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Incels, Stigma, and Masculinity on 4chan's /r9k/ Message Board

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Abstract

In the mid 2010's, a loosely defined online collective of involuntary celibates came to the forefront of media discourse, after a high profile terrorist attack was perpetrated by a self-identified "incel". While infamous for their extremely misogynistic views, incel forums have nonetheless remained a sparsely researched area. This paper aims to elucidate the way incels feel towards society and themselves through studying one of the most notorious incel forums, 4chan's /r9k/ board. Using a combination of digital ethnography and thematic analysis, this paper finds that incels on /r9k/ generally speak of their relation to society in terms of stigmatisation, holding forth that *normals* view them as less than human. Having internalised this view of themselves, discussions on /r9k/ are often extremely toxic, with vitriol often being aimed by posters at other posters as well as themselves. Further, the paper explores the strictly hierarchical, gendered view of society that incels espouse, and finds that incels believe in a warped hegemonic masculinity, where women in actuality are the beneficiaries and dictators of the social hierarchy. Additionally, the findings of the paper suggest that the demographics of incels may be significantly more heterogeneous than previously thought. Many self-identified incels on /r9k/ also present themselves as female, homosexual, transgender, or ethnic/racial minorities.

Keywords: Incel, 4chan, /r9k/, hegemonic masculinity, stigmatisation, stigma

Content Warning: Mentions of suicide. Offensive slurs.

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1. Introduction

In 2018, the word 'incel' was shortlisted for the Oxford English Dictionary word of the year, after garnering considerable attention globally in the aftermath of the 2018 Toronto van attack (OxfordLanguages 2018). Drawing inspiration from the similarly infamous 2014 Isla Vista killings committed by Elliot Rodger, Alek Minassian posted "Private (Recruit) Minassian Infantry 00010, wishing to speak to Sgt 4chan please [...] The Incel Rebellion has already begun!" on his Facebook page, before ploughing through a crowded pavement in a rental van, killing 10 and injuring 14 (Yang, 2018). While the full extent of the loosely defined collective (consisting predominantly of young men who are frustrated at their incapability of establishing romantic and sexual relationships with women) remains unknown, the phenomenon has been identified as a growing terrorist threat (Hoffman et al. 2020).

1.1 Research Context

The man behind the 2015 Umpqua community college shooting is believed to have posted his intentions on the 4chan board /r9k/ the day before his act, prompting a federal investigation into the website (Statt, 2015). The board has also received infamy for it's incel userbase, regarded along with the Reddit forum /r/incels as being the source of the explosion of media discourse surrounding incels in the mid-2010's (Ging, 2019). In spite of the centering of incels in media discourse, research is sparse and the few studies that exist have focused solely on the more recent forum Incels.me, established in 2017 (SeargentIncel, 2017).

The perpetrators of the three aforementioned terrorist attacks were active members of online incel communities, and all three explicitly identified as incels (Ging, 2019; Hoffman et al., 2020). While these are three of what remains to date a handful of fatal attacks carried out by self-identified incels, the increasing threat of further violence suggests that this is an important area of research (Ging 2019; Hoffman et al. 2020). Moreover, existing research on incels overwhelmingly indicates that the life of an incel typically involves social isolation, depression, anxiety, and self-harm (Baele et al., 2019; Donnelly et al. 2001; Hoffman et al., 2020; Jaki et al. 2019). Ultimately, understanding the incel phenomenon is crucial not only for the betterment of

society in the form of increased safety from indiscriminate attacks, but for the mental health of individuals who identify with the incel movement.

1.2 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to, through a combination of digital ethnography and thematic analysis on the 4chan board /r9k/, answer the following research questions:

1. How do incels on /r9k/ describe their relation to society?

2. How do incels on /r9k/ discuss masculinity?

For the sake of this paper, the "incels" in question are a part of a specific internet subculture. Although there is a large overlap between this group and true involuntary celibates, that is, people who don't have sexual intercourse at all, these two groups cannot be regarded as one and the same, as I will demonstrate in section 2.2 *The Manosphere*. With regards to the first research question, the relation to society is in this paper analysed in terms of incels' perceptions of stigmatisation, leading to social isolation. For the second question, "masculinity" entails a specific theoretical construct regarding gendered hierarchies, presented in section 3.2 *Hegemonic Masculinity*. It should be noted that both of the research questions are limited in their scope to only concern how the incels on the 4chan board /r9k/ discuss society and their relation to it. Thus, this paper does not definitively determine what their relation to society *actually is*, rather, how it is *perceived* by them and how this perception manifests in discussions as well as statements regarding their personal lives.

2. Literature Review

In this section, I will outline the current state of the research landscape with regards to incels. First, I will provide historical context to the concept of involuntary celibacy. Then, I will draw upon Ging (2019) and Jaki et al. (2019) to introduce the manosphere as a concept, and argue that the incels of today are similar yet distinct from those surveyed by Donnelly et al. (2001). Following that, I will further draw upon Ging's (2019) work to relate incels to the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Further, I will use the linguistic analysis by Jaki et al. (2019) to illustrate the demographics and language of incels on an online forum. Finally, I will emphasise the strictly hierarchical worldview of incels (Baele et al. 2019).

The literature was mostly found through searches on web indexing services such as Google Scholar and LUBsearch, as well as through looking over the literature referenced in the articles I found. I made use of the extensive filtering options available to refine and optimise the search in order to get as broad a view as possible. These methods include filtering by dates, combining search terms (such as "Incel AND online"), and excluding irrelevant search terms (such as "Incel -Nurgul" to omit search results from an author in a different field).

2.1 Involuntary Celibacy

There is little doubt over the historical existence of people who have been unable to establish romantic and sexual relationships whilst desiring to do so. In spite of this, involuntary celibacy as such is a relatively recent field of study. Knight (1995) observed a wave of involuntary bachelorhood among young males in Japan during the late 80's and early 90's as the result of a historically novel exercise of choice by women. On a nationally observable scale, more and more women were opting for a single life rather than a life of marriage - resulting in a sort of voluntary celibacy for women, and involuntary celibacy for men. However, he argues that this is not the result of inadequate men and defiant women, rather it is the result of an aversion for traditional familial hierarchies in rural Japanese culture. Typically, the wed couple would reside with the family of the husband and the mother-in-law of the bride would assume domestic authority over her. The aversion to marriage on the part of rural Japanese women was, put simply, a result of this friction within the familial hierarchy.

Through an online survey of 82 involuntary celibates in the United States, Donnelly et al. (2001) described the process and consequences of living a life of involuntary celibacy. The participants consisted of 60 men and 22 women, who were categorised into three groups based on their life situation - those who had never had sexual intercourse, those who had but were currently single, and those who were partnered but were not sexually active. The participants commonly reported that the reason for their involuntary celibacy was due to factors such as social incompetence and shyness. Notably, some trends could be observed across all three groups. All groups spoke of celibacy in terms of time, although in different ways. Virgins described the stress of not meeting the 'cultural deadline' of having sexual intercourse by a certain age, single people reported that they worried about the time that had and would come to pass since the last time they had sexual intercourse, and partnered participants described having ended sexual activity at a much earlier age than their peers. Despite these differences, Donnelly et al. reported that the experience of involuntary celibacy was markedly similar across all three groups. Participants reported largely negative experiences as a consequence of their involuntary celibacy, commonly citing "despair, depression, frustration and a loss of confidence" (Donnelly et al. 2001, p. 167). The authors argue that this, at least in part, appears to be the result of cultural expectations of masculinity and femininity - for instance, men in the sample reported feeling trapped by traditional expectations of males taking the initiative in the relationships (Donnelly et al., 2001).

While Knight (1995) observed what he termed 'involuntary celibates', and Donnelly et al. (2001) specifically surveyed online those who self-identified as such, neither can truly be said to represent the group that commonly (and for the purposes of this paper) is known as 'incels' today. It should also be noted that the sample in Donnelly et al. (2001) was not representative, and as such didn't establish the true prevalence or demographics of involuntary celibacy. For instance, despite more than a quarter of the participants being female, it need not necessarily be the case that a quarter of all involuntary celibates are female. In spite of the limitations of these studies with regards to the specific aims of the research questions of this paper, they provide much needed historical context. Donnelly et al. (2001) especially can provide insights into the processes, consequences and feelings that involuntary celibacy entails.

2.2 The Manosphere

In order to understand the emergence of incels as a specific group distinct from those that are merely involuntary celibate, one needs to understand the emergence of the manosphere. The manosphere is a loose confederacy of men's interest communities online, including communities such as men's rights activists (MRAs), pick up artists (PUAs), men going their own way (MGTOW) (Ging, 2019). This network of interest groups is characterised by misogyny, aggrieved entitlement and hardline anti-feminism (Ging, 2019). A central tenet of the ideology espoused by these groups is the idea of the *redpill*. Borrowed from the *Matrix* film franchise, the concept refers to the protagonist's choice between taking the red pill and the blue pill - the red pill will wake you and allow you to see society for what it really is; the blue pill will keep you in a delusory state of blissful ignorance (Ging, 2019; Jaki et al., 2019). This way of describing people's attitude to society and life as a whole is very prevalent in incel discourse, even spinning into further *-pill* terms such as the nihilistic *blackpill* (Jaki et al., 2019). Indeed, it is here that we can find the group of incels that see themselves as part of the manosphere, and are distinct from the aforementioned involuntary celibates (Baele et al., 2019; Ging, 2019; Hoffman et al., 2020; Jaki et al., 2019).

In *Alphas, betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere*, Ging (2019) analyses discursive practices on thirty-eight antifeminist sites, to theorise the masculinities found within.[1] Interestingly, she finds that the masculinities on display in the context of 'beta masculinities' are markedly distanced from hegemonic masculinity, instead trying to make claims to subordinated and marginalised masculinities. However, Ging points out that these claims are nothing more than thin facades, pointing to the extreme racism and misogyny present in the communities to demonstrate that there exists a will to establish hegemonic masculinity in the online spaces they inhabit, even if the members of the manosphere themselves would not be able to make claims to hegemonic masculinity in the offline world. She borrows the concept of hybrid masculinities from Bridges and Pascoe (2014, cited in Ging 2019), and describes the men in this space as "self-positioning as victims of feminism and political correctness", which in turn "enables them to strategically distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity, while

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[1] See 3.2, *Hegemonic Masculinity*

simultaneously compounding existing hierarchies of power and inequality online" (Ging 2019, p. 651). She identifies that there exists a sort of ideological elasticity, by which members of the manosphere can flexibly confound gender expectations in order to establish male hegemony in an online space. This is exemplified by the contradictory way in which homosexual and heterosexual men come together to drive anti-feminist narratives, despite homophobic language and attitudes being rampant in the manosphere (Ging, 2019).

2.3 The Language of Incels

With the origin of the incels particular to the paper and the general public discourse established, I will now discuss the language typically used by this group of people. Jaki et al. (2019) used a combination of quantitative and qualitative linguistic analysis of the rhetoric in the forum Incels.me to determine how users speak of women and other out-groups, as well as how they speak of themselves and other incels. They used the Pattern toolkit for Python to scrape approximately 65,000 posts by 1,250 unique users from Incels.me. Using modern automatic language analysis methods, they then analysed the data to profile users and analyse the rhetoric present in the discourse, comparing posts on Incels.me with neutral posts retrieved from Wikipedia and Twitter. The quantitative analysis was followed up with a manual qualitative content analysis based on self-provided categories.

Overrepresented in the sample of posts from Incels.me were references to gender, physical traits, sex, swear words, and internet slang. Notably, the authors found a strong presence of coded language in the form of Incel jargon (one example of which is the aforementioned redpill). Other examples include the *Chad*, *Stacy*, and *Tyrone* archetypes, 'Chad' and 'Tyrone' being derogatory terms for attractive and successful young white and black men respectively, and 'Stacy' being an attractive, promiscuous young woman. Further analysis revealed an abundance of hate speech (such as the words *f*ggot, n*gger*, and *r*tard*), references to male sexuality and pornography (such as *fuck*, *cum*, and *ass*), misogyny (such as *whore*, *bitch*, *slut*) negative adjectives (such as *lonely*, *pathetic*, and *useless*) (Jaki et al. 2019, p. 247). Incels on the site have developed elaborate views on beauty and an extensive vocabulary to describe said views. One example of such is the suffix *-let*, which is attached to words in order to indicate a shorter stature (e.g. *manlet* to describe a short man).

2.4 Incel Demographics

In profiling the users on Incels.me, Jaki et al. (2019) identified certain core aspects that are generally accepted as defining what it is to be an incel, as well as more peripheral aspects, the legitimacy of which is debated to varying degrees in incel circles. The baseline definition of inceldom according to their analysis of the forum is that the individual is male, and that they haven't had sex for a long time despite wanting to. Herein lies one shortfall of their study, since this baseline definition is determined by the rules of the forum which dictate that all females are to be banned on sight. Naturally it follows that no openly female posters were represented in the study.

Further aspects commonly associated with inceldom in Jaki et al. (2019, p. 259) were loneliness, ugliness, virginity and hating women, with less common aspects including having a mental disorder, having no self esteem, having no social life, being a member of an ethnic minority, and having no career. This heavy emphasis on physical shortcomings contrasts with Donnelly et al. (2001), whose participants attributed their involuntary celibacy largely to shyness and social incompetence.[2]

It should also be noted that the findings of Jaki et al. (2019) with regards to the role of homosexual men within this space are somewhat contradictory to those of Ging (2019). According to Jaki et al. (2019), the homophobia that runs deep in the discourse of Incels.me has resulted in a skewing of the membership of the site into being almost exclusively heterosexual - only a single openly homosexual man was identified in the manual qualitative content analysis. This is surprising in the light of Ging's (2019) findings that both homo- and heterosexual members of the manosphere seemed to set aside their overwhelming homophobia in order to establish male hegemony in these spaces. Clearly, the presence of traditionally subordinate masculinities (homosexual men, in this case) within incel spaces remains a contentious question.

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[2] Compare the isolation of individuals bearing a stigma in 3.1 *Stigma*

2.5 Incel Social Hierarchy

In an attempt to map and analyse the online incel community, Baele et al. (2019) identified key topics of discussion that commonly appeared on Incels.me, using a cognition-oriented conceptualisation of the *worldview*. Worldviews are, at their essence, a set of truths or beliefs that an individual uses to construct their understanding of the world around them (Koltko-Rivera, 2004). Some of those beliefs entail what social categories exist, who belongs to those social categories and why, and how those social categories interact with each other. Baele et al. (2019) emphasise the strictly hierarchical nature of the incels worldview, which places "alpha" males and females at the top, "betas" in the middle, and incels at the bottom. As such, incels see themselves as the victims of a rigid social structure, defined mostly by the (in)ability to attract a sexual or romantic partner - alphas 'get' who they want, betas 'get' the rest, and incels 'get' no one at all. This hierarchy is reinforced by the incel narrative of "lookism", the idea that that social standing is determined by certain physical traits - especially traits that are thought to be considered attractive by the opposite sex, such as a tall and muscular build for men.

3. Theoretical Frameworks

In this section, I will outline the theoretical frameworks that I build my analysis upon, namely Erving Goffman's (1963) *Stigma*, and R.W. Connell's (2005) *Masculinities*. I will briefly address why these frameworks are chosen for this particular case, summarise the pertinent foundations of the theories, and provide a short list of central terms that will be used in the analysis.

3.1 Stigma

In order to understand the way in which incels construct their social identity, I will make use of the concept of *stigmatisation*, as described by Goffman (1963).

The term "stigma", deriving its name from the ancient Greek practice of branding physical symbols onto the bodies of those who deviated from moral norms, refers to an undesirable attribute that a person possesses which renders them tainted in the minds of others - in other words, they are *stigmatised* (Goffman, 1963). Such an attribute is not necessarily one that is undesirable or even noteworthy universally, in fact, Goffman stresses that the concept should be thought of more in terms of relationships rather than personal attributes specifically. For instance, to ground the concept in the world of incels, it is evident from the research presented below that a man who is 160cm tall can feel that his height is an attribute that causes others to perceive him as inferior or deviating from the norm. However, that same attribute is likely to be perceived differently if the one possessing it is a woman. As Goffman (1963, p. 3) puts it, "An attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another, and therefore is neither creditable nor discreditable as a thing in itself".

Goffman identifies three different types of stigma, all of which are of relevance for this paper. The first, *abominations of the body*, entails physical attributes such as height, blindness, or leprosy. The second, *blemishes of character*, includes attributes such as alcoholism, mental illness, or unemployment. The third, *tribal stigma*, are more overarching attributes such as race, nationality, and religion (Goffman, 1963).

Those who do not possess such discrediting attributes are a separate group, described by Goffman as the *normals*. It can be said that the crux of the stigmatisation lies in how the person bearing the stigma perceives the relationship between themselves and the normals. Through the eyes of the stigmatised, the normals view them as incomplete human beings. Indeed, those who do not bear the stigma do often look down upon those that do, and as such contribute to the social isolation that the stigmatised feel. However, the immediate presence of normals isn't a prerequisite for stigmatisation - as Goffman (1963, p. 7) explains, "self-hate and self-derogation can also occur when only he and a mirror are about".

Goffman discusses a number of ways in which an individual may respond in dealing with their stigmatisation. Firstly, the individual may directly attempt to remedy the source of the stigma, such as undergoing plastic surgery to remove a physical blemish, or therapy to treat a mental illness. Secondly, the individual may forego this and instead attempt to indirectly 'correct' their condition by devoting effort to master an area of activity that is usually seen as off-limits for them, such as a physically disabled person becoming an expert sportsman. Most relevant for this paper, however, is the response to the anticipation of social interactions between the *normals* and the stigmatised - both groups often seek to arrange life such that these interactions are avoided . Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for this self-isolation to result in seeking comfort from fellow stigmatised individuals, rather than a life of true solitude. Goffman writes of *the own*, a set of sympathetic others that share the stigma and can provide moral support, acceptance, and 'tricks of the trade' (Goffman, 1963, p. 19).

Central terms:

Stigma: An attribute that is deeply discrediting for an individual, that renders them less worthy in the eyes of others.

Abominations of the body: Stigmata that are physical attributes, such as height, paralysis, or blindness.

Blemishes of character: Stigmata that concern individual personality or mental health, such as alcoholism or dishonesty

Tribal stigma: Stigmata that are associated with an overarching group such as race, class or gender.

The own: Fellow individuals that also bear a stigma, often drawn to each other as a source of comfort, advice and acceptance.

The normals: The group of people that do not bear the stigma.

3.2 Hegemonic Masculinity

To explore the way in which incels perceive and reinforce their gendered social hierarchy, I will utilise the theoretical conceptualisation of *hegemonic masculinity*, as described by R.W. Connell (2005). Rejecting the rigid traditional definition of gender as a natural character type or a set of behaviours and norms, Connell instead sees gender as a structure of social practice. These structures permeate society at all levels - for instance, she argues that the ban on homosexual men in the United States military was motivated by a desire to preserve a particular definition of masculinity (Connell, 2005). This highlights the fluid nature of Connell's definition of masculinity: a masculinity is, simply put, a certain way of doing gender that men and boys in a certain cultural context are socialised into. She emphasises that the masculinity that any given person is socialised into is dependent on a multitude of factors, such as race, class, and nationality. Certainly, the way in which a working class boy in the United Kingdom is socialised into doing gender will differ from the way in which a middle class boy in Sweden is, for example.

As such, Connell has recognised the existence of multiple masculinities. It is in the relationship between these that we find the theoretical framework that is to be used for analysis in this paper. Hegemonic masculinity is not a set archetype that is the ideal male across all cultural and historical contexts. Rather it is, as Connell (2005, p. 76) puts it, "the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations". The hegemonic position in this context is one that is culturally exalted, that is to say the way of doing masculinity that is culturally dominant in a particular society. This structural dominance is operational on three levels: (1) power relations (patriarchy, the overall domination of women by men), (2) production relations (the divisions of labour and capital), and (3) cathexis (sexual and emotional attachment) (Connell, 2005, pp. 73-75).

However, in practice, the number of men who can be said to fulfill the culturally dominant way of doing masculinity is low (though it should be noted that the majority of men benefit from this hegemony regardless) (Connell, 2005). There are at any point in time a multitude of masculinities interacting with each other in different ways. Other than hegemonic masculinity, these can be described as *subordinate masculinities*, *complicit masculinities*, and *marginalised masculinities*. Subordinate masculinities are those that are dominated by hegemonic masculinity. Much more than a stigmatised behaviour or normative deviance, it is a way of doing gender that is directly oppressed, for example in the form of legal restrictions, political and cultural exclusion, and physical violence (Connell, 2005). To demonstrate, Connell points to the dominance of heterosexual masculinity and the subordinance of homosexual masculinity. 'Gayness' is associated with aspects of identity and behaviours that are rejected by hegemonic masculinity, such as being the receiving partner during anal sexual intercourse. In this sense they go beyond even being considered masculine at all, rather they are seen as feminine. (Connell, 2005)

As mentioned above, few men follow rigidly the pattern of hegemonic masculinity in any given society. However, Connell argues that the majority of men do benefit from and indeed contribute to hegemonic masculinity. These masculinities, that are constructed in a way that they benefit from the societal domination of men over women while not fully embodying hegemonic masculinity, are known as *complicit masculinities* (Connell, 2005).

Going beyond internal gender hierarchies and taking into account race and class allows Connell to identify an additional group, *marginalised masculinities*. These are masculinities that can contribute to hegemonic masculinity, but are limited in the benefits that they receive from it. Connell (2005, p. 81) points to black men in the United States as an example: "black athletes may be exemplars for hegemonic masculinity. But [...] it does not yield social authority to black men generally".

Central terms:

Hegemonic masculinity: The dominant form of masculinity that males are socialised into in a given society (Connell 2005). Traditionally, it is characterised by homophobia, physical prowess and wealth-based status (Ging 2019).

Subordinate masculinities: Forms of masculinity that are dominated by the hegemonic masculinity. Often characterised by that which is outright rejected by hegemonic masculinity, essentially 'effeminate' behaviour (Connell 2005).

Complicit masculinities: Masculinities that benefit from, and contribute to the hegemonic masculinity, without doing so explicitly. These are masculinites constructed in such a way that "realise the patriarchal dividend, without the tensions or risks of being the frontline troops of patriarchy" (Connell 2005, p. 79).

Marginalised masculinities: Masculinities that can contribute to the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity, but are limited in the benefits that they receive from it (Connell 2005).

4. Method

In this section I shall discuss the combination of netnography (digital ethnography)[3] and thematic analysis used in the study, and argue for /r9k/ as a suitable site to collect empirical data for the purposes of the research question.

4.1 Research Boundaries

4.1.1 Operationalisation

Operationalisation is key in any case - this is especially true of cases where the boundaries of social categories are highly politicised and contested (Luker, 2008). As demonstrated in the literature review of this paper, this can certainly be said of the boundaries with regards to inceldom online (Ging, 2019; Jaki et al., 2019). Thus, in this section I will discuss definitions and boundaries of key concepts needed to understand and answer the research questions.

For the sake of this paper, the "incels" in question are a particular online subgroup as described in the literature review. Sometimes called a "movement", this subgroup is characterised by misogyny, self-hatred, and the aforementioned rigid hierarchical view of society (Baele et al., 2019). Consequently, this paper does not consider a person an incel simply for the fact that they cannot establish a romantic or sexual connection (see Donnelly, 2001), rather an incel is one who considers themselves to be a part of the incel subgroup. This paper does not follow the strict definition imposed on previous studies through the rigorous rules of Incels.me (Baele et al., 2019; Ging, 2019; Jaki et al., 2019). Crucially, this allows for analysis of posts and replies to posts of which the authors are openly female. To avoid taking the demographics of an anonymous message board for granted, and for the sake of brevity, the research questions, and in turn the paper as a whole, refer to the group as "incels" rather than "males who identify as incels".

Likewise, the theoretical adaptation of Goffman's (1963) *Stigma* should be clarified. Given that the nature of stigmatisation lies in the relationship between the normals and the stigmatised, what

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[3] There are competing terms (see Hine (2000) *Virtual Ethnography*), for the sake of this paper they are used interchangeably.

is to be considered a stigma for the sake of this paper may be far from what is typically considered one. For instance, during my initial netnographic analysis I repeatedly encountered the adage "a few millimeters of bone", which refers to the incels belief that their position in the social hierarchy is determined by small differences in facial bone structure. Needless to say, not everyone who possesses a facial bone structure that differs from the idealised 'Chad' feels that it is an *abomination of the body* - it is however evident from the analysis in this paper that incels feel that such an attribute can be deeply discrediting.

4.1.2 /r9k/ as a Field of Research

In this section, I will argue for 4chan's /r9k/ board as a valid source of empirical data for answering research questions regarding incels online, as well as reflecting over the advantages and disadvantages when compared to the Incels.me forum analysed in previous research.

Despite not originally having been intended to be an incel forum, the board has gained notoriety in the media for being heavily populated by incels (Beauchamp, 2019; Dewey, 2015). My initial ethnographic analysis (described in section 4.2 *Netnography*) confirmed that the incel rhetoric presented in previous research is flourishing on this board, making it a suitable place to collect empirical data to answer the research questions (Baele et al., 2019; Hoffman et al., 2020). Indeed, 4chan has been established as central in the network that is the manosphere, as well as having been directly tied to incel terrorist attacks (Baele et al., 2019; Ging, 2019; Hoffman et al., 2020). The /r9k/ board specifically was investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the wake of a shooting in Oregon in 2015 (Ging, 2019).

Furthermore, /r9k/ holds a number of additional advantages when it comes to this research that a traditional incel forum does not. Firstly, it is entirely anonymised which largely alleviates an ethical barrier to an otherwise potentially sensitive research topic (Berg, 2015). Secondly, the entirety of the /r9k/ board from 2012 onwards is archived on desuarchive.com, which essentially provides a database of searchable, segmented posts as empirical data. Lastly, /r9k/ employs an automatic moderation algorithm that does not allow for duplicate posts, with circumvention (for example in the form of adding gibberish to the end of a post) being a bannable offense (Anonymous 4chan Moderator, 2015). This allows for a social environment that is information-

rich, which is crucial for detailed descriptions (Berg, 2015). These factors combined make /r9k/ a valid source that provides a breadth of data to be analysed in relation to the research question.

4.2 Netnography

The initial method for collecting empirical data and familiarising myself with the culture of the board was a sort of 'lurking ethnography', which has been used previously to research online discussion forums (Squirrell, 2019). To do this, I visited /r9k/ 3-5 times a week during a three month period from February to May 2021. I took field notes and saved screenshots of noteworthy posts, and continually reflected on the data I collected in order to refine my research questions and strategy (Berg, 2015). The idea behind lurking ethnography is to observe and read a digital forum without interacting directly with it, in order to gain an understanding of the norms in the community. I argue similarly to Squirrell (2019) that using such a hands-off method of digital ethnography provides an experience that aligns more closely to that of the majority of users, and that I as a researcher am unlikely to unintentionally alter the course of the discussion taking place.

The type of digital ethnography to be carried out is not necessarily chosen at the discretion of the researcher (Bryman, 2018). One of the factors that dictate this is the level of hostility towards outsiders, and particularly the potential hostility towards researchers (Bryman, 2018, p. 544). In doing my initial lurking ethnography, as well as through a search of academic-related terms on desuarchive.com, I determined that the members of /r9k/ have an overwhelmingly negative opinion of academia, especially the social sciences. For example, upon being presented with a sociological study by another poster, a poster speaks of "the f*ggot fest of social sciences", before remarking "Good God, please kill yourself. You're too stupid to live". In light of this, I decided early on not to make my presence known as a researcher, neither in advance nor in retrospect. The reasoning for this was two-fold: firstly, to avoid personal harassment and potentially endangering myself. Secondly, the potential material collected from threads wherein I announced my presence would have been dubious at best, given the prevalence of trolling[4] on social media (Swenson-Lepper & Kerby, 2019).

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[4] *Trolling* in this context means "the practice of behaving in a deceptive, destructive, or disruptive manner in a social setting on the Internet with no apparent instrumental purpose." (Trapnell & Paulhus 2014, p. 97)

A potential drawback of digital ethnography contra traditional ethnography is that the researcher could be missing crucial social interactions that take place within the group offline (Berg, 2015; Bryman, 2018). Further, when taking such a hands-off approach there is no way to definitively know whether online activity truly reflects a person's social identity offline, or if it is merely a detached expression of fantasy (Berg, 2015). However, as I demonstrated in section 2.2, this is very much an online phenomenon, and as Hine (2000, p. 22) points out: "the decision to privilege certain modes of interactions is a situated one. If the aim is to study online settings as contexts in their own right, the question of offline identities need not arise". Further, I argue that the ecosystem of /r9k/ constitutes a bounded social context with socially constructed and maintained boundaries (Hine, 2000). As such, digital ethnography is naturally the best method by which to answer the research questions.

4.3 Data Collection

To complement the lurking digital ethnography, I made use of the /r9k/ archive on desuarchive.com in order to search for posts relevant to particular themes. As Patton (2001) stresses, qualitative inquiry typically relies on the purposeful sampling of information-rich cases that can be studied to answer the given research question.

As of May 2021, desuarchive.com has archived just short of 60 million posts on /r9k/. Day-to-day digital ethnography could also only get me so far - fraught as the board is with discussions of inceldom, masculinity, and stigmatisation, much of it consists of irrelevant discussions that are unusable in terms of answering the research questions. As such, I intended to use the desuarchive.com search function to filter posts that contained terms aligned with the themes I identified during the course of the lurking ethnographic work.

However, that task was not entirely unproblematic. For instance, when I wanted to analyse discussions of masculinity, simply filtering for posts that contain the word "masculine" returned a staggering 66,000 results. It became clear early on in the research process that I would need to establish a truly purposeful sample to analyse the research question, that is, I would need to find out ways to search for posts that would allow for a breadth of statements relevant to the theme,

while simultaneously returning a reasonably manageable sample that allowed for qualitative analysis. This challenge, I argue, is however indicative of a strength in the sample: clearly the discussions relevant to answering the research questions are abundant.

To establish an adequate sample of posts, I used Patton's (2001) logic of intensity sampling, which entails collecting information-rich cases in which the phenomenon of interest manifests itself intensely, while trying to avoid extremely unusual cases. This necessitated that I be cognisant of the search terms that I chose to explore the themes. As demonstrated by Baele et al. (2019), incel rhetoric is nuanced and the tone of discussion can often dictate which descriptors are used to describe certain entities. For instance, the word "women" is in itself often generally used as a neutral descriptive term, whereas other labels are used in a dehumanising context (such as "roastie") or a positive context (such as "girlfriend")(Baele et al., 2019). Unique to the empirical field of this paper is also the descriptor "fembots", meaning a female user of /r9k/. To avoid the extremely unusual discussions, while still analysing the information-rich ones, I therefore had to search the archive using a variety of positively loaded, negatively loaded and neutral descriptors. This was done in an iterative manner parallel to the analysis, continually sampling new posts as theoretical concepts were developed (Berg, 2015).

The goal of this iterative process was not to establish a sample of statistically representative posts, rather it was to ensure that the data was heterogeneous and information-rich. The limits of the samples were therefore guided by *theoretical saturation*, that is, posts were continually analysed until conceptual categories were formed and relationships between these could be explained (Bryman, 2018).

4.4 Method of Analysis

To answer the research questions, I made use of a qualitative thematic analysis in accordance with Bryman (2018). Initially, I read through the wealth of posts that I had collected and started writing notes on recurring ideas and themes, which is essential to do as soon as possible. After reading through the collected material, I constructed a framework consisting of those recurring ideas and themes that were aligned with the concepts present in the research questions (Bryman, 2018). In addition to the initial coding, I drew upon previous research such as Baele et al. (2019)

and Jaki et al. (2019) to construct the framework. One such example is the overarching theme of considering physical traits as determinants of an individual's position in a social hierarchy (coded as "lookism"), with a subcategory of that being "height". Building the framework upon these themes allowed me to identify the prevalence of each, and mark individual posts as having contained particular themes in order to aid further analysis. I made sure to properly mark which posts I assigned to which themes and tried to avoid altering the original context in order to avoid one of the common pitfalls of coding, namely letting my interpretation as a researcher warp the data (Bryman, 2018). After completing the coding of the posts, I then analysed possible connections, patterns, and variance in the codes that I had established. Using the insights I gained from this reflection, I constructed a narrative about the data that could be used to construct a sufficient answer to the research question. During the whole process of analysis, I made sure to continually reflect on and revise the coding, and also remained transparent in how I constructed my arguments based on the data collected in the study (Bryman, 2018). While the coding work helped to identify and organise thematic patterns, I found that structuring the analysis of stigmatisation along theoretical lines made for a more easily digestible analysis.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Just as it is important for the sake of the quality of the results, the iterative analytical process of continually updating the understanding and conceptualisation of the social context of /r9k/ is also necessary to ensure good ethical practice (Berg, 2015). In simpler terms, during the course of the research I would reflect on my presence on the board as a researcher and what risks it entailed for the members of it, particularly those who actively posted. The nature of digital ethnography dictates that any researcher(s) must lead a continual internal discussion in order to adapt ethical principles to the specific field, since no strict ethical code can be easily applicable to all netnographic research (Berg, 2015). As Hine (2000, p. 24) eloquently puts it, "It is the ethnographer's task to find out during the ethnography what is considered sensitive, not as an additional task but as a part of the ethnography itself".

In traditional ethnography, and indeed social research collectively, care is typically taken to ensure that the identities of participants remain unknown to the reader. In digital ethnography, usernames are seen as an extension of personal identity and thus tend to be anonymised, to avoid

the possibility of negative consequences to the poster (Hine, 2000). This is not directly applicable to this study, seeing as all posts on /r9k/ are entirely anonymised in the first place - no usernames are attached to any of the posts. However, as Hine (2000) points out, merely anonymising the username is insufficient, since any committed individual can trace virtually any post that is quoted verbatim in the research. To remedy this, I rephrased the few posts that were taken from threads that contained any links to a poster's identity, such as twitter or discord links. I made sure that I refrained from altering the meaning and general tone of what was written, so as not to misrepresent the intention of the poster (Berg, 2015).

5. Analysis

In this section, I will argue that incels on /r9k/ see their relationship to society as one of *stigmatisation*, and explore the complicated relationship posters on the board have with masculinity. The analysis on stigmatisation is divided into subheadings based on the theoretical concepts discussed in section 3, while the analysis of masculinity instead is organised along the lines of themes identified during the course of the research.

Since the board is entirely anonymous, quotes stand on their own. Some were truncated for the sake of brevity, and some were altered in order to censor exceedingly offensive slurs, as well as to correct for significant grammatical errors.

5.1 Stigmatisation

On /r9k/, posters discuss their inceldom largely in terms of *stigmatisation*. To demonstrate this, I will discuss the ways in which the theoretical constructs of Erving Goffman's *Stigma* (1963) manifest themselves on /r9k/.

5.1.1 *Abominations of the Body*

One of the ways in which feelings of stigmatisation manifest themselves most clearly on /r9k/ is found in how posters discuss their perceived physical shortcomings. Ever-present is the narrative of "lookism", the idea that social standing is determined by physical features, often those associated with attraction of the opposite sex. The following quote aptly summarises the feelings generally echoed across discussions of lookism:

> ">Society doesn't care about ugly or below average men
> >Your life is over by the time you turn 30
> >Relationships as a whole are dying thanks to women refusing to lower their standards
> >I'm going to die alone
> >Nobody cares that I'm going to die alone
> >The fact that I'm even upset about this means that I'm extremely selfish since I can't just accept
> my place in the social hierarchy like a good dog"[5]

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[5] Posts on 4chan are often structured in this fragmented narrative manner, known as *greentexting*.

In the incel narrative, a man who is seen as being below the average in terms of physical attractiveness is destined to eventually live a life of social isolation. Often, this destiny is discussed as being absolute and unavoidable, with posters expressing hopelessness and suicidal ideation - common expressions in this context are "it's over" and references to "roping".[6]

The boundaries of what is considered an average, below average, and an ugly man respectively are not always clear. In many cases, the difference between an ugly man doomed to inceldom and an attractive man destined to success is purported to be, quite literally, "a few millimeters of bone":

> "A few mm of bone in the jaw or a few cm of penis for example literally shape someone's entire life. You cant tell me this is not a clown world[7] reality we live in."

> ">cucked out of having a bf[8] and happiness because my facial bone structure being different by a few mm is considered ugly"

> "I've come to find it both deeply saddening yet bizzarely amusing that a few millimeters of bone density can be the arbiter of whether a person is capable of being loved or not."

The members of /r9k/ are rarely unanimous in their views, and some are opposed to the hopeless resignation of others when it comes to lookism. When discussions of lookism arise, sentiments of hopelessness often run parallel to discussions of coping strategies. It should be noted that they are just that - coping strategies. That is, they echo the sentiment that physically unattractive men are placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy, but suggest ways in which to remedy their condition. These can generally be said to fall into two categories. Firstly, there are strategies recommended to an individual to directly intervene in their physical appearance with varying degrees of invasiveness. These range from simple hygiene and fitness tips, to recommending plastic surgery or the use of anabolic steroids. Secondly, there are strategies to bypass the societal requirement of attractiveness, such as through the acquisition of capital. They are often

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[6] To "rope" meaning to hang oneself.
[7] "Clown world", a term commonly used on 4chan for expressing disdain at modern society.
[8] BF, acronym for Boyfriend.

disputed, however. For example, hardline proponents of the lookism theory hold forth that unattractive men cannot attain wealth unless they are born into it, and as such any attempt by an unattractive man to climb the social hierarchy through wealth acquisition will be futile.

While solutions and approaches to managing physical stigmata are disputed, it remains evident that discussing physical shortcomings in terms of stigmatisation is a recurring theme of /r9k/ discourse.

5.1.2 *Blemishes of Character*

Stigmatisation is arguably most prevalent in discussions surrounding incels character traits and mental health. In fact, in these discussions it is not uncommon to see the word "stigma" verbatim, used by posters to describe their situation:

> "Prostitutes don't count because the whole stigma behind being an incel isn't about whether or not your penis has been [physically] present inside a vagina, it's that you've been evaluated by other women as so worthless that not even one of them would willingly let you have the mutually pleasurable act of sex with them."

> ">20 y/o virgin but no interest in having sex aside from losing social stigma of being a virgin"

> "We do not want to be incels. [...] The social stigma is putting this label on us, we merely choose to accept it."

The overwhelming sentiment on the board is that there exists a severe social stigma towards male virgins, especially those who identify as incels. In fact, the stigma towards inceldom seems to transcend a binary view of virginity; a man can have sexual intercourse with a woman but still retain the incel identity and thus the stigma that comes with it.

It cannot be stressed enough how debilitating the stigma of inceldom is seen to be on the board. Going beyond nihilistic resignation, posters here discuss themselves as being morally reprehensible at best and less than human at worst. One user posits that it is preferable to be a rapist than to be labelled an incel, since a rapist "gets what he wants" and "women are more drawn to violent and "unlawful" men". Others often discuss their inceldom with similar severity,

using words such as "subhuman" or "degenerate" to describe their situation. In this regard, they have truly internalised the aspects of their identity that the *normals* consider less than human. In Goffman's (1963, pp. 8-9) words, "those who have dealings with him fail to accord him the respect and regard which the uncontaminated aspects of his social identity have led them to anticipate extending, and have led him to anticipate receiving; he echoes this denial by finding that some of his own attributes warrant it".

Given the toxic nature of the board, two surprising aspects of social identity that are discussed in these terms of stigmatisation are sexual orientation and gender identity. One of the most active threads on the board, /r9gay/, is specifically populated by homosexual men. The language herein is generally just as hostile towards homosexuality as the rest of the board, commonly referring to themselves and others using pejorative terms such as "fagg*t" and, again, "degenerates". In spite of this, it is flourishing, and incel narratives are just as present here as anywhere else on the board. On /r9k/, feelings of stigmatisation seem to be increased for homosexual men who identify as incels. There exists a notion that homosexual men are far more promiscuous than heterosexual women, which logically entails that homosexual men more easily can rid themselves of the incel stigma. When a homosexual person fails to do this, they may feel that they are even more inadequate than their heterosexual peers:

> "I can't see things changing. I cry or nearly cry over this too often. If I weren't a coward I'd kill myself because my life is just hopeless, but I exist by inertia.
> And the worst part is, as stereotypical as it sounds, is how few people will understand. There may be some here in the same boat. I don't hate anyone, but there are some similarities between myself and incels, although I don't blame others for my predicament either. The situation is, no matter how hard or in what way I try, I can't get a boyfriend. I recognize being a "gaycel"[9] doesn't truly exist, as anyone can go on Grindr and get fucked by a 60 year old boomer who will do anything that moves. While I definitely want sex, I want a relationship first and foremost and this sort of sleazy way out holds no draw to me whatsoever."

> "my normie friends from highschool are literally getting engaged meanwhile i rot here as a 23 years old gaycel. it was supposed to be easy for us bros, want went so wrong?"

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[9] -cel is commonly used to form portmanteaus of certain characteristics and "incel". In this case, it simply refers to a gay incel.

Perhaps even more rampant than the open homophobia on the board is the sexism and transphobia present in most threads. Nonetheless, there are a number of posters that present themselves as female as well as a number of posters that present themselves as transgender. The women, mostly referred to as "fembots"[10] or "femcels", tend to express feelings of despair when failing to meet supposedly easily attainable societal expectations, similar to those of homosexual incels. Posters who openly identify as transgender instead tend to see their gender identity itself as a stigma, one poster remarking that they had given up ever attaining a partner: "noone would ever want a transexual [sic] degenerate like me".

5.1.3 *Tribal Stigma*

Much like the female and LGBT presence on the board, there is a vocal group of non-white posters on /r9k/ in spite of the abundant use of racial slurs and stereotyping. This is in part apparent through descriptors posters will use to communicate their identity, presenting as "ethnicels"[11], "blackcels", amd "currycels"[12] for example.

> "The only race I think couldn't be incels are whites (JBW). They're accepted in damn near every country and have absolutely no excuses. They are locationcels[13] + volcels[14]."

> "JBW is real. You can't be an incel if you are white."

> "Just be white confirmed again. Can we ban all white dudes from this board?"

Generally, individuals identifying as ethnicels attribute their low standing in the social hierarchy to white supremacy and anglo/eurocentrism, though rarely describing it as such explicitly. They are often proponents of the "Just Be White" (or JBW) theory, which holds forth that the social hierarchy is racially structured with the white man at the top. According to the theory, white men

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[10] Portmanteau of "female" and "robot", the latter being a general descriptor of any user of /r9k/, deriving from the name of the ROBOT9000 algorithm.

[11] Portmanteau of "ethnicity" and "incel", umbrella term for nonwhite incels.

[12] A "currycel" is an incel of South Asian descent.

[13] Locationcel, meaning that their inceldom is dependent on where they live, and thus can't be "true" inceldom since they are free to move to a country where they wouldn't be incels.

[14] Voluntary celibate, implying that their claim to inceldom is illegitimate.

are considered especially attractive in non-white countries, and as such no white man can stake a claim as a true incel.

5.1.4 The *Own* and the *Normals*

It is overwhelmingly evident that incels on /r9k/ view themselves as a group of stigmatised individuals, the *own*, isolated from the rest of society, the *normals*. In order to argue this point, I will demonstrate that they do so in three ways: (1) the language describing outsiders, (2) hostility to outsiders, (3) in-group support.

Firstly, the language they use as descriptors for outsiders explicitly parallels that of the stigmatised individuals that Goffman (1963) describes.

> "15 is when I realised I had some serious mental fuckery that normal people didn't."

> "Normal dudes and even lowtier dudes dont like me, so basically chad[15] is like decoration to me"

> "NEETs[16] and freaks are literally just way more interesting to talk to. they spend most of their time with their hobbies so they go deep. whenever im around normies they just talk about celebrity culture and tiktok shit which i dont follow so i'm just either out of the loop or bored. usually both"

It is clear that there is a perceived divide between incels and "normal" people, strongly evident just from the fact that discussions regularly make references to a distinct group of others, explicitly referring to them with words such as "normal people" and "normies".

Overlapping with this is the hostility which is shown towards normals. In addition to having separate terms by which to describe normals, some of these terms are incredibly negatively loaded by way of being portmanteaus with slurs. Examples include referring to normals as "normalf*gs", "normalf*ggots", or, less commonly, "normaln*ggers".

> "Sexhavers need to GET THE FUCK OUT RIGHT FUCKING NOW /r9k/ is a board for lonely socially awkward virgin men with autism who have NEVER had sex and NEVER been in a

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[15] See 2.3 *The Language of Incels*

[16] NEET, acronym for Not in Education, Employment, or Training.

relationship. [...] Do us all a favor and GET OUT AND STAY OUT NORMALFAGS ROAST
BEEF WHORES CHADS"

"GET OUT NORMIES GET OUT KILL YOURSELF DIE DIE DIE DIE"

Territory on /r9k/ is viciously guarded; if a poster is suspected of being a normal, they are often
met with vitriol and disdain. Such suspicions are aimed at everything from a person not knowing
regular incel jargon, to the implication that someone has a partner.

Finally, the in-group support on /r9k/ resembles that of the *own* as described by Goffman (1963).
In this regard, there exists a sort of duality on /r9k/. On the one hand, there are in many ways a
sense of camaraderie and community on the board. In addition to the aforementioned sharing of
coping strategies, posters express that it is one of a few places that meet them with acceptance
and understanding:

> "I love this board. Posting here is the only way I can truly express myself without feeling like a
> complete degenerate and social outcast."

> "This is why I come to r9k. Anywhere else people would try to "help" me by typing pointless
> platitudes as advice."

> "Well we may all have our different ideals, likes and dislikes, but despite that there's a great sense
> of camaraderie in these threads and that's what keeps me coming back to /britfeel/. I love you guys
> no homo"

A further example of this is /britfeel/ which, along with /r9gay/, is one of the most active general
threads on the board. Consisting of British /r9k/ users, /britfeel/ threads are more relaxed and
conversational in nature than the rest of the board, but generally exhibit the same sense of
community - posters feel a shared sense of acceptance, that the rest of society does not extend to
them.

On the other hand, the hateful posts on /r9k/ are not limited to statements of self-deprecation or
vitriol towards outsiders. Much of the negativity is aimed at other incels, that is, fellow

stigmatised individuals. Goffman (1963, p. 108) describes this ambivalence in terms of repulsion and shame: "The sight may repel him, since after all he supports the norms of the wider society, but his social and psychological identification with these offenders holds him to what repels him, transforming repulsion into shame, and then transforming ashamedness itself into something of which he is ashamed". Indeed, it is not uncommon for expressions of suffering on /r9k/ to be met with antagonism, usually echoing the self-deprecating sentiments of the original poster.

5.2 Hegemonic Masculinity on /r9k/

As indicated by previous research (Ging, 2019; Jaki et al., 2019), incels on /r9k/ explicitly think of the world in terms of a gendered social hierarchy. In this section, I will demonstrate this by exploring the ways in which the theoretical concepts introduced in section 3.2 *Theory of Hegemonic Masculinity* manifest in discourse on /r9k/. Because of the overlapping and interacting nature of the different masculinities, this section will be organised along the lines of three themes identified in the thematic analysis: (1) *The incels' view of hegemonic masculinity,* (2) *the role of incels, normies, and women in reinforcing the hierarchy,* and (3) *the elasticity of subordinated and marginalised masculinities*.

5.2.1 The Incels' View of Hegemonic Masculinity

On /r9k/, posters often seem to align with the idea that there exists a culturally dominant form of masculinity. Similar to the incels described in previous literature (Jaki et al., 2019), they use a language of archetypes to portray what they perceive to be the social reality. These archetypes can generally be categorised in two ways. Firstly there is a recurring cast of characters that each represent a place in the gendered hierarchy. The following list is a summary of the three most common archetypes.

> "A chad is a human who's blessed with good genes, good prenatal Testosterone (almost all chads have low finger digit ratios) and good postnatal Testosterone. Because you only have control over the latter, people consider being a chad a "genetic" or "determined" thing."

Chad - A physically large, strong, confident and attractive white man. He can always easily establish relationships with women despite treating them poorly. The term is often used

pejoratively, with the implication that Chad is unintelligent and that he only places at the top of the social hierarchy because of his genetically predetermined looks.

> "[...] to Stacy, the only acceptable topic of discussion is the incredibly tedious and petty details of the social relationships of her circle. Stacy just wants to spew non-stop about how all the other girls she knows are bitches and whores, and just wants Chad to nod while she does it. That's what "conversation" is to Stacy."

Stacy - The female equivalent of Chad, an attractive, vapid, promiscuous and confident woman. It is used almost solely as a pejorative, whereas incels might on occasion speak of Chad with admiration, Stacies are only mentioned with disdain.

> ">majority of whites in the world were born lucky
> lol i think the white privilege shit is kind silly myself [but you] cant deny white men have an edge when it comes to dating. Chang and tyrone will always have to try harder than chad"

Tyrone/Chang - Black and East Asian versions of Chad respectively, possessing the same traits with the exception of their race. Despite the prevalent racism on the board, it should be noted that incels seem to recognise the intersectionality of the social hierarchy.

Parallel to this recurring cast of character types, incels on /r9k/ speak of the social hierarchy using terms borrowed from ethology, the study of animal behaviour. Posters use "alpha", "beta", and "omega" to describe the hierarchy, placing the alpha Chads at the top, the beta/bluepilled[17] normies below, and the omega incels at the very bottom.

In describing what they believe to be the socially idealised way of doing gender for men, common traits discussed are physical dominance, emotional distance and misogyny.

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[17] See 2.2 *The Manosphere*

5.2.2 The Role of Incels, Normies, and Women in Reinforcing the Hierarchy

Interestingly, incels on /r9k/ believe that women hold a great deal of agency in the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity. In fact, the prevailing belief on the board is that women collectively opt into the global male hegemony out of self-interest at best, and malice at worst.

"Women have all of the power. Men have none of it unless you're chad."

"It's almost like giving power and independence to women caused hypergamy[18] and created a crisis where men are never good enough and the ones that are are usually cheated on by stupid fucking women who's only goal in life is to manipulate men to make money! And there's no defense males have against this because they cannot rape, they cannot discipline women, they cannot even raise their voice at them lest they be accused of sexism."

"ya know I use to hate being gay but now see that God blessed me with the great ability to nullify all of womens power (sexual attraction) I literally treat women like dirt and simp[19] for dudes and I cant imagine dealing with females."

In sociology, it is argued that hegemonic masculinity is upheld by power structures such as patriarchy and the division of labour and capital (Connell, 2005). Incels instead propose that such structures no longer are applicable, and that female sexuality in particular is what determines the social hierarchy. Women's liberation movements have granted women the free choice of any sexual and romantic partner they wish to have, which has resulted in women flocking to those men who live up those men that follow the pattern of hegemonic masculinity. Incels see themselves as forced into the bottom rung of this hierarchy, at the mercy of modern feminism. Indeed, the way the incels describe their situation is comparable with the subordinate and marginalised masculinities in Connell (2005): dominated by hegemonic masculinity, and excluded by society.

"You don't get it, a true robot has accepted the social status quo.
Men>Women

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[18] On /r9k/, hypergamy is the idea that the majority of women (80%<) are only willing to start relationships with a minority of men (<20%).

[19] A simp is someone who goes out of their way to impress a person they're attracted to, often unreciprocated. Sometimes used as a verb.

Chads>normies>robots

The best we can do is lash out at the women who have deceived the normies and lesser betas into thinking that women are equal to or greater than men. Chads are the few bastions of manhood left. If we undermine chad we feed into the feminist agenda."

"Society is royally fucked up. Women were always valued higher socially and the emergent technology allowed them to turn this power gap into a huge advantage, which in turn caused the value of the lesser desirable males to plummet and thus chase the girls who are whoring themselves out, or at least fap[20] over them on a daily basis. This created a social ecosystem of power being transferred in cyclical ways, the betas provide, pay, give attention, the woman receives the offerings, neither side really progressing anywhere on a personal level because validation is given at such a shallow and primitive level."

Normies, or "beta males", are discussed on /r9k/ in terms of complicit masculinities, keeping in mind that incels see women as beneficiaries and dictators of hegemonic masculinity. Incels disdain for normies seems to be rooted in their belief that women are afforded a great deal of power by men who are attracted to them.

5.2.3 The Elasticity of Subordinated and Marginalised Masculinities

Much like the masculinities of the manosphere studied by Ging (2019), there exists a sort of ideological elasticity amongst subordinated and marginalised masculinities on /r9k/. Similar to the duality of camaraderie and antagonism described in section 5.1.4, here there is a contradiction in the heterogeneity of the board and the hostility of the posters. On the one hand, as demonstrated in section 5.1.3, there is an active subset of subordinated and marginalised masculinities (and even femininities) - "ethnicels", "gaycels", "transcels", and "femcels" lament in their struggle and find acceptance on /r9k/. On the other hand, in order to do so, they have to overcome an enormous amount of opposition, mostly in the form of direct slurs and insults every time they openly identify themselves. Just as overall incel self-hate however, this is in part self-reinforced. Posters will rarely react negatively, or at all, to being insulted in such a manner, and it is common for members of minority groups to self-identify using slurs in very matter-of-factly ways:

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[20] Slang for masturbating.

"drunk paki[21] here, too hairy to be cute white femboi[22], not chad enough in terms of height or muscles. being a paki is being invisible and worthless you are nobodies first choice. its really harsh even white/black bots/incels have a higher chance in the west"

"my mom found out that im a faggot what do i do"

It should be said that similar to the beta masculinities studied in Ging (2019), the overwhelming racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia on the board make it difficult to take seriously the incels' claims on subordinate and marginalised masculinities. Indeed, there is little doubt that their alternative interpretation of hegemonic masculinity (that is, one dictated and reinforced by and for the benefit of females) and their following opposition of it is not truly based on wanting to see equality, as opposed to the case of homosexual men in the United States (Connell, 2005). Rather, they wish to establish a hegemonic masculinity whereby they themselves are placed at the top of the gendered hierarchy. In this regard, they are just as interested in the male dominance over women as the alpha male Chads that they so detest.

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[21] Slur used to describe pakistani people, sometimes South Asians in general.

[22] Femboy, term for an effeminate man. Often implies homosexuality.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to, through the use of digital ethnography and thematic analysis, determine how incels on 4chan's /r9k/ board discuss their relation to society, and further explore how they discuss their masculinity. It could be claimed that incels on /r9k/ largely understand their relation to society in terms of *stigmatisation*, on three levels: physically, mentally, and on a group level. They describe their isolation from society as being due to a number of stigmata, ranging from height, to mental illness, to racial bias. This perceived stigmatisation has manifested itself in a marked divide between the in-group (the *own*), and the outgroup (the *normals*). There is however a duality within the in-group. On the one hand, the in-group provides acceptance, camaraderie, and coping strategies for fellow stigmatised individuals. On the other hand, it is clear that the toxic nature of /r9k/ means that this stigmatisation is largely reinforced by the in-group itself.

The gendered and strictly hierarchical worldview of incels on /r9k/ echoes that of other incel communities that have been studied (Baele et al., 2019; Jaki et al., 2019). This is apparent through their use of archetypes to describe the social world, as well as the commonly expressed sentiment that incels are subordinated by an unjust hegemonic masculinity. Notably, incels believe that women are those that wield the power to reinforce hegemonic masculinity, and that they choose to do so out of their own benefit.

Additional findings suggest that incels may be a more heterogeneous group than portrayed in media, or even indicated in previous research. In spite of the overwhelming bigotry on /r9k/, posters regularly present themselves as female, homosexual, transgender, or as an ethnic minority, and regularly discuss these aspects of their identity in relation to their inceldom. It is crucial that future research does not overlook this potentially sizeable group of incels.

Limitations notwithstanding, the applications of this paper are threefold. Firstly, it may lead closer to tangible solutions with regards to incels and their personal suffering. If developed further, the connection between inceldom, stigmatisation, and masculinity may contribute to social work, specifically to the benefit of social workers that come in direct contact with incels. Secondly, the study may also inform policy makers, in particular those involved with domestic

security. Groups that incels are especially hostile towards, such as attractive young people (particularly women), potentially make up demographics of future victims of incel violence. Finally, this paper provides a framework by which future studies can analyse other communities online, especially those that are socially isolated. Subgroups of incels, such as female incels, homosexual incels, transgender incels, and incels of ethnic and racial minorities are noteworthy, and make up interesting cases for future research.

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