

# RIDP

Gert Vermeulen, Nina Peršak  
& Stéphanie De Coensel (*Eds.*)

Researching the boundaries of **sexual integrity,**  
**gender violence and image-based abuse**

Revue Internationale de Droit Pénal  
International Review of Penal Law  
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Международное обозрение уголовного права  
刑事法律国际评论  
المجلة الدولية للقانون الجنائي  
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Internationale Revue für Strafrecht



MAKLU

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Edited by

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# UNDERSTANDING INCELDOM: AN ADAPTED FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSING THE INCEL COMMUNITY WITHIN AN ONLINE RADICALISATION APPROACH

Renée Pattyn\*

## Abstract

*The ‘involuntary celibate’, or (predominantly) men who have been unable to find romantic or sexual relationships with women despite desiring to, have come together in the online incel community. Though initially supportive in nature, the community has become a hotbed for (violent) online misogyny. This exploratory virtual ethnographic research focusses on the nature of the incel community and its members, and how the community plays a role in online misogynistic radicalisation. To this end, this paper applies Bayerl and others’ Radicalisation-Factor Model and its four interlinked factors – the individual, the environment, the radical groups and ideology, and technologies – to the incel community. This adjusted framework finds its basis in existing insights from the literature on online radicalisation, social psychology, gender, masculinity, and misogyny, and is further supplemented by insights from non-participatory observations on incel forums. By approaching the incel phenomenon from different perspectives, this framework has the aim of providing a holistic understanding of the incel community as well as highlighting the importance of the interplay of various individual, ideological, contextual, and technological features in the process of online radicalisation.*

## 1 Introduction

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence is a worldwide problem that affects women and girls on a day-to-day basis. The 2023 Fundamental Rights Agency report on online content moderation showed that misogyny is the most prevalent form of online hate among several popular social media platforms.<sup>1</sup> Online misogynistic hate speech often includes dehumanising language where women are compared to objects or animals. Posts targeting women more frequently include enticement to violence as compared to other groups, this is also often of a sexual nature.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fundamental Rights Agency, ‘Online content moderation - Current challenges in detecting hate speech’ (November 2023) <<https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2023/online-content-moderation>> accessed 15 February 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Other than present on mainstream platforms, online misogyny has also carved its own space in the ‘manosphere’, an overarching antifeminist network consisting of blogs, forums, influencers, organisations, and communities revolving around men’s issues.<sup>3</sup> The manosphere has not only become more popular over the years but also increasingly toxic and misogynistic.<sup>4</sup> A particularly controversial segment of the manosphere has come to be known as the incel community. The incel community is a community that unites people (mostly men) who have been unable to find sexual and/or romantic relationships (mostly with women) and therefore identify as ‘involuntarily celibate’ (incel). While the community found its origin as a support forum under the name of ‘Alana’s Involuntary Celibacy Project’ which welcomed people regardless of their sexual or gender identity,<sup>5</sup> this changed drastically over the years. Though instances of mutual social support can still be found if one is to look through incel spaces, the community has now become infamous for its widespread online misogyny, racism, and homophobia.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, there have been instances where this hate found its way outside these dedicated spaces. In 2019, 17-year-old Bianca Devins was murdered by Brandon Andrew Clark after a night out when he saw her kissing another friend. Following the murder, Clark published several photos of her deceased body on social media. Though not an incel himself, the incel community has been linked to the harassment of Bianca’s family after the murder.<sup>7</sup> At least one member of an incel forum confirmed he had personally sent the mother a ‘cum tribute’<sup>8</sup> to photos of the deceased Bianca.<sup>9</sup> In addition, there have been several (planned) real-life violent attacks by men who identified as incels.<sup>10</sup>

### 1.1 The incel community as a radical milieu

Considering that the term ‘involuntary celibacy’ merely refers to a lack of success in finding a romantic and/or sexual relationship despite desiring to, it can encompass a wide

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<sup>3</sup> Debbie Ging, ‘Alphas, betas, and incels: Theorizing the masculinities of the manosphere’ (2019) 22 *Men and Masculinities* 638.

<sup>4</sup> Tracie Farrell and others, ‘Exploring misogyny across the manosphere in Reddit’ (10th ACM Conference on Web Science, Boston, June 2019) <<https://doi.org/10.1145/3292522.3326045>> accessed 6 March 2024; Manoel Horta Ribeiro and others, ‘The evolution of the manosphere across the web’ (15th International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media, June 2021) <<https://doi.org/10.1609/icwsm.v15i1.18053>> accessed 6 March 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Love Not Anger, ‘About’ (*Love Not Anger*) <<https://www.lovenotanger.org/about/>> accessed December 15, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Sylvie Jaki and others, ‘Online hatred of women in the Incels.me forum’ (2018) 7 *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict* 240; Center for Countering Digital Hate, ‘The Incelosphere: Exposing pathways into incel communities and the harms they pose to women and children’ (Center for Countering Digital Hate 23 September 2022) <<https://counterhate.com/research/incelosphere/>> accessed 16 February 2024

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Leach, ‘Family targeted by online community after teen’s murder: “Absolutely traumatizing”’ *CBS News* (New York City, 10 August 2022) <<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/bianca-devins-murder-family-targeted-online-community/>> accessed 13 March 2024.

<sup>8</sup> A ‘cum tribute’ is the act of ejaculating on someone’s picture.

<sup>9</sup> This finding was made in function of online observations on incel forums.

<sup>10</sup> For example, the 2014 Isla Vista Killings by Elliot Rodger, the 2018 Toronto van attack by Alek Minasian and the planned but unexecuted shooting by Tres Genco.

range of people. While the contemporary incel community is nowadays mostly characterised by an emphasis on heteronormative relationships, specifically men who have been unable to attract women, there are also peripheral communities that discuss aspects related to involuntary celibacy and singlehood that welcome people regardless of their gender or sexuality (eg the subreddit r/ForeverAlone) while distancing themselves from the contemporary incel identity, incel-related content, and misogyny. R/IncelExit is an example of a community that does focus on the incel identity but similarly distances itself from misogynistic rhetoric. Further, there are also women-only and female incel(-adjacent) spaces to be found (eg r/ForeverAloneWomen, FemaleDatingStrategy).<sup>11</sup> As such, (the broad interpretation of) the incel community is not a monolithic block in which all incels share the same ideas, mentalities, or experiences. Notwithstanding the diversity in the community, this paper narrows its focus to a specific subset. For this reason, when reference is made to the 'incel community' or 'incels', this should be understood as male incels in particular unless stated otherwise.

Furthermore, the incel community has been described as a 'radical milieu', an environment that – though not physically violent itself – can provide incels with a support system, a sense of belonging and legitimisation for their grievances and frustrations, lending itself as a space for online radicalisation.<sup>12</sup> Radicalisation is the process by which an individual becomes increasingly engrossed in a set of ideas and beliefs that differ from and are more radical than the dominant ideas in society. This may also lead to the glorification, support, justification, and – in very exceptional cases – the use of violence.<sup>13</sup> This process can occur both (and simultaneously) offline and online. With regards to online radicalisation, the internet is a venue in which people can efficiently share ideas with a wide range of (like-minded) people all over the world without the need for physical contact.<sup>14</sup>

This paper needs to be situated in a broader exploratory research project that aims to shed more light on how the incel community contributes towards the presence of misogyny online. In order to better understand the process of online misogynistic radicalisation, a virtual ethnographic study is being carried out focussing on the incel community. Online non-participatory observations spanning fifteen months (January 2023 – March 2024) specifically targeting three incel forums took place in connection to this, with the intention of gaining further insights into the members of the community as well as its overarching culture and functioning. The forums were: incels.is (referred to as 'IS' from

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<sup>11</sup> Allysa Czerwinsky, 'Misogynist incels gone mainstream: A critical review of the current directions in incel-focused research' (2023) *Crime, Media, Culture* 1 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/17416590231196125>> accessed 17 January 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Sara Brzuszkiewicz, 'Incel radical milieu and external locus of control' (ICCT Journal Special Edition-Volume II: Contemporary Developments, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism 2020) <<https://www.icct.nl/publication/incel-radical-milieu-and-external-locus-control>> accessed 6 March 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Randy Borum, 'Radicalization into violent extremism I: A review of social science theories' (2011) 4 *Journal of Strategic Security* 7.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Koehler, 'The radical online: Individual radicalization processes and the role of the Internet' [2014] *Journal for Deradicalization* 116.



here on), The Blackpill Club (incels.in; referred to as 'BP' from here on), and RealIncels (saidit.net/s/RealIncels; referred to as 'RI' from here on). These forums were specifically chosen for their clear presence of misogyny, and thus it should be made clear this paper does not aim to make a statement about those male incel(-adjacent) communities that distance themselves from the contemporary misogynistic incel identity. The collected data relevant for this paper, which formed the basis for the preliminary insights from the observations, include textual data (ie specific threads and their replies, and usernames) and more general observations about how the forum functions (ie the forum rules, the types of topics discussed, the way of interaction between members).

For the purpose of understanding radicalisation in terms of internalising and perpetuating misogynistic beliefs, the paper adapts the Radicalisation-Factor Model<sup>15</sup> (RFM) of Bayerl and colleagues and applies it to the incel phenomenon. This theory-independent framework consists of four interlinked factors: the individual, the environment, the radical groups and ideology, and technologies. The interpretation of these four factors finds its basis in existing insights from the literature on online radicalisation, social psychology, gender, masculinity, and misogyny, and is further inspired by preliminary insights from the non-participatory observations on incel forums. A framework like RFM allows for a holistic understanding of the incel community as well as highlighting the importance of the interplay of various individual, ideological, contextual, and technological features in the process of online radicalisation. Below, the adaption of this model to the incel community can be found.

## 2 The Radicalisation-Factor Model

### 2.1 Features of the environment

According to Bayerl and colleagues, the wider context – the political, economic, social, technological, and legal characteristics of the environment – in which the individual and the ideological group operate, needs to be taken into consideration.<sup>16</sup> Many of these aspects may also differ between countries and so nationality<sup>17</sup> may influence which and how incel beliefs are expressed. Nevertheless, this section – based on the literature – limits itself to covering only certain aspects in a more global manner and mostly from a Western angle, and should therefore not be regarded as an exhaustive exposition.

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<sup>15</sup> Petra Saskia Bayerl, Arif Sahar and Arif Akhgar, 'The radicalisation-factor model (RFM): Proposing a framework for the systematic investigation and modelling of online radicalisation' in Babak Akhgar, Douglas Wells and José María Blanco (eds), *Investigating radicalization trends: Case studies in Europe and Asia* (Springer Cham 2020).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Radicalisation Awareness Network, 'Incels: A first scan of the phenomenon (in the EU) and its relevance and challenges for P/CVE' (Publications Office of the European Union 2021).

### 2.1.1 *Men's Rights Movement, aggrieved entitlement, and masculinity*

Influenced by feminism and other rights movements, Western society has undergone significant changes in the social, political, and economic spheres resulting in more equality. Nevertheless the progress in terms of women's rights, the UN Women's gender report of 2023 underscores that reaching gender equality has proven to be an arduous undertaking.<sup>18</sup> Many countries are still lacking in legal frameworks combatting gender discrimination. Not only are existing forms of inequality insufficiently addressed, but many rights have been actively rolled back following antifeminist backlash.<sup>19</sup> Today, antifeminist backlash is increasingly observed on the internet in the manosphere. Yet, this online source of antifeminist backlash did not come out of thin air and is rather a reflection of a wider culture that encourages such beliefs.

The origins of the Men's Rights Movement (MRM) and the manosphere can be traced back to the Men's Liberation Movement (MLM) of the 1970s which was an ally of feminism. Like the feminist movement, they acknowledged the negative influence of sex role stereotypes for both women and men. However, attempts to strike a balance between the recognition of men's privilege and institutional power over women while simultaneously being aware that narrow conceptions of masculinity also harmed men, caused tension over time. Some started to assert that women and men were not only differently oppressed but also equally, depoliticising the issue of oppression. This led to a split of the MLM into a pro- and antifeminist faction by the late 1970s. The pro-feminist faction exchanged its sex role language for that of gender relations and power to focus on ending men's institutionalised privilege and violence against women. In contrast, the antifeminist faction – which came to be known as the Men's Rights Movement – co-opted sex role language and trivialised or refuted feminist claims that the patriarchal system benefits men at the expense of women.<sup>20</sup> Now calling themselves 'men's rights activists' (MRAs), they moved the discussion to the internet, establishing the manosphere, and sought to promote misogyny, antifeminism, and masculinity.<sup>21</sup>

Notwithstanding the existence of multiple masculinities, there is one that is culturally dominant in a given society, ie hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity are those practices that systematically institutionalise men's power, bringing along certain expectations of men that guarantee men's dominance over women and other groups of men and masculinities. Though it does not have to be the most widespread or enacted form

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<sup>18</sup> Ginette Azcona and others, *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The gender snapshot 2023* (UN Women and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2023).

<sup>19</sup> Susanné Seong-Eun Bergsten and Song Ah Lee, 'The global backlash against women's rights' (*Human Rights Watch*, 7 March 2023) <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/07/global-backlash-against-womens-rights>> accessed March 5, 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Kimmel, *Angry white men: American masculinity at the end of an era* (Nation Books 2013); Michael A. Messner, 'Forks in the road of men's gender politics: Men's rights vs feminist allies' (2016) 5 *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 6; Lisa Sugiura, *The incel rebellion: The rise of the manosphere and the virtual war against women* (Emerald Publishing Limited 2021).

<sup>21</sup> Ging (n 3).

of masculinity, it is the one to be most likely admired.<sup>22</sup> Hegemonic masculinity in Western societies is associated with characteristics such as assertiveness, stoicism, competitiveness, physical strength, dominance, aggression, and participation in heterosexual sex.<sup>23</sup> Men's social, sexual, economic, and political privilege is often a reflection of hegemonic masculinity. However, societal changes (eg women and racial minorities entering the labour market, politics, and higher education, gaining sexual autonomy) have levelled the playing field, increased competition, and present a threat to that privilege. According to Michael Kimmel, this can lead to 'aggrieved entitlement', a sense of resentment that stems from the idea that something one was entitled to in the past has now been taken away by others. Failing to achieve what used to be self-evident, these men are left humiliated and their sense of masculinity has now been compromised.<sup>24</sup> According to the masculine overcompensation thesis, in situations where masculinity is threatened, men may resort to overcompensating (and extreme) demonstrations of masculinity.<sup>25</sup> Willer and colleagues tested this thesis and found that men who believed that societal changes threatened the status of their gender, reported more support for war and homophobia, held stronger dominance attitudes, and believed more strongly in male superiority.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, aggrieved entitlement has a distorting effect where the resulting anger and frustration are often misplaced, directed at those below them such as women or certain groups of men (eg men of colour, non-heterosexual men), rather than those who hold the power in society. Through the lens of aggrieved entitlement, violence may be seen as necessary and justified for restoring their dominance against those who have wronged them. And so, the concept of aggrieved entitlement has been used to explain various demonstrations of hate such as shootings and involvement in white supremacy groups, but also violence against women and the MRM.<sup>27</sup>

Similar tendencies can be observed in the incel community. In the manosphere, including the incel community, hegemonic masculinity has become intertwined with narratives of victimhood.<sup>28</sup> Focussing on sexual privilege, incels belief in a 'right to sex', an entitlement that is now threatened due to feminism and the sexual revolution having increased women's bodily and sexual autonomy. Their own inability to meet hegemonic standards (eg participation in heterosexual sex) leaves their masculinity in jeopardy which needs to be rectified. Consequently, they resort to online hate and glorify violence focussing on

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<sup>22</sup> Robert William Connell, *Masculinities* (2nd edn, Routledge 2005); Robert William Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept' (2005) 19 *Gender & Society* 829

<sup>23</sup> Robb Willer and others, 'Overdoing gender: A test of the masculine overcompensation thesis' (2013) 118 *American Journal of Sociology* 980.

<sup>24</sup> Kimmel (n 20).

<sup>25</sup> Willer and others (n 23).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Kimmel (n 20).

<sup>28</sup> Ging (n 3); Alyssa M. Glace, Tessa L. Dover and Judith G. Zarkin, 'Taking the Black Pill: An empirical analysis of the "incel"' (2021) 22 *Psychology of Men & Masculinities* 288.

women's subordination.<sup>29</sup> Online misogyny in that sense may be seen as an attempt at securing male hegemony in the absence of the same in the offline world.<sup>30</sup>

### 2.1.2 *Loneliness and the new male-only space*

The incel phenomenon can also be placed in a context that has seen a change in socialisation patterns. Given peoples' social nature and the importance of social connections for our happiness and quality of life, over the years there has been a growing concern over the impact of loneliness. The World Health Organization has declared loneliness as a pressing global health threat affecting people of all genders and ages.<sup>31</sup> Though numbers on the prevalence of loneliness and social isolation differ between studies, the first-ever EU-wide survey on loneliness found that a third of the 25,646 respondents were lonely at least sometimes and thirteen percent were lonely most of the time. Further, people aged eighteen to twenty-five who reported feeling frequently lonely had doubled between 2016 and 2020. Loneliness did decrease with age, however.<sup>32</sup> The Meta-Gallup survey on connections and loneliness found that among the approximately 1,000 people from each of the surveyed 142 countries aged fifteen or older, 49% of respondents reported not feeling at all lonely, and the other half reported feeling at least a little lonely. Almost a quarter (24%) of the respondents felt 'very' or 'fairly' lonely. Self-reported loneliness was also highest for the ages nineteen to twenty-nine, with 27% of these adults reporting feeling 'very' or 'fairly' lonely compared to seventeen percent of people aged 65+.<sup>33</sup>

A related concept is that of (virtual) third places. Third places are those spaces that exist outside the home or workplace (eg pubs, coffee houses, public parks, bookstores, ...) and foster social interaction and support, and community building.<sup>34</sup> At least in a North American context, there has been a so-called decline of such places, potentially contributing to loneliness and worsening mental health.<sup>35</sup> However, rather than just focussing on the *(non-)existence* of third places, the *quality* or *experience* of those third places for specific people is just as important. Though incels, generally speaking, may have the

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<sup>29</sup> Joshua Thorburn, Anastasia Powell and Peter Chambers, 'A world alone: Masculinities, humiliation and aggrieved entitlement on an incel forum' (2023) 63 *The British Journal of Criminology* 238.

<sup>30</sup> Ging (n 3).

<sup>31</sup> World Health Organization, 'WHO Commission on Social Connection' (*World Health Organization*, 15 November 2023) <<https://www.who.int/groups/commission-on-social-connection>> accessed 24 January 2024.

<sup>32</sup> Francesco Berlingieri, Marco Colagrossi and Caterina Mauri, 'Loneliness and social connectedness: Insights from a new EU-wide survey' (Fairness policy brief 3/2023, European Commission's Joint Research Centre 2023).

<sup>33</sup> Gallup and Meta, 'The global state of social connections' (Gallup 2022).

<sup>34</sup> Charles Soukup, 'Computer-mediated communication as a virtual third place: Building Oldenburg's great good places on the world wide web' (2006) 8 *New Media & Society* 421.

<sup>35</sup> Jessica Finlay and others, 'Closure of 'third places'? Exploring potential consequences for collective health and wellbeing' (2019) 60 *Health and Place* 1; AlibsWrites, 'The death of third places and the evolution of communities' (*Medium*, 12 January 2023) <<https://medium.com/illumination/the-death-of-third-places-and-the-evolution-of-communities-5bbfc01c5e>> accessed 24 January 2024.

same access to (free) public and offline third places as non-incels, they may experience that it does not serve the same purposes that it has for other people. They may feel that their identity as incels – that heavily emphasises a lack of sexual/romantic success in a world built around its success, thus portraying themselves as an outsider to modern society – inhibits them from finding the same level of benefits in a way that more sexually/romantically successful people have. To this day, the world continues to see an increase in global internet usage, particularly among teens and young adults.<sup>36</sup> As it can provide new opportunities for connection and socialisation, it is of no surprise that some may turn to virtual third places.<sup>37</sup>

And so, the incel community as a male-only and virtual third place can be seen as an answer to this backdrop of loneliness (to which incels seem to be particularly susceptible, see section 2.2.2.) and changing gender relations in many spheres of society. Though not explaining online misogyny by itself, it does show that the incel community did not develop in a vacuum divorced from its wider context. However, many other factors inter-link in explaining participation in misogynistic places and perpetuating such beliefs.

## 2.2 Features of the individual

Features of the individual looks at those factors that are ‘associated with a weaker or stronger vulnerability to radicalisation or affinity with certain ideologies and specific patterns of online and radical behaviours’.<sup>38</sup> The following section will look at demographic factors as well as some other person-centric factors. Additionally, some of the mentioned factors will expose certain vulnerabilities and needs of incels, and in turn, motivate seeking affiliation with the incel community. While this section is mainly based on the literature, the preliminary insights from the observations regarding demographic factors and social and psychological issues seem consistent with the literature. The subsection on needs and reasons in particular is strongly shaped by the observations.

### 2.2.1 Demographic factors

The image associated with incels is usually that of a young, white, and heterosexual man with no romantic and/or sexual history, an image that has for the most part been confirmed by both research and the community itself. Two surveys conducted by IS<sup>39</sup> themselves and academic studies showed incels to be male.<sup>40</sup> Approximately 60% of incels

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<sup>36</sup> International Telecommunication Union, *Measuring digital development: Facts and figures 2023* (International Telecommunication Union, 2023).

<sup>37</sup> Soukup (n 34).

<sup>38</sup> Bayerl, Sahar and Akhgar (n 15) 34.

<sup>39</sup> In 2019 and 2020, respectively three and two women participated in the official forum surveys but their results were excluded from analysis by the moderators.

<sup>40</sup> Jaki and others (n 6); SergeantIncel, '[News] survey results - Oct 2019' (*Incels.co*, 30 September 2019) <<https://web.archive.org/web/20200630175717/https://incels.co/threads/survey-results-oct-2019.147774/>> accessed 12 November 2021; SergeantIncel, '[News] survey results - March 2020' (*Incels.co*, 24 March 2020) <<https://web.archive.org/web/20200614024321/https://incels.co/threads/survey-results-march->

seem to be between the ages of eighteen to twenty-five.<sup>41</sup> Still, the existence of very young (and old) incels should not be overlooked. Jaki and colleagues' qualitative analysis and the official forum surveys showed there to be a non-negligible group of older incels in the community. Additionally, survey studies on incels exclude people younger than eighteen from participating, leading to a potential underrepresentation of the younger demographic in (quantitative) research.

The majority of members seem to originate from either Western Europe or North America, the remaining members are from other parts of the world such as Eastern Europe, Asia, Central or South America, Africa and Oceania.<sup>42</sup> Though a majority of incels identify as White/Caucasian, the community seems to be ethnically diverse with almost half of the members identifying as Black, Hispanic, Asian, Indian, Middle Eastern, or Other/Not sure.<sup>43</sup>

The official forum surveys did not attempt to determine members' sexual orientation. This is no surprise given that the forums, at least IS and BP, explicitly forbid LGBTQ+ people from joining the forum according to their rules.<sup>44</sup> And so, it is assumed members are exclusively heterosexual men. A ban on LGBTQ+ people nevertheless does not mean non-heterosexual people cannot be found in the community. Other surveys found that the large majority of incels are indeed heterosexual, though a few did identify as bisexual, homosexual, or another sexual orientation.<sup>45</sup> According to the official forum surveys, just less than two-thirds of members reported having never kissed someone, the majority had never been in a romantic relationship or reported never having had sex.<sup>46</sup>

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2020.188748/> accessed 12 November 2021; Anne Speckhard and others, 'Involuntary celibates' experiences of and grievance over sexual exclusion and the potential threat of violence among those active in an online incel forum' (2021) 14 *Journal of Strategic Security* 89; Sophia Moskalenko and others, 'Incel ideology, radicalization and mental health: A survey study' (2022) 4 *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare* 1; Anne Speckhard and Molly Ellenberg, 'Self-reported psychiatric disorder and perceived psychological symptom rates among involuntary celibates (incels) and their perceptions of mental health treatment' (2022) *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 1.

<sup>41</sup> Jaki and others (n 6); SergeantIncel, '[News] survey results - Oct 2019'; SergeantIncel, '[News] survey results - March 2020'; Joe Whittaker, William Costello and Andrew Thomas, 'Predicting harm among incels (involuntary celibates): The roles of mental health, ideological belief and social networking' (Commission for Countering Extremism 2024).

<sup>42</sup> SergeantIncel, '[News] survey results - Oct 2019'; SergeantIncel, '[News] survey results - March 2020'; Speckhard and others (n 40); Speckhard and Ellenberg (n 40).

<sup>43</sup> SergeantIncel, '[News] survey results - Oct 2019'; SergeantIncel, '[News] survey results - March 2020'; Speckhard and others (n 40); Moskalenko and others, 'Incel ideology, radicalization and mental health: A survey study'; Speckhard and Ellenberg (n 40); Whittaker, Costello and Thomas (n 41).

<sup>44</sup> Incels.is, 'Rules and FAQ' (*Incels.is*) <<https://incels.is/threads/rules-and-faq.799/>> accessed 3 January 2024; The Blackpill Club, 'Terms and rules' (*The Blackpill Club*) <<https://incels.in/index.php?help/terms/>> accessed March 6, 2024.

<sup>45</sup> Speckhard and others (n 40); Moskalenko and others, 'Incel ideology, radicalization and mental health: A survey study'; Whittaker, Costello and Thomas (n 41).

<sup>46</sup> SergeantIncel, '[News] survey results - Oct 2019'; SergeantIncel, '[News] survey results - March 2020'.

Most incels have had some form of post-secondary education and were currently (full-time or part-time) employed or in education. Around one in four incels reported being NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training).<sup>47</sup>

On their own, these characteristics are perhaps less directly relevant in the context of online radicalisation. Nevertheless, several of these aspects can play a role in the process of identity construction for incels and may even influence certain group dynamics and so affect behaviour. This will be discussed further below.

### 2.2.2 *Social and psychological issues*

Many incels have a history of adverse life experiences such as difficulties with socialisation (including a lack of social skills and friends, and overall feelings of loneliness and exclusion)<sup>48</sup>, overall negative internal experiences (eg low self-esteem, self-pity, hopelessness)<sup>49</sup>, as well as being mistreated and bullied by peers.<sup>50</sup> Some also report having experienced adverse home situations (eg emotional and physical abuse)<sup>51</sup>. Research has also shown a high incidence of psychological issues (both formally diagnosed and subjectively experienced) among incels. This includes depression and anxiety, suicidal ideation, autism spectrum disorder, bipolar disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse, as well as having engaged in self-harm.<sup>52</sup>

Additionally, incels who perceive themselves as not having certain characteristics that many non-incels do possess and are generally seen as major factors in determining your status and treatment in society (eg an attractive physical appearance, absence of mental health issues, social skills, sexual/romantic experience, etc) whilst having experienced a

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<sup>47</sup> SergeantIncel, '[News] survey results - Oct 2019'; SergeantIncel, '[News] survey results - March 2020'; Speckhard and others (n 40); Moskalenko and others, 'Incel ideology, radicalization and mental health: A survey study'; Whittaker, Costello and Thomas (n 41).

<sup>48</sup> Jaki and others (n 6); SergeantIncel, '[News] survey results - Oct 2019'; December Maxwell and others, "'A short story of a lonely guy': Qualitative thematic analysis of involuntary celibacy using Reddit' (2020) 24 *Sexuality & Culture* 1852; SergeantIncel, '[News] survey results - March 2020'; Glace, Dover and Zarkin (n 28); Elizabeth Ann Hintz and Jonathan Troy Baker, 'A performative face theory of analysis of online facework by the formerly involuntary celibate' (2021) 15 *International Journal of Communication* 3047; William Costello and others, 'Levels of well-being among men who are incel (involuntarily celibate)' (2022) 8 *Evolutionary Psychological Science* 375; Whittaker, Costello and Thomas (n 41).

<sup>49</sup> Jaki and others (n 6); SergeantIncel, '[News] survey results - Oct 2019'; SergeantIncel, '[News] survey results - March 2020'; Roberta Liggett O'Malley and Brenna Helm, 'The role of perceived injustice and need for esteem on incel membership online' (2023) 7 *Deviant Behavior* 1026

<sup>50</sup> SergeantIncel, '[News] survey results - Oct 2019'; Maxwell and others (n 48); SergeantIncel, '[News] survey results - March 2020'; Speckhard and others (n 40); Sarah E. Daly and Shon M. Reed, "'I think most of society hates us': A qualitative thematic analysis of interviews with incels' (2022) 86 *Sex Roles* 14; Moskalenko and others, 'Predictors of radical intentions among incels: A survey of 54 self-identified incels'.

<sup>51</sup> Hintz and Baker (n 48).

<sup>52</sup> Jaki and others (n 6); SergeantIncel, '[News] survey results - Oct 2019'; SergeantIncel, '[News] survey results - March 2020'; Hintz and Baker (n 48); Glace, Dover and Zarkin (n 28); Speckhard and others (n 40); Moskalenko and others, 'Incel ideology, radicalization and mental health: A survey study'; Moskalenko and others, 'Predictors of radical intentions among incels: A survey of 54 self-identified incels'; Speckhard and Ellenberg (n 40); Whittaker, Costello and Thomas (n 41).

range of negative experiences partly due to a lack of these characteristics, in combination with the idea that one is entitled to certain things (see section 2.1.1.), may leave incels with grievances, feelings of perceived injustice, victimisation and exclusion. This can make individuals more susceptible to the influence of certain ideologies and groups.<sup>53</sup>

### 2.2.3 Needs and reasons

Many of the aforementioned elements can leave incels with certain needs. Research has shown that people join groups for their perceived benefits, ie the fulfilment of needs. Below, the reasons as to why people might join online communities are sorted into four categories. This categorisation was based on research on the potential benefits of both deviant (including incels)<sup>54</sup> and non-deviant<sup>55</sup> online communities, as well as the online observations. Moreover, a distinction can be made between manifest reasons that are more easily observable by the person themselves and others, and latent reasons that are more hidden. While presented here as separate categories, they may also overlap (eg finding like-minded people vs finding a sense of belonging, see below).

#### (1) Social reasons

This category emphasises interpersonal connectivity. With many incels noting they struggle with socialisation and a lack of genuine offline connections, the community can be a source for social interaction and finding social and emotional support and advice, like-minded people, and friendships.

#### (2) Psychological and self-developmental reasons

The uniting thread here is that participating in the community might fulfil some intrapersonal need, either on a more 'superficial level' or closer to the core of oneself. The former includes the expression of various emotions (eg anger, frustration, sadness, etc), participation as a form of entertainment – which could encompass trolling behaviour –

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<sup>53</sup> Matteo Vergani and others, 'The three P's of radicalization: Push, pull and personal. A systematic scoping review of the scientific evidence about radicalization into violent extremism' (2020) 43 *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 854.

<sup>54</sup> Willem de Koster and Dick Houtman, "'Stormfront is like a second home to me": On virtual community formation by right-wing extremists' (2008) 11 *Information, Communication & Society* 1155; Koehler (n 14); Mairead Eastin Moloney and Tony P. Love, '#TheFappening: Virtual manhood acts in (homo)social media' (2018) 21 *Men and Masculinities* 603; Ging (n 3); *ibid*; Sugiura (n 20); Daly and Reed (n 50); O'Malley and Helm (n 49); Thorburn, Powell and Chambers (n 29).

<sup>55</sup> Utpal M. Dholakia, Richard P. Bagozzi and Lisa Klein Pearo, 'A social influence model of consumer participation in network- and small-group-based virtual communities' (2004) 21 *International Journal of Research in Marketing* 241; Catherine M. Ridings and David Gefen, 'Virtual community attraction: Why people hang out online' (2004) 10 *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* <<https://academic.oup.com/jcmc/article/10/1/JCMC10110/4614455?login=true>> accessed 13 December 2023; Vivian Hsueh-Hua Chen and Henry Been-Lirn Duh, 'Investigating user experience of online communities: The influence of community type' (2009) *International Conference on Computational Science and Engineering*, Vancouver, August 2009) <<https://doi.org/10.1109/CSE.2009.367>> accessed 22 February 2024; Alicia Iriberry and GONDY Leroy, 'A life-cycle perspective on online community success' (2009) 41 *ACM Computing Surveys* 1.



and the community as a source of freedom of expression. The latter includes finding a sense of belonging/community, but also the role of the community in identity construction. Some incels may feel as if others in the offline world cannot understand them. A community of people with similar experiences and circumstances might meet that need. Identity construction can be regarded as a latent motivation as incels might not explicitly state this, incels' online practices can be seen as ways to construct a masculine and/or incel identity.<sup>56</sup> Tied to the latter are the discussions surrounding what it means to be an incel (see section 2.3.2.).

### (3) Instrumental reasons

This category includes those motives that are less tied to the self and are more practical in nature. This can include discussions based around exchanging information (eg gaming advice: which may also fulfil a socialisation need), or (incel-)ideological, political, spiritual, psychological, and religious discussions. BP for instance has a subforum dedicated to such discussions. People can also use forums to give support to, organise, and/or participate in offline or online activities.

### (4) Platform/technical reasons

This contains reasons pertaining to specific features of the used platform, especially in comparison to other platforms. This category does not necessarily reflect why people join/participate in the first place, but perhaps why they choose one platform over the other. This can be due to the forum rules, how smoothly the platform works, and the degree of moderation (which can tie back to the forum as a source of freedom of speech).

## 2.3 Features of the radical group/ideologies

The RFM also recognises how features of both the specific ideology and the groups themselves can play a role in the process of online radicalisation.<sup>57</sup> What follows is first a brief overview of the incel ideology as found in the literature. Second, aspects of the framework of the social identity approach (SIA) under 'Group dynamics' will be applied to the incel community based on preliminary insights from the observations.

### 2.3.1 *Incel ideology*

As said before, the incel community is not a monolithic block in which all incels share the same frame of mind. However, there is a commonality to be found when describing their ideology. Incels adhere to a rigid worldview influenced by the so-called 'black pill' and biological determinism. This set of beliefs categorises people into a tiered social hierarchy<sup>58</sup>, and is largely based on 'lookism', a social bias that favours women and high-

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<sup>56</sup> Moloney and Love (n 54); Ging (n 3); Daly and Reed (n 50); Thorburn, Powell and Chambers (n 29).

<sup>57</sup> Bayerl, Sahar and Akhgar (n 15).

<sup>58</sup> At the top there are the attractive 'Chads' and 'Stacys', below them the average-looking 'normies', and at the lowest tier the unattractive 'incels'.

status 'Alpha' men and systemically oppresses 'genetically inferior men'.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, it is characterised by 'radical dualism' which exposes the contractionary nature of the ideology.<sup>60</sup> For example, incels describe themselves as intellectually and morally superior to women and Chads whilst acknowledging their own 'subhuman status' and worthlessness.<sup>61</sup> Women are described as unintelligent and only led by emotions (eg sexual desire) and anti-social values (eg cheating), whilst simultaneously being calculative and manipulative.<sup>62</sup> This radical dualism is further emphasised by the use of (racially) derogatory and dehumanising language such as 'foid/femoid', '(noodle)whores' and 'roasties' when referring to women.<sup>63</sup> The ideology is also shaped by the way incels approach women's sexuality. Dating takes place in the 'Sexual Marketplace' where women function as the sexual gatekeepers and choose their partners through a process of mate selection. One's success here is determined by their sexual market value (SMV), which is composed of physical attractiveness and wealth, and so excludes incels as they have a low SMV.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, incels believe in 'female hypergamy', the idea that women are innately and animalistically driven to pursue high-status men with a high SMV to maximise the social, economic, and genetic potential of their children. However, women simultaneously and strategically decide to settle down with a man of lower status to live a comfortable life while still 'riding the cock carousel'.<sup>65</sup> Feeling entitled to sex but being denied in this aspect while others are not, incels yearn for a 'past golden age' where women's hypergamous and promiscuous nature could be more sufficiently suppressed, assuring a fairer distribution of relationships and so guaranteeing all men access to women and sex.<sup>66</sup> Incel ideology is also characterised by a sense of fatalism and hopelessness, with the state of 'being an incel' seen as a predetermined condition from which no escape is possible.<sup>67</sup>

### 2.3.2 *Group dynamics*

According to the social identity approach, an important source of people's self-concept and self-esteem is not just personal identity but also social identity. Whereas the former refers to personal traits and other characteristics used to define ourselves, social identity is formed through interactions with others and is derived from several psychological

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<sup>59</sup> Stephane J. Baele, Lewys Brace and Travis G. Coan, 'From "incel" to "saint": Analyzing the violent worldview behind the 2018 Toronto attack' (2021) 33 *Terrorism and Political Violence* 1667; Angus Lindsay, 'Incel violence as a reclamation of masculinity and defence of patriarchy on three distinct levels' (2021) 36 *New Zealand Sociology* 25.

<sup>60</sup> Sugiura (n 20).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Baele, Brace and Coan (n 59).

<sup>63</sup> Sugiura (n 20).

<sup>64</sup> Roberta Liggett O'Malley, Karin Holt and Thomas J. Holt, 'An exploration of the involuntary celibate (incel) subculture online' (2022) 37 *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* NP4981.

<sup>65</sup> Angus Lindsay, 'Swallowing the black pill: Involuntary celibates (Incels) anti-feminism within digital society' (2022) 11 *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 210.

<sup>66</sup> Baele, Brace and Coan (n 59).

<sup>67</sup> Jaki and others (n 6); *ibid*; Michael Halpin, 'Weaponized subordination: How incels discredit themselves to degrade women' (2022) 36 *Gender & Society* 813.

processes including social categorisation, social identification, and social comparison.<sup>68</sup> As will be explained further along, these processes can also encourage certain (harmful) behaviours.

Social categorisation is the process where individuals categorise themselves and others into different social categories.<sup>69</sup> Social categories are a collection of people that share at least one common characteristic (eg age, gender, leisure activities), and can transform into social groups when individuals start to interact with each other. Those who belong to the same social group or category that we identify with and possess similar characteristics become the in-group, while those who do not belong to our group or share characteristics with us are placed in the out-group.<sup>70</sup>

Hence, the incel community can be considered the in-group as it unites people of the same life circumstance to interact with each other. The 'others' are categorised into out-groups, which happens mainly on the basis of (physical) attractiveness (the out-group: Chads, Stacy's, and normies) or sexual status. Categorisation on the basis of sexual status goes beyond a binary division in terms of 'ever had sex' versus 'never had sex', but is further based on the criteria of 'genuine' involuntariness. Incels generally do not deny the existence of female virgins but their status as virgin is not immutable, unlike incels. By contrast, the existence of female incels ('femcels') is denied.<sup>71</sup> This stems from the idea any woman can find someone if only they would be willing to lower their standards enough. 'Femcel' is seen as an oxymoron.

Social categorisation also happens *within* the community to some degree. This can be seen through discourses on what it means to be a (true) incel ('truecel'), as discerned during the observation period. For example, some discussion exists on whether incels who are open to having used sex services in the past or present ('escortcels'), can be considered part of the community. Those who are for the exclusion of this subgroup seem to adhere to a narrow definition of inceldom that emphasises a lack of sexual experience, and hence the use of sex services precludes this. Thus, such members may be labelled a fake incel ('fakecel') by others. Others underline that this subgroup should not be excluded as their sexual experience cannot be compared to those of sexually experienced non-incels, as the underlying cause of this experience is the opportunity and funds to

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<sup>68</sup> Benjamin Ducol and others, 'Assessment of the state of knowledge: Connections between research on the social psychology of the internet and violent extremism' (Working paper No. 16-05, The Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society 2016).

<sup>69</sup> Sabine Treppe and Laura S. Loy, 'Social identity theory and self-categorization theory' in Patrick Rössler, Cynthia A. Hoffner and Liesbet van Zoonen (eds), *The International Encyclopedia of Media Effects* (John Wiley & Sons 2017).

<sup>70</sup> Kira Harris, Eyal Gringart and Deirdre Drake, 'Understanding the role of social groups in radicalisation' (7th Australian Security and Intelligence Conference, Perth, December 2014) <<https://doi.org/10.4225/75/57a83235c833d/>> accessed 31 January 2024.

<sup>71</sup> This also has the effect that women are explicitly disallowed from joining incel forums. This goes for IS and BP (see n 44). RI does not explicitly forbid women on the forum.

access sex services and not genuine acceptance, affection, and love of a woman. Additionally, members who admit to being (close to) six feet tall (a trait commonly seen as attractive) are called out for being a fakecel as they are seen as having it easier in terms of dating compared to shorter incels. Ethnicity is also used to categorise, and many discussions exist about the different experiences of incels of different ethnicities. The 'racepill'<sup>72</sup> states that men of certain race/ethnicity are more disadvantaged than others, particularly 'ricecel's' (East Asian ethnicity) and 'currycel's' (South Asian ethnicity). In contrast, 'whitecel's' (white ethnicity) are more favoured in dating due to the colour of their skin as stated by the 'Just Be White Theory'.<sup>73</sup>

People also tend to strive towards enhancing self-esteem and status. This can occur through social identification and social comparison. Through social identification, people define themselves in terms of the social groups they categorise themselves in. Group membership and the group's characteristics, norms, and values become internalised, and those groups become a source of people's self-concept. It also regulates behaviour as it may lead people to behave in ways they believe members of that group would behave.<sup>74</sup> This does not necessarily reflect what is seen as normative by outsiders, merely what is normative *within* the in-group. The incel community can be described as encouraging attitudes and behaviours characterised by (sexual) entitlement, hostility, and misogyny (see section 2.3.1.). While such standards are not accepted in broader society, incels have an incentive to conform to these established norms. Repeating hateful rhetoric invites positive attention from other members and thus social approval, while also reaffirming their identity as an incel and thus positively affecting their sense of belonging and status. All this can increase self-esteem. Behaviour or opinions that go against the grain carry the risk of lowering their standing in the community (or even getting banned), threatening their self-concept. This is a risk some may not want to take as for many the community is their one source of meaning, belonging, and identity.

Social comparison is the process where the in-group (incels) compares themselves to out-groups. This can create pressure to emphasise intergroup differences so that the in-group will be perceived as more favourable.<sup>75</sup> This in turn can lead to in-group/out-group bias, the tendency of people to describe members of the in-group in more positive terms (thus positively affecting self-esteem), whereas those part of the out-group are seen as possessing and portraying negative traits and behaviour.<sup>76</sup> Social comparison can so manifest itself in harmful attitudes and acts. Online hate posts that highlight women's 'inherently' bad nature and subordination can be seen as a way to play up incels' superiority

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<sup>72</sup> Incels.wiki, 'Racepill' (*Incels.wiki*) <<https://incels.wiki/w/Racepill>> accessed March 8, 2024.

<sup>73</sup> Incels.wiki, 'Just be white theory (JBW)' (*Incels.wiki*) <[https://incels.wiki/w/Just\\_Be\\_White\\_Theory\\_\(JBW\)](https://incels.wiki/w/Just_Be_White_Theory_(JBW))> accessed March 8, 2024.

<sup>74</sup> Harris, Gringart and Drake (n 70).

<sup>75</sup> Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, 'The social identity theory of intergroup behavior' in John T. Jost and Jim Sidanius (eds), *Political Psychology* (Psychology Press 2004).

<sup>76</sup> Borum (n 13).

on certain aspects and may serve as a way to improve self-esteem despite their own shortcomings in appearance and romantic/sexual inexperience.

SIA also provides a more nuanced understanding of 'deindividuation'. The classic deindividuation theory states that identification with social groups would lead to a loss of the self, thus implicating reduced self-regulation. Instead, the SIA states social identity becomes more salient than personal identity, and thus reflects a process of strong self-regulation or 'depersonalisation'.<sup>77</sup> More on how this can relate to incels follows in section 2.4.

## 2.4 Features of the means and technology

Lastly, this section looks at how certain aspects of the internet and the used platforms may prove to be useful for radical groups and encourage (harmful) behaviour. The following mainly discusses the role of anonymity and invisibility, but other factors will also be briefly discussed. While this section is mostly based on the literature, some aspects will be applied to the incel community based on the observations.

### 2.4.1 *Anonymity and invisibility*

Both the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation (SIDE) and the online disinhibition effect (ODE) refer to anonymity as a major factor in explaining online behaviour, though they emphasise other aspects.

SIDE is an extension of the aforementioned SIA framework and applies it to the context of computer-mediated communication (CMC).<sup>78</sup> Approaching the incel phenomenon from the SIDE perspective lays bare the intersection between technology and social identity, and is particularly useful for understanding how this perpetuates hate. According to SIDE, anonymity serves a double function. First, anonymity of the in-group affects identity salience. It obscures (visual) interpersonal differences and instead, the self and others are seen in terms of group norms and stereotypes, this creates online depersonalisation.<sup>79</sup> The incel forums create an environment that is conducive to the salience of social identity over personal identity. Though members have their own (pseudonymised) accounts and user profiles<sup>80</sup> which can reveal certain (personal) information depending on the specific platform and member, the forums present themselves as places where

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<sup>77</sup> Russell Spears, 'Social identity model of deindividuation effects' in Patrick Rössler, Cynthia A. Hoffner and Liesbet van Zoonen (eds), *The international encyclopedia of media effects* (John Wiley & Sons 2017).

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> IS and BP publicly show the join date and total amount of posts of members. Members also have the choice to display more personal information such as age or location either through a dedicated field on their user profile (which is not accessible by outsiders who do not have an account on the forums in question) or through a self-written and publicly viewable user bio. On the other hand, while RI does display some limited information such as join date, members do not have the option to list more personal information on their profile or write a user bio.

people of a common social identity – despite interpersonal differences – can come together.<sup>81</sup> Albeit that aspects related to personal identity (eg personal characteristics, experiences, ...) are frequently discussed on the observed forums, most of these aspects are explained in relation to their identity as incel that sets them apart from others (see section 2.3.2.). A seemingly common theme among the pseudonyms collected during the observation period are also those that end with or have the pre/infix '(in)cel' to further emphasise this incel identity. And as mentioned before, social identification can affect the way people behave.

Second, anonymity *to* the out-groups affects identity expression. When out-groups have the potential ability to sanction the in-group, and in-group members are visible to these out-groups, the out-groups have a stronger ability to hold the in-group accountable for behaviour that is normative for them but not to the out-groups. This makes it for the in-group less likely to express such behaviour. However, when in-group members are simultaneously visible to each other, they have a stronger ability to show social support. This strengthens the in-group in opposing the out-groups' power and increases the chance of expressing behaviour that is normative for them but not to the out-groups.<sup>82</sup> As stated earlier, though misogynistic attitudes are seen as normative within the incel community, they are unlikely to act on it in the offline world considering society's bias in favour of women would quickly penalise this. The online incel community however groups these men together in a united front where members mutually support each other in the misogynistic posts they publish, while being anonymous to outsiders.

As opposed to SIDE, ODE focusses on how features of technology connect with psychological mechanisms rather than social factors to influence behaviour, both in a negative ('toxic disinhibition', eg online hate comments) and a positive sense ('benign disinhibition', eg self-disclosure).<sup>83</sup> Anonymity, due to the concealment of identifying information, causes self-compartmentalisation (offline vs online self) rather than depersonalisation (the group within the self). This can decrease accountability for actions and may encourage both the posting of misogynistic content as well as increase self-disclosure (eg talking about loneliness) among incels. In ODE, the lack of visual cues due to online in-

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<sup>81</sup> IS does this explicitly, as seen in their forum description stating the following "[...] We welcome men from all walks of life, and from all cultural and racial backgrounds, as long as you are an incel". RI also explicitly states their forum is for "real incels". BP does not explicitly state who is welcomed, though the forum content as well as the recently changed URL clearly indicate BP target incels or at the least those who believe in the black pill.

<sup>82</sup> Stephen Reicher, R. Mark Levine and Ernestine Gordijn, 'More on deindividuation, power relations between groups and the expression of social identity: three studies on the effects of visibility to the in-group' (1998) 37 *British Journal of Social Psychology* 15.

<sup>83</sup> John Suler, 'The online disinhibition effect' (2004) 7 *Cyberpsychology & Behavior* 321.

visibility means people can think less about how they or other people look when communicating, leaving them more free to express themselves.<sup>84</sup> Thus, from the ODE perspective, both anonymity and invisibility can lower inhibitions stemming from social anxiety in face-to-face interactions.

#### 2.4.2 *Asynchrony and accessibility*

As opposed to face-to-face interaction where social interactions happen in a constant feedback loop and bound to a shared space, interactions through CMC (particularly forums) often transcend both spatial and temporal boundaries.

The asynchronous nature has the benefit of allowing more time for lengthier and thoughtful contributions, which can result in both toxic and benign disinhibition.<sup>85</sup> The former can be observed in the subforums 'Must-Read Content' and 'Best-Of Section' on IS and BP respectively, where threads tackle a variety of incel-ideological topics and demonstrate harmful beliefs about women and society on a usually more detailed level. Moreover, it may make incels more comfortable to share more personal feelings as a message can be posted and be 'archived' in the mind as there is no immediate response. Suler describes this as being able to 'run away'.<sup>86</sup>

The decentralised and low-cost nature of the Internet also has the advantage of allowing groups to reach a broader range of (otherwise unreachable) people.<sup>87</sup> Rather than confined to a certain geography, men who identify as incels regardless of their nationality/ethnicity are brought together in one place as long as they have a device that can access the internet.

### 3 Conclusion

If we wish to better understand how the incel community plays a role in the proliferation of online misogyny in the context of online radicalisation, it is necessary to underscore that several overarching factors are at play. For this purpose, this paper presented an adapted framework of the Radicalisation-Factor Model by Bayerl and colleagues. Many incels have reported various social and psychological issues, leaving them with certain needs, frustration, and feelings of injustice. This is where the incel community enters the picture. The power of groups is often found in the benefits they provide. The incel community can be described as a radical milieu that offers many of those benefits: social support, belonging, an answer to grievances. However, groups also have their own

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Azy Barak and William A. Fisher, 'Toward an internet-driven theoretically-based, innovative approach to sex education' (2001) 38 *Journal of Sex Research* 324; Ines von Behr and others, 'Radicalisation in the digital era. The use of internet in 15 cases of terrorism and extremism' (RAND Europe 2013) <<https://doi.org/10.1145/3292522.3326045>> accessed 22 February 2024.

group dynamics which can encourage members to act in accordance with group expectations. In a place like the incel community that is characterised by a worldview that emphasises women's subordination, such dynamics may work to encourage misogynistic beliefs. Moreover, the nature of the CMC works in a way that it may accelerate these processes. Nonetheless, online misogyny as observed in the incel community should not be seen as divorced from its wider context. It is rooted in pre-existing and certain harmful notions of masculinity and entitlement.

Though this paper does not wish to claim this to be an exhaustive exposition of the phenomenon, it does want to demonstrate that the individual, the social and ideological, contextual and technological are interconnected and need to all be considered to provide for a holistic understanding of the incel phenomenon and its role in perpetuating online misogyny.

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