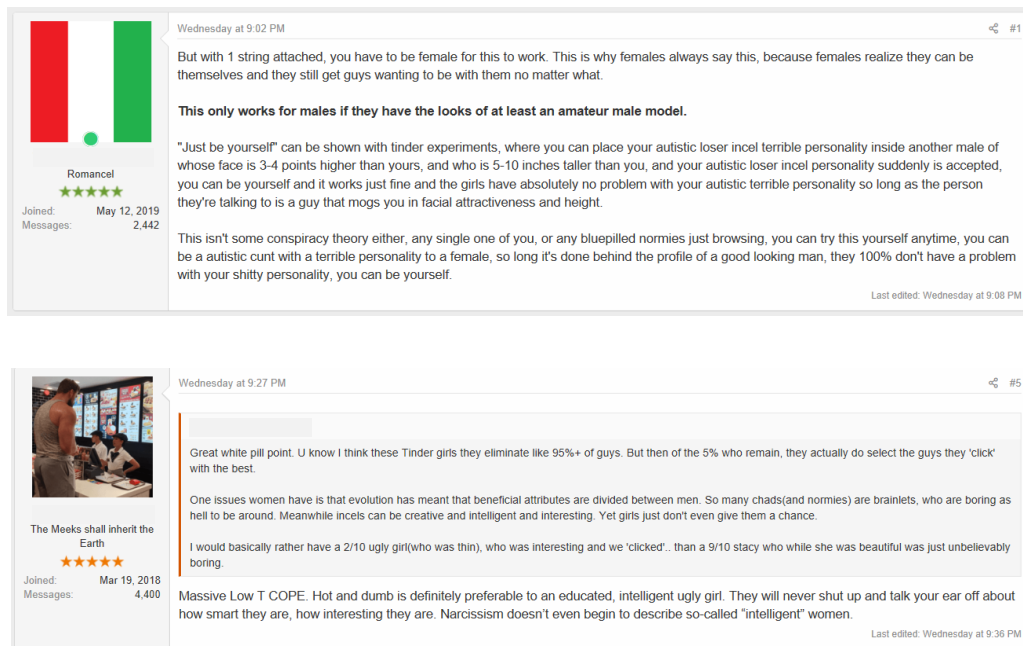


Figure 6.9: Another post from Incels.co demonstrating the term "cope"

Figure 6.9 shown above is another example of the use of the term ‘cope’. In this case, the original poster (OP) focuses on the term “just be yourself”. He claims that this only works if you “have the looks of at least an amateur male model”. In response to this post, one user states that evolution has “meant that beneficial attributes are divided between men”, and they go on to say that Chads are “brainlets, who are boring as hell to be around” whereas incels can be “creative and intelligent and interesting”. He concludes that he would rather have an unattractive woman who is interesting, than an attractive woman who is boring. But another user responds to this view by referring to it as a “Massive Low T COPE” stating that “hot and dumb is definitely preferable to an educated, intelligent ugly girl”. This post, therefore, shows both evolutionary theory and the anti-solution mindset on Incels.co. One user makes broad, binary statements about men and women based on spurious evolutionary theory, and another comes along and brands his conclusion as “cope”. The use of the term “cope” here is therefore slightly different than in the previous post (fig. 6.8). Here it is being used to simply brand an idea as ill thought-out. The prefix “Massive Low T” in this context means low testosterone, a term that, along with “low IQ”, is used

to refer to ideas which are deemed particularly ridiculous or poorly thought through. It is also worth noting, as an aside, that this post demonstrates incels' intense misogyny and pickiness when it comes to women. Despite appearing desperate to lose their virginity and be in a sexual relationship, a lot of incel discussion is around why certain types of women are not worth pursuing because they are unattractive or deficient in some other way.

The incel outlook, therefore, could not be further from the optimism and solutions-based rhetoric of /r/TheRedPill and /r/MGTOW. Instead, it offers a bleak and unforgiving perspective which leaves no room for hope or improvement. Incels exist at the edges of the neoliberal consensus where subjects are situated in a state of crisis (Bratich and Banet-weiser, 2019, p.5007). This crisis is caused by neoliberalism's own increasing inability to retain individuals within its political logic. As a result, incels think and act differently from the archetypal neoliberal subject, eschewing magical voluntarism in favour of fatalism and solutions in favour of complete inaction.

Incel fatalism therefore stands in stark contrast to the magical voluntarism that underpins neoliberal capitalist society and, therefore, /r/MGTOW and /r/TheRedPill. It is important to remember that gender cuts across here too, and that the ability to exercise agency is seen as a fundamentally masculine trait. If agency is curtailed, therefore, this poses an existential threat to men. With this in mind, it is necessary to question why men might be attracted to such a fatalistic ideology. Why, in other words, would incels want to subscribe to an ideology that provides no hope for change and removes the ability to live up to hegemonic masculine ideals? To frame it in Solomon's (2012) terms, what do discourses of fatalism offer incels that attract their affective investment? I argue that they offer an abdication of responsibility for failure. Unlike men on /r/TheRedPill and /r/MGTOW who view the individual as entirely responsible for their own failure, incels see their failure as entirely structural. This offers an antidote to responsibilism that is, counter to /r/TheRedPill and /r/MGTOW, a complete abdication of the illusion of control.

This, I believe, is a comforting discourse for those who feel they consistently fail under neoliberal capitalism and hegemonic masculinity.

It will already be clear what negative effects this fatalistic discourse conjures up, but at the risk of repeating myself, it is necessary to point out the ways in which, despite offering wholeness in the form of an abdication of responsibility, this discourse fails to deliver. In many ways, this discourse actively harms the wellbeing of men who identify as incels. Journalist David Futrelle (2017) points out that incel fatalism “encourages a sort of nihilistic hopelessness” and spending even a few hours on one of these forums makes this patently clear. It locks incels in a depressive cycle in which they gather and disseminate more and more evidence that their collective situation is doomed. Within this discourse, solutions are offered – as seen in the discussion of ‘copes’ – but these serve only to give false hope. Users on Incels.co are therefore stuck in the now familiar position of oscillating between wholeness and lack, as they consider possible solutions in full knowledge that their situation is hopeless.

On top of this, despite providing an analysis of current state of neoliberal capitalist society, incels are completely unable to imagine any alternative to the current system. They are, in Mark Fisher’s terms, the archetypal capitalist realists, completely unable to imagine anything other than the current neoliberal system (2009, loc.35-45). It is this which leads to incel despair. Despite noting that magical voluntarism is an untenable way to view and exist in the world, and therefore countering the neoliberal consensus in a significant way, incels still have one foot within neoliberalism’s political rationality. They may believe themselves to have no agency and therefore no responsibility, but this does not bring with it a sense of relief. Instead, as they still cling on to neoliberal patriarchal ideals of what it is to be a man, demonstrated by their simultaneous idolisation and rejection of the Chad archetype, and are therefore left to oscillate between feeling unable to change but simultaneously believing that a different life would have been possible if only

they had not lost out on the genetic lottery. As Bay-Cheng notes, “neoliberalism purports to protect agency, but it also operates as a hegemonic imperative such that not exerting free will – no matter the reason – invalidates one’s status as a fully-fledged human.” (2015, p.280). The result is that “incels consider themselves incapable of “exerting free will” because of their own “low value status”, which following a tautological reasoning further evidences their failure to be “fully-fledged human[s]” in a neoliberal environment” (Price and Pratten, 2021).

It is incels’ position as on the edges of the faltering neoliberal consensus that means they are both simultaneously within and without. They both provide a criticism of neoliberal patriarchal society but are unable to imagine any alternative. The only course of action, therefore, is to “lay down and rot”, to abdicate responsibility, and to torture yourself with potential solutions in full knowledge that they are merely ‘copes’. They oscillate, perhaps in the most painful way, between wholeness and lack, being able to imagine a fulfilling life only within a neoliberal patriarchal context, in other words as ascending from incelism and becoming Chad. That they view neoliberal society as inevitable and without any alternatives means they are trapped within this oscillation, deepening their despair.

But within this despair, lies hope. Incels offer an accurate assessment of the inequalities of neoliberal capitalism and the harms of patriarchy. They are, in some ways, closer to breaking out of this paradigm than men on /r/TheRedPill and /r/MGTOW, they just require a belief that an alternative is possible. There are other ways of seeing the world, and kinder ways of acknowledging one’s shortcomings. Incels, for the most part, have acknowledged the burden and harm patriarchy causes men, and it may just be a case of exposing them to alternative discourses which promote body positivity, and reduce the emphasis on sex and romantic relationships being the cornerstone of masculine identity.

## Support and a Sense of Belonging

In *The Lonely Century* Noreena Hertz points out that even before the coronavirus pandemic, and the mandated isolation it imposed upon billions, loneliness was already a big problem (2020, pp.1–2). Hertz defines loneliness broadly compared to more traditional definitions. To her it is not only about feeling bereft of love, company, or intimacy, it is also about:

“Feeling unsupported and uncared for by our fellow citizens, our employers, our community, our government. It’s about feeling disconnected not only from those we are meant to feel intimate with, but also from ourselves. It’s about not only lacking support in a social or familial context, but feeling politically and economically excluded as well.”

(Hertz, 2020, pp.7–9)

Soon after reading Hertz’s book, I visited an exhibition titled *What if...?/Scotland* which brought together 25 designers, architects, and artists with people from across Scotland who shared their hopes and wishes for their community (V&A Dundee, 2021). As part of the exhibition, visitors were encouraged to write down their own wishes on piece of paper which would later form part of a mobile hanging from the ceiling. Looking at the suggestions that had already been hung up, I was struck by how many related to loneliness. People shared their desire for better public spaces in which to meet others, and for more opportunities to make new friends. These suggestions had been made after 18 months of social distancing measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, but the factors that have led to loneliness have a much longer history. In other words, the degradation and reduction in public space means that loneliness had already proliferated into a pandemic – it just took a different kind of pandemic to highlight the extent of the problem.

Hertz’s expansive definition is fitting for the current moment. The neoliberal era, especially post-2008, has brought with it a hyper-individualism, the degradation and privatisation of public space, and the underfunding of public services. Speaking from my own context in the UK, youth



services in England and Wales have suffered a 70% funding cut in real terms, between 2010 and 2019 nearly 800 public libraries were forced to close, and between 2014 and 2019 local councils were forced to sell off more than 12,000 public spaces (including parks, libraries, and community centres) in order to raise funds (Davies et al., 2019; Flood, 2019; Weale, 2020). Notably, all of this data comes from before the COVID-19 pandemic which has negatively affected council funding further and will lead to the further closure of public spaces (Ogden et al., 2021). Loneliness, by Hertz's definition, is baked into neoliberal capitalism which seeks to reduce state welfare, cut any benefits for workers, and underfund and privatise public space and services (Becker et al., 2021, p.960). Perhaps most starkly, the imposition of market logics onto every aspect of our lives encourages competition between individuals and constructs everything in life as a zero-sum game (Ibid). Other people are therefore objects of suspicion and barriers to one's own self-enhancement and progression.

Loneliness was a key theme on Incels.co, showing that incels are not an aberration but products of the neoliberal system. As Bratich and Banet-Weiser explore extensively, however, incels do not act as neoliberalism's ideal failed subject (2019, p.5018). Instead of internalising responsibility and restarting the same project, like a user on /r/TheRedPill might do, incels "turn their individual disappointments into a community" (Ibid, pp.5007, 5018). As Steven Crimando puts it, incels are therefore "alone, but now they are alone together" (2019). Their loneliness, in other words, means they seek out others who are going through the same experiences as them. This creates a support network where men can go to share emotions and seek advice. Thus, Incels.co offers these men an encounter with a sense of belonging that creates a particular sense of identity based on victimisation and suffering, whilst at the same time providing support which allows them to feel more in control of their emotions.

During my research, I was struck by the many examples of incels asking for advice and emotional support and even more surprised by how often support was offered by other incels. Given these men are lonely, they lack support in their immediate social circles and therefore turn to online spaces to find solutions and express their emotions. This is not the case on either /r/TheRedPill or /r/MGTOW where emotions often associated with vulnerability and weakness are strongly discouraged and mocked on the rare occasion they are expressed.

⋮  
↓

### Field report: first time I was really amogged

So we were at a party and I made a mistake, I took someone elses drink by accident, which is cool. This guy comes up and starts patronizing and being a passive aggressive little bitch calling me stupid and being arrogant (he was in charge of the psrty). I got pissed, look him dead in the eye and say "are you fucking done now?" never breaking eye contact, at this point we are very close because of the party. I though he would back down, 90% od guys would, Im tall and pretty dominant. The dude does not breack EC but gets even closer to me, we are almost kissing, sticking his chest out and threatens me somehow. My ape brain went ballistic, that guy was about to swing, I immediately backed down and diffused the situation.

Anyways the main point was that afterwards and for the rest of the night I felt like absolute shit and was very submissive, a shadow of my former self. I just thought how crazy it was how losing frame like that desteoys your confidence and mojo, obviously I didnt pull that night, judt felt like absolute shit. Even the days following it I felt so low in the dumps and lost my alphaness.

TLDR:Got amogged so hard the rest of the night I acted like a little bitch, very different than my usual self

3 Comments Share Save Hide Report 50% Upvoted

Figure 6.10: Post from /r/TheRedPill about a user who was "amogged"

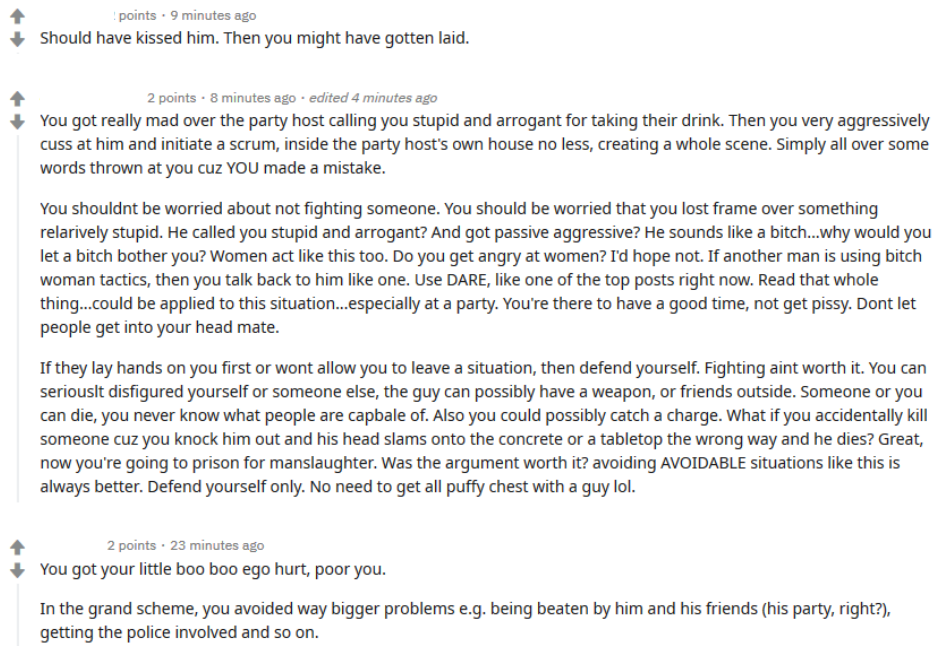



Figure 6.11: Responses to the above post from /r/TheRedPill

The post above is a rare example of a user sharing emotions on /r/TheRedPill (fig. 6.10). They detail their experience of getting “amogged” at a party. They discuss how they got into an argument with someone else at a party, nearly got into a fight with them, but then backed down and diffused the situation. After this incident, he spent the rest of the night feeling “like absolute shit” and “very submissive, the shadow of [his] former self”. Even in the days that followed he “felt so low in the dumps and lost my alphaness [sic]”. There is a vulnerability here which is rarely found on /r/TheRedPill and judging by the comments the post received (fig. 6.11) it is clear why. The responses belittle the user’s emotional reaction to this event, saying that he “should have kissed him” (the other man at the party) and “you got your little boo boo ego hurt, poor you”. Another user completely invalidates the OP’s emotional response by saying that he should not be worried about not fighting someone but should instead be worried that he “lost frame over something relarively stupid [sic]”.

**[Serious] Anyone Else Afraid to Embrace Loneliness?**  
 Monday at 9:06 PM



Monday at 9:06 PM #1

I cant believe Im going to start getting tickets to football games, plays, cruises etc by myself. Nobody should have to do things like this by themselves.

I dont want to be alone. I want to share my life with someone. Every minute of it. Im kind of worried what embracing being alone will do to me. Will I get use to it and not care about sharing my life with someone anymore? That genuinely scares me. I hate having my back against the wall all the time.

I have no place in the world  
 ★★★★★  
 Joined: Apr 18, 2019  
 Messages: 385

Figure 6.12: Post from Incels.co in which a user discusses their fear of loneliness

**[Venting] Am I being melodramatic or am I justified in feeling FUCKING MISERABLE for 25 years without affection?**  
 Yesterday at 6:49 PM



Yesterday at 6:49 PM #1

The hugs from my mother and family dont count

I've been starved of physical touch and affection my whole life, and it makes me fucking miserable and basically emotionally dead these days.

Am I just being an over dramatic faggot? Or do I have a right to feel this way?


....

Should I be living my life without complaining right now, and should I just forget about it? Cos "the right girl will come alone when you stop looking?"

You wont change reality, friend  
 ★★★★★  
 Joined: Jun 13, 2019  
 Messages: 826

Figure 6.13: Post from Incels.co in which a user shares their anguish over a lack of physical affection

Friday at 10:01 PM #1



Friday at 10:01 PM #1

I find myself becoming more and more depressed. The depression will become worse in the winter; I know that from experience.

Has anyone here found any supplements that help? I am currently taking turmeric, fish oil, vitamin C, a multivitamin, and several types of fibers...with limited effect.


does anyone know of anything else? I don't want to take pharma meds, although I am open to that.

Thank you

Currycel \* Autist \* 4-inch dicklet \* Fascist  
 ★★★★★  
 Joined: May 3, 2019  
 Messages: 920

Figure 6.14: Post from Incels.co in which a user asks for advice on treating/coping with depression

Friday at 11:11 PM #19



Currycel \* Autist \* 4-inch  
dicklet \* Fascist

★★★★★

Joined: May 3, 2019  
Messages: 920

Just go for the anti-depressants. Its what I did. I'd recommend Paroxetine(Paxil) or Amitriptyline.

Thanks. I might eventually do that. But I tried that once and just gained weight without seeing any change. I might try it again tough. Good to see its working for you.

sleep

Thanks. I've been doing that. I'm also doing lots of exercise as well.

Vitamin D bro.

You mention winter, which is when you get the least sunlight, so you may be deficient.

Try vitamin d if it gets worse in winter.

Good thinking. I will do that as well.

Try phenibut or shrooms

Thank you. I might try phenibut, but it does seem kind of risky.

@RageAgainstTDL has recommended St. John's wort. I've never tried it, though.

I've noticed a few natural things that improve my mood: coffee and tea, probably owing to their caffeine and l-theanine in the case of tea- coffee consumption has an inverse correlation with suicide risk; related to the first, l-theanine on its own, which I take in powder form, is a bit anti-depressive; exercise, though its effect is pretty small; eating lots of fruits and vegetables, which just seems to improve my mood generally; and vitamin D at a high dose (I take 5000IU per day).

Thanks a lot for this. I have noticed the positive effects of caffeine as well. I'll try l-theanine, it sounds good (I've just read a bit on it). I've noticed benefits with fruits as well.

Be careful about the vitamin D however. Too high doses can be extremely dangerous. It is an oil-soluble vitamin, meaning that it stays in your body for a long while. so you can easily overdose on it.

I don't want to rope as long as my parents are alive. Once they die, I would seriously consider it.

Figure 6.15: Post from Incels.co showing responses to the above user's post about coping with depression

In contrast to this, these three examples above (figs. 6.12-6.14) show how emotions associated with vulnerability are more readily expressed and received on Incels.co. The first post here (fig. 6.12) sees a user sharing how they are afraid of loneliness and do not want to embrace being alone for fear of what this will do to them. The second post (fig. 6.13) has a similar theme, with the user sharing how they feel “starved of physical touch and affection” and that this makes them “miserable and basically emotionally dead”. Both posts, therefore, see users sharing particularly intense and heavy affective experiences which they are struggling to cope with. There is a tension here in the second post, however, with the user wondering whether they are simply

being “over dramatic” or if they are “right to feel this way”. This shows a degree of internalised judgement which comes from the way in which men are socialised into expressing or, more often, suppressing emotions. But the fact these men are sharing these emotions at all is notable. It shows that, unlike /r/MGTOW and /r/TheRedPill, men use Incels.co to share emotions and, perhaps more importantly, ask for help. This is seen in the third post below (fig. 6.14) where a user is asking for advice on how to deal with depression. Instead of the mocking or invalidating comments that would be expected on /r/MGTOW or /r/TheRedPill, the user receives responses which are offering genuine advice. Some of these responses can be seen quoted in orange in the OP’s reply (fig. 6.15). This is indicative of a forum that is far more accepting of vulnerability and helpful than might first be expected given the distinctly antisocial attitude incels have to outsiders.

What all three of these posts confirm is that incels are bearing the brunt of the consequences of individualism and a neoliberal capitalist society which reduces humans to capital enhancing agents, thereby reconfiguring human relationships into what O’Neill refers to as forms of “antisocial sociability” (2018, p.X). Incels, in other words, are the symptom of much wider societal trends under neoliberal capitalism. They not only feel abandoned by those around them, but society more generally. They therefore have nowhere to turn but to a community of likeminded individuals who are going through a similar experience of disenfranchisement. In doing so, Incels.co is not necessarily offering these men an encounter with what they feel they have lost: company, a sense of belonging, and emotional support. Although this narrative is often framed as a sense of a loss of interaction with women in particular (especially sexual encounters), it is clear that the problems incels face are far more general than this. They suffer from loneliness, poor mental health, and rage. Incels.co offers men an encounter with emotional support for these issues which they have failed to find elsewhere, either because their grievances are not listened to or not taken seriously, or because they are deemed by others to be unreasonable or extreme.

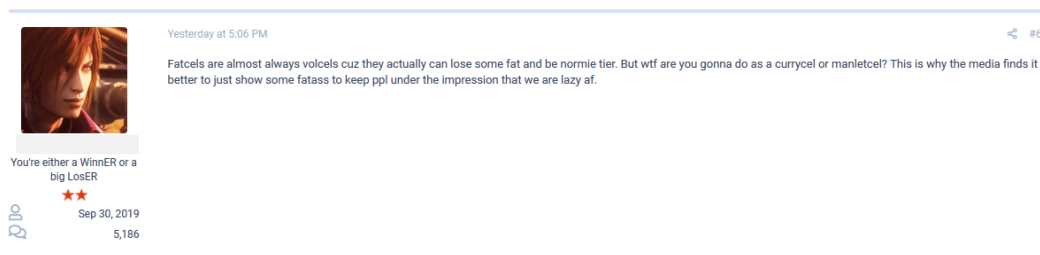


Figure 6.16: Example of user on Incels.co denying that a "fatcel" can be a true "incel"

This sense of belonging, however, is fraught. Although it offers members of Incels.co an encounter with belonging, it ultimately fails to deliver on this offer. Much like the discourses found on /r/TheRedPill and /r/MGTOW, this discourse constructs a subject position which is impossible to fully inhabit. This is seen most clearly in the way in which the incel identity is policed on Incels.co. The term “volcel”, introduced in the previous section, is used to identify those who, despite maybe claiming to be *involuntarily* celibate, are in fact *voluntarily* celibate. In other words, these are men who may have convinced themselves that they are incels when, in actual fact, there are things they could do to improve their situation and therefore sleep with women. When researching a previous iteration of Incels.co, Jaki et al. noted that a significant portion of the discussion on this forum focused on who can actually be considered a genuine incel (2019, p.13). I found examples of this in my own research. The first example (fig. 6.16) features a user that states “fatcels are almost always volcels” because they “actually can lose some fat and be normie tier [sic]”. However, if you’re “a currycel” (meaning an Indian man who is also an incel) or a “manletcel” (meaning a man who is small and an incel) you are a true incel because you cannot as easily change your appearance to fit society’s beauty standards.

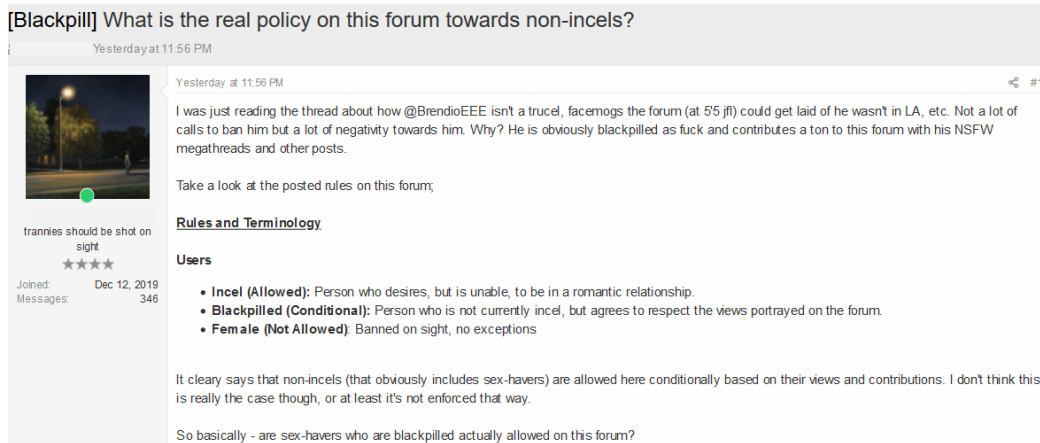


Figure 6.17: Post from Incels.co asking what the forums policy is for non-incels

The second example (fig. 6.17) features a user asking what Incels.co’s policy is towards non-incels given another user, who is particularly active and “blackpilled as fuck”, has been outed as not a “trucel” but rather someone who “facemogs the forum”. As discussed in chapter 4, the suffix “mog” means is related to the term “AMOG” which stands for “alpha male of the group”. In this context, the suffix is used to denote how someone is superior to you based on a particular trait. The term “facemogs” describes how this user has a more attractive face than most or all other members of the forum. What we see in both posts, therefore, is a strict policing of the category of incel, to the extent where anyone can be called out for being a “volcel” who is merely playing at being an incel. The sense of belonging on Incels.co, therefore, is far from unconditional, meaning users can never fully achieve the sense of belonging the group offers. This strict policing of the boundaries of the incel identity, however, also leads to a strong sense of coherence and exclusivity. The aim of this is to offer an encounter with identity which, although conditional and unstable, nevertheless has a feeling of superiority attached to it.

The emotional support that users receive on Incels.co is also far from consistent or unconditional. For one, as has already been shown, suicidal ideation and encouraging others to commit suicide is a common occurrence on Incels.co. Although users may not respond directly to



other user's emotional expressions with encouragement to suicide, it is necessary to question what spending time on a forum where suicide is normalised and frequently discussed will do to someone's mental health when they already feel loneliness, depressed, anxious, or as if life is generally overwhelming. One category of post on Incels.co is tagged "SuicideFuel" and this term – along with the related terms *suifuel* and *ropefuel* – is common. Posts tagged as "SuicideFuel" tend to include either allusions to what living as an attractive man is like or statistics that reinforce the incel worldview (such as the list of Jared Leto's girlfriends shown in fig. 6.6). Incels.co, therefore, becomes one of the only place in which these men can find a sense of belonging and support, whilst simultaneously reinforcing users' existing fatalistic worldview and actively encouraging depression and suicide. Members of this forum thus become stuck in a pattern where they may be sharing an intense emotion to process it and get support, and then reading a post which reinforces their intensely negative emotion in the next. The sense of emotional support Incels.co is supposed to offer, therefore, remains forever out of reach and is forever frustrated by the intense negativity and fatalism of this group.

Incels.co's discourse of emotional support and belonging also fails on a more fundamental level. Although users spend a lot of time on this forum, I found very little evidence of any sustained digital relationships between users, even those I came across regularly. Although it is difficult to know this for certain, I did not see users referring to each other by usernames or referring back to previous discussions or and sort of shared history. There may have been some particularly notorious users, as is evidenced by the discussion of user in figure 6.17, but this is not the same as a deep and meaningful connection. These relationships, therefore, seem limited to brief encounters in which users share support and advice which varies in its usefulness. When this is combined with fatalism, suicidal ideation, and theories and examples which serve to reinforce the incel worldview

which feeds intense emotional experiences in the first place, it is clear that Incels.co is far from being support group in an unambiguous sense.

In many ways, the exact opposite might be true. It came to my mind several times throughout my research that men might be logging on to Incels.co not to feel better, but to feel worse (Innuendo Studios, 2019). The concept of digital self-harm is one which has some exposure in popular online discourse, but is the subject of relatively few academic articles (Pacheco et al., 2019; Patchin and Hinduja, 2017; Pater and Mynatt, 2017). The term is defined in one paper as “when a person’s behaviours are negatively influenced through his or her online activities in such a manner that these online activities lead to the infliction of non-suicidal direct or indirect physical harm to oneself” (Pater and Mynatt, 2017, p.1501). However, although this definition is certainly helpful in settings where self-harm is seen as inflicting physical harm on oneself, I would argue that self-harm is not limited to this and can just as readily include emotional harm too. It is not possible to say for certain the extent to which discourse on Incels.co leads to acts of physical self-harm, but the potential emotional harms consuming this content are clear. If users are indeed coming to this forum to deliberately make themselves feel worse, and there is strong evidence to suggest that this is the case, then this is a direct inversion of the optimistic, solutions-based approach of /r/TheRedPill and /r/MGTOW.

This makes it very hard to see how Incels.co is offering men an encounter with what they believe they have lost. Incels predominantly believe they have lost out on their ability to have sexual and romantic relationships with women, and their ability to engage in society. But Incels.co does not provide any solutions to this. All Incels.co does therefore, is connect individuals with similar experiences of disenfranchisement and abandonment and collectivises these negative affective experiences in a way that is distinctively un-neoliberal. In providing a place where men

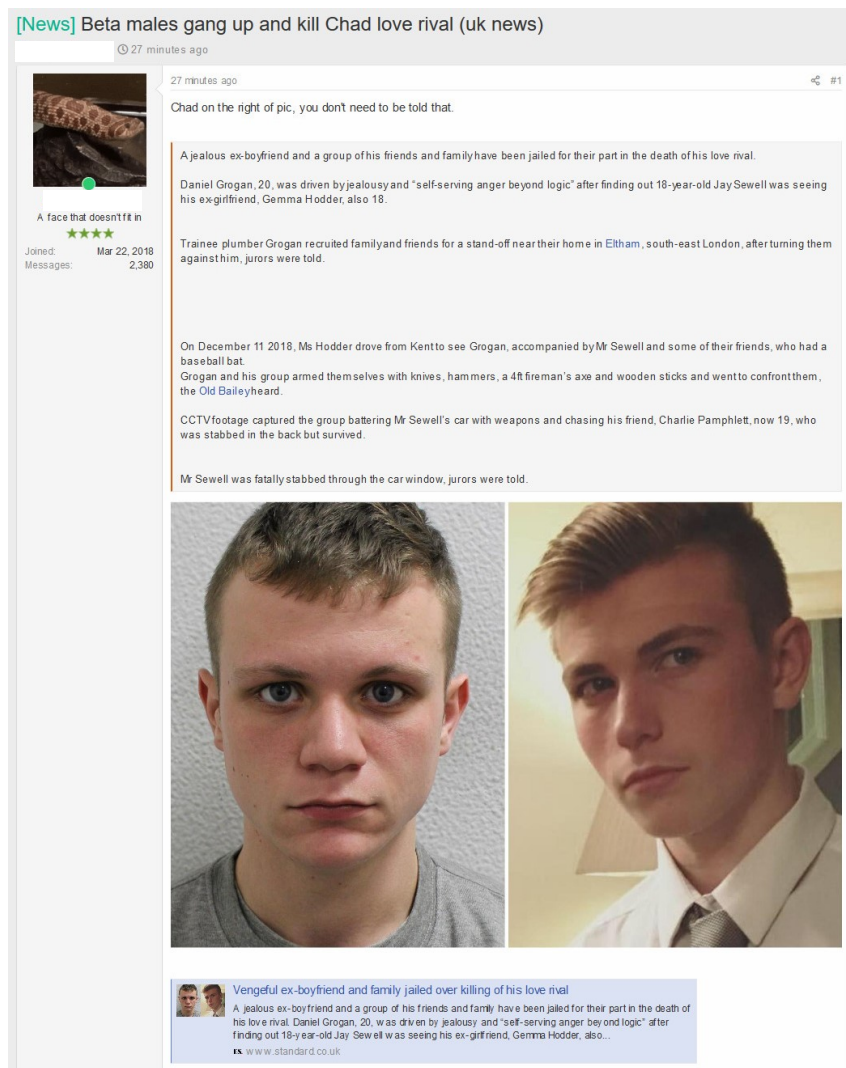
can share emotions, Incels.co creates a space that runs counter to hegemonic masculine ideals of stoicism and invulnerability.

However, in neither case do these discourses deliver on their promise. As Bratich and Banet-Weiser put it, “incel support transforms from a mutual aid and solidarity network to one that encourages its members to individualize via hostility” (2019, p.5017). In this environment, “the notion of “support” loses its connection to therapeutic empathy and instead becomes mutual incitement and escalation” (Ibid). This can be seen in the encouragement and normalisation of suicide as well as the way in which expressions of vulnerability are directed towards women in ever more violent and intense ways. In other words, “you share your loneliness, but then to build it into anything other than anger is a sign of weakness” (Ibid). All of this reveals the extent to which incels exist in a community underpinned by a particular “antisocial sociability” (O’Neill, 2018, p.X) which fails to fully provide both a sense of belonging and emotional support, leaving these men to oscillate between the wholeness and lack in a state of permanent frustration.

But as with the discourses of fatalism present on Incels.co, however, I also think that there is hope to be found in the belonging and emotional support this forum provides. Incels’ desire for a sense of belonging and emotional support is something that can be replicated by other groups and discourses. A proliferation of alternative discourses might either prevent men from joining Incels.co or tempt existing members away from the group. It also shows the importance of mental health awareness and care among men. A lot of men on Incels.co exhibit symptoms of anxiety and depression, with some explicitly discussing their experience with these illnesses. It’s possible that in providing this sort of emotional support in a less toxic and negative setting might prevent men from slipping into the incel worldview.

## Incel Vicarious Victory

Incel vicarious victory offers users on this forum an encounter with control and identity in a far more recognisable way. In this section, I want to discuss this and what distinguishes incel vicarious victory from the concept as found on /r/MGTOW. This will mean looking at the sense of revenge, retribution, and glee that feature in incels' version of vicarious victory and also how, in some cases, it is particularly extreme and inflicts harm directly on women.



[News] Beta males gang up and kill Chad love rival (uk news)

27 minutes ago

Chad on the right of pic, you don't need to be told that.

A jealous ex-boyfriend and a group of his friends and family have been jailed for their part in the death of his love rival.

Daniel Grogan, 20, was driven by jealousy and "self-serving anger beyond logic" after finding out 18-year-old Jay Sewell was seeing his ex-girlfriend, Gemma Hodder, also 18.

Trainee plumber Grogan recruited family and friends for a stand-off near their home in Eltham, south-east London, after turning them against him, jurors were told.

On December 11 2018, Ms Hodder drove from Kent to see Grogan, accompanied by Mr Sewell and some of their friends, who had a baseball bat. Grogan and his group armed themselves with knives, hammers, a 4ft fireman's axe and wooden sticks and went to confront them, the Old Bailey heard.

CCTV footage captured the group battering Mr Sewell's car with weapons and chasing his friend, Charlie Pamphlett, now 19, who was stabbed in the back but survived.

Mr Sewell was fatally stabbed through the car window, jurors were told.

A face that doesn't fit in  
★★★★★  
Joined: Mar 22, 2018  
Messages: 2,380

Vengeful ex-boyfriend and family jailed over killing of his love rival

A jealous ex-boyfriend and a group of his friends and family have been jailed for their part in the death of his love rival. Daniel Grogan, 20, was driven by jealousy and "self-serving anger beyond logic" after finding out 18-year-old Jay Sewell was seeing his ex-girlfriend, Gemma Hodder, also...

www.stamford.co.uk

Figure 6.18: Post from Incels.co in which a user shares a news story about a man who was killed his ex-girlfriend's new boyfriend

Like /r/TheRedPill and /r/MGTOW, incels also police the boundaries of what they consider to be the “in-group” and mock those who fall outside of it. For Incels.co this means vilifying “Chads” and “normies”. The post above (fig. 6.18), includes a news article about a “jealous ex-boyfriend and a group of his friends” who “have been jailed for their part in the death of his love rival”. The victim, shown on the right, is instantly identified by the OP as a “Chad” and the ex-boyfriend/perpetrator and his friends as “beta males”. This not only shows the way in which the strict social categories that arise from incel ideology are applied to understand events in the world, but also how this language dehumanises and undermines the seriousness of this particular case. More than that, it shows how vicarious victory on Incels.co works to offer incels a masculine identity. Despite incels frequently positioning themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy created by Lookism, vicarious victory allows them to experience the murder of “Chad” through the actions of another who, through labelling them a “beta male”, they have claimed as one of their own. Murder, in this respect, is the ultimate act of revenge and domination, allowing them to encounter both a sense of beta male identity and control over other men.

The examples of incel vicarious victory with Chad as the object are less common than those which target women. This is to be expected on a forum which vilifies women and shows, like with vicarious victory on MGTOW, that it is primarily women who are held responsible for incel suffering. One example of vicarious victory post on Incels.co is the ‘chadfishing’ post. The term ‘chadfishing’ refers to the ‘catfishing’ a practice whereby someone adopts a fake identity or fictional persona on social media. The term originates from the documentary *Catfish* (Joost and Schulman, 2010) which follows Nev Schulman, the executive producer, as a victim of catfishing. ‘Chadfishing’ is a similar idea, but specifically involves men pretending to be ‘Chads’ usually on dating apps. Normally this means setting up a fake profile on a dating app using pictures of a male

model. Men then get matches on their fake profile and will speak to women, leading them along and perhaps even organising to meet up with them. Part of a BBC documentary titled *Inside the Secret World of Incels* (Rawles, 2019) follows one man who engages in ‘chadfishing’, and then meets with the women he has tricked and films their reactions upon discovering he does not look like the pictures on his dating profile. This man takes their reactions as evidence that women are disgusted by his appearance and only want to date male models, rather than seeing it as a valid reaction to having been tricked and feeling threatened (Ibid).

Fuarrkkkkkkkkkk. I got cucked fuckkkk I hate it. I was jerking my cock to her and shit. I am basically a cuck now, this dumb cunt pissed me off.

So it's 2 am and I was horny af I had a fight with one of the girl so I decided to call the next girl. I have phone sex with basically 6/12 girls in my snap as chadfish.

So I call her and stuff and she sends me nudes and we talk for 30 minutes and I bust, but 5 mins later I hear some dude on her side. He comes behind her and says “who are you talking to baby” this is late at night. It sounds like he grabbed her from the back. And then starts laughing and shit I was like wow.

Then later she spans me saying it was her little brother like wtf. Am I suppose to believe that? She sends nudes and stuff to make up for her shitty behaviour but she will never cuck chad.

She says she will send me picture of him and with her and her mom and dad to prove he is indeed her brother. But that's bs, he could be her bf. Later when I told her I am hurt, she took a picture with him and sent it to me and said “just my brother”. The guy looked like a 7'10 5'9 Eastern Europe chad. Why would she cuck 6'3 210 pound pretty boy blonde chad with him ? Makes no sense.

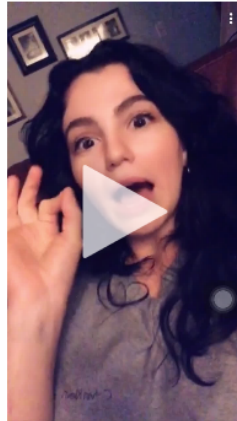
She also said when she is angry she laughs. That's why she laughed when he did that. I don't buy it. She said she hates her brother for this he ruined it. Jfl. Apparently he doesn't like me cuz she showed him my chadfish and he doesn't like guys dating his sister and I look like a big asshole from my chad bio (see history for chads bio)

I spend rest of the night listening to her explain herself and I made her trust that I am ok with it. But I wana fucker her over. So here are the options

1. Keep talking to her and keep getting nudes and phonesex till Friday and when date night comes. Send a video of chadfish with other girl right before the date.

2. Send a video of chadfish with another girl tomorrow.

Here is a video of her apologizing and looking frustrated and pretending she cares about chadfish. Jfl even chad can't keep a girl loyal



Can't post nudes it's not allowed apparently and these posts stay permanently

Figure 6.19: Example 1 of "chadfishing" on Incels.co

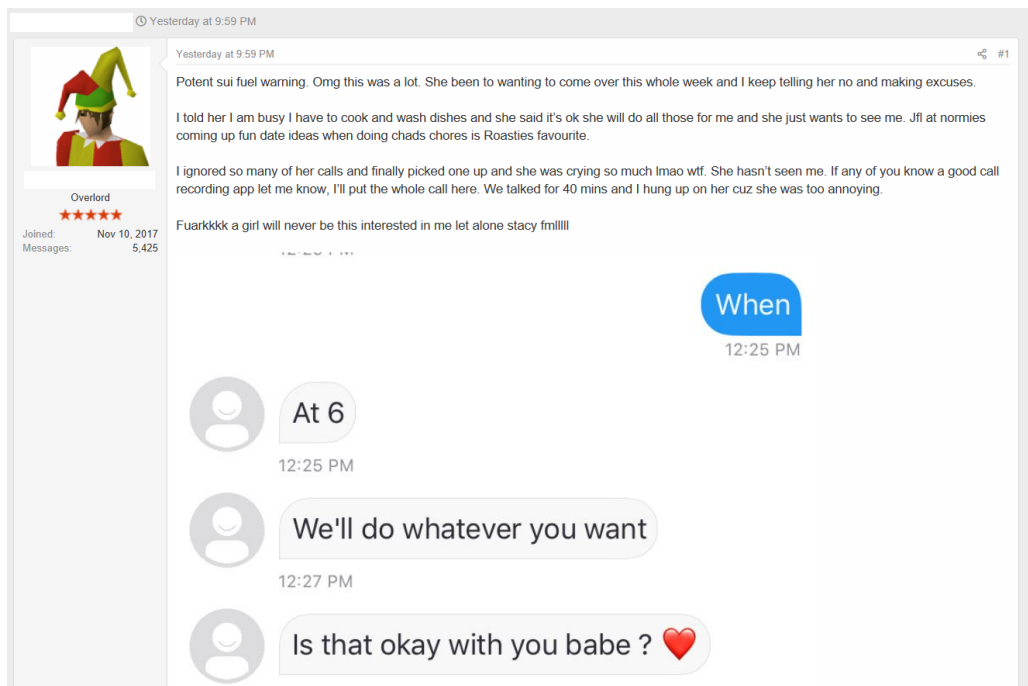


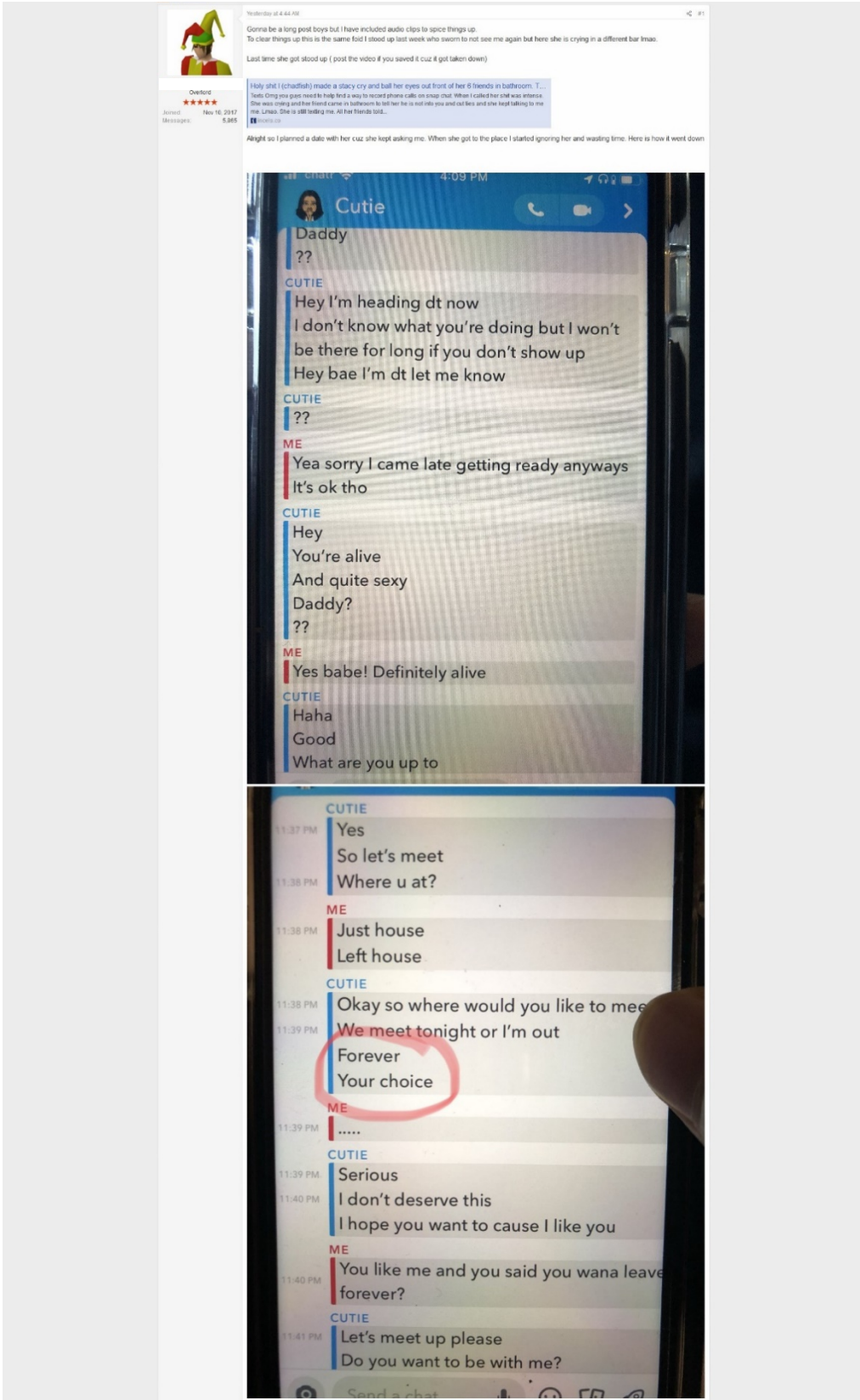
Figure 6.20: Example 2 of "chadfishing" on Incels.co

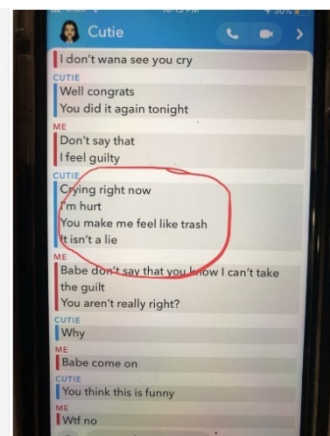
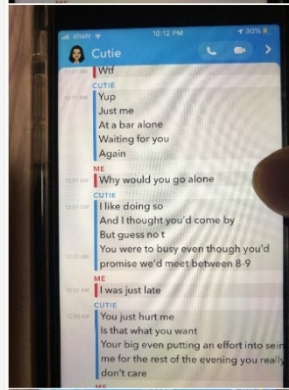
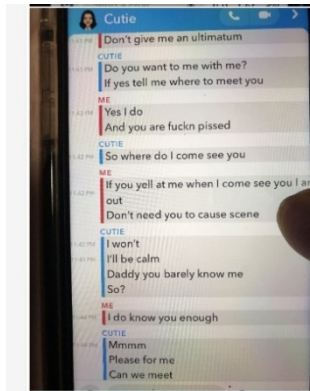
I was surprised that only a few posts I read during my research affected me to the extent that I felt deeply disturbed and had to take a break. Of those few posts, three were made by the same user who shared their 'chadfishing' experiences with the rest of Incels.co. During my research only this user engaged in this behaviour, although it is possible that others did as well but did not

make their engagement in it public. And it is also possible that ‘chadfishing’ was a more popular pursuit before the start of my research on Incels.co or has become more popular since. The first post (fig. 6.19) outlines this user’s experience of being “cucked”. He had deceived a woman into thinking he was a “6’3 210 pound pretty boy blonde chad” and, whilst having “phone sex” with her, he hears a man’s voice in the background who he assumes to be her boyfriend. Despite the woman’s protestations that the voice belonged to her brother, the user remains unconvinced and decides that he wants to “fucker her over [sic]”. The post also features a video of the woman at the bottom apologising and explaining the incident.

The next post (fig. 6.20) sees the same user explaining how he has been talking to another woman he has “chadfished”. He is trying to evade her requests to meet in person by saying he needs to carry out domestic chores, but the woman says she will come and do those for him if it means she gets to see him. The user concludes that, if you are Chad, you do not even need to come up with good ideas for dates because women will just want to come over and do your chores for you. In both posts, therefore, vicarious victory is being used not only to get revenge on women, but also to confirm beliefs incels already hold about women, namely that they are shallow and will do anything for Chad with the aim of getting access the best genes.







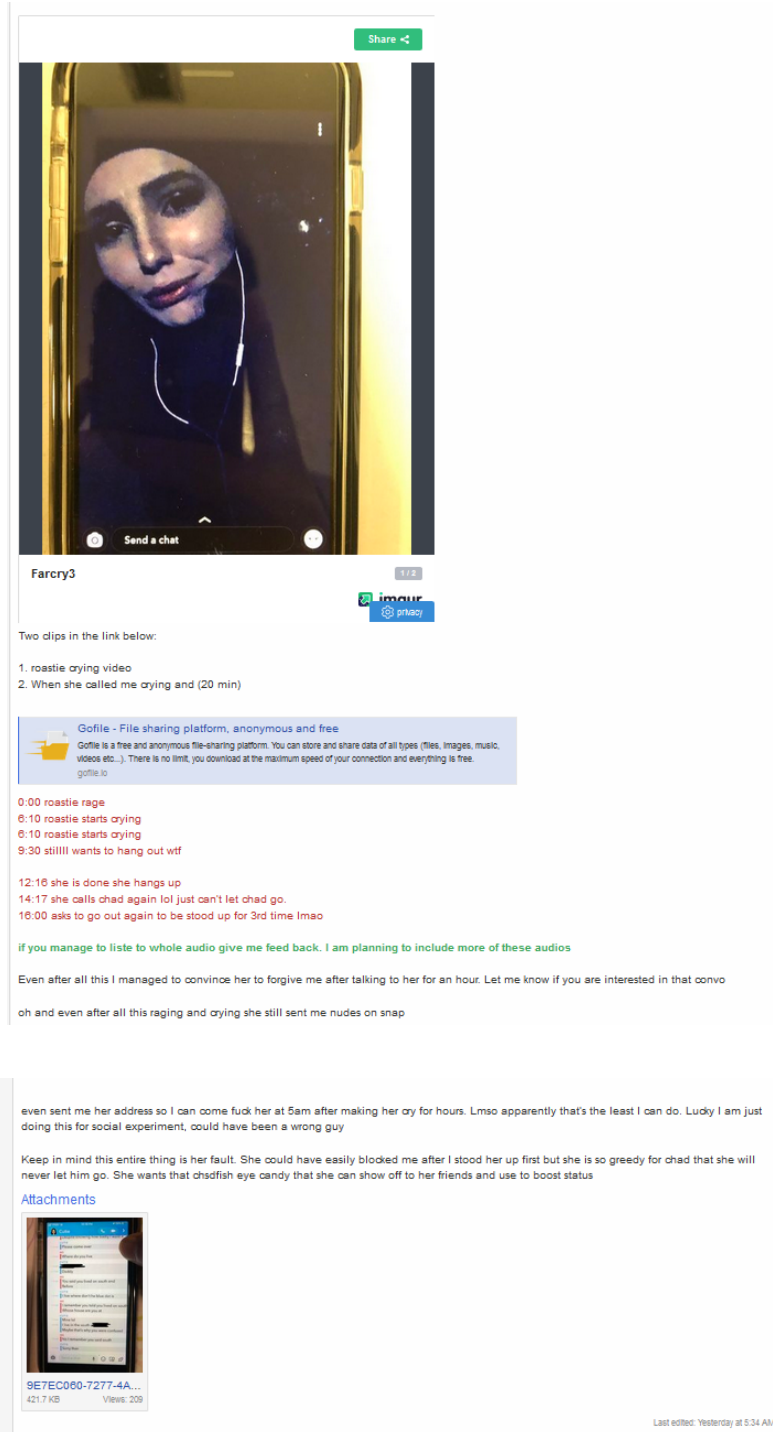


Figure 6.21: Example 3 of "chadfishing" on Incels.co

The final example of vicarious victory I have included (fig. 6.21) is the most disturbing. It again features the same user sharing extensive screenshots of a conversation with a woman after leaving her at a bar where he said he would meet her. The screenshots from Snapchat reveal the

user agreed to meet with the woman but then does not show up. The woman is upset and oscillates between saying she no longer wants to see him and asking if they can meet. At the bottom of the post the user includes a video of the woman crying and a recording of a phone call he had with her in which she is also crying. Listening to this was particularly affecting. There was a lack of remorse or empathy in the user's voice in the face of a woman sobbing down the phone that was frankly chilling. The user says that this was all part of a "social experiment" and that he hopes to include more audio recordings in future posts. Like the previous two posts, this one also concludes women are just "greedy for chad" and will do anything for him, regardless of how much Chad mistreats them. The implication is that incels, on the other hand, cannot even get women to pay them any attention. This stark dichotomy is set up and repeated throughout many other conversations on Incels.co.

What are we to make of this extreme form of vicarious victory? At this point, it is necessary to refine the definition of this term as used on /r/MGTOW so it applies more readily to Incels.co. In the previous chapter I mentioned that, on /r/MGTOW, vicarious victory is doubly vicarious, in that men on that forum were not themselves perpetrating the act of humiliation or abuse *and* women are not being directly affected by the sharing of the post itself. In this case, however, a woman is being directly targeted and a user is carrying out the attack directly too. The effect is therefore more damaging and less mediated. Incel vicarious victory also comes from a slightly different place. As discussed in the previous section, incels, in not being able to rely on women's emotional and social reproductive labour, are exposed to the harms of neoliberal capitalism and therefore turn against women in order to discipline them back into fulfilling this role.

It is telling that the most prominent vicarious victory method of choice for incels is 'chadfishing', an act which allows them to experience masculine expectations of social reproduction that they feel they are entitled to but are otherwise not provided with. Bratich and

Banet-Weiser centre their discussion around the concept of confidence, something which men both need in an entrepreneurial, individualise world, but also expect to be provided with by women's social productive role (2019, pp.5006–5007). They go on to point out that, despite neoliberalism's pushing of an individualising agenda, it has always relied on the labour of others, both paid and unpaid, to provide care, support, comfort, guidance, and expertise (Ibid). Incels, in other words, are men who fail in terms of sexual and romantic relationships with women and therefore do not receive care, support, or comfort, at the same time as they see the guidance and expertise offered by others as simply con games. The result is a subject whose feeling of failure is networked through pre-existing structures of misogyny and a masculine subject who feels threatened (Ibid, p.5007). This fear, aggrieved entitlement, and feeling of external threat is then directed towards a collective figure of blame, namely women.

Vicarious victory on Incels.co, therefore, works to offer these men an encounter with control which they feel they are otherwise lacking. But this is also about more than just control. Within incel vicarious victory there is also the promise of an encounter with the care, support, and comfort which they feel they are otherwise being denied by women. There is a sense that, by oppressing women, incels might force them into providing the social reproductive role they believe they are owed. As discussed in the previous section, women's social reproductive labour and their role as objects for sexual gratification mean they are used by men to cultivate self-confidence. Vicarious victory in an incel context allows these men to inhabit the position of 'Chad', albeit briefly, and vicariously experience the cultivation of self-confidence which they otherwise lack. Women, therefore, are constructed as both the barriers to receiving care, support, and comfort, and the only means of receiving these things in the first place.

It is clear, therefore, that the vicarious victory discourse on Incels.co, like on /r/MGTOW, is designed to bring incels an encounter with wholeness. This feeling of wholeness is primarily

dependent on women fulfilling their supposed duty and providing affective resources for men's benefit. When this is not forthcoming, however, incels direct their ire at women for withholding these resources. Bratich and Banet-Weiser point out that:

“the passage of online incel communities from sadness and shared isolation to rage and vengeance could not have occurred without the easily available affective resources of popular misogyny, which is always engaged in a threatened relationship with popular feminism and indeed blames feminism and women for their sexual disappointment” (2019, p.5018).

But, as Price and Patten (2021) point out, incels have the wrong target. Instead of looking to neoliberal capitalism as the cause of their problems, they point the finger at feminism. What Price and Pratten miss, however, is that incels should be looking at patriarchy as the cause of the problems as well. In not questioning the pressures and expectations patriarchy places upon men in the form of hegemonic masculine ideals, incels continue to direct their ire at the wrong targets. This discourse, therefore, is unable to deliver to them the promise of wholeness given it is women themselves who are supposed to be providing the things they desire (comfort, care, emotional support). They are therefore simultaneously repelling women at the same time as wanting to use them for their social reproductive role. As with /r/MGTOW, therefore, the vicarious victory discourse on Incels.co fails to deliver on its promise of wholeness because it is, in itself, creating the very sense of withoutness incels are aiming to overcome.

What this and the incel desire for belonging and emotional support show is that, fundamentally, these men are lonely and require either a sense of community and/or therapy. Their suffering is very real, if misdirected, and this shows that it's possible for alternative discourses which offer a sense of belonging and emotional support, to draw men away from what is an intensely negative and violent forum. These would be discourses which open up the realms of

possibility rather than closing them off. They would offer alternatives to black pill ideology, and show that a person's worth isn't based on their physical appearance. They would also undo the entitlement men feel to women's bodies, as well as the pressure men feel to be in a sexual and/or romantic relationship. There is, therefore, hope to be found in this dark forum. Finding the commonalities between incels and those outside of this forum shows that the problems these men are facing are not too dissimilar from problems in society more widely. Loneliness, insecurity, and mental illness are all prevalent not just on Incels.co, but across Western societies. Finding these commonalities is the first step to understanding incels and coming up with alternative discourses that might offer these men an alternative which is not based on violence, misogyny, and self-hate.

## Conclusion

*“And I’m so ignorant now with all that I’ve learnt”*

(Black Country New Road, 2021)

The question that motivated me throughout this project has remained consistent: why do men join these groups and choose to remain there? I also had a personal motivation. I was curious as to why, when I first came across /r/TheRedPill and other groups that make up the Manosphere, I was not also drawn in by their solutions and explanations for my circumstances. I knew from quite early on that emotions would play a big part in explaining why men are attracted to these groups, so I had supplementary questions too. How does taking emotions into account help to explain the pull of these groups? How does affect help explain why certain men are drawn to one group and not a different group? Each group certainly had its own emotional tone, but does that explain why different men are drawn to them? At the end of my research, I feel that I have provided answers to these questions but the process of doing so has also given rise to so many more. In this concluding chapter I will provide a brief summary of my findings, discussing both the expected and unexpected discoveries and reflecting on the way in which the research has changed and how it has changed me. Following on from this, I will talk more generally about the contribution my work has made both to the immediate field my research is situated in, studies of the Manosphere, but also more generally. Finally, I will discuss the limitations of my research and possible avenues for future inquiry.

## Findings

The most daunting thing about writing this conclusion is the invitation to reflect on the past three and a half years of research. Casting my mind back over this time not only means thinking about how my research has developed, but also how I have changed. Who was I when I started this research? Who am I now? So many things are different. I carried out my research, in part, during a global pandemic which led to huge disruption and uncertainty. The ramifications of this period have not been fully understood yet, and I feel as if I’m finishing my PhD in a world that is distinctly different from the one I started it in. Other things in



my life have changed too. I've loved and lost, made new friends, experienced things that have altered how I understand the world around me. I've also explored a lot of the East Neuk of Fife on foot, providing new perspectives and a sense of place to go along with these memories. Looking back on all of this gives a feeling akin to vertigo. I'm looking below me at the cliff I've climbed and there's a deep vein of nostalgia running down the whole face. I feel as if I am not just finishing my PhD, but an entire period of my life.

Early on, I had a suspicion that emotions would play a big role in my research, and this turned out to be right on two counts. My own emotions were important to the research. The rational/emotional binary means the role emotions play in research and other intellectual pursuits is often ignored by mainstream IR. But emotions are essential to any research project. Delight, curiosity, concern, hope, worry, and tenacity are all things researchers feel (Goldie, 2012, p.122). At the same time, a loss of affect in intellectual pursuits can be debilitating. It can manifest as a lack of curiosity, a feeling that answers or resolution might not be out there, and a lack of desire to challenge our own existing views and assumptions (Ibid, p. 124). During my thesis, I had moments of excitement when reading something new that either changed how I saw the Manosphere or chimed with my findings. I was also motivated by a curiosity and empathy for those on the forums I research. But there were, of course, also periods of despondency, frustration, and a distinct lack of excitement and curiosity.

Emotions were also integral to understanding the reason why certain men are attracted to the Manosphere. Affect was also instrumental in my 'diagnosis' of the problem this thesis tackles. I have argued that a significant constituency of men are suffering at the hands of neoliberal capitalism and hegemonic masculinity, and some men are suffering more than others. As stated in the introduction, men who have met different life milestones consistently and without much trouble are unlikely to be members of these groups. Men for whom relationships, jobs, and a financial security come easily for the most part do not have need for the teachings of /r/MGTOW, /r/TheRedPill, or Incels.co. They may find a home elsewhere in the Manosphere, but I would still argue this is unlikely. This is because those who turn to the Manosphere often do so because it offers something they feel they have lost. They are men who feel perpetually insecure in their identity and as if they have lost control of their lives. They are men who have been told that a job,

wife, and stability would be offered up to them upon reaching adulthood, but who haven't received one or all of these things. They feel, in other words, as if their entitlement to these things as been denied.

It is easy to view this as simply a problem of masculine entitlement, and this is certainly part of explaining the Manosphere, but there is more going on here. These men are genuinely suffering. The mixture of neoliberal capitalism and hegemonic masculinity means men are in a situation where failure is both an existential threat and an ever-present possibility. Neoliberal capitalism is inherently unstable and crisis-prone, both on a micro and macro level. At the macro level, neoliberal capitalism is prone to crises because of the reliance on market forces and lack of long-term planning. The 2008 financial crisis is one example of this, but capitalism is always in crisis. And, of course, this crisis is not just abstract, it is embodied too. At a micro level, men live in fear of losing their jobs, their financial security, and their social standing. And, of course, even when a man has a stable job, this does not mean they feel secure. The ravages and uncertainties the market inflicts on men continue even then, and they seek shelter from this suffering in the domestic sphere. But what happens if this sphere is not available? What if a man is struggling to find a wife or partner and therefore to exact the free emotional labour he feels entitled to after a hard day's work? And what if a man has both lost his job and also cannot rely on the caregiving role women are expected to offer? Patriarchy means a significant number of men feel entitled to these things, and if they are not forthcoming, they seek alternative discourses that explain this lack.

In order to understand this I synthesised the affect theories of Solomon (2012) and Ahmed (2007) to draw a connection between men's suffering and their attraction to the Manosphere. This theoretical framework outlines the relationship between affect, emotion, and discourse in order to explain how certain discourses become sites of affective investment. In short, discourse translates affect into recognisable emotional signifiers and, in the process, explains the cause of the negative affect resulting from a loss or lack of something. Discourses that become sites of strong affective investment, and therefore dominant, do this whilst simultaneously offering an encounter with that which has been lost or is lacking. I used this framework to understand the way in which men's negative affect was being translated into recognisable emotions at the same time these men were being informed by these discourses that their suffering was due

to a lack of something. During my time on /r/TheRedPill, /r/MGTOW, and Incels.co it became clear that there were three general themes of loss: a loss of control, identity, and meaning. As I discussed throughout the analysis, these three themes are intimately intertwined. The discourses on each group both construct men as lacking meaning, identity, and control and then offer the return of these three things. This is how each discourse becomes a site of strong affective investment and attract certain men.

In each empirical chapter I showed how these discourses offered members of the forum an encounter with control, identity, and meaning. Chapter four looked at the feminism-as-problem discourse that spans all three forums and explains why these men are suffering. It places responsibility for men's anguish on feminism and, more broadly, femininity, blaming these two factors for men's loss of control, identity, and meaning. At the same time, by explaining men's negative affect, this discourse is simultaneously offering a return of meaning, control, and identity through this very explanation.

Chapter five focused on /r/MGTOW and /r/TheRedPill specifically and looked at the ways in which their offer of separatism or seduction contains within it the promise of an encounter with control and identity. On both forums, a particular configuration of agency, informed by an adherence to magical voluntarism, offers men on these forums an encounter with control and identity by informing them that everything is within their control if they exercise their agency, and that exercising agency is an inherently masculine thing to do. Building on this, /r/MGTOW's discourse of vicarious victory offers men on this forum an encounter with control and identity by giving them the opportunity to experience the domination of women but without needing to risk anything in the process. /r/TheRedPill, on the other hand, allows men to experience this return to control and identity through learning seduction techniques. In learning how to dupe and trick women into sex, /r/TheRedPill is offering men on this forum an encounter with control by turning sexual relationships into a 'game' to which skill and expertise can be applied. Given sexual virility is a hallmark of hegemonic masculine identity, this discourse offers an encounter with masculine identity as well.

Finally, chapter six looked specifically at Incels.co and the ways in which the discourses found on this forum offered encounters with meaning and control. This forum was more difficult to understand

mainly because rather than offering a positive message of overcoming adversity and regaining control and hegemonic masculine identity, Incels.co is characterised by its negativity, fatalism, and a hybrid masculinity which takes on a lot of features of subordinate, victimised masculine identities. However, although it initially seems as though Incels.co cannot be explained by my theoretical framework (and it would have been acceptable if it wasn't), there are ways in which this forum offers an encounter with wholeness, albeit in different ways to /r/MGTOW and /r/TheRedPill. The pessimistic, fatalistic outlook on the forum brings with it an abdication of responsibility which, in a system characterised by an over-emphasis on individual responsibility, brings with it contentment. On top of this, Incels.co offers a sense of belonging for those who are otherwise alienated and disenfranchised, as well as its own particular configuration of the vicarious victory discourse found on /r/MGTOW.

Although each forum contains discourses that offer the men on them an encounter with wholeness, each fails to do so. Acknowledging this is integral to understanding why men remain on the forums. The subject positions created by each discourse are impossible to fully inhabit due to their ambiguity and unrealistic ideals. On /r/MGTOW, for instance, it is impossible for men to fully separate from society and women. Although the ideal MGTOW subject is one who lives in the wilderness, is self-sufficient, and has no contact with women, no man can ever achieve this particular identity. Furthermore, although each discourse promises an encounter with control, none succeed in delivering on this promise. Instead, in the case of both /r/MGTOW and /r/TheRedPill, agency becomes overburdened and structural factors are ignored completely. These men are therefore promised an encounter with total control, they are thwarted by external factors and the reality that it is not possible to control everything purely by exercising agency. These men therefore inevitably fail but are not provided with a means of dealing with this failure. Instead, they are told to simply go back to the beginning and try again.

As a result, the men on these forums are left to oscillate between wholeness and a lack of control, identity, and meaning as they continue to aspire to the subject positions each discourse creates and continue to believe that they will offer an encounter with meaning, control, and identity if they just try harder or try a few more times. This oscillation causes frustration, frustration that is then channelled towards women to

obscure the failings and contradictions of the discourse itself. Women are blamed for stealing from men and for erecting barriers to men's wholeness. Out of this comes the vehement misogyny that is present on all three forums. Men also become the targets of this frustration too, specifically men who do not adhere to the masculine ideals of each of the forums. For /r/MGTOW and /r/TheRedPill this means men who have been feminised and who are dependent on women. For Incels.co, it can mean men who have been feminised, but more often than not frustration is directed at 'Chad' or men who are deemed attractive and who adhere to hegemonic masculine ideals.

But out of this frustration comes hope. Although each discourse protects itself by blaming its failure to deliver wholeness on women, there is a chance that the men on these forums will eventually start to slip out of the forums' logic. There may come a point at which a man has failed to achieve wholeness so many times that he begins to question the efficacy and validity of the discourse he has subscribed to. Thus, just as these men found these groups whilst searching for alternative discourses, they may begin to seek a new discourse yet again. Bratich and Banet-Weiser (2019) chart this process by studying the transition from pick-up artist to incel, but I posit that this process is not necessarily a linear one and does not necessarily have to go from one extreme to another. Instead, there is hope that these men might find alternative discourses that are more positive, do not rely on misogyny, and encourage men to be kinder to themselves. These discourses do exist, but they are often drowned out by the Manosphere and the latent misogyny that exists in society. The task, therefore, is to provide and promote positive alternative discourses so that when the process of losing investment in these discourses starts, there is a possibility that men will be drawn to them rather than other extremist ideologies.

I also discovered things both about myself and these groups which I did not expect. I was surprised by the ways in which the research affected me. Incels.co in particular got under my skin, influencing the way I thought about the world events that happened to me. In the midst of my research, incel terminology filled my head and I would use it to reappraise situations to amuse myself. If I saw a couple holding hands and they were attractive according to culturally informed standards, I'd categorise them as 'Chad' and 'Stac'y' and wonder what an incel might feel upon seeing them. Would they be frustrated? Angry? Feel a sense of

loss or yearning? And there are also more insidious ways in which this forum affected me. The focus on aesthetics and emphasis on romantic and sexual relationships as being markers of human value is an idea that is not limited to Incels.co. As I reflected on in the third interlude, these ideas also exist in wider society and can induce a background hum of anxiety and insecurity.

Although the grip incel terminology had on my inner monologue has drastically loosened as time has passed, the way in which incels focus so intently on physical deficiencies and abnormalities has stuck with me more closely. Being self-conscious is certainly not something new to me, but Incels.co certainly provided new ways of framing self-consciousness, making it seem far more existential and important than ever before. It amplified and reframed anxieties that had been there before, reconfiguring them in novel ways. Linked to this, I was surprised at how much empathy I had for the men on Incels.co. Of all the groups, I identified with them the most, having experienced loneliness and felt similarly insecure as a result of a lack of romantic relationships at times.

This served to teach me that Incels.co does not exist in a vacuum and that the forces in society that affect them also have the ability to affect everyone else. Is there much difference, for instance, between an incel comparing themselves to ideals of masculine beauty and chastising themselves for not living up to them, and a teenage girl comparing herself to other women on Instagram and believing herself similarly lacking? Of course, the context differs and the key distinguishing factor here is that incels go on to engage in misogynistic invective and acts of violence, but in isolation there are many similarities to be seen here. The increasing emphasis on aesthetics, the ability to compare oneself to others at all times via social media, and the proliferation of dating apps which reduce romantic relationships to a marketplace where one need only make judgements based on a few pictures and lines of text. As Bo Burnham puts it, this is a system in which people (in particular the gen z and millennials) “are self-conscious. They have been forced by a culture that they did not create to be conscious of themselves at every moment, to curate every aspect of themselves and present it to the world for judgement” (2019). What happens when it’s not possible to live up to the standards set by social media? Burnham goes on to say that digital natives “live their lives as a movie – a movie of which they are their own star, writer, director, cinematographer, colorist... And part

of their stress, I believe, is their thinking that compared to the representative media the movie of their life sucks” (Ibid). This observation applies to incels as well. They too feel as if their lives suck when compared to those around them and the ideal constructed by hegemonic masculinity.

/r/TheRedPill or /r/MGTOW do not exist in a vacuum either. Not only is there the increase in self-consciousness and need to perform all the time among both men on the Manosphere and men more broadly, but there is also a decrease in confidence in neoliberalism and the continued pressures hegemonic masculinity places on men. A large constituency of men find themselves on the receiving end of this dual pressure and exist in a state of constant insecurity. This leads to men frantically searching for certainty and ways to control their environment. The discourses of magical voluntarism found on both /r/MGTOW and /r/TheRedPill are therefore far from unique. As Mark Fisher points out, responsibilisation is “one of the most successful tactics of the ruling class” (2014). It is, therefore, an idea that is endemic within Western societies but which manifests in a particularly extreme way in parts of the Manosphere. Instead of being an unexpected and random development, in other words, the Manosphere is informed by and symptomatic of a much wider context. In the words of John Muir, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe." (1988, p.110).

## **Contributions**

Writing about the contribution my project has made makes me uncomfortable. The very idea that something has to be new and original is steeped in masculine and colonial assumptions. The idea that a researcher is one who goes where no one else has gone before, stakes a claim in that as yet unexplored territory, and does so entirely independently is one I want to challenge. Before talking about the contribution my project makes, therefore, I want to add the caveat that any contribution would have been impossible without the work of other people. In particular, as has already been stated, the work of Solomon (2012) and Ahmed (2007) has been pivotal, as has the work of Bratich and Banet-Weiser (2019) and numerous others who have written on the Manosphere before now (Bates, 2020b; Nagle, 2017; Srinivasan, 2021). Although it feels as if the majority of a PhD is spent

in a self-induced solitary confinement, it is far from an individual pursuit. To paint it as such would be to reinforce some of the very individualising forces this thesis has sought to highlight and criticise. My contribution, therefore, is necessarily situated within the wider context of Manosphere and affect literature. It builds on this work in the hope that it might offer a better understanding of what is a relatively novel phenomenon.

With that in mind, the main contribution my work makes is to bring affect theory to the study of the Manosphere. This is by no means the first work on the Manosphere to do so, with many other articles bringing in emotions as a means to understand this phenomenon (Bratich and Banet-weiser, 2019; Dynel, 2020; Labbaf, 2020; Tolentino, 2018). My project, however, builds on this by bringing a theory of affect, emotions, and discourse to the Manosphere in order to explain why certain men are drawn to it. On top of this, I have noted that control and identity are key concepts when it comes to understanding the Manosphere. Both come up in various guises on all three of the forums I researched and represent that which these men feel they are lacking. Similarly, men on these forums are also seeking meaning. The worldview they held previously has been proven to be inaccurate and is unable to explain the world around them, so a new worldview is required.

I believe that this theory is not simply limited to explaining the Manosphere. After I had settled on my theoretical framework and noticed how common themes of control and identity came up on these forums, I began to notice how often the word ‘control’ was used in political discourse. There is, of course, the by now infamous slogan used by the Vote Leave campaign during the 2016 EU referendum in Britain: ‘Take back control’. Similar to this, the levelling up programme included in the UK Conservative party’s 2019 manifesto is imbued with the language of control too. An announcement in February 2022 on the details of this programme saw Secretary



of State for Levelling Up, Michael Gove, state that the levelling up strategy would allow people to “take back control of their lives” (The BBC, 2022).

Even when the word ‘control’ isn’t used explicitly, a desire to regain control of something – be it political institutions, the country as a whole, or, on an even more personal level, our own lives – is prevalent in contemporary political discourse. Neoliberal capitalism and globalisation have opened up not only national economies but people’s lives to the uncertainties and chaos of the market. Capitalism, as the saying goes, is crisis. At the same time, it homogenises and erodes any secure sense of place and time. Is it any wonder, in this context, that people are seeking and becoming invested in discourses which offer both control and a strong sense of identity? This framing reveals that the Manosphere, far from being an aberration, is a bellwether for much more universal and powerful forces. The rise of nationalism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and white supremacy, as well as social democratic movements in Europe and America, there is a possibility that all can be explained, in part at least, by studying the way in which the discourses attached to these phenomena take people’s affective experiences, translate them into feelings of a loss of control, identity and then offer a means of resolving that loss and achieving wholeness.

My project has also added detail to an already well rendered picture of Manosphere. In spending four months on these three forums and reading prior research, I was able to gain a deep understanding of the ideologies of all three and the dominant discourses that make them up. In exploring these discourses and providing screenshots of posts from each forum, this project provides more material to substantiate existing hypotheses whilst also revealing some new patterns. My conceptualization of vicarious victory, for instance, relates to a genre of post that is far from unique to /r/MGTOW and Incels.co. It can be applied to other forums that seek to ridicule and discipline outgroups in order to understand the function of this discourse.

I intended from the beginning to make this project one of hope and empathy. I wanted to ensure I both avoided fatalism and the idea that these were men who could not change, whilst at the same time listening to them on their own terms and trying to understand them rather than putting their decision to join these forums down to vast deterministic concepts like patriarchy and misogyny. Both of these concepts are helpful, of course, but they don't allow for a nuanced understanding of why men find themselves on the Manosphere. I believe that one of the main contributions this project makes is to show how the men on these forums are not stuck on them forever, nor are they destined to move from one extreme to another. Instead, there is the possibility that, when they begin to slip from one discourse's rationality, they might become invested in another that is less toxic, harmful, and misogynistic. At this moment of transition anything is possible. It is also my hope that this project has shown the men on these forums in an empathetic light. Empathy does not require agreement with these men or justifying their behaviour, but instead means being curious about their beliefs and actions.

### **Limitations and future avenues**

The main limitation of my research is the lack of interviews or engagement with the members of these forums. I decided early on to avoid both for reasons of my own safety and because I thought focusing on forum posts would provide direct access to these men's narratives in their own environment. The ability to be a hidden observer on these forums and to simply experience them was both exciting and sufficient for the aims of my work. But there are certainly benefits to interviews and engagements. Indeed, a few studies and articles have already included interviews as part of their data (Bates, 2020b; Tait, 2017). Conducting them would have given me the ability to ask questions about the discourses I had identified on each forum and how being a member of each forum makes these men feel. I could also have asked directly why the interviewees had joined each group. Although the answers to these questions would have no doubt been varied, they may have provided more detail to my discussion. Engagement would also have allowed me to

clarify certain points and to learn more about the users that make up these forums. There is, in short, certainly the potential for research that includes interviews and engagement with users on these forums to be incredibly productive.

I believe there are now three main areas for future research. The first includes further studies into the way in which discourses become sites of strong affective investment and the consequences of them failing to deliver on the promise of wholeness. These studies need not be limited to the Manosphere but could, in fact, spread to other extremist groups online and, in fact, any dominant discourse. This framework has the potential to explain why dominant discourses become dominant in the first place, and its sensitivity to the role affect plays in this process has the potential to be particularly enlightening. The second involves future research on incels. This was undoubtedly the group I found the most interesting to research, the potential for research projects here is endless. In particular, gaining a better understanding of how incels are the most visible product of discourses that are endemic to Western society more generally would be fruitful.

Finally, future research projects might look into the types of discourse that might draw men away from the Manosphere. These are alternative discourses that also attract strong affective investment, but do not contain within them the misogyny, anger, and lack of affective structure for dealing with emotions present in discourses found on the Manosphere. There is some research on former members of the Manosphere and what drew them away from the group they were a part of, but little focusing on the role affect and discourse play in this process (Bates, 2020b; Tait, 2017). This research could seek to find commonalities in the discourses that have attracted men away from the Manosphere, and other extremist ideologies. The aim could be to develop these discourses further and coming up with ways in which they could be deployed to either prevent men from being drawn to the Manosphere in the first place, or drawing men already engaged in forums on the Manosphere away from its toxic discourses of misogyny, hegemonic masculinity, and rage. This is the most urgent area of research, and it represents an important complement to what this project has sought to explore. Instead of asking what draws men to the Manosphere, in other words, the question is what draws men away from it or prevents men from slipping into its grasp. If there

is to be any hope of preventing more men joining the Manosphere this research is key. But this research is also the logical conclusion of the empathy this project has sought to extend. It is one thing to try to understand the men on these groups, and this is a necessary first step, but the goal should ultimately be to ask how they can be helped. What are these men really lacking? How might their suffering be abated? What might it mean to understand these men as full human beings? Although it is undeniable that members of these forums may believe, say, and in some cases do, abhorrent things this is not to say they are unworthy of empathy and understanding. To fail to empathise with them is to risk not fully understanding their situation and therefore to fail to come up with solutions that might prevent them from slipping further into extremism or fail to prevent other men from also joining these groups.

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