

University of Helsinki  
Dissertationes Universitatis Helsingiensis 191/2026

# **United by victimhood: Negotiating identity in incel online communities**

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Doctoral thesis  
Political history

To be presented for public discussion with the permission of the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Helsinki, in the Suomen Laki hall, Porthania, on the 25th of April, 2026 at 12:00.

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Publisher: Helsingin yliopisto

Series: Dissertationes Universitatis Helsingiensis 191/2026

ISBN 978-952-84-2255-6 (paperback)

ISBN 978-952-84-2254-9 (PDF)

ISSN 2954-2898 (print)

ISSN 2954-2952 (online)

PunaMusta, Joensuu 2026

## Abstract

In this thesis, I examine misogynist incel ('involuntary celibacy') online communities. These communities consist mostly of heterosexual men who have constructed an identity around their perceived lack of sexual and romantic attention from women. Incels present themselves as victims in a rigid sexual hierarchy. Most often, they see this as a result of their unattractive appearance; they believe that women are biologically hardwired to prefer conventionally attractive, traditionally masculine men as partners. Incel discussions commonly include hopeless, self-deprecating content and detailed comparisons to the 'Alpha males' that incels see as ideal examples of heterosexual masculinity. Despite this self-hatred, incels ultimately blame women for their situation, and dehumanising, violently misogynistic rhetoric is prevalent in incel online discussions.

In this thesis, I examine how incels themselves understand inceldom, and what political implications being an incel involves to self-identified incels. My approach is discursive: I focus on the processes of meaning making, the discursive dynamics at play when the incel worldview is constructed, negotiated, and contested. In the three articles in this thesis, I employ an inductive approach, using both online discussion and interview data.

Using discourse theory and critical discourse analysis, I demonstrate that for incels, the political implications of inceldom are centred around victimhood, and that the idea of victimhood affects how all other themes and topics are viewed in incel discourse. The importance of victimhood, overall, has been recognised in previous research, but I argue that the ways this victimhood works to structure incel discourse, and the political implications it has to incels themselves, are more complex than have been shown before. Focusing on the constant collective and individual renegotiations of identity in incel communities, my research shows the need to acknowledge the diversity of narratives, ideas, and experiences in these online spaces and in the offline lives of the participants.

Employing Laclaudian discourse theoretical tools, I analyse victimhood as an empty signifier that holds a variety of different meanings and demands, a floating signifier that different discourses attempt to define in competing ways, and as a nodal point that structures incels' self-understanding. Incels disagree on what 'incel' means in the first place, whether incels should be considered to be a political movement or not, whether political violence is justified, and what an ideal society would look like. What pulls incel discourse together despite these differences is the focus on and attachment to victimhood. This victimhood can be used to defend contradictory views and goals: in the case of violence, for example, claims of incel victimhood are used both to justify and argue against political violence. Still, victimhood manages to create temporary discursive unity, to bring together a wide set of demands and to present them as though they are uniform. At the same time, victimhood is used to differentiate from the broader manosphere and to reject masculinist and anti-feminist attempts to present all men as united against feminism.

Incel victimhood as a central nodal point is used to articulate a political non-agency in a way that renders political mobilisation as ultimately useless. Incels constitute their agency through negation, as stolen by women, feminism, and society at large. In this sense, different views on the political implications of inceldom do not matter. Whatever broader goals, propositions, or solutions individual incels might have to their situation, incel attachment to victimhood and hopelessness dictates that they can never be reached.

In this thesis, these findings inform a discussion on extremism and online radicalisation as concepts frequently used to analyse incels. I approach these concepts with a problematising rather than definitional view, examining the different implications these discursive framings hold. I argue that while the incel worldview, in many ways, matches common definitions of extremism, the overarching attachment to victimhood, and therefore the perceived lack of political agency, differentiates incels from other extremist communities. Moreover, defining incels as extremists carries risks of exceptionalising incel misogyny and therefore losing sight of its strong connections to mainstream structural misogyny.

## Abstrakti

Tämä väitöskirja käsittelee naisvihamielisiä incel-verkkoyhteisöjä ('involuntary celibacy'). Incel-yhteisöt koostuvat lähinnä heteromiehistä, jotka kokevat, etteivät saa naisilta romanttista tai seksuaalista huomiota, koska eivät ole näille riittävän viehättäviä. Incelit uskovat naisten haluavan kumppaneikseen vain erityisen miehekkäitä 'Alfa-miehiä', ja näkevät itsensä miehisen hierarkian häviäjinä. Incel-verkkoyhteisöjen keskustelut rakentuvat tyypillisesti toivottomuuden ja itseinhon varaan ja esittävät incelit naisten ja muiden miesten uhreina. Incel-keskustelut sisältävät huomattavan väkivaltaista, naisvihamielistä sisältöä, ja itseinhosta huolimatta naiset nähdäänkin varsinaisina syyllisinä inceliin uhriasemaan.

Tässä väitöskirjassa tarkastelen, miten incelit itse ymmärtävät inceliyden merkityksiä, ja mitä poliittisia implikaatioita inceliys heille sisältää. Lähestymistapani on diskursiivinen: keskityn niihin merkityksenannon prosesseihin ja vastakkainasetteluihin, joilla incelit rakentavat ja neuvottelevat maailmankuvaansa, ja tarkastelen, millaisia ristiriitoja näihin sisältyy. Kolmessa väitöskirjaan sisältyvässä tutkimusartikkelisssa analysoin aineistolähtöisesti sekä verkkokeskustelu- että haastattelumateriaalia.

Käyttäen sekä diskurssiteoriaa että kriittistä diskurssianalyysia osoitan, miten inceliyden poliittiset implikaatiot määräytyvät uhri-identiteetin kautta; uhriuden idea jäsentää kaikkea muuta keskustelua. Uhri-identiteetin merkitys on tunnistettu myös aiemmassa tutkimuksessa, mutta väitöskirjani syventää tätä ymmärrystä osoittamalla, miten moninaisilla ja keskenään ristiriitaisillakin tavoilla uhrius rakentaa incel-identiteettiä ja -yhteisöä ja sen poliittisia ulottuvuuksia. Tutkimukseni osoittaa, että verkon eri incel-yhteisöt ja inceliksi identifioituvat miehet eroavat toisistaan lukuisin tavoin, ja että incel-identiteettiä neuvotellaan jatkuvasti uusiksi niin yksilöiden itseymmärryksen kuin yhteisöjen verkkokeskustelujenkin tasolla.

Analysoin uhriuden merkitystä inceliin identiteetin rakennuksessa käyttäen diskurssiteorian työkaluja. Tarkastelen uhriutta tyhjänä merkitsijänä, joka itseensä laajan joukon erilaisia vaatimuksia, kelluvana merkitsijänä, jota eri diskurssit pyrkivät määrittelemään eri tavoin, sekä diskurssin kiinnekohtana ('nodal point'), joka jäsentää kaikkea muuta keskustelua. Incelit ovat erimielisiä siitä, mitä 'incel' itsessään merkitsee, pitäisikö incel-yhteisöt nähdä poliittisina liikkeinä vai ei, onko poliittinen väkivalta oikeutettua, ja millaisia yhteiskunnallisia ihanteita inceliyteen liittyy. Eroista huolimatta uhriuden idea onnistuu yhdistämään incelit. Uhriutta voidaan käyttää perustelemaan keskenään ristiriitaisia näkemyksiä ja tavoitteita. Esimerkiksi poliittista väkivaltaa sekä oikeutetaan että vastustetaan vetoamalla uhriuteen. Jaettu uhrius muodostaa kuvan yhtenäisyydestä ja yhteisyydestä ja piilottaa näkyvistä eroavaisuudet ja vastakohtaisuudet. Samalla sitä käytetään kuitenkin muista miehistä erottautumiseen ja laajemman antifeministisen manosfääriin yhtenäisyysargumenttien torjumiseen.

Uhrius diskurssin kiinnekohtana kumoaa mahdollisuuden merkitykselliseen poliittiseen toimijuuteen. Poliittinen mobilisaatio nähdään incel-keskusteluissa useimmiten lähtökohtaisesti turhana, koska uhrius ja siitä seuraava toivottomuus sanelevat, että mikään toiminta ei voi muuttaa inceliin tilannetta paremmaksi. Incelit rakentavat toimijuutta negaation kautta ja näkevät mahdollisuutensa olemattomina, naisten, feminismin, ja yleisesti yhteiskunnan heiltä viemänä. Uhriuden ja toivottomuuden merkitys diskurssissa johtaa siihen, etteivät eriävät näkemykset lopulta merkitse, koska mitkään inceliin vaatimukset, ratkaisuideat tai tavoitteet eivät kuitenkaan voi lopulta saavuttaa minkäänlaista haluttua muutosta.

Peilaan artikkelien löydöksiä laajempaan teoreettiseen keskusteluun ekstremismistä ja radikalisaatiosta. Määrittelyjen hakemisen sijaan pyrin problematisoimaan näitä käsitteitä ja analysoimaan sitä, millaisia implikaatioita niiden käytöllä on niin tutkimuksessa, politiikkatoimissa kuin julkisessa keskustelussakin. Osoitan, että vaikka incel-yhteisöt monin tavoin sopivat ekstremismin määritelmiin, niiden perimmäinen kiinnittyminen uhriuteen ja toivottomuuteen erottaa incel-yhteisöjä muista ekstremistisistä yhteisöistä. Esitän myös, että inceliin tulkitseminen pelkästään kapean ekstremismimääritelmän kautta voi erityistä inceliin naisvihaa tavalla, joka häivyttää näkyvistä sen, miten keskeisesti inceliin maailmankuva on sidoksissa valtaviiran sukupuolikäsityksiin ja rakenteelliseen naisvihaan.

## Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the help and support of many people I have had the privilege of meeting along the way. While it would be impossible to mention everyone I am grateful to, I appreciate all of you.

First, I wish to thank my supervisors, Emilia Palonen and Leena Malkki. You supported me and helped me grow as a researcher throughout this process. You guided me when I needed it, but you also trusted me to be capable and independent as a researcher, encouraging me to believe in myself. Beyond the supervision of my thesis, by creating networks and support systems, you offered me the invaluable opportunity to become a part of inspiring research communities. These communities made this project much more stimulating, fun, and fruitful than it would have otherwise been. I am grateful for everything.

In addition to my supervisors, I also received help and support from Juhana Aunesluoma who acted as my administrative supervisor. Thank you for your constructive feedback on my article drafts in doctoral seminars, for always being ready to advise on any administrative issues, and for agreeing to fill the role of custos in my defence.

I am equally grateful to my pre-examiners Hilary Pilkington and Elizabeth Pearson for agreeing to review my thesis, and for the insightful, nuanced, and constructive feedback I received from you. Your comments have made this thesis much better. I am honoured and grateful to Elizabeth Pearson for accepting the invitation to be my opponent.

I was privileged to have a brilliant thesis committee with academics and practitioners who truly are experts on the topics of extremism and gender. Thank you, Debbie Ging, Tuija Saresma, and Tarja Mankinen, for your support.

I want to sincerely thank the current and former incels who participated in my interview research. This research would not have been possible without you, and I appreciate your trust and your time. Your contribution helps bring much needed nuance into discussions on incel communities, extremism, and online radicalisation.

Part of my research was funded through the *Retostra* project. I want to thank everyone in it, Tiina, Eetu, Antti, Ümit, Anna, Laura and Pihla, for being open-minded in figuring out new ways for how linguists can work together with an all-over-the-place social scientist. I learnt to think of data and analysis in new ways through our co-operation.

I want to thank my co-authors for their co-operation. Shane, writing articles and figuring out academic publishing together has been wonderful, and I am thankful we ended up getting to know each other through research. Ümit, working with you has been fun and inspiring, and I learnt a lot from you. I am very happy that our co-operation continues with you both.

While not included in this thesis, I also co-authored an article with Jonne and Mikko. Our work together introduced me to game studies, which has been useful ever since. I was a beginner with academic research, and you took me in as an equal colleague. I really enjoyed working with you.

I am excited to continue working together with brilliant academics in postdoctoral research. Thank you, Jon, for involving me in the RISE project. It was lucky we met at the VOX-POL summer school, where I also got to know so many other wonderful academics. It has been so much fun working together and I am happy to continue with the whole project group in the future. Mikko, Maria, Aasa, and Kirsti, I could not be happier to continue working with you on the themes of gaming, masculinities, and extremism.

Megan, thank you for mentoring me, and for the wonderful support and constructive feedback you have given me during this process. Kirsti, thank you for unforgettable conference trips, memes, and thinking together, I am so happy to get to continue working together moving on to postdoc research. Katri-Maaria, thank you for weird and fun discussions on everything from extremism to trail running and trolls. Lani, Zea, and Niko, thank you for support, cocktails, and manifestation, which will surely result in a great project together in the near future. Thank you to Laura, Olena, Alex, Marina, and other HEPP people for a sense of community and constructive feedback on my work. Thank you Katja, Kit, Matti, and Harry for peer support. I loved getting to know all of you during this process.

I have also received endless support and love from my friends outside academia. Thank you, Iida, Emmi, Anna, Satu, Hensu, Aura, and all other dear friends for encouragement, fun, relaxation, and support; it has been invaluable.

Thank you to my big, loud, weird, wonderful family, for always believing in me. I would not be here without you.

Lastly, I want to thank my husband (and favourite colleague) Mikko, for your love and support in all I do. It is a privilege to get to share my life with the smart, funny, and genuinely good person that you are. I have grown to appreciate you even more during this process. I love you.

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## List of Original Publications

This thesis is based on the following publications:

A1 Lounela, E., & Murphy, S. (2023). Incel Violence and Victimhood: Negotiating Inceldom in Online Discussions of the Plymouth Shooting. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 36(3), 344–365. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2022.2157267>

A2 Lounela, E., Murphy, S., & Bedretdin, Ü. (2025). “The Good Years Have Passed and Will Never Come Again”: Political Functions of Nostalgic Fantasies in Incel Discussions. *Social Media + Society*, 11(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051251332679>

A3 Lounela, E. (2025). What makes an incel? An interview study of former and current incels. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2025.2590848>

## List of Abbreviations used

CDA            Critical discourse analysis

DT             Discourse theory

Incel          Involuntary celibate

## 1. Introduction: Discursive approach to incel communities

In recent years, misogynist extremism has received growing interest from academic researchers. Young men's increasingly conservative gender views, the popularity of openly misogynist social media influencers, and the risks of online radicalisation are frequently discussed in public. Often, there is a tendency to simplify the issue; rather than acknowledging the systemic, structural, and historical nature of the phenomenon, it is exceptionalised and reduced to the individual level. In no phenomenon is this dynamic more pronounced than in the case of incel communities.

In this thesis, I examine misogynist incel ('involuntary celibacy') online communities. These communities consist mostly of heterosexual men who have constructed their identities around their perceived lack of sexual and romantic attention from women. Most often, incels see this as a result of unattractive appearance; they believe that women are biologically hardwired to prefer conventionally attractive, traditionally masculine men as partners (Ging, 2019; Murphy, 2023). Incel discussions commonly include hopeless, self-deprecating content and obsessive comparisons to the 'Alpha males' or 'Chads' that incels see as ideal examples of heterosexual masculinity (Ging et al., 2025). Despite this self-hatred, incels ultimately blame women for their situation; they present women as manipulative, shallow, and wielding unfair sexual power, and themselves as victims in a rigid sexual hierarchy (Sugiura, 2021).

This victimhood is central to how incels identify with, perform, and thereby constitute incelness (see Palonen, 2019). Unpacking this victimhood narrative, I examine how incels themselves discursively construct incelhood, how they negotiate and debate what 'incel' means, and the political implications that being an incel involves to self-identified incels. My approach is discursive: I focus on the processes of meaning making, the discursive dynamics at play when ideology is constructed, negotiated, and contested (Laclau, 2005). The three articles in this thesis demonstrate the complexity present in incel online communities. They show that acknowledging the diversity of narratives, ideas, and experiences in these online spaces and in the offline lives of the participants is fundamental in producing a holistic understanding of the phenomenon. This approach can help in understanding and even explaining the (heuristic) logics through which groups articulate themselves and identification takes place (Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Palonen 2025).

In this thesis, I examine and analyse the implications of incel victimhood constructions, based on incels' self-understanding, and the academic literature on incels. Building on the three research articles included in this thesis, I reflect on the broader question of incels in the context of extremism and radicalisation. I examine how incels fit the often-contested concepts of extremism and radicalisation, and in which aspects. I also consider the ways forward in acknowledging, yet critically contextualising, incels' own constructions of incelness in academic research. To unpack the logics of meaning making and the complex dynamics of constituting an 'us' in incel discourses, I build my analysis on three specific research questions:

1. How are the meanings of 'incel' constructed in incel discourse, and what are they connected to and defined against?
2. What political implications does incelhood have for incels?

### 3. How can incel self-understanding inform academic research on incels without legitimising incel ideology?

The structure of this thesis is as follows. First, I look at how incels have been constructed in academic research, which aspects of the phenomenon have been emphasised or privileged in academic discourse on incels, and which traditions or disciplines emphasise which elements. I also present an overview of how victimhood as a political claim has been studied in previous literature, and how extremism and radicalisation have been conceptualised and defined. Then, I present the methodological framework of discourse theory employed in this thesis and explain the concepts I use as heuristic tools to unpack the incel discourse (see also Hartikainen, 2025; Palonen, 2019; 2025). Finally, I use these tools to analyse incel discourse, based on the findings from the three research articles included in this dissertation, and discuss the meaning of these findings in relation to the previous literature on extremism and victimhood.

A discursive approach to studying incel communities situates the phenomenon within the broader theoretical understanding that language is not just a medium for expressing pre-existing views or identities, but a constitutive social practice through which subjectivities, meanings, and power relations are produced (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Fairclough, 1995; 2013). In the case of incel communities, these meanings are produced simultaneously by self-identified incels themselves, as well as non-incels, such as researchers, practitioners, media, politicians, and social media commentators. All this happens in interaction with and informed by other discourses, such as how extremism, misogyny, or masculinity are understood more broadly.

Identification through victimhood is central to incel communities' self-understanding and in justifications of the incel worldview. The strong victimhood narrative constructs boundaries between incels and outsiders, strengthening in-group bonds and motivating continuing attachment to incel communities. While the centrality of victimhood in incel identification and discourse has been shown in the literature (e.g. Ging, 2019), my research delves deeper into how this victimhood is constructed, negotiated, and articulated in online discussions and interviews with current and former incels. I demonstrate the complex, contradictory, and ambiguous ways victimhood operates in incel discourse, and argue that the centrality of victimhood determines the bounds of incels' potential for political mobilisation.

Victimhood acts as a unifying signifier, or nodal point, in incel discourse, either concealing or surpassing ideological and individual differences. In the context of a loose online community in which identification happens by choice and is constantly renegotiated there is no clear-cut, unifying ideology that all incels would agree to. The weight placed on victimhood draws incels together as a community despite significant differences in how violence, ideal society, or identification with inceldom are viewed by individual incels (see Laclau, 2005; Palonen & Sunnercrantz, 2021). Incels' strong attachment to victimhood and hopelessness dictates that no positive change is possible despite any efforts, rendering incels into political non-agency. Thus, to them, incel violence can be justified as revenge, but holds no possibility of societal change. This view distinguishes incels from many extremist ideologies in which radical or violent action is motivated by the idea of ultimately reforming society. Incels see the battle as already lost, the only possible course of action being an attempt to cope with the ever-worsening present.

Incel victimhood is intertwined with their views on gender, and especially with the fundamental othering of women in incel discourse and the experienced failure in embodying a 'normal' masculinity. The antagonism against women works to draw a boundary that defines incels as 'us' against 'them'. While this antagonism is the most violent and hostile against women, it is also directed at attractive men, other non-incels, and society as a whole, all of whom are presented as either complicit in or ignorant of incels' suffering. Antagonistic frontiers are central in explaining how incels articulate themselves as a victimised group, and how inceldom becomes a political identity in incel discourse (see Chouliaraki, 2021). Similar to the form of populist discourse (Palonen 2025), this antagonism and us-building are also defined and fed by victimhood claims, and the antagonistic frontiers work to pull incels together through articulating a shared enemy. In this way, the differences between incels are concealed, and a logic of equivalence constructs incels with differing views and demands as united in their shared suffering, thus producing an affective, antagonistic 'us' (Palonen, 2020b; 2025).

Because of the prevalence of violent, dehumanising misogynistic rhetoric in incel communities, and the history of several violent attacks connected to incels, incels have to largely been studied in the context of extremism, radicalisation, and risk of political violence. The articles included in this thesis also examine incels in the context of violence and misogyny, and two of them were published in journals focusing on political violence. Therefore, I situate this thesis in the field of extremism and radicalisation research. Because of this academic context, and because of the prevailing uncertainty or disagreement on whether it is fruitful to examine incels in the framework of extremism (Baele et al., 2023), I reflect on the questions of incel extremism and radicalisation in this thesis. Rather than labelling and naming incels as either extremist or not, I seek to further problematise these concepts, their implications, and their utility in defining loose and heterogeneous online communities (see Pearson, 2019; Pilkington, 2024).

The aim of my research is to understand incels' individual experiences of victimhood, while at the same time critically examining them in a broader context of gendered power structures. Many incels claim victimhood and suffering based on their experiences of violence, marginalisation, and humiliation, stemming from performing masculinity 'wrong' in peers' view. While much of incel victimhood claims appear to be strategic, and arguably are, these experiences cannot be sidelined when analysing incel victimhood. Victimhood claims require considering multiple perspectives, from the subjects' perspective to the broader societal structures these claims are made in. Even when victimhood claims are harmful and exclusionary, understanding the individuals and communities making the claims requires acknowledging their *experience* of feeling victimised.

Incels position themselves as subordinate in relation to masculinity ideals, highlighting their inferiority in almost ritualistic displays of self-hatred. They constantly lament their failure to gain sexual and romantic validation from women, and consequently, the failure to gain status in a masculine hierarchy that incels view as gatekept by women. It is evident through my research that this antagonistic victimhood narrative constructs women as the ultimate oppressor, even in situations where violence and humiliation are directed at incels by other men. In incel discourse, sex and relationships with women become symbolic and gain an instrumental value in claiming masculine power and respect, rather than being desired for actual connection and joy. I posit that this continuous failure to realise masculine norms, and the victimhood connected to it, grips incels as subjects and motivates their attachment in

communities they themselves recognise as harmful. This attachment to the affective narrative of victimhood and a rigid masculine hierarchy, in the end, upholds the very structures that produce their suffering.

## 1.1 A note on terms used in this thesis

'Incel' as a term has been imprecisely and sometimes inaccurately used to describe a variety of manifestations of violent misogyny, especially in media and public discourse, but also in academic research. Adding to the confusion, the term is also used to refer to separate groups of people, from self-identifying incels frequenting misogynist online communities to anyone without sexual or romantic relationships, to anyone who holds misogynist views. Therefore, some researchers suggest distinguishing between self-identified incels, misogynist incels, and non-violent incels, for example (e.g. Czerwinsky, 2023; DeCook & Kelly, 2022).

In this thesis, I research misogynistic incel online communities and self-identified incels who have, or had, some connection to these online communities (see Johanssen, 2023). While all genders can experience unwanted lack of sex and relationships, the misogynistic incel communities I study in this thesis are specifically aimed only at men, thus naturally limiting the scope of this research to incel men. As for naming individual incels as non-violent or misogynist, my approach to the phenomenon is more problematising than definitional. I explore the contingency of these definitions in my research articles and in chapter 5 of this thesis, examining how they depend on the cultural, political, historical, and institutional situations they are made in.

Incels have been analysed as a community or communities (e.g. Aiolfi et al., 2024; Coufal et al., 2025; Maryn et al. 2024; Osuna, 2024; O'Donnell & Shor, 2022), an online subculture (e.g. Andersen, 2025; Helm et al., 2024; O'Malley et al., 2022), and a movement (e.g. Palma, 2019; Watson et al., 2025). In this thesis, and in the articles included in it, I use the term 'incel communities'. While other conceptualisations would bring out different aspects of the phenomenon, with this wording, I particularly wish to highlight the communal aspect. Incels have community-specific norms of communication, a purpose for coming together, and they interact online and can therefore be regarded as an online community (Preece et al., 2003). By using the plural, I want to emphasise the diversity of incel online spaces, each of which have their own moderation practices, rules, emphases, and discussion norms, despite focusing on the same broader theme and identity of inceldom (see A1).

In examining misogynist online communities, it is necessary to define how misogyny is understood and used as a concept. In this thesis, I approach it as a structural, systemic phenomenon. Instead of seeing misogyny as individuals' feelings of hatred against women, I follow Manne's (2017) definition and view it as a broader system of normative control used to keep women 'in their place', that is, subordinate to men. This can manifest in several ways and on many levels, from societal to personal; in addition to physical violence against women, it also involves discursive constructions used to justify women's subjugation (see Kelly et al., 2024).

## 2. Previous research on incel communities, victimhood, and extremism

In this chapter, I explain how incel communities have previously been studied, and situate the phenomenon and this thesis in the broader field of research by introducing relevant items from the literature on the broader themes of victimhood and extremism.

After briefly describing incel communities as a whole, I introduce the current state of research through three themes that are central to how incels have been understood and discussed by various researchers and disciplines. First, in section 2.1.2, I present topics related to incels' focus on appearance, mental health problems, and loneliness - key aspects in how incels themselves understand inceldom. Then, in section 2.1.3, I examine current research through the themes of masculinity, misogyny, and male supremacism. Finally, in section 2.1.4, I look at academic views on incels in relation to violent extremism, radicalisation, and gendered violence.

In section 2.2, I present an overview of previous research on extremism and radicalisation, concepts often used to analyse and define incel communities. This is to provide context for my later reflections on the implications of applying extremism as a framework to incels. Rather than offering clear definitions of what extremism and radicalisation mean, my approach is a problematising one: while I present central definitions from previous literature, I also show their contingent, context-dependent nature.

In section 2.3, I present previous research on gender and masculinity and introduce my discursive approach to masculinity ideals and hegemonic masculinity. I explain how I analyse masculinity as a discourse that men negotiate their relationship to and show how incels construct gendered victimhood as collective and antagonistic.

Finally, to provide background for my analysis, I examine previous work on victimhood in section 2.4. As stated above, victimhood is central to incels' self-understanding, and exploring the various ways victimhood works in incel discourse is a central topic of this thesis. But victimhood claims play an important role in political rhetoric much more broadly than in just incel communities, and connect to politics and gender in multiple, complex ways, as will be discussed below.

### 2.1 Incel online spaces as communities of male victimhood

Building on the broader idea of male victimhood, incels see themselves as the worst off among men. In their view, they are placed the lowest in a social hierarchy favouring traditionally masculine, conventionally attractive men, 'Chads'. Incel communities share many of their misogynistic views with the broader anti-feminist, masculinist online ecology often referred to as the 'manosphere'. The manosphere overlaps with and is connected to other anti-gender, far-right, gender conservative, and religious communities and movements both online and offline (Iñigo, 2025) and shares a strong attachment to the affective idea of male victimhood (e.g. James, 2024). These victimhood constructions will be discussed in more detail in section 2.3. in this chapter.

Incels often refer to their way of accepting their situation and its hopelessness 'taking the blackpill' or 'becoming blackpilled' (Johanssen, 2023). This refers to the red and blue pills in

the movie *Matrix*, an analogy widely used in the manosphere: in the movie, taking the blue pill means remaining idealistic and misguided, while taking the red pill means accepting the ugly truth about the world (see Sugiura, 2021). In the manosphere, taking the red pill is often used to mean accepting a masculinist, anti-feminist idea of the world as gynocentric and leveraged against men, and the masculine hierarchy of 'Alphas' and 'Betas' dictating men's place in the social order, whereas taking the blue pill means remaining oblivious to these 'truths' (Puhmann & Schlaerth, 2024). Blackpill takes this one step further, adopting an even more nihilistic view to the world. While definitions of what the blackpill includes or means vary between individual incels, the core idea is that incels' inferiority and victimhood are permanent; for true incels, or 'truecels', there is no hope of ever 'ascending' out of incelhood (Murphy, 2023).

In addition to women and feminism, incels also see themselves as victims of technology, especially online dating applications and social media platforms (Preston et al., 2021). Despite strong connections to and overlap with online geek and gaming communities (Ging, 2019), and the fact that incels themselves convene online, incel nostalgia often idealises times before social media and information technology as more authentic, connected, and communal (A2). In incel discussions, social media and dating applications are seen as amplifying *hypergamy*, i.e. women's supposedly innate tendency to seek partners with higher social status, and therefore as further worsening incels' situation (Preston et al., 2021; A2).

Incels often present their worldview as scientific and rational rather than as ideological. They refer to studies on women's preferences for men and often cherry-pick and generalise findings to support the most catastrophic, fatalistic ideas about relationships and women's standards for men (Baker, 2023; DeCook, 2021; Murphy, 2023; Pettersson et al., 2025). This pseudo-scientific worldview can thus be presented as objective and non-ideological, leaning on and fortifying broader narratives about men's natural and intrinsic rationality and logic (Andersen, 2023). Still, in a survey study, the majority of incel respondents agreed that an incel ideology and a shared incel worldview do exist (Costello et al., 2025).

Incel online communities have existed since the 1990s, but the discussion culture and user base were different on the early internet. The first incel community was created by a woman, and it started as a peer support group, inclusive of both men and women of different sexual orientations, for people experiencing sexual and romantic loneliness (Preston et al. 2021). Over time, misogynist content took over, and incel communities evolved into the male supremacist online spaces they are today (Carian et al., 2023).

### 2.1.1 A brief history of incel research

Research on incels comes from several academic disciplines, employs a wide variety of theoretical and methodological tools and frameworks, and is directed by quite different emphases. For example, fields and disciplines include gender studies, terrorism studies, computer science, linguistics, criminology, sociology, and military studies (Czerwinsky, 2023). Here, I briefly discuss the history and diversity of academic research on incels, looking at how the different approaches affect research foci and therefore also the knowledge produced.

Overall, the field of research focusing on incel online communities is rather new. Before being mostly attached to specific, misogynistic incel online communities, the term 'incel' was used in research to describe anyone involuntarily celibate for over six months (Donnelly et al.,

2001). In late 2010s, incel online communities became an object of study, mostly in an attempt to understand what had led to the violent attacks in, first, Isla Vista in 2014 (e.g. Allely & Faccini, 2017; Larkin, 2018), and later in Toronto in 2018 (e.g. Baele et al., 2019). This also explains the common application of extremism, radicalisation, and political violence frameworks: incels became visible in public and academic discussions through acts of mass violence.

As research on incel communities began to increase in volume, the scope of inquiry also broadened. Risk of violence was still a focus, but attention started shifting from individual attackers to the communities as a whole, examining their discussion dynamics and the normalisation, idolisation, and encouragement of violence in them (e.g. Brzuskiewicz, 2020; Ging, 2019; Jaki et al., 2019; Witt, 2020). The aim to understand incels as communities, milieux or subcultures also meant more focus on the diversity of incels' views. This diversity and heterogeneity are also central in my research, as will be further discussed in chapter 5.

In a review of the literature on incels, Czerwinsky (2023) calls for more specificity when defining incels, and for acknowledging this diversity. She notes that some researchers rely on incels' own identification and self-understanding, whereas others define inceldom from the outside. She thematises incel research into three connected but distinct approaches: *incels as risk*, *incels as oppressors*, and *incels as oppressed*. The first includes research that examines incel experiences of masculinity, loneliness, and hopelessness, the second highlights incel misogyny in its different forms, and the third focuses on the risk of violence and extremism. Similarly, in this thesis, I examine these aspects of both academic research and incel self-understanding, and look into incel masculinity, misogyny, and violence.

While much of incel research has come from gender studies and extremism or terrorism studies (see Murphy, 2023), over time, there has been increasing interest in studying incels' mental health and personality traits. This research comes especially from the fields of psychology and psychiatry, but some strands of evolutionary psychology and radicalisation research focus on these themes as well. In these studies, the focus is often on quantitative approaches and especially survey data, and research aims at mapping the prevalence of different mental health problems among incels, for example (Broyd et al., 2023; Fontanesi et al., 2024; Sparks et al., 2022; Sparks et al., 2024; Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2022), or measuring the connections between life situations, personality traits, mental health problems, and attitudes (Costello et al., 2022; Moskalenko et al., 2022).

In terms of research data, early research on incel communities often focused on attacker manifestos (e.g. Blommaert, 2018; Witt, 2020) and online discussion data (e.g. Baele et al., 2019; Ging, 2019; Jaki et al., 2019). Central to understanding incel communities, this type of data have continued to be employed in incel research (e.g. Menzie, 2022; Miller, 2023; Papatheodorou, 2025). In time, the variety of different online forums studied has broadened to cover non-Anglophonic incel communities and participation from linguistically and culturally different areas (e.g. Caso et al., 2023; Ignazzi et al., 2025; Oskolkov & Kennedy-Kollar, 2025; Uzun & Tiryaki, 2024; A3), although more research is needed on these themes. Computational analyses using large datasets have also increased as the technology has developed and become more available (e.g. Baele et al., 2023; Solopova et al., 2025; Stijelja & Mishara, 2023).

While the types of data have become more varied over time, much of the research still focuses on the best-known forum, *incels.is*. Calls for more attention to other, smaller online forums, different social media platforms, and inclusion of image data in addition to text all highlight the need for more variety in terms of online data (e.g. Gerrand et al., 2025; Ging et al., 2025; A1). Although most research on incels is still secondary analysis of online discussion material (Andersen & Sugiura, 2024), the number of studies using survey or interview data has increased, bringing in perspectives of individual incels participating in these online communities, as well as pathways in and out of them (e.g. Adams & Smith, 2025; Andersen, 2025; Fontanesi et al., 2024; Moskalenko et al., 2022; Murphy, 2023; Sugiura, 2021; A3).

The increasing inclusion of new types of data and diversifying viewpoints has begun to demonstrate the variety and diversity present in incel communities and in individuals' identification to them. Still, more focus on the complexities, contradictions, and individual experiences related to incel communities is necessary to create a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. My research contributes to this diversification of research on incels in terms of data, methodology, and focus. It includes data from a variety of incel forums and from interviews with incels, introduces discourse theoretical and Lacanian analysis of the issue, and explores topics, such as nostalgic narratives and arguments for and against violence, which have not been previously researched in the context of incel communities. Because of these new angles to the phenomenon, my results highlight the complexity and variety of incel discourse and identity negotiations in a novel way.

### 2.1.2 Appearance and mental health problems as defining incelhood

In this section, I present previous research focusing on incels' mental health and appearance - central aspects in how incels construct their inferiority and victimhood.

In online discussions, incels often construct their victimhood through presenting incelhood as inextricably connected with mental health issues, self-harm, and social marginalisation (e.g. Daly & Laskovtsov, 2021; Murphy, 2023; A1). *Lookism*, the idea that physically attractive people are favoured in society, is used to explain why incels are being discriminated against for their appearance, specifically by women but also in society overall (e.g. Ging et al., 2025; Halpin, 2022; Sippel, 2025). Building on this, incels often see their situation as stemming from immutable and predetermined biological and genetic features that cannot be changed or altered; even plastic surgery cannot change a person's height or build or reformulate facial features enough to make a 'truecel' attractive enough for women. Appearance is seen as an objectively measurable trait, and incels often use a scale of one to ten to rate both their own and others' looks. Overall, incels' 'appearance-focused discourse upholds and amplifies perceptions of victimhood' (Sippel, 2025).

In discussions on appearance, lookism, and incelhood, incels often engage in detailed comparisons between themselves and conventionally attractive 'Chads' (Sousbois, 2025). Incel vocabulary includes specific terms for this appearance-related sense of inferiority, all describing aspects of insecurity, such as *baldcel* or *shortcel*. While some self-identified incels believe that *looksmaxxing*, i.e. modifying one's appearance to better fit with conventional beauty ideals, can help, many believe this hopeless for true incels who are forced to *LDAR*, 'lay down and rot', experiencing profound hopelessness and loss. This negative self-perception and hopelessness can lead to a reduced sense of agency and social disconnection

from people outside the forums, feeding into further isolation and pessimism (Tirkkonen, & Vespermann, 2023). Inside the community, ultimate hopelessness and unattractiveness, namely being a *truecel*, become a source of in-group status in a competition over this 'inverted form of self-aggrandisement' (Scotto di Carlo, 2023, p. 19) or 'misery economy' (Smith, 2026).

Incels base their victimhood claims on the idea that women are advantaged in the 'sexual marketplace' and act as gatekeepers of sexual and romantic experiences, whereas men are not selective and not as interested in their partners' appearance. Despite this, in online discussions, incels themselves often rate women's appearances strictly and state their specific preferences, positing that despite their involuntary celibacy, they would never be interested in women who are not conventionally attractive.

It is undeniable that appearance and looks do affect how people are treated in social situations, including romantic and sexual relationships and dating, and discrimination based on appearance certainly exists (e.g. Barth & Wagner, 2017; Midtgaard, 2023). However, the incel interpretation of lookism posits that because of their appearance, incels are the most disadvantaged and oppressed group in modern society, and that men are more harshly judged based on their appearance, especially in dating (Sousbois, 2025). Conversely, research shows that men value appearance more than women in dating, women experience more appearance-related pressure and not conforming to appearance norms has serious consequences for them (e.g. Mason, 2017; Walter et al., 2020). Still, it is clear that body image pressures affect men and women alike, and higher use of social media may increase body comparisons and poor body satisfaction (Jarman et al., 2024).

In both online discussions and in survey and interview research, incels often discuss mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts or self-harm (e.g. Costello et al., 2025; Glace et al., 2021; Moskalenko et al., 2022; Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2022; A3). In addition to these, experiences of loneliness, bullying, marginalisation, and trauma are often discussed as being naturally connected to inceldom (e.g. Daly & Reed, 2022; Regehr, 2022; A3). Mental health problems, such as depression, are often seen as being caused by inceldom, rather than leading to it (Sparks et al., 2022). Neurodiversity, and especially autism, is also frequently discussed in incel communities, and incels themselves state that autism is common among incels (Sugiura, 2021; Tirkkonen, & Vespermann, 2023; A1). While pathologising incel ideology and views carries risks, as will be discussed further on, it is nevertheless clear that several pressures and anxieties surrounding hegemonic ideas of ideal and respectable masculinity, present in young men's lives more broadly, also feed into the incel phenomenon (see Allan, 2018; Sharkey, 2021; A3). Reconciling these different levels of incel victimhood discourses and experiences is not simple, but I argue that it is necessary to form a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon. This topic will be further discussed in chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis, building on the findings from my empirical research.

These mental health and well-being aspects are a major aspect in incel self-understanding and identity and need to be considered when analysing incel communities, but they also need to be approached critically. Countless people experience mental health problems, loneliness, rejection, and bullying, and do not react with hateful, dehumanising, or violent behaviour. Incels 'specifically use discourses around trauma and victimhood as means to rationalise their destructive and hateful narratives' (Johanssen, 2023, p. 194). Carian, DiBranco, and Kelly

(2023) caution against explaining incel violence or misogyny with mental health problems and loneliness. In their view, such approaches

lack explanatory power and methodological rigor, validate misogynist incels' claims to victimhood, reflect undue sympathy for violent perpetrators, and obscure and legitimize incel violence (p. 533).

While mental health problems and body image pressures do not explain incel misogyny and hostility, the focus on looks and appearance is still a central feature of incel communities and needs to be considered when analysing them. For incels themselves, appearance plays a key role in explaining mental health struggles and marginalisation. The male body, as a focus of attention, can thus become 'a medium for expressing broader anxieties around identity, power, and belonging' (Sousbois, 2025). Appearance and body-image related sense of inferiority are used to legitimise misogyny and justify incel victimhood claims. In the incel worldview, appearance is regarded as a form of capital incels lack, but inside the communities, this lacking itself becomes social capital in the form of recognition as real incels, and therefore as real victims (see Sippel, 2025).

### 2.1.3 Perceived failure as men justifying misogyny

The relationship between incel communities and gender, and especially masculinity and misogyny, are recognised in current research as central features of the phenomenon. Incels' self-understanding is strongly based on failing to reach accepted or ideal forms of masculinity (Ging, 2019; Murphy, 2023; A3), and anti-feminism, violent misogyny, and ideas of male supremacy are a central, recurring themes in incel discussions (Chang, 2020; Lucy, 2024; Menzie, 2022). In this section, I present current research on incel misogyny and masculinity perceptions. Later, in section 2.3, I present literature on men and masculinities more broadly and discuss my approach to these topics in this thesis. These themes will be further discussed in chapter 5, when I analyse incel misogyny and masculinity as central aspects of incel victimhood discourse.

Incel misogyny is constructed and justified in strong connection to their victimhood identification. This victimhood, and therefore the justification for misogyny, is explained through an imaginary of historical change. In their online discussions, incels often refer to the masculinist idea that society is becoming increasingly feminised, disadvantaging men and favouring women (Menzie, 2022). Modernity is seen as corrupting; echoing broader conservative and 'culture wars' rhetoric, cultural decay is presented as ruining society (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Hartman, 2019). Often, incels present the past as an ideal, patriarchal state in which the monogamy norm and women's subordinate economic position guaranteed every man a wife. In these fantasies, analysed in A2, a harmonious, pre-feminist gender order prevailed, society was not as focused on shallow qualities, and women were not able to choose freely or switch intimate partners without severe social consequences (see also Brzuszkiewicz, 2020; O'Malley et al., 2022; Wilson, 2022).

Incel online discussions are filled with violent misogynist rhetoric, and dehumanising women is a part of basic incel vocabulary. For example, women are called 'foids' (female humanoids, i.e. not completely human), 'toilets', 'holes', 'whores', 'sluts', and 'cum dumpsters' (Chang, 2020; Prażmo, 2020). Women are also described as degenerate, vile, or disgusting, and likened to pests, pigs, and dogs (Czerwinsky, 2023). They are described as property,

insentient objects, and tools, and constructed as dirty, disgusting, and mentally ill (Scotto di Carlo, 2023). Celebrating acts of violence against women, such as rape, murder, harassment, and abuse, is standard in incel online discussions (Åkerlund, 2026; Cottee, 2021). Women are seen as shallow and cruel, always looking to switch partners to gain access to the most attractive man possible (Scotto di Carlo, 2023).

Incel misogyny, and manosphere masculinist and anti-feminist ideas more broadly, are justified through appealing to pseudo-scientific explanations about the 'true nature' of men and women and about how societies operate. This tendency of generating and repeating 'untested and speculative evolutionary hypotheses', or 'just-so stories' (Bachaud et al., 2025), works to justify the incel worldview as truthful and objective rather than ideological, and incels as rational observers seeing the world for what it is. As previously mentioned, incels frequently refer to scientific studies, but often distort, misrepresent, or cherry-pick findings to fit their own worldview. Incel Wiki, a community-generated digital repository of information related to incels, is a central platform for these claims. It was established in an effort to push back on negative publicity incels received and is an important platform for disseminating male supremacist ideology online (Baker, 2023). The site lists several scientific and especially evolutionary psychological studies to justify 'scientific blackpill'. This page states to maintain 'a neutral tone' and to 'convey the scientific findings without judgment' while referring to, for example, 'cucks' and 'sluts', blending together violent, humorous, and (pseudo-)scientific styles (see Incel Wiki, 2025a).

Incel misogyny is built on a long history of sexist and misogynist views. Even if the language, platforms, and terminology incels use to mediate their misogynist views are new, incels' presentation of women as animalistic, irrational, and subhuman is a continuation of a misogynistic narrative visible in Western history from antiquity on (e.g. Mercer, 2018), which incels themselves also acknowledge and use to defend their ideas. To justify misogynist arguments, incels quote different historical figures' misogynist views. The Incel Wiki page 'Timeless quotes on women' lists an extensive set of quotes from different religious texts and famous philosophers, scientists, artists, and other well-known figures throughout world history. This demonstrates the solid foundation of misogyny the incel worldview is built on; while in many ways, incel misogyny is aesthetically more extreme than mainstream misogyny (see Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021), the underlying views on women and gender remain similar (e.g. Åkerlund, 2026). Because of this, these broader views feed into incels' misogynist views and help construct the misogynist worldview as a universally recognised 'truth'. Chang (2020) notes the connection between historical misogyny and incel views by pointing out that 'there is hardly an epistemic break between pre-internet misogyny and the misogyny expressed online by these incels; the former paved the way for the latter' (p. 14)

As described in the previous section, the incel worldview organises men into a strict hierarchy, mostly based on appearance, but also including social status more broadly. Incels see themselves at the bottom of this masculine hierarchy, which positions them as victims in relation to both other men and women (Zimmerman, 2024). Women, on the other hand, are not seen as being limited by a similar hierarchy of appearance (Heritage & Koller, 2020).

Incels' experience of failing to reach masculine norms and ideals does not result in questioning these norms, but rather in categorisations and comparisons that reinforce the immutability of them. Incel masculinity has often been studied in relation to *hegemonic masculinity* (Connell

& Messerschmidt, 2005). Several studies on incels build on the theory of hegemonic masculinity, and analyse incels as performing *hybrid* or *geek masculinities*, both affirming and rejecting certain masculine ideals and upholding male supremacy over women (e.g. Andersen, 2023; Ging, 2019). These theories on men and masculinities will be discussed in more detail below in section 2.3.

Despite incels' feeling incapable of reaching masculinity ideals, incel discourse includes a sense of entitlement to both dominant masculine positions and to attention, affection, support, and sympathy from women (see Vink et al., 2024), all of which feeds into incel constructions of victimhood. A sense of failure and humiliation and a will to regain masculine status has been connected to incel violence as well as to both intimate partner violence and political violence more broadly (e.g. O'Donnell, 2021; Rottweiler et al., 2024; Vink et al., 2024). Therefore, masculinity and violence are intertwined in many ways, as discussed in A1. To provide background to my analysis on incel victimhood narratives in the context of violence and to the discussion on incels and extremism in chapter 5, previous research on incel violence will be more closely examined in the next section.

#### 2.1.4 Incel communities' connections to violence

The violent attacks in Isla Vista, US, in 2014 (e.g. Allely & Faccini, 2017; Larkin, 2018), Toronto, Canada, in 2018 (e.g. Baele et al., 2019), and Plymouth, UK, in 2021 (Lockyer et al., 2025; A1) have made incel violence a central question in academic research. Following these acts of mass violence, incels are inextricably linked with extremism, radicalisation, and risk of violence in different discourses on incels, from academic research to public discussion and media (see Bengtsson Meuller, 2024; Sugiura, 2021). Therefore, the previous literature explored in this section is closely connected to these concepts. However, as they merit closer examination to provide background to my analysis, the concepts of extremism and radicalisation are discussed more closely in the next section and reflected on the basis of my own research findings in chapter 5. In this section, I focus on research specifically examining incel violence, views on violence, and risk.

There are differing approaches to the term 'incel' in the context of violence in academic research. In some research, violent attacks have been retroactively named as incel attacks, despite incel online communities not existing at the time of the events, or a lack of connections between the attackers and incel communities (DeCook & Kelly, 2022). This variation often arises from the question of whether self-identification should be privileged in defining perpetrators of violence, or whether the presence of misogyny, loneliness, or resentment are sufficient to define incelhood from the outside (Czerwinsky, 2024). DeCook and Kelly (2022) critique the latter approach, stating that these classifications re-name much broader misogyny erroneously as 'incel traits' and therefore ignore the existence of and connections to broader, systemic misogyny.

As previously noted, violent rhetoric and idolisation of mass violence and violence against women are prevalent in incel online discussions (e.g. Chang, 2020; Ging, 2019; Jaki et al., 2019; O'Donnell & Shor, 2022; A1). Some governments classify incel ideology as extremist (Pearson, 2024; see also DeCook & Kelly, 2022), and incel acts of violence have been investigated as terrorism in Canada and the UK (Sparks, Zidenberg & Olver, 2022). Researchers have different views on how incel violence should be understood and interpreted. While some argue that incels should be predominantly interpreted through mental health and

trauma rather than risk of violence (e.g. Moskalenko et al., 2022), others caution against legitimising incel victimhood claims and note that incels' tendency to highlight their suffering should be regarded as potentially strategic and harmful (e.g. DeCook & Kelly, 2021).

It is clear that not all self-identifying incels are terrorists, and that overall, not all individuals spending time in incel online spaces are physically violent. Still, as Hart and Huber (2023) note, there is not enough research on how seriously incels take the violent, hostile rhetoric that is pervasive in incel online discussions, and whether endorsement of violence expressed in the discussions is genuine. As will be further discussed in chapter 3, incel discussion culture is built on irony and deliberately extreme violent rhetoric. This intentional exaggeration becomes a signal of belonging and a way of drawing frontiers between incels and outsiders, which makes judging the intent of violent posts difficult, if not impossible (e.g. Jaki et al., 2019; A1). Nevertheless, the undeniable pervasiveness of exceedingly violent rhetoric in incel discussions has, in itself, been described as discursive violence (Åkerlund, 2026).

Gender and masculinity have been noted as central aspects in understanding incel violence (see also A1). Lindsay (2021) analyses incel violence as an attempt to reclaim threatened masculinity and to defend male dominance. Vink et al. (2024) show that for incel mass perpetrators, violence acts as a form of justified punishment to women for not remaining subordinate to men. While Baele et al. (2024) find that violent and misogynistic rhetoric has increased in incel online discussions over time, they also note that violent views are not uniformly held across incel communities (see also A1). Other research has also found that in surveys, most incel respondents report rejecting or condemning violence (e.g. Costello & Buss, 2023; Moskalenko et al., 2022). At an individual level, narratives and emphases connected to mass violence vary considerably between incels (Ellenberg et al., 2024; A1).

It is important to note that mass violence is not the only form of violence that should be considered when considering incel communities. While less explored in research, incel online discussions have been shown to normalise and laud violence against women in multiple forms, and to support misogynistic harassment campaigns (e.g. Chan, 2022; Ging, 2019; Thorburn et al., 2023; Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021).

## 2.2 Contingent definitions of extremism and radicalisation

While mass and political violence is a central theme in academic research on incels, there is currently no clear consensus in literature on whether it is fruitful to consider incel ideology to be a form of violent extremism or not (Baele et al., 2023; Hart & Huber, 2023). This stems partly from the unclear, ambiguous, and differing definitions of extremism and radicalisation, in the first place. In this section, I present previous literature on these phenomena and explain how they have been used as concepts both in the case of incel communities and more broadly. Later, in chapter 5, I reflect on the application of these concepts on incel online communities in this thesis.

In discussing the definition of incel perpetrators of mass violence as lone actor terrorists, and their attacks as political violence, Wood et al. (2024) note that the definition depends on how 'political' is understood. Defining violence as political is not objective (Malkki, 2025). Violence is socially constructed as extremism or terrorism, these terms do not have an objective essence - while violence is a physical fact, what it is labelled as is not (Jackson et al., 2011).

In the media, similar attacks can be framed as political violence or as an isolated event caused by mental health problems. For example, attacks perpetrated by young, white men are presented as mental health related and non-political more often than attacks connected to racialised perpetrators. The media also presents incel violence as non-political and stemming from personal reasons more often than in reporting on other ideologically motivated mass violence (Bendfeldt, 2024). In addition to media bias, this probably results from the incel tendency to focus on individual victimhood and suffering rather than grand political demands, a tendency visible in both attacker manifestos and in how incel communities discuss violence (Blommaert, 2018; A1).

To understand these different approaches and views, it is necessary to consider how extremism and radicalisation have been defined in previous research overall. Despite being frequently discussed in public and political discourse and researched in academia, extremism and radicalisation as concepts are, in fact, rarely defined (see Pasiëka, 2021). The way they are interpreted depends on the social, political, and historical setting they are discussed in (Ford & Jackson, 2024). There are several foci in how terms are defined in various contexts; for example, foreign policy, security officials, civil society, and educational institutions all have different interests when it comes to understanding extremism (see Bouhana, 2019; Malkki, 2025; Vallinkoski, 2024). Research on these phenomena spans multiple disciplines, including political science, psychology, security studies, sociology, and criminology. The phenomena researched in the broader framework of extremism and radicalisation vary significantly, ranging from terrorist organisations to militant groups, lone actor terrorists and online radicalisation, and consequently the dynamics present also differ considerably.

There is a range of views on whether extremism refers to ideology, behaviour, methods, or some combination, whether violence is required for something to be defined as extremism, and whether radicalisation, by definition, needs to result in violent extremism. Empirically researching these complex and relatively rare, difficult to reach phenomena is often challenging. Data are rarely comprehensive, samples are often small or biased, and factors influencing an individual's radicalisation into extremism are numerous and complex, all of which further add to this conceptual difficulty (see Horgan, 2008; Marwick et al., 2022). Despite these issues, these terms can have descriptive and even explanatory value in analysing incel online communities, if applied critically (see Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Palonen, 2025). As Hart and Huber (2023) note,

we recognize that there are difficulties with applying terms such as radicalization and extremism to the Incel community, but we argue that there is a certain utility in using these terms to help us understand how people become enmeshed in Incel ideas even though very few will ever commit acts of violence (p. 6).

Because of this complexity, next I will present an overview of the diverse ways extremism and radicalisation as concepts have been defined and used in previous literature. I will discuss the implications of these concepts in the case of incel communities later, in chapter 5. While I discuss the concept of extremism more in my analysis, I consider extremism and radicalisation as so interrelated (see Pilkington, 2024) that examining both is necessary to provide a sufficient background to my analysis.

### *2.2.1 Radicalisation as a relational concept*

No universally agreed-on definition for radicalisation exists; different actors define the term differently, often resulting in confusion and inaccuracy (Sedgwick, 2010). What is defined as radicalisation and therefore as dangerous, is not objective or clear-cut but reflects broader values and ideals. Importantly, Pilkington (2024) notes that radicalisation, as relational and contingent, must be understood as a process situated in broader societal structures and dynamics; 'as the outcome of interactions between "us and them", not something in "them"' (p. 271).

Pearson (2024) notes that a dominant view of radicalisation seems to be a 'process of cognitive change towards a violent and problematic identity' (p. 165). However, what is seen as problematic is contingent. As Githens-Mazer (2012) points out, action defined as radical or individuals defined as radicalised somehow challenge the status quo. While some forms of radical action and challenging the status quo are accepted in society, others are not. Holding views deemed as radical cannot in itself be defined as dangerous or problematic; radical views and action are a key part of social and political activism and freedom that are incremental in democratic societies (see Vallinkoski, 2024).

This is an arena of constant renegotiation, as it speaks directly to what is seen as either positive or problematic political and social action. It is also relevant in relation to incel communities, in which violent rhetoric is normalised, but mass physical violence motivated by incel ideology is committed by very few community members (Gerrand et al., 2025). Radicalisation into committing violent acts is clearly a problematic phenomenon in a democratic society, but research suggests that for most people, developments understood as radicalisation do not result in violence (Gentry & Sjoberg, 2022; Pilkington, 2024; 2025). According to Kundnani (2015, p. 94) research on radicalisation 'fails to offer a convincing demonstration of a causal relationship between holding an ideology and choosing to use violence'.

In some definitions, violence itself is not a necessary endpoint of radicalisation, but radicalisation includes some degree of accepting violence as a legitimate way of attempting political change. According to Bermingham et al. (2009), radicalisation is a process in which individuals come to see violence as a legitimate method in solving social and political conflicts. To distinguish between violent and non-violent radicalisation, McCauley and Moskaleiko (2010, p. 240) differentiate between 'activism' and 'radicalism', defining activism as 'readiness to engage in legal and non-violent political action' and radicalism as 'readiness to engage in illegal and violent political action'. But here, again, defining illegal action as always problematic leads to difficulties, as laws are changed for political ends even in democratic systems; defining opposing the government in illegal ways as radicalisation or radicalism cements a power imbalance in favour of the political elites making these definitions.

Considering definitions in such an in-depth way may seem unnecessary; why not focus on actual radicalisation and not its definitions? But, as Schmid (2013, p. 7) notes, a careful consideration of radicalisation as a concept is necessary

if we want to keep the concept analytically useful and not just a political container term used by political players as pejorative labels to place some distance between the

middle ground they claim to stand on and the presumed far out position of selected political enemies.

As my approach to these terms and to incel communities as a phenomenon is discursive (see chapter 3), my aim is not to decide on one correct definition, but to further explore and problematise the usefulness of these concepts in the context of my research. I continue to reflect on them below in chapter 5. Before that, keeping with definitions, I continue onto current research and conceptual work on extremism.

### *2.2.2 Extremism as contingent and structural*

Extremism, as a word, refers to something extreme and therefore out of the ordinary. This constructs a dichotomy: defining something as extreme works to define what is normal, either explicitly or implicitly, and usually that is the status quo (Ford & Jackson, 2024). There is often a tendency to dismiss or disregard this connection in public discourse and even in academic research, concealing, as Pasiëka (2021) puts it, 'the relationship between extremism and the magical "rest" of society' (p. 40). However, as will be further discussed later on, most extremist ideologies are firmly rooted in the mainstream (e.g. Pearson et al., 2020).

Despite both the common lack of definitions of and the diversity of views on extremism (see Hassan et al. 2023), there are some common elements that are often mentioned in academic research on extremism. Essentially, some conflict between groups of people is usually seen as being necessary. Along these lines, J.M. Berger (2018) famously defines extremism as the belief that hostile action against an out-group is necessary for an in-group's survival or success. This action can be either physically violent or not, thus including what researchers sometimes differentiate as violent and non-violent extremism (Orofino & Allchorn, 2023), or as attitudinal and behavioural extremism (Pilkington, 2025). Because of the definitional contingency, extremism needs to be understood and defined in relation to its historical and political context (Jackson, 2019).

It is important to note that, similar to radicalisation as a term, defining or labelling something as extremism is a way of exerting power, and can be utilised to profile and securitise certain groups and frame them as dangerous (Awan & Lewis, 2024; Pearson, 2024; Pilkington, 2024). Extremism research is also an arena connected to political and policy action and therefore has real consequences in people's lives (Sjoberg, 2024). Conducting ethical research in a field and topic that is this closely related policy making means that these definitions should be very critically reflected on (Ford & Jackson, 2024; Malkki & van der Vet, 2024), as will be further discussed in chapter 3 of this thesis.

Recently, misogynistic extremism as a concept has received increasing interest in academia, policy, and media (O'Hanlon et al., 2023). There is a growing body of research demonstrating that masculinity, misogyny, and extremism are strongly connected (e.g. McCulloch et al., 2019; Rottweiler et al., 2024), and that there is a strong connection between misogynist attitudes and support for political violence (e.g. Hart, Huber & Littler, 2023). Misogyny, male supremacy, and idealisation of patriarchal control connect different extremist movements, from jihadists to far-right actors (Roose & Cook, 2025). Still, the role gender plays in radicalisation and extremism has often not been sufficiently recognised and incorporated into research and policy (Agius et al., 2023; Pearson, 2019; 2024). Pearson (2024) argues that

this is due to a lack of integrated theoretical approach; as a theoretical lens, gender has been neglected by extremism and radicalisation research (see also McCulloch et al. 2019). In the case of incels, gender is a main theme in the communities' self-understanding and therefore noted in academic research more comprehensively than in research on other phenomena related to extremism. Still, the strong connections between broader, systemic misogyny and incel communities are often ignored (DeCook & Kelly, 2021).

Gender as a social construct does not just affect radicalisation trajectories and vulnerabilities but is fundamental in both extremist and mainstream meaning making and understanding the world. Therefore, gender should not just be added to existing frameworks, but should be truly incorporated into how radicalisation and extremism are studied (see Gentry & Sjoberg, 2022; Pearson, 2024). To centre the role of masculinity and gender in understanding extremism and radicalisation, Pearson (2023) suggests examining radicalisation as a project of masculinity (but not only of men); as produced through masculinities and around gender binaries, and in support of patriarchal domination. In chapter 5, I analyse incel constructions of masculinity and the antagonistic narratives of women as an enemy as core features of incel discourse.

### *2.2.3 Incels in the context of extremism and radicalisation*

In this section, building on the previously presented definitions and approaches to extremism and radicalisation, I examine them more closely in the context of incel online communities. The difficulties of applying the concepts of extremism and radicalisation to incel communities represent broader challenges in describing what, in real life, is fluid, ambiguous, and constantly in process (Pearson, 2023; Pilkington, 2025), and perhaps even more so in loose online communities.

Research on radicalisation often focuses on formal organisations or groups intentionally recruiting new members to their ranks through extremist propaganda (Hart, Huber & Littler, 2023). While online and offline radicalisation are often intertwined in complex ways (Herath & Whittaker, 2023), much of extremism and radicalisation research has focused on extremist organisations or communities operating at least partly offline. In the case of incels, the communities being solely an online phenomenon complicates defining them. Different academic models and theorisations of (violent) extremism, often featuring individuals radicalised to terrorism, do not seem to fully capture the heterogeneity and fluidity present in (incel) online communities, because membership and participation are based on self-identification, and identity and worldview can change day to day (see Leidig, 2021; A3).

Dynamics of online discussions complicate naming either individuals or communities as 'extremist'. Defining incel ideology as extremist, defining incel communities as extremist, or defining individual incels as extremists all hold quite different meanings. Research suggests that only a small proportion of incels actively discuss and produce content on online forums (Jaki et al., 2019). This mirrors a broader phenomenon of online activity both in extremist online communities and in online behaviour, in general: much of content is produced by active 'super-posters', and a large proportion of users remains more passive (Baele et al., 2022; 2023; Scrivens et al., 2022). Online content and participation also allow participants to pick and choose elements of ideologies and worldview that appeal to them, and to reject or ignore others (e.g. Gartenstein-Ross et al., 2025). As shown in A3, individual interpretations of an online ideology and narrative can differ significantly without it ever becoming evident on the

level of online material, as many individuals do not actively participate in online discussions and therefore never leave traceable footprints of their ideology and identity negotiations.

Hart, Huber and Littler (2023) suggest that while not centralised or organised, viewing incels as loosely affiliated online communities can still have a radicalising effect on the people participating in them. Following Brzuszkiewicz (2020), they approach incel communities as a *radical milieu* (see also Pilkington, 2024; 2025; Pearson et al., 2020) that legitimises and feeds into grievances, even if it does not necessarily lead to violence in case of most participants. As Pilkington (2025) words it, radical milieus

‘provide the immediate social environments from within which those engaged in violent activity can gain affirmation for their actions; more routinely, they constitute the space in which “grievance” narratives and “rejected” or “stigmatized” knowledge are shared and come to form the basis of internal cultures’ (p. 1101).

This approach avoids treating all incels as extremists and allows for the considerable variety of opinions and views in incel communities but acknowledges the harmful and violent nature of incel online discussions and the radicalising effect they can have on individuals (see Pilkington, 2024).

### 2.3 Masculinity as expectation, performance, and power

Masculinity is both explicitly and implicitly at the core of incel identity. Because of this, as noted above, gender studies and especially research on men and masculinities are often drawn on in incel research. The theory of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) is especially influential in this area of research. The concept refers to a culturally valued form of masculinity within a given historical and social context. Hegemonic masculinity is a social construct; there is nothing essential enabling its constitution, even if a more foundationalist view is predominant in popular consciousness (see Howson & Hearn, 2019). This foundationalist and essentialising view of men’s gendered privilege and authority is also prevalent in manosphere narratives more broadly and underpins incel ideology more specifically. In this thesis, I unpack and analyse the discursive meaning making connected to masculinity in incel communities, and examine the ways incels uphold these gendered privileges in the form of male supremacism, on one hand, and distance from and criticise hegemonic masculinity as a set of norms and demands, on the other (see Ging, 2019).

The theory of hegemonic masculinity takes a structural view on masculinity, defining it as securing the dominant position of men and the subordination of women, as well as the marginalisation of non-hegemonic masculinities. Drawing on Gramsci (1971), Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) understand hegemony as a cultural practice of normalising and idealising certain ways of performing masculinity, enforced primarily through consensus rather than coercion (see also Howson, 2017). As characteristics and values connected to ideal masculinity change through time and place, it should not be understood as a list of features or an identity (Messerschmidt, 2019). Instead, it acts as a societal and cultural ideal that individual men are evaluated in relation to and negotiate their relationship to. It being a normative ideal, men cannot embody hegemonic masculinity completely but may often feel pressured to strive for the ideal. Performances of masculinity are regulated and valued through peer sanctions and symbolic recognition. At the same time, as it operates as a power structure

built on patriarchal power relations, it also often benefits men even if they do not embody or enact the ideal.

Masculinity does not only concern men, and it is not essentially tied to maleness (Halberstam, 1998; Sedgwick 1995). Practices and features understood as masculine relate to all genders, but they are discursively connected to men in the above-mentioned foundationalist discourse on gender (see Howson & Hearn, 2019). Masculinity is defined and produced in relation to and as a contrast to femininity, which is devalued and policed in both men and women (Hoskin, 2019). Women and femininity are subordinated in relation to men, but women are also policed for being 'too masculine' (Padda et al., 2026). While patriarchal systems privilege men on a broader level, not all men experience privilege in the same ways. Intersectional factors like race, sexuality, ability, and class affect the opportunities and status men can achieve and the way they are viewed in relation to masculinity (Coston, & Kimmel, 2012).

In this thesis, I approach masculinity through a discursive lens (see Howson, 2017; Howson & Hearn, 2019; Johansson & Ottemo, 2015) and examine how masculinity is negotiated, performed, and mediated through technology (see Raun & Nebeling Petersen, 2026). Hegemony is continuously contested, rearticulated, and renewed in discourses on masculinity and gender, and masculinity ideals can be internally incoherent and contradictory. Still, and while individuals negotiate their relationships to masculinity in different ways, hegemonic constructions of masculinity act as norms and expectations that affect men's lives. These ideals are, in many ways, aspirational (Howson, 2017), or, in other terms, fantasmatic and always out of reach (see Butler, 2011; Glynos, 2021). In a similar vein, building on Berlant's (2011, p. 24) concept of *cruel optimism* as 'maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object', Allan (2018) has analysed masculinity as a form of cruel optimism. In his analysis, he emphasises (p. 186) that being masculine or doing masculinity is always set up to fail: 'boys and men always fail at masculinity. One can never be masculine enough.' Still, this hegemonic discourse creates gendered expectations that shape the way men understand themselves as either successful or failed, as they 'were raised to believe themselves entitled to feel that power, but do not feel it' (Kimmel, 1997). Incels' idealised depictions of 'Chads' or 'Alpha males' as unreachable ideals include a recognition of this impossibility, but instead of questioning or challenging these ideals, incels remain attached to them.

This contingent meaning making of hegemonic masculinity produces exclusions that work to construct masculinity through antagonism and drawing frontiers; through what it is not (Johansson & Ottemo, 2015). The discursive angle to masculinity I take in my analysis means that rather than treating masculinity as an essential, objective, or structural category, I approach it as a discursive construction that men negotiate their relationship to. If hegemonic forms of masculinity were essential to men in a specific, foundational way, and if masculinity's limits were complete and non-arguable, this pure particularity would mean that there would be no need for politics in relation to it. Clearly, however, this is not the case: 'The reality is that the gender order contains gender politics, and where there is politics there is antagonism [--]' (Howson, 2017, p. 124). While masculinity ideals and pressures are also negotiated individually, in the case of incels, gender becomes constructed as a political and collective issue (Copeland, 2024). For incels, hegemonic masculinity being both aspirational and impossible, and therefore oppressive, is articulated explicitly, and acts as a main component of their victimhood claims.

## 2.4 Victimhood claims as a discursive struggle

As demonstrated in all the articles included in this thesis, and further analysed in chapter 5, victimhood is central to how incels discuss and construct inceldom (e.g. Halpin, 2022; Sugiura, 2021). The overall incel narrative paints incels as the most oppressed group of men in a gynocentric society that has a heavy focus on appearance. Key elements in incel constructions of victimhood are the ideas of lookism, marginalisation, female hypergamy, and cultural decay. Through these, the incel is constructed as an isolated, suffering figure prevented from realising basic human needs for intimacy and sex, and therefore experiencing mental health problems, marginalisation, and loneliness (see Cacioppo & Patrick, 2009). As this victimhood organises incel discourse on a fundamental level, it is related to all other aspects of incel self-understanding, in ways shown above based on previous research, and as will be further discussed in chapter 5 of this thesis.

The incel worldview merges together personal distress and a group victimhood narrative, feeding into antagonism and dehumanisation of those seen as enemies (Vadalà et al., 2025). Often on both personal and systemic levels, incels view themselves as being limited unfairly by perceived barriers to realising ideal or normal masculinity (O'Malley & Helm, 2023; A2; A3). The affective incel victimhood narrative constructs non-incels, but especially women, as responsible for incels' suffering, and therefore as deserving of violent revenge (Zimmerman, 2024; A1). By inverting the roles of victim and perpetrator, incels construct themselves as innocent but entitled to violence, and women as oppressors and therefore deserving of any violence they face (see García Mingo & Díaz Fernández, 2023).

As has been shown in the context of various extremist or supremacist groups and ideologies, positioning the self as a victim is often central to making political demands (see Berbrier, 2000; de Boise, 2019; Marwick & Caplan, 2018), and can be an effective political strategy. Research on extremism shows that victimhood, oppression, and injustice do not need to be objectively true; a *feeling* of being unfairly treated is enough to fuel radicalisation (e.g. Charkawi et al., 2021; Ebbrecht, 2023).

A focus on victimhood is not restricted only to incels or extremists; it is a powerful claim and a site of discursive struggle more broadly (Horwitz, 2018). This is especially visible in today's political discourse: neoliberal capitalism's meritocratic individualism causes uncertainty and distrust, and the logics of social media prioritise affect and recognition, all feeding into victimhood as an ultimate claim (Capelos et al., 2024; Chouliaraki, 2021). Rather than the focus being on the systemic level, on structures and mechanisms that produce suffering, it is on the individual. Recognition is demanded and achieved through communicating suffering, and attention is directed at the affective figure of the victim – the 'injured self'. But while victimhood is an increasingly popular claim to recognition, not every victimhood claim is heard or accepted similarly: the market of victimhood is an unequal one.

Lilie Chouliaraki (2021) analyses victimhood as a moral signifier that different actors attempt to claim. Claims to suffering do not need to be, and cannot be, an objective truth – rather, they are often used to obfuscate structural conditions and to present those in power as victims. Therefore, she suggests acknowledging the 'radical contingency of the victim' as a starting point to any analysis, and proposes a

distinction between ‘tactical’ and ‘systemic’ vulnerability as a heuristic frame that enables us to ask questions about who claims to be a victim, from which position and to which effects; and, in so doing, helps us to scrutinize the social contexts in which affective claims to victimhood are made and the power relations such claims reproduce or challenge (p. 10).

Similarly, Salmela and Capelos (2026) distinguish between *paradigmatic* and *ressentimentful* victimhood. While paradigmatic victimhood is often based on historical or structural oppression or disadvantage, in ressentimentful victimhood, ‘individuals or groups claim victimhood despite often retaining privileged positions’ (p. 7). Using the concept of *ressentiment* in their analysis of manosphere and incel victimhood, Capelos et al. (2024) note that the shared victimhood and the common enemy both work to morally elevate incels’ suffering. They also argue that in addition to moral superiority (see also Salmela & Capelos, 2026), incels also construct a sense of epistemic superiority: while the blackpill dictates that real incels have no hope of ever ‘ascending’ from incelhood, understanding and acknowledging this hopelessness positions them above others (see also Tirkkonen & Vespermann, 2023; Wilén, 2025; Zimmerman, 2024).

Halpin (2022) analyses incels’ claims of victimhood as weaponised subordination, and shows how incels ‘blend subordination and subjugation, leveraging their perceived status as discredited men to justify their misogyny’ (p. 814). In this way, victimhood becomes a moral justification for hatred, and incels’ self-articulated trauma or collective wound is ‘mobilised or transformed in a destructive way’ (Johanssen, 2023, p. 193). Similarly to Salmela and Capelos above, Horwitz (2018) also builds on Nietzsche’s concept of *ressentiment* and notes how

The resentful are no longer actors per se; rather, they are defined passively by their victimhood. They become active only in their hatred of their purported oppressors. Their hatred is a mark of their moral goodness. (p. 555)

This question of power relations that the victimhood claim either reinforces or challenges is central in the case of incels and the manosphere. Currently, gender is one of the main arenas of the struggle over victimhood status (e.g. Chouliaraki, 2021). Incels, the manosphere, and masculinist actors more broadly claim that men are being victimised and oppressed by feminism and modernity (James, 2024) - a narrative that is not either new or in any way limited to fringe online communities (de Boise, 2019). Therefore, ‘since men are in crisis and suffering because of women in general and feminists in particular, the solution to their problems involves curbing the influence of feminism and revalorizing masculinity’ (Blais & Dupuis-Deri, 2012, p. 22).

Masculinist claims of male victimhood in modern, ‘feminised’ societies (Nicholas et al., 2024) present patriarchy as an ideal, non-political state in which a traditional gender order ensured life was natural, harmonious, and ‘normal’. This naturalisation of patriarchy and claims of victimhood both work to depoliticise these gendered demands of returning to an imaginary past before feminism (A2); victimhood becomes an ‘anti-politics machine’ (Jeffery & Candea, 2006) that moves demands beyond politics and demands recognition and validation of suffering (Chouliaraki, 2021; A1). While not all manosphere communities and actors embrace victimhood, and some outright reject it, a focus on perceived oppression and difficulty faced by men in modern societies is nonetheless shared by the broader manosphere (James, 2024).

Populist right-wing politicians, conservative movements, and manosphere communities and influencers claiming the position of oppressed victims, while at the same time advocating for removing rights from women, strategically flip gendered power structures (Banet-Weiser & Kay, 2025). In this way, neoliberal patriarchy reroutes victimhood to construct men as victims of oppression and conceals or individualises actual systemic inequalities women face (Banet-Weiser, 2019; Chouliaraki, 2021). As masculinist and anti-feminist sentiment is gaining momentum, and the abovementioned logics of political discourse prioritise victimhood and affect, manosphere actors articulate their position in a mirror image of feminist demands (Banet-Weiser, 2021; Rothermel, 2020). Banet-Weiser and Kay (2025) note that 'by mimicking and appropriating the language of popular feminism, popular misogyny claims it is white men and boys who are uniquely injured' (p. 3). However, instead of an emancipatory agenda, anti-feminist and masculinist victimhood claims construct a 'zero-sum game of victimization' in order to claim real, ultimate victimhood and to 'de-legitimize all other experiences' (Rothermel, 2020, p. 738; see also Salmela & Capelos, 2026).

The deeper roots of these discursive struggles over gendered victimhood can be seen as a question of recognition and connected to the difference between redistribution and recognition (see Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Incels often perceive their situation as stemming from unfair distribution of attention and sex from women - a resource they commodify as they liken their situation to claims of economic inequality. However, as will be further discussed in chapter 5 of this thesis, lack of sex becomes symbolic of a much broader experience of being insufficient and humiliated as a man (A1; A2; A3), a 'symbolic wound' that constructs incelhood as a collective identity (Johanssen, 2023) and a reactionary, anti-egalitarian subaltern counterpublic of sorts (see Fraser, 1992). This totality of failure, described by incels in both online discussions and in interviews (A1; A2; A3), is more concerned with recognition and with negotiating masculine ideals and perceived shortcomings of the self (see Allan, 2018). By articulating their struggles as collective through broader antagonism, incel communities construct individual grievances as political; 'Many times, incel trauma is merely used to mimic what it actually entails. It becomes a collective idea (symbolic wound) around which incels form.' (Johanssen, 2023, p. 197).

### 3. Research design

In this chapter, I present my overall research design. First, I outline the broader research problem this thesis aims to contribute to and explain how I approach it more specifically. After this, I present my overall discursive approach, and the different strains of discourse analysis I have employed in the research articles included in this thesis and discuss their epistemological and ontological bases. Then, I reflect on the research ethics angle of studying misogynist online communities and explain the choices I have made in the process. Finally, I present the types of data I have used in my research, and describe the limitations and implications of using these data have.

#### 3.1 Constructions of incelism as a research problem

The main research problems motivating this thesis relate to the difficulties in conceptualising incels in academic research, especially in relation to extremism; how can incels' own construction of incelism, complex and contradictory as demonstrated in my research articles, be acknowledged yet critically unpacked and situated in academic research? How do incels fit the concept of extremism, and is the framework of extremism and radicalisation fitting when analysing incels?

To respond to these research problems, it is vital to understand how incels themselves construct their identity, community, and place in society more broadly. This happens through examining incels' own meaning making inside incel communities and in connection to other discourses. To unpack this, I have articulated three research questions:

- 1. How are the meanings of 'incel' constructed in incel discourse, and what are they connected to and defined against?*
- 2. What political implications does incelism have for incels?*
- 3. How can incel self-understanding inform academic research on incels without legitimising incel ideology?*

In making these questions the focus of this thesis, I draw from the findings of the three research articles included in this dissertation to answer these research questions. Rather than corresponding to specific articles, these questions address the broader themes of incels' self-understanding present in my research. In chapter 5, I explore these questions in the context of incel victimhood, discussing them in relation to the themes of gender and violence. Then, I reflect on these questions in the context of the broader research problems, in light of our current definitions and understanding of extremism.

#### 3.2 Discourse analytical concepts as tools for unpacking incel discourse

My approach to studying incel communities is discursive (see De Cleen et al., 2021). This means that I am interested in incel communities' meaning making; how incels construct and negotiate what incelism means, who is an incel, and what kind of values, views, and ideological elements are included in being an incel. I approach the phenomenon as discursively constructed and constantly renegotiated; a community that offers subjects a discourse to identify with, and this discourse thus producing the incel subject (De Cleen et al., 2021; Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000). I examine the dynamics of how the incel community

produces and constitutes itself, and what contradictions, tensions, antagonisms and pluralities this meaning making involves (see Fraser, 1992; Laclau, 2005).

Different approaches and schools of discourse studies share an interest in language and discursive meaning making, but differ in focus, heuristic tools, and use a variety of methodological guidelines (Alekseev, 2025; De Cleen et al., 2021). In the articles included in this thesis, I have employed two distinct discourse analytical approaches: Discourse Theory (DT), developed by Ernesto Laclau, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), developed by Norman Fairclough. This section focuses on a broader exploration of these discourse analytical approaches. The specific ways I have used discourse analytical concepts and tools are explained briefly in chapter 4 (Summary of original publications), and in a more detailed way in the research articles themselves.

The precise definition of what a discourse is varies between schools and traditions of discourse analysis (Forchtner & Wodak, 2017). In Laclau's DT, discourse is defined as a 'structure of meaning' (De Cleen et al., 2021), or as

'an articulatory practice that constitutes social relations and formations, and thus constructs their meaning. Discourse is articulatory in that it links together contingent elements – linguistic and non-linguistic, natural and social – into relational systems, in which the identity of the elements is modified as a result of the articulatory practice' (Howarth, 2014, p. 5).

Discursive struggle follows from attempts to fix meanings and present certain ways of seeing the world as 'true' (Laclau, 2005). This contingency and incompleteness mean that discourse is a never-ending struggle over meaning.

I examine incel communities through the lens of discourse and view the incel subject as created in discourse (A3). Incel communities produce the incel subjectivity by naming it and explaining what inceldom is and why it exists. They create a sense of 'us' and 'them' by contrasting their victimhood with a shared enemy (see Laclau 2005; Palonen 2025). To understand this process and to contextualise incel discourse, it is necessary to consider specific aspects of incel online discussions and online discussion culture in general.

As is typical in different online communities, incel vocabulary, imagery, and discussion culture developed into a specific form that works to separate insiders and outsiders (Jaki et al., 2019). Incelness is performed and signified through language, by using specific terminology and sayings, and by repeating arguments and narratives that fit the misogynist, nihilist blackpill ideology (see Murphy, 2023). Incel discussions are often highly violent and deliberately aim to shock outsiders (see A1). Incels are hostile towards other men, society at large, and themselves, but the language used to discuss women is especially dehumanising (Chang, 2020). With such intentionally shocking language, incels manage to gather outside attention and repeatedly become the subject of public outrage.

Incel online rhetoric is performative in nature (see Palonen, 2019; 2025). As with other online discourse, most violent fantasies or threats should not be read as tangible plans for action. However, this does not mean that this violent rhetoric is without consequences or that there is no cause for concern. While the intentionally exaggerated nature of incel online discussions

needs to be acknowledged, the violent and dehumanising worldview propagated in them should still be taken seriously. Humour and satire allow for presenting controversial opinions simultaneously as both serious and non-serious content, depending on the audience interpreting it, and can be used as a strategic choice in normalising extreme rhetoric (Chang, 2020). Because of this complexity and contradictions, discourse analysis is a useful approach in unpacking these different levels of incel discussion culture.

In discourse analysis, theory and method are intertwined. Levels of specific methodology and more abstract theorisation vary between the various approaches: while CDA includes more specific steps and emphasises close textual and intertextual analysis of language to reveal power and ideology, DT is more ontologically oriented. There have been efforts to formulate DT as a clearer methodological framework (e.g. Glynos et al., 2021; Howarth, 2005; Marttila, 2015; Palonen & Sundell, 2019), but it is not a method in the narrow sense. It is more concerned with questions of ontology than the ontic level (Kølvraa, 2017). Therefore, I have used it in the studies included in this thesis as a guiding framework and its central concepts and ideas as heuristic tools, to guide interpretation rather than provide clear methodological steps (see Alekseev & Palonen, 2025).

In A1, online discussion data are analysed using CDA, more specifically Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995). This strand of discourse analysis tends to focus on how linguistic choices reproduce or challenge power relations, often analysing rhetorical patterns in media and political texts (Kølvraa, 2017). The three-dimensional model examines data on three levels, from more specific to broader, societal level: textual, discursive practice, and socio-cultural practice. This approach is explained in more detail in A1. In A2 and A3, DT is employed to analyse online discussion data and interview data. While the specific ways I have used the tools connected to DT are explained in the respective articles, I also present the central concepts in the next subsection, as I also employ them in this thesis to analyse the overarching findings from the research articles.

DT and CDA have been employed and interpreted in varying ways (Alekseev, 2025; Krzyżanowski & Forchtner, 2016), and CDA has previously been applied in connection with both structuralist and post-structuralist ontological and epistemological approaches (Anderson & Holloway, 2018). Despite some ontological and epistemological differences, the tools for analysing discourses are not in contradiction, and on the level of actual analysis the lines between the different approaches are not clear-cut (Alekseev & Palonen, 2025). Approaching each tradition's concepts as heuristics – operational tools that illuminate different dimensions of the same empirical phenomena – makes these approaches complementary rather than contradictory (see Alekseev, 2025). Overall, the variety of data, methodology, and theoretical tools used in this research make it possible to gain a more holistic and diverse view into the incel phenomenon as a whole.

### 3.2.3 Framework and tools used in this thesis

In this thesis, I employ discourse theoretical concepts to analyse incel discourse. I use the central DT concepts I also used in A3: *nodal point* and *empty signifier*, and similarly, I use these concepts as heuristic devices (Palonen, 2025). In addition to nodal points, building on my analysis in A3, I use the concepts of *empty signifier* and *floating signifier* as tools to analyse the way 'incel' as a signifier is understood, defined, and struggled over. Incels themselves

constantly negotiate the meaning of incelism and disagree on what its political implications are and should be (O'Donnell & Shor, 2022; A1; A2; A3), and these analytical tools are useful in focusing on this contingency. Rather than attempting to name aspects of incel discourse using these concepts, my aim is to unpack the logics and dynamics present in the discourse to contribute to understanding of incel meaning making more generally. Here, I use logics in the everyday sense of the term in analysing meaning making (Glynos & Howarth, 2007).

In my analysis, I view incel discourse as performative, and incel rhetoric as an active practice that constitutes and produces the incel identity. Incel discourse creates incels as subjects, brings antagonisms and differences into being, and generates meaning that structures the incel worldview. Employing a rhetoric-performative approach, I examine how incel discourse works to construct frontiers, enemies, and 'us', through repetition and naturalisation (Palonen, 2019; 2025).

In DT, discourse is seen as being structured by nodal points. These key signifiers affect the way other signifiers in each discourse are understood; they are 'privileged discursive points' that 'partially fix meaning' (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, pp. 112–113; see also Kølvrå, 2017). In a specific discourse, nodal points collect other ideas and concepts and affect the way they are understood, defining them against an opposite (Kølvrå, 2017; Palonen 2020). In A3, I analysed 'incel' as a nodal point restructuring and coming to define participants' life narratives. Experiences of bullying, marginalisation, and rejection came to be defined through the prism of incelism. Similarly, in extremism discourse, 'safety', 'democracy' and 'violence' become understood in the same chain of equivalence and connected to the nodal point of 'extremism' (see Onursal & Kirkpatrick, 2021).

An empty signifier refers to a term or concept that can be used and interpreted in different ways by different actors. It can manifest these different meanings to generate a temporary discursive unity, bringing together a broad set of different people, groups, and demands and presenting them as uniform, thus constructing chains of equivalence (Laclau, 2000; Palonen & Sundell, 2019). Because the empty signifier is vague and interpreted differently depending on the actor and audience, it can manage to unite groups with different or even contradictory demands (Palonen, 2020b).

A floating signifier, on the other hand, means a term or concept that is contested in discursive struggle (Kølvrå, 2017; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). The meaning of the signifier is defined differently and struggled over in different discourses. As the competing definitions of the signifier vary, different actors aim to hegemonise their own interpretation of the issue. For example, 'safety' as a floating signifier can be claimed to defend civil and human rights and equality, to justify broadening security officials' intelligence operations, or even to excuse unlawful arrest and detention of people deemed as dangerous to the state (see Onursal & Kirkpatrick, 2021).

Central to these concepts, and to political discourse in general, is producing an 'us'. This shared 'us' as an identifiable object is constituted through differentiating it from 'them', and needs to be constantly reproduced (Laclau, 2005; Palonen & Sunnercrantz, 2021). The other, or 'them', is 'something that the totality expels from itself in order to constitute itself' (Laclau, 2005, p. 70). Analysing populism, Palonen (2020) shows that forming a sense of shared identity happens by creating frontiers between the affective 'us' and 'them', and in this sense,

the 'us' is empty; it is constructed through antagonism and differentiation from others. In a discourse built on othering and antagonism, the content can remain vague and ambiguous, and both the frontiers the discourse produces, and the content itself can be contradictory. Making these contradictory claims and actors an 'us' with shared demands happens through forming a *chain or logic of equivalence*; articulating different meanings as connected and excluding others. In an opposite dynamic, a *logic of difference* works to undo this unification and to present different actors, factions, and groups as separate and individual instead of similar (Palonen, 2020b).

Post-foundational discourse theory draws on Lacanian psychoanalytical theory, employing it in a social scientific and discourse analytical approach rather than as an individual psychology oriented one. This approach, employed especially in A2, offers insight into 'the relationship between fantasy and reality that pays attention to emotional and affective investments in discourses, images and ideas' (Johanssen, 2023, p. 193). In the Lacanian view, all subjects are governed by a constitutive, ontological lack (Stavrakakis, 1999). Inherent to all humans, this lack is named differently in different discourses. The ever-present nature of this lack means that identification to discourses, ideologies, political projects, and communities never definitively mends it, and therefore it continues to motivate attachment to these various projects. The lack cannot be mended, but subjects constantly seek the impossible by identifying with different discourses that fantasmatically promise fulfilment. These political or ideological discourses also present the lack as caused by an enemy stealing the subjects' lacking enjoyment. The impossibility of the fullness subjects chase produces *jouissance*, a complex combination of enjoyment and suffering – 'pleasure in displeasure' (Stavrakakis, 2007, p. 78) – that keeps subjects attached to discourses even when they cause negative effects (Flisfeder, 2023; Wojczewski, 2022).

I use these abovementioned concepts as heuristic tools rather than as a rigid instructive framework. DT does not offer specific methodological pathways but rather proposes an overall approach to discourse that can be modified and complemented with other methodological and theoretical tools (see Hartikainen, 2025). These conceptual choices and research design are what I have deemed to be useful in this specific context; other research questions and other emphases could lead to different analyses.

### 3.3 Research ethics

In researching a community connected to both violence and vulnerability, ensuring an ethical approach becomes especially important. The two types of data collected for the articles in this thesis required different approaches and reflections on research ethics. Therefore, I will first examine a broader, overarching approach to research ethics in regard to an ethically challenging topic and discuss my role as a researcher and my reflexive approach in studying this topic. After this, I move on to examine the more specific and technical aspects of research ethics, focusing first on studying public online discussion data and then on collecting and analysing interview data.

The discursive approach I take in this thesis entails recognising that analytical categories, theoretical frameworks, and empirical observations are discursively constructed rather than neutral or given. As discussed above, I do not seek to uncover an objective or 'true' social structure underlying discourse, but to trace how particular meanings and identities become

temporarily stabilised as if they were natural or necessary. This requires reflexivity: remaining aware of the researcher's role in the construction of the analysis and the interpretive decisions taken. My research critically analyses the discourses of victimhood in incel online communities, and traces connections to broader discourses on gender and victimhood. I do not attempt to either validate or deny individual incels' experiences or feelings of victimhood, but to understand how these ideas are discursively constructed, how they are negotiated, contested, or accepted, and why they manage to grip incels as subjects. Throughout the research process, I have strived to remain open to the possible surprises, both positive and negative, to be found in my data (see Sedgwick, 1997).

In my research, and especially in the interview study, my aim has been to take an empathetic approach to the people I study, while at the same time maintaining a critical view of the broader phenomenon (see Pearson, 2019). Incel communities provide different challenges in this regard. While the potential vulnerability of the individuals participating in the communities evokes, and according to some views, even requires empathy from the researcher (see Shaw et al, 2020), in the case of violent or supremacist actors, empathy also carries risks of justifying their harmful actions and accepting their victimhood claims without sufficient criticism (de Coning, 2021; Toros, 2022).

To solve this problem, de Coning (2021) proposes the methodological framework of critical empathy to navigate the researcher's reflexivity and emotions when studying ethically challenging, harmful, or 'unsavoury' populations. She suggests acknowledging and reflecting on researcher's feelings of empathy towards the subjects and involving these feelings in the research process, while also retaining a critical approach to avoid being apologetic for actual harm done by the communities researched:

One of the dilemmas of critical empathy is the double bind of recognizing our subjects' humanity while also acknowledging that their beliefs and behaviours may be troubling, toxic, repugnant, dangerous, or dehumanizing toward others (p. 220).

Employing this approach has helped me in reconciling these coexisting aspects. As a woman, I am the target of incel antagonism and misogyny. At the same time, during the interviews in A3, I felt privileged in many regards compared to the participants who had experienced violence, bullying, and humiliation from peers for not fitting masculine norms and expectations. In reality, no one is fully a victim or a victimiser, and several intersecting variables affect individual experiences (see Pearson et al., 2020). Claims of victimhood can be both sincere and harmful. Doing research that prioritises the self-understanding of communities that actively harm others requires balancing the possibly strategic claims of victimhood and harmful views with individuals' experiences of inadequacy, marginalisation, and violence - events they can be regarded victims in. As Pilkington (2016) notes in the context of far-right activists, seeking to understand does not need to mean accepting:

While I would not choose to designate those who are the focus of the current study as 'victims', their actions in public spaces have contexts that require analysis and interpretation rather than a priori moral condemnation (p. 223).

I have also critically examined and reflected on my own feelings of empathy towards incels, and the possible bias of excusing misogyny that is normalised in society on so many levels.

Contextualising these individual feelings into a broader, systemic view is imperative, as ‘our empathy may reify structural inequalities that implicitly position some people as “inherently” more deserving of our compassion and patience’ (de Coning, 2021, p. 222). As Toros (2022) notes, establishing an ethically balanced, empathetic approach depends on multiple differing factors, but committing to an emancipatory purpose is a step forward:

the answer is not to avoid empathy, leaving this field to the right and its media and academic pundits. Rather, the only way forward seems to be to claim this space from them with honest empathetic and emancipatory research that recognises everyone’s humanity and community (p. 230).

Understanding requires acknowledging the other’s experience, even if not accepting it as true. Balancing these aspects is not an easy task and has required constant reflection throughout this research process. As Pilkington (2016) puts it, I have attempted

treading a fine line between the conflicting demands of capturing the meaning of the movement for its supporters and employing critical judgement of the movement arising from observation (p. 224).

Radical milieu actors often do not agree with being labelled as extremist or radicalised, and experience this as unjustified use of power (Pilkington, 2024). While the accounts of actors in radical milieus need to be critically analysed and contextualised (see DeCook & Kelly, 2022), the experienced unfair labelling as extremist may also be counterproductive in prevention of radicalisation and can feed into victimhood narratives and therefore cement grievances (Cockburn, 2007; A1). Acknowledging emic (inside) perspectives and views can support and inform critical views into theory and policy formation, but done incautiously, it can also work to legitimise non-democratic, hostile, and extremist views and actors (Pilkington, 2021; 2024). My aim was to provide new knowledge on incel communities based on primary data, while maintaining a critical perspective on the data, the previous literature, and the constructions of extremism more broadly.

Using online discussion data gathered from publicly available forums, as we did in A1 and A2, means that the discussants are likely to be aware of the data being visible to outsiders, but not always. In some online communities and forums, the discussions can still be regarded as somewhat private, as the discussants do not expect outsiders to read them (Franzke et al., 2020). However, in incel online discussions, the presence of outsiders is recognised and often explicitly acknowledged by the participants, and incels are aware of their discussions being read by journalists, academics, and critics (A1). Of course, this requires acknowledgement in research more broadly: incels’ aim is often to shock outsiders, which affects their online discussion culture, as discussed previously. Moreover, in the cases in which it would be possible, contacting discussants for consent for their posts to be included in research data could risk their privacy instead of protecting it (Conway, 2021).

In terms of collecting interview data, as I did for A3, multiple ethics questions need to be considered. As the study included reaching out to incel communities that include vulnerable individuals, the potential effects of the interviews needed to be carefully assessed before setting about the study. The potential safety issues to the researcher, especially being an early career woman, also needed to be carefully evaluated. Because of these concerns, the study

that resulted in A3 was reviewed by the University of Helsinki Research Ethics Committee in the Humanities and Social and Behavioural Sciences beforehand.

As mentioned, privacy is important to most incels and being an incel is potentially socially stigmatising. Because of this, I wanted to take all precautions to protect the participants' anonymity. The participants were free to contact me with anonymous email addresses and could choose freely what information they wanted to share with me. Most participants did not share their names, specific ages, or locations. If there were any possibly identifiable details in the interviews, I removed them while transcribing.

The interviews took place via Zoom, a video conferencing platform that allowed the participants to participate with a pseudonym and use a VPN if they so preferred. The interviews were conducted through audio only and recorded with the participant's consent, after they had familiarised themselves with the data protection plan and their rights as research participants. One interview was conducted through email. The participants were told they were free to pass any questions they did not feel comfortable answering, they could take breaks at any point during the interviews, and they could withdraw any parts of their accounts later if they wanted to. The interviews also included a de-briefing part at the end to make sure the participants were not feeling distressed, and to allow for any questions or comments regarding the study. The participants all reported that they felt good after the interviews, and for most, it was a relief to be able to talk openly and anonymously about the issues they had mostly not discussed with others in their lives.

### 3.4 Data

In the research articles included in this thesis, and in co-operation with co-authors, I have employed a variety of data. In A1, the inclusion of nine incel online forums allows for necessary variety in examining incel presentations of mass violence. The article shows that the level of justification for violence differs significantly between different platforms. In A2, the vast amounts of data from *incels.is* in the initial data gathering, and the inclusion of a random sample of posts from this initial dataset consisting of millions of posts, ensure a comprehensive approach to incel imaginations of the past. In A3, interview data allows for incorporating viewpoints often invisible in both incel online discussions and in research on incels. Altogether, this variety of data brings to surface the heterogeneity, complexity and contradictions often lacking from research on incels. The articles included in this thesis demonstrate that incels constantly negotiate and disagree on the incel identity and political and ideological questions, both individually and in online forum discussions.

The choice and availability of data naturally affect the results and findings. While the three articles included in this thesis employ different datasets and therefore offer a variety of viewpoints to the incel phenomenon, there are limits to what information it can provide. Researching online-based communities and worldviews, always with to some degree incomplete data, makes saying anything unequivocal about individual incels or the 'majority' of incels quite difficult (see Gibbon et al., 2024). Labelling such loose online communities as extremist, for example, can lead to simplifications that are not fruitful in describing the phenomenon as a whole, as will be discussed further in chapter 5. Online material only provides views into the minority of incels who actively participate in online discussions (Baele et al., 2023), and it only sheds light on the publicly available and explicit aspects of individuals' participation and identification processes. It is difficult to assess the discussants' age, location,

or degree of personal identification to incelism only from online material. Interview data, on the other hand, offer a different view into individual incels' experiences and lifeworlds, but is often limited in scope and potentially a polished presentation of the topic, either consciously or subconsciously (see A3). While there are unavoidable limitations with each individual dataset used here, and more broadly in researching online communities with limited access to data, the combination of these approaches compensates for this and results in a more nuanced picture of the phenomenon.

The approach I have taken to analysing data is inductive. Rather than having strict hypotheses or applying theory or method in a specific, pre-defined way, I have prioritised openness to the diversity of themes and views present in the data. I have aimed to explore incel discourses in their context and to understand their meaning to incels themselves, while also critically analysing their dynamics. In this chapter, I present the more technical details of the data used in this research. More detailed discussion on the reasoning behind choosing each individual dataset can be found in chapter 4, and in the respective research articles.

#### 3.4.1 Article 1: Online discussion data from nine incel forums

The data used in article 1 comprises all discussion threads addressing the Plymouth shooting between August 12 (the day of the shooting) and August 16, 2021. We started collecting data in the immediate aftermath of the attack and collected all available discussions concerning the attack. This allowed us to examine how incels on different online forums reacted to the attack, largely framed as incel violence, without messages or threads being removed.

We collected our data from a variety of forums differing in popularity, discussion culture, and moderation practices, to ensure that our findings would be representative of incel communities more broadly. The nine forums included in our data collection - incels.is, incels.net, lookism.net, blackpill.club, love-shy.net, ncu.su, lookstheory.org, forum.looksmaxxing.com, and looksmax.org – represented all the public, English language incel forums (not subreddits, Facebook groups, etc.) listed on the Incel Wiki during data collection. Ninety-six threads were saved as PDFs, amounting to 1702 posts overall.

#### 3.4.2 Article 2: Thematic samples from a large dataset

The data used in A2 were collected from incels.is, the most popular incel online forum. The initial data collection, using a custom-built web scraper, resulted in 7,653,561 public posts from November 2017 to May 2023. To examine incel presentations of the past in general, and to guide our coding, we first compiled and analysed a random dataset consisting of 9044 posts.

After this, we compiled a second dataset that consisted of posts mentioning decades from the 1950s to the 2000s in either full (e.g., the 1950s) or shortened form (the 50s). This range of decades was included in the study to analyse incel constructions of recent history. After collecting all posts mentioning these decades, we then extracted a random sample of these posts. Each sample consisted of 200 posts per decade, as we noticed that this number was enough to reach a saturation point. This second dataset was then coded with codes informed by the initial coding of the first, random dataset.

### 3.4.3 Article 3: Interview data

The data used in A3 consists of six interview transcripts with self-identified former or current incel men, collected through semi-structured interviews through the video call service Zoom and recorded as audio. One of the interviews was conducted through email. Most of the research participants were Finnish, one was Italian, and one was North American. Identification with inceldom at the time of the interviews differed significantly between participants, which offered different personal perspectives to inceldom.

The interviews were in-depth and lasted between 2 and 3 hours. The topics discussed ranged from personal life experiences to pathways into and out of inceldom and views on incel violence and misogyny. I collected and approached my data in an inductive manner. As I wanted to allow for a diversity of views and themes in the data, I had no strong hypotheses to guide my inquiry.

## 4. Summary of the original publications and main contributions

The empirical research in this thesis consists of three original research articles. They examine incel communities from three viewpoints: negotiations on the justification of political violence, phantasmatic constructions of the past and their political implications, and the complexities of defining and identifying with inceldom. The articles are summarised below in chronological order.

Article title	Research question(s)	Data	Methodology	Journal
A1	How is the Plymouth attack discussed on different incel online forums?  How is inceldom constructed in the context of violence?	Discussion forum data from 9 different incel online forums, 1702 posts	Thematic coding; Critical discourse analysis	Terrorism and Political Violence
A2	How is the past constructed in incel discussions, and what are the political functions of these presentations?	Discussion forum data from incels.is: 1) a random sample of 9044 posts, 2) 4958 posts mentioning the decades from the 1950s to the 2000s	Discourse theoretical analysis	Social Media + Society
A3	How do current and former incels discursively construct inceldom and negotiate their relationship to it?	Six in-depth, semi-structured interviews with current and former incels	Semi-structured interviews; Discourse theoretical analysis	Critical Studies on Terrorism

Table 1. Summary of the original research articles included in this thesis.

### 4.1 Article 1: Violence and victimhood

Article 1 was co-authored with Shane Murphy (Dublin City University) and published in *Terrorism and Political Violence*. In it, we analyse incel online discussions regarding the 2021 shooting in Plymouth, UK. The shooting was broadly presented as an incel attack in the media, which led incels to discuss and negotiate the relationship between incels and violence. As we set out to examine incel discourses surrounding violence connected to incels in public

discussion, and to analyse the way this violence is presented as justified or unacceptable on different incel online forums, the 'real' motivations of the attack are not central to our research.

The data for article 1 comprises 1702 posts, being all posts related to the Plymouth shooting on nine different public incel online forums during our data collection. We began gathering the data right after the shooting, allowing us to access discussions as they were happening. We continued collecting data for five days until the discussion concerning it quieted down. Our initial plan had been to gather data for seven days after the shooting, but we noticed the discussion moving on to other topics and quieting down before that and modified our plan accordingly.

In this study, we used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its primary methodological framework for examining how online discourses construct, negotiate, and reproduce what inceldom means in the context of violence. More specifically, we employed Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of CDA consisting of three levels: (1) *textual analysis*, which examines vocabulary, grammar, and rhetorical strategies; (2) *discursive practice*, which considers processes of text production, distribution, and consumption; and (3) *social practice*, which situates the discourse within broader socio-political structures.

In the article, we demonstrate that justification for violence is not agreed on among incels. Despite incel online forums being known for idolising violent incel attackers, our research shows varying views on justification of mass violence both on specific forums, and between these forums. Incels disagree on the justification, usefulness, motivations, and definitions of political violence. Some discussants argue against committing political violence for moral reasons, and some for practical reasons, not to make outsiders see incels as terrorists. For the discussants arguing for more political violence as a means of revenge, or justifying the attack, victimhood is a way to shift blame for the violence from incels to women and society as a whole for victimising incels in the first place. In these accounts, incel violence is used as proof of incel victimhood; perpetrators are presented as unfairly driven to violence because of their suffering as incels. The central theme agreed on by discussants is victimhood; arguments both for and against political violence are justified by referring to incel victimhood in society. Still, this victimhood is seen as permanent and violence is not presented as a way to change the situation - to the discussants, its only function, whether acceptable or not, is revenge.

The broader idea of male victimhood and oppression under feminism and a feminised society is a frequent theme in the discussions, as well as the more personal idea of women's requirements for partners rising to an unreasonable standard. Both are used to justify incels' ultimate victimhood. We also show how closely looks and appearance are tied to the incel understanding of violence and victimhood; for many incels in our data, the perpetrator's appearance dictates whether they can be regarded a 'true' victim, and therefore, justified in committing (political) violence. Despite incels claiming that attractiveness is objectively measurable, there are major disagreements on whether the attacker was attractive or not. In addition to closely analysing the perpetrator's appearance, his mental health is under scrutiny and being speculated on; for many of the discussants that considered the attacker too attractive to be a true incel, serious mental health issues are another possibility to claim inceldom and therefore victimhood. However, unlike appearance, the relationship between mental health problems and being an incel are not agreed on.

We find that the way this attack was discussed varies considerably on the nine different incel online forums included in the study. Because research at the time, and still today, mostly uses data from single sources, the comparative approach brings much needed diversity to research on incel discourses on violence. It is important to note this variance and heterogeneity in incel discussions. Presenting incel communities as monoliths means losing sight of how online participation and identification works; it risks ignoring the more moderate, less vocal, or uncertain factions of these communities and the internal contradictions, disagreements, and negotiations that shape the way the communities change through time.

#### 4.2 Article 2: Nostalgic narratives justifying victimhood

Article 2 was co-authored with Shane Murphy (Dublin City University) and Ümit Bedretin (University of Helsinki) and published in *Social Media + Society*. In it, we map and analyse the way incels construct fantasies of ideal pasts and unbearable futures and use them to justify misogynist ideology. We argue that while incel constructions of the past closely resemble those of far right and right-wing populist movements, their political functions are different because of the hopelessness and pessimism integral in the incel worldview. Therefore, we propose using a specific concept, *incel nostalgia*, to describe the particular way incels construct and use imaginations of the past.

Our initial data collection covered the whole incels.is forum, gathered using a custom-built web scraper, consisting of 7,653,561 posts from November 2017 to May 2023. From this vast dataset, we first separated a random sample of 500 threads, consisting of 9044 posts (Dataset 1), to guide our questioning and to ensure we catch the less defined, more vague references to the past that would be difficult to reach through specific search words. After this, we looked for all the posts in the initial dataset mentioning decades from the 1950s to the 2000s and compiled them into six random datasets divided by decades, 200 posts each, altogether 1200 posts (Dataset 2).

Our approach in this article is based on Lacanian theory of fantasy, and specifically a discourse theoretical application of it (e.g. Glynos, 2021; Stavarakakis, 1999). Operationalising this framework, we recognise three central elements of fantasy in the context of incel discussions regarding the past: a *beatific fantasy* that promises utopian fulfilment, and a *horrific fantasy* that threatens a catastrophic future. In between these elements stands *the enemy*; an obstacle to obtaining the beatific fantasy. In incels' nostalgic views of the past, the utopian past is presented as a harmonious patriarchal gender order in which incels did not exist, because women were not freely able to choose their partners. The dystopian future is seen as inevitable and preventing it as hopeless; women and feminism, the enemy, have already won the battle. This fantasmatic narrative works to strengthen and justify incel victimhood and to explain its origins in the past.

We use the Lacanian concept of *jouissance* to analyse the mix of suffering and enjoyment incels derive from their victimhood, and to suggest an explanation as to why a hopeless, self-deprecating incel discourse manages to grip subjects. *Jouissance* describes this complex combination of pleasure and displeasure, an obsessive fetishisation of victimhood and inferiority. We also suggest that *jouissance* has explanatory power on the appeal of hostile, antagonistic, and violent discussion culture: the shared transgression provides a thrill, even if the opposition never leads to actually defeating the shared enemy.

In the article, we show the diversity of incel presentations of the past and the nostalgic narratives present in incel online discussions. In previous research, incel nostalgic narratives have received little attention, and the focus has mostly been on the far-right adjacent restorative narratives of a glorious patriarchal past. While we do find these narratives of an idealised 1950s patriarchy and 'decency', we also show that 1990s and 2000s nostalgia is prevalent in incel discussions concerning the past. In these nostalgic narratives, the 1990s and 2000s are presented as a lost golden age of the internet, gaming, and geek hobbies. Our results demonstrate the connections of incel nostalgic narratives to broader geek and gaming culture nostalgia that presents geek online spaces as originally masculine, and the supposed influx of women, minorities and 'normies' as an offensive and detrimental development.

Imaginations of the past are central to how incels understand the present. They connect violence, victimhood, and gender by explaining the origins of incelhood in women's oppression of men in modernity. They are related and draw from broader conservative, anti-feminist discourses of the past 'golden age' and modernity as detrimental but add to it the incel focus on victimhood and hopelessness. Nostalgic fantasies work to construct incelhood as a political identity, even if their inherent hopelessness does not promise a solution to incel victimhood.

#### 4.3 Article 3: Negotiating the incel identity

Article 3, published in *Critical Perspectives on Terrorism*, is based on six in-depth, semi-structured interviews, and focuses on the complex, ambiguous, and contradictory ways the incel identity is negotiated by former and current incels.

In this article, based on interview data from six semi-structured interviews with current and former incels, I show the inherent complexity and contradictory nature of identification as an 'incel' in the first place. Drawing from the in-depth interviews, I demonstrate the difficulties and uncertainties self-identified former or current incels have with defining what 'incel' means, who can and should be regarded as an incel, and in the end, what is central to incelhood. In the article, the participants describe the processes of constructing, and for some, leaving behind, incel identities. Employing discourse theory, I show how incel discourse grips subjects by restructuring their life narratives and giving explanations to their pre-existing experiences of victimhood and marginalisation. I demonstrate the variety of meanings 'incel' has to incels themselves, and the way incels struggle with which discursive construction of incelhood to attach to. While 'incel' as an outside label, often antagonistically defined in other discourses, creates a sense of togetherness and community among incels, it is also constantly being renegotiated and disagreed on inside incel communities. In this way, being both unifying and contested, 'incel' acts as both an empty and a floating signifier.

Many participants described their initial interest in incel communities as stemming from feelings of inadequacy in relation to their masculinity. Not having sexual or romantic experiences with women, or them not being the right kind, became symbolic of the broader sense of not measuring up to the standards of acceptable and 'normal' masculinity. Many participants had experiences of bullying, violence, and social isolation. At first, they felt like spending time in incel online communities acted as peer support and relief; in time, however, they noticed it having negative effects because of the hostile, pessimistic, and self-deprecating discussion culture. The participants reflected on the victimhood identity adopted from incel

communities, describing how it had been harmful to their mental health and well-being in the long term. This, rather than ideological changes or social relationships, was the main reason for the participants to distance themselves from incel communities to differing degrees, too.

The research participants negotiated the role of violence and gender in incel-dom either by discursively distancing themselves from the more extreme or violent notions of misogyny, or through their current distance from incel communities altogether. Some participants in the study were significantly more critical of incel misogyny and violent rhetoric on the forums, while others still actively negotiating their identity in relation to incel-dom were unsure of how to view it, agreeing with some sexist and misogynist narratives and rejecting others. Altogether, the participants articulated more moderate stances in relation to women and violence than often seen on incel forums. This can be regarded, at least partly, as strategic positioning of self and incel communities as harmless victims. However, it also works to show the diversity of people participating in incel discussions, and the complexity of negotiating online narratives and offline experiences together. Overall, the similarity and connections between views articulated by the current and former incels and mainstream gender narratives need to be noted; misogyny is not a binary but a continuum.

Interview research focusing on either current or former incels, although increasing, is still rare. Interview research can bring forward perspectives that would otherwise remain hidden. Focusing on online discussion material, for example, leaves out the experiences and perspectives of the people who mostly consume online material and do not actively participate in discussions. It also fails to pick up trajectories, pathways, and over-time fluctuations in individuals' identification and participation in online communities. Therefore, research based on the critical use of interview data can open new avenues into understanding incel communities and individual incels.

## 5. Victimhood as the core element of incel discourse

While the articles included in this thesis focus on several aspects of incel online communities, in all of them, victimhood arises as a key theme. In this chapter, I examine incel communities' self-understanding, exploring how incels view themselves and their position in the world, and discussing the political implications incels themselves attach to inceldom in both online discussions and interviews. I show that victimhood works in more complex and diverse ways in incel discourse than noted in previous literature. It fundamentally dictates how incels see their political and personal agency, and how possibilities of mobilisation and societal change are viewed.

Despite differing and even contradictory views present in incel communities, what pulls the incel discourse together is the idea of victimhood. I focus on this victimhood, as I argue that incel discourse is structured around it, and that it is the main aspect other themes are understood in relation to. I analyse incel victimhood by employing the concepts of *nodal point*, *empty signifier*, *floating signifier*, and the *logics of equivalence* and *difference* that I presented above in section 3.2. Here, I use them to zoom in on incel victimhood constructions in relation to gender and violence.

Using these heuristic tools, I examine how victimhood is harnessed in incel discourse to explain and justify different, sometimes contradictory views, goals, and statements. First, I examine incel victimhood in general and place it in dialogue with the previous literature on victimhood presented in chapter 2. Then, I analyse incel views on victimhood in the context of gender, focusing on the themes of masculinity and misogyny that are central to incel self-understanding. I then move on to examine how victimhood and violence are connected and negotiated in incel discourse. After this, I consider what incels' victimhood identification means in the context of potential for political action and mobilisation. Finally, I view these findings in relation to extremism research and reflect on what applying different frameworks and definitions of extremism mean in the context of incel communities.

I analyse victimhood as a nodal point in incel discourse, structuring discourse and enjoyment in relation to itself through its privileged status in incel self-understanding. I also show how victimhood acts as both unifying and contested, and therefore as both an empty and a floating signifier: while 'incel' as negatively defined in other discourses creates a sense of togetherness and community through shared victimhood, the definitions of inceldom and victimhood are also constantly being renegotiated inside incel communities (A1; A2; A3; Laclau, 2000; 2005; Palonen, 2020b; 2025). Incels claim victimhood as their property and constitute any outsiders as categorically not entitled to any victimhood claims. By excluding non-incel men from the sphere of male victimhood, incels partially reject the manosphere discourse that attempts to unify all men as victims of feminism, and exceptionalise themselves as the only truly innocent victims.

### 5.1 Incel victimhood claims in context

How should incel claims of victimhood be approached? As shown in section 2.3, claims of suffering and victimhood are not neutral. Despite their personal nature, they are increasingly a political claim to power and recognition (see Chouliaraki, 2021; Horwitz, 2018; A1). Therefore, it is necessary to consider that victimhood claims can often be strategic or strategically emphasised and have political effects. Incel victimhood claims work to ignore,

override, or deny women's experiences of violence, oppression, and discrimination, thus concealing or denying patriarchal power structures. Incels keep claiming victimhood while harassing, hurting, or applauding violence against women (Halpin, 2022), in a discursive reordering of privilege (Pilkington, 2016). However, while claims of victimhood should be approached critically, the *feeling* of injustice and victimhood can be true to the individuals claiming them, and many of the difficult personal experiences incels recount are violent and traumatising (A3). Many of the pressures and uncertainties faced by incels are well-documented phenomena affecting young people more broadly (see Duckworth & Trautner, 2019; Ford & Freund, 2022; Stanaland & Gaither, 2021). Summarising this complex dynamic, Jeffery and Candeia (2006) ask, 'How should we attend to expressions of suffering when such expressions obscure or deny others' suffering?' (p. 287). It is this duality of personal and structural that makes victimhood claims difficult to examine in a way that recognises the multifaceted and complex nature of them.

I argue that it is imperative to distinguish these different levels in incel claims to suffering. Recognising sincere feelings and experiences of personal injustice is necessary to understand incels' identity construction, community attachment, and motivations, but at the same time, the misogynist explanations incels give to their suffering need to be critically unpacked.

While considering the centrality of mental health problems in the self-understanding of incels (A1, A3), it is also important to take a critical approach to how individuals and communities understand themselves and present themselves to outsiders. As discussed in chapter 3, the violent, carnivalistic and over-the-top online discussion style cannot be taken at face value; not every individual joking about killing all women or writing about violent fantasies online is at risk of actually realising these actions. In the same critical vein, the self-presentation of misogynist and hostile communities as victims needs to be carefully considered and contextualised (see Pilkington, 2021). Accepting incel constructions of victimhood as factual justifies and reinforces these narratives.

Therefore, acknowledging incels' own victimhood identification and performance needs to be done cautiously. Taking incel victimhood claims at face value risks ignoring ideological and political elements present in incel communities. While incels themselves often centre mental health problems and loneliness in their self-presentation, incel misogyny and violence cannot and should not be explained as stemming from these (Carian, DiBranco & Kelly, 2024). There are millions of people in the world experiencing similar situations who do not adopt misogynist, violent views. Overall, incel misogyny needs to be carefully contextualised on a structural level and not viewed as following from individual incels' pathologies (Kelly et al., 2024; Pearson, 2019). Misogyny is not a mental illness - it is a political and ideological view of the world (DeCook & Kelly, 2021).

## 5.2 Gender as a key aspect of incel victimhood

Gender is central in how incel victimhood is constructed and articulated. Because incels view involuntary celibacy as a life situation only men can legitimately be in, and as caused by women and feminism, these victimhood constructions are necessarily gendered. In the next two subsections, I analyse incel victimhood constructions in relation to women and misogyny, and as connected to masculinity and manhood.

In incel discourse, a good or even tolerable life is presented as depending on access to women's bodies in the form of sex and care (see Sharkey, 2021). Additionally, men's good life is also presented as depending on the companionship and company of women, and impossible in absence of them. Men are often seen as merely surviving, capable of only coping or *laying down and rotting*, without sexual partners, girlfriends, and wives making their lives meaningful – a task friend or family relationships cannot fulfil. Rather than being an opportunity for connection, pleasure, or fun, sex and relationships become an achievement that dictates a man's place in a masculine hierarchy, and losing to other men in this comparison is seen as shameful.

### 5.2.1 Misogyny as justified or rejected through victimhood

On a general level, incel victimhood is articulated as a frontier between incels and non-incels. Incelness, the incel 'us', is constructed in opposition to the broader 'blue-pilled' majority who do not understand the detrimental effects of feminism on society and men. Still, misogyny and anti-feminism inform the most prominent and hostile enemy construction that the incel discourse provides to men looking for explanations for their feelings of loneliness or inadequacy. These frontiers work to establish incels as innocent victims with superior knowledge of how the world truly operates, as powerful on the level of perception and logic but powerless to act on this knowledge (Hart & Huber, 2023; A1; A2; A3).

The articles included in this thesis demonstrate the complex and sometimes contradictory ways incels justify misogynistic views by invoking claims of *ressentimentful* victimhood (Salmela & Capelos, 2026). They present themselves as victims of women and therefore argue that violent misogyny present in incel online discussions is merely reactive. Women, as well as feminism as a movement that has enabled women to gain political, societal, and sexual agency, are seen as the ultimate enemy causing the downfall of patriarchy, the oppression of men, and the overall cultural decay ruining modern societies. While incels often state that in the past, women were less shallow and more capable of loving relationships with ordinary men (A2), they also argue that women are intrinsically, biologically driven to seek sex with only the most attractive men (Ging, 2019; Sugiura, 2021). These contradictory claims are driven by the central idea of inevitable decline; while women were always bad, their standards for men are constantly becoming even more impossible as feminism and human rights are allowing women more freedom to realise their true nature.

Victimhood as an empty signifier, defining inceldom against a constitutive outside, works to render any other groups' victimhood claims or experiences as fake (see Jeffery and Candea, 2006; Laclau, 2000; Mouffe, 1996; A3). In this narrative, women have caused incel misogyny by structurally emasculating incel men through feminism, and therefore incels are the victims of this development. By discursively constructing a chain of equivalence in which incels themselves are linked with victimhood, incels manage to create an affective narrative in which women are always responsible for the violence and discrimination they face, and incels are never responsible for their misogyny or any rejection they experience. Incel discourse constructs true incels as connected by innocence, oppression, injustice, and suffering, and establishes non-incels, specifically women, as the culprits of this suffering. In constituting the antagonistic frontier, incel discourse employs a logic of equivalence in presenting all incels as a unified group, despite individual differences.

As presented in Figure 1, in this scenario, women, attractive men, and any other groups placed on the other side of this antagonistic frontier can never be truly innocent. Incels are constructed as unified in their suffering, and different demands and grievances that would not otherwise be linked to each other become absorbed into the broader idea of incel victimhood. Rather than recognising similarities or acknowledging other groups' experiences of suffering, incel discourse rejects any victimhood claims not originating from themselves, antagonistically reversing such claims into yet another symbol of 'their' injustice towards 'us'.

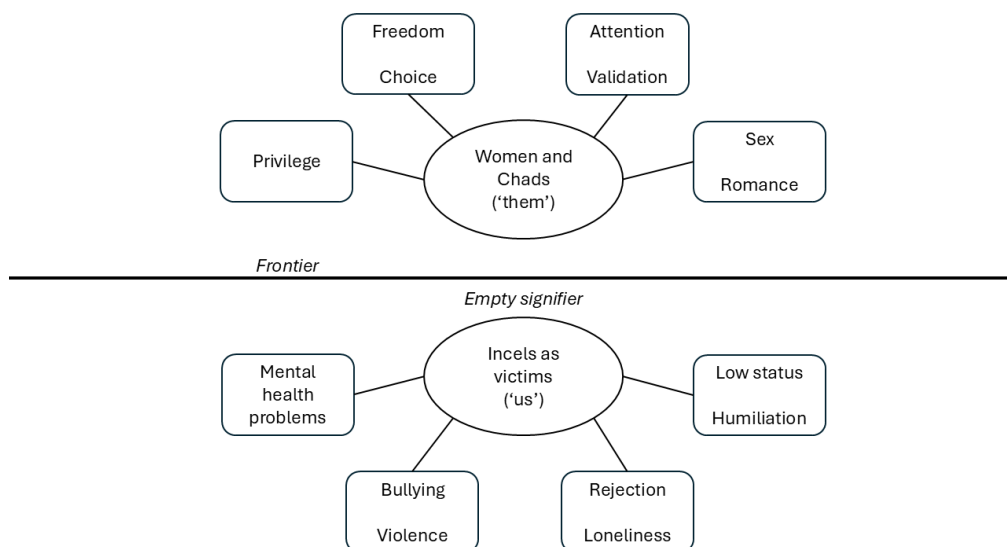


Figure 1. Incel 'us' as constituted through victimhood and antagonism.

The violent rhetoric and overt hostility against women can seem contradictory with the central incel narrative of being left lonely and loveless and lamenting the lack of sex and romance with women. If women are despicable, evil, and cruel, why want anything to do with them? This phenomenon, visible both in incel communities and more broadly in society, is summarised by Jane Ward (2020) as *the misogyny paradox*: 'boys' and men's desire for girls and women is expressed within a broader culture that encourages them to also hate girls and women' (p. 27). Women become both hated and wanted in this dynamic, and heterosexual gender norms dictate that while women are seen as inferior and less than, they are also seen as inherently necessary to men in performing masculinity.

The same dynamic, especially in the case of incels desiring but not achieving access to women, can also be analysed as an example of *ressentiment*. Incels' affective, *ressentimentful* rhetoric simultaneously highlights sexual and romantic relationships with women as the most important measure of a good life as a man and devalues and dehumanises women as worthless. It justifies incel suffering as righteous, alleviating perceived inferiority and validating resentment and hostility as proof of true victimhood. It motivates incels to attach to their failures and frustrations without the need to attempt change, and to ruminate on victimhood as biologically determined and unchangeable. While feeding into hopeless fatalism, *ressentiment* simultaneously works to validate incels as special. As Salmela and Capelos (2021) explain, 'What was desired/valued, yet unattainable, is reassessed as undesirable and rotten; and one's own self from being inferior, a loser, is reassessed as being noble and superior' (p. 192).

*Ressentiment* allows incels to both attach to their victimhood in relation to women, and to keep articulating women as inferior, disgusting, and undesirable.

Despite frequently promoting misogynistic views and celebrating and applauding several forms of misogynistic violence in their online discussions (Chang, 2020; Ging, 2019; Sugiura, 2021; A1), individual incels often argue that they are not misogynistic (Andersen, 2023), or that only a small subset of incels are misogynists (see Pearson et al., 2020 on claims of anti-racism; Preston et al., 2021; A3), and that presenting incels as misogynistic and violent is a deliberate misrepresentation and stigmatisation of them. Misogyny is presented as happening somewhere else and being done by other, more problematic men. This happens partly through employing a very narrow definition of what misogyny means (cf. Pilkington, 2016 on racism). For example, in A3, some of the participants state that they do not support removing women's right to vote or are not physically violent towards women and therefore do not belong to the subgroup of misogynist incels. They present both 'other men' and 'other incels' as misogynists, discursively distancing themselves from misogyny and highlighting their own moderateness (see Pearson, 2019; Harrington, 2021).

At the same time, however, some of the same participants also refer to dehumanising, misogynistic narratives adopted from incel online forums, and describe the difficulty of leaving behind their strong feelings of hatred towards women. For these participants, misogyny is seen as an individual problem, something they personally suffer from, and it becomes political and therefore real misogyny only in the case it manifests in direct physical violence or explicit political or legal oppression of women. Instead of a political view or an active choice, these participants articulate their participation in incel online communities as a private experience that further prevents them from being happy and content, and thus as representing their individual victimhood.

This distancing can be strategic or comfortable to the speaker. Anything negative is often constructed as happening elsewhere or done by others to present the self or 'us' positively. As mentioned above, incels are very aware of the outside portrayals of them as dangerous misogynists, and there may be either a conscious or subconscious wish for the participants to present themselves as 'good' and harmless in public. It also shows the differing interpretations of misogyny as a concept, visible in mainstream discourses as well: misogyny is often not recognised, and there is a tendency to exceptionalise it as a pathology of 'harmful' or 'bad' individuals (Pearson, 2019). In addition to these factors, presenting misogyny as distant or negative likely also follows from the selection of participants in the interview study A3; most were either former incels or were unsure of their identities in relation to incel communities, and were critical of at least some incel narratives.

Still, in distancing from or rejecting misogyny, incel discourse's logic of equivalence is challenged or rejected by individual incels who criticise incel misogyny. Antagonism becomes less prominent, and rather than strictly differentiating from others, these incels position themselves closer to the mainstream and non-incels. Despite these varied views inside incel communities, visible in research that directly interacts with incels themselves, these moderate or critical views of incel misogyny do not often become visible in incel online discussions. In them, strict discussion culture norms dictate that rather than voicing disagreement, it is easier to remain quiet (A3), which further feeds into an imagined unity and agreement among incels online.

It is important to note that individuals' views on incel communities' relationship to misogyny and violence are shaped by the specific forums they frequent, as levels of violent and misogynist content differ between forums (A1). Still, individuals participating in incel online forums are well aware of the misogynist ideology present in the communities and actively comment on it in interviews, recognising that incel communities and misogyny are tightly connected (Andersen, 2023; A3). In this sense, what Pilkington (2016) notes in the context of the far-right organisation English Defence League holds true in the case of incels as well: 'the movement is constituted in reflexive engagement with its own external representation' (p. 224). The experienced unfair labelling as misogynistic, dangerous, or violent also works to strengthen a sense of belonging, contributing to a further 'us versus them' differentiation (A1). It entrenches the antagonistic frontiers incel discourse constructs between themselves and all others and effectively confirms and reinforces incels' victimhood narrative.

Therefore, while the levels of explicitly violent misogyny may differ between forums, the individuals who choose to participate in incel communities still consciously continue to expose themselves to misogynistic, dehumanising material. Individual incels' discursive distancing from misogyny needs to be understood in this context; continuously consuming violently misogynistic material means that they accept it enough to not reject it.

### 5.2.2 Perceived failure at masculinity as a signifier of incel victimhood

While incel discussions are obviously characterised by hostile and *ressentimentful* rhetoric regarding women, incels constantly discuss both their own and other men's masculinity in relation to hegemonic masculinity ideals. Overall, issues linked to masculinity are central to how incels understand and present themselves. Ideas of failure in relation to manhood and masculinity are tightly intertwined into incel notions of victimhood; incels present themselves as inferior in relation to hegemonic masculinity ideals (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Howson & Hearn, 2019). Comparisons to the exaggerated and ultimately unreachable, fantasmatic ideals of 'Alpha males' or 'Chads' are used to lament incels' hopeless state and the impossibility of ever 'ascending' from incelhood. From a fantasy studies perspective, masculinity becomes an unattainable fantasy that grips subjects despite being impossible, or perhaps precisely because of it (see also Allan, 2018). This out-of-reach fullness produces *jouissance* that keeps incels invested in the impossible chase, despite failure, and explains the failure as caused by the enemy, women, by stealing incels' enjoyment (see Glynos, 2021; Stavrakakis, 1999; A2).

The *jouissance* that continues to grip subjects can arise from a failure to achieve the enjoyment promised by hegemonic discourse (Müller, 2013); in incels' case, the hegemonic discourse that outlines normal and acceptable masculinity (Howson & Hearn, 2019; Johansson & Ottemo, 2015). Similarly to how Maly et al. (2013) have analysed whiteness as a loss, male supremacy and masculinity also become a central feature in incel discourse through loss, and therefore as victimhood rather than dominance. This loss is both general and specific: incels have been deprived of good life as men, but men, overall, have also lost control and power to women and feminism. In this way, victimhood as a nodal point directs how incel discourse articulates incels' masculinity as failed, as not allowed to reach its natural potential.

The attachment to masculinity ideals means that incel discussions devote considerable attention to discussing other men. As Sedgwick (1985) argues, the heterosexual competition over women also fundamentally links men together with a bond 'as intense and potent' as the

bond between a man and a woman, either fantasmatic or real (p. 708). This triangular connection between rivals and the potential sexual or romantic interest, formed by heterosexual desires and homosocial anxieties, is explicitly visible in incel discussions. The figure of the 'Chad', while treated with bitterness and envy, often appears as being closer and more intimate to incels than the similarly unreachable figure of the woman. The ideal male aesthetic and beauty is obsessively examined in a way that allows for an admiring and even erotic gaze through the eyes of the imagined audience of women, while at the same time reinforcing incels' gendered victimhood claims and the homosocial bonds inside the community.

The bonds of shared victimhood work to construct antagonism against other men on various levels. Figure 2 shows how the broader masculinist and manosphere discourse constructs an antagonistic frontier that separates men as oppressed from the oppressive other, feminism, thus attempting to unite men against a shared enemy (see Palonen 2025; Stavrakakis, 1999). This discourse attempts to overcome particularity to form unity among (anti-feminist) men by connecting a variety of demands and grievances as equal (see Howson & Hearn, 2019). They discuss issues affecting a broader group of men, such as unequal conscription or fathers' rights in child custody decisions, as proof of men's disadvantaged position in society. While also employing the idea of men being victimised in modern societies, incels often reject this chain of equivalence and stress that they, instead of all men, should be seen as the ultimate victims (see Figure 2). They argue that non-incel men and especially 'Chads' are privileged in relation to them, and should therefore be seen as enemies instead of allies (see Figure 1). While Figure 1 shows the direct antagonism incels use to construct women and 'Chads' as the enemy, Figure 2 presents incels' less hostile differentiation from the broader masculinist and manosphere narrative through employing the logic of difference. In this dynamic, victimhood acts as a floating signifier that different manosphere actors, including incels, attempt to claim and utilise in constituting 'us' and combining different demands.

While rejecting the broader manosphere discourse's unifying attempts, incels still claim and rearticulate aspects and demands from this discourse (see Figure 2). They discuss issues such as women's rights advancing 'too far' or men's mental health problems, linked to perceived detrimental effects of feminism in both manosphere and incel discourse. By both drawing from and refusing broader discursive elements, incel discourse manages to uphold hegemonic masculinity as a construction justifying male supremacy over women as natural and moral, while at the same time rejecting the universality of masculinity as an overarching category that surpasses other intersecting factors. Both the rejection and inclusion of elements work to construct incel victimhood in relation to women and other men, and to justify incels' moral superiority as wronged by others.

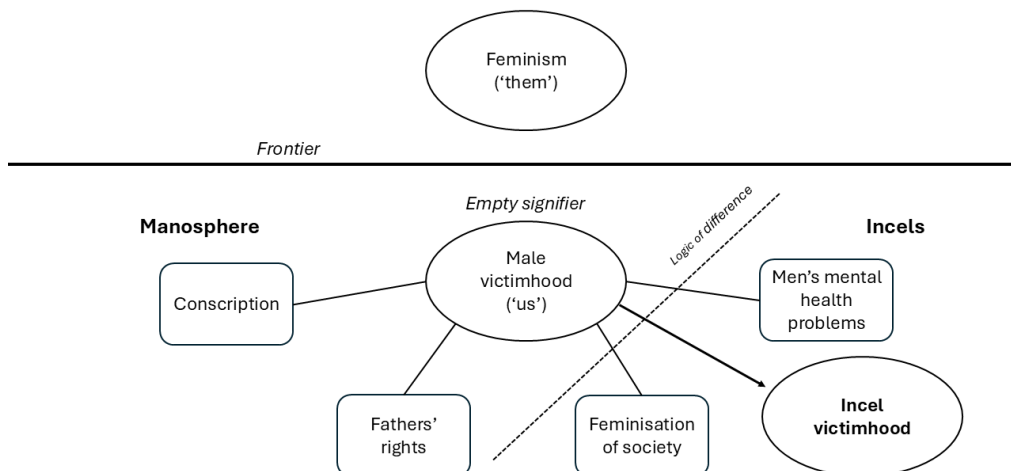


Figure 2. The logic of difference incels use to reject manosphere claims of universal male victimhood.

Incel attachment to a lack of sex as symbolic of their victimhood highlights the way women are perceived in both incel communities and society more broadly: for men, heterosexual sex is seen as social capital and a way of advancing in a masculine hierarchy (Adams & Smith, 2025; Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Fleming & Davis, 2018; Maryn et al., 2024; A3). Instead of individuals, incels often present women as a form of commodity that is unfairly distributed. Sex is seen as a gateway to 'normal' masculine adulthood, and being left without it means never reaching this normality. Overall, the achievements incels view as necessary to achieve a good life are out of reach, and incels are left in a twilight zone between childhood and adulthood, being a boy and becoming a respectable adult man (Murphy, 2023). This idea of normative failure is not only incels' invention, but a broader cultural narrative of heterosexual success (Sharkey, 2021).

This instrumental role women play in defining masculine worth and respectability, and the bitterness and resentment directed at both other men and the women seen as denying sex from incels, are visible in both my online discussion and interview data:

In A1, on incel discussions about violence, for those that view the perpetrator of the Plymouth attack as an incel, he is presented as rejected, humiliated, and frustrated as a man, and therefore driven to violence.

In A2, in the online discussion data regarding the past, incels are compared to men in the past, and presented as victims of several historical developments. Feminism is seen as a force emasculating men, and online dating as giving women even more sexual power over men and favouring only the best-looking men. Life as a man in the past, in the 1950s or 1990s, is presented as more aligned with what men 'naturally' want: girlfriends and wives were not as demanding in terms of partners, men were given the dominant role that now has been taken from them, and entertainment freely sexualised women who were otherwise kept out of men's spaces.

In A3, the former and current incels interviewed describe feelings of humiliation, inferiority, and abnormality because of their lack of sexual and romantic experiences. Some also reflect on their past attempts to find partners as stemming from the pressures of succeeding as men and meeting the expectations of 'normal' masculine adulthood rather than a desire for genuine connection or for sex itself.

For incels, acceptable or respectable adult masculinity is measured through sexual conquest and the lack of it. Although not an incel-specific idea, but a broader patriarchal view of masculine sexuality as conquest (see Adams & Smith, 2025; Fleming & Davis, 2018), in incel communities, this becomes central in identity construction. Women are seen as the gatekeepers of masculinity (A3), which in turn becomes a prerequisite for a 'good life' (see Sharkey, 2021), always out of reach. Echoing Pearson's (2019) notion that for nationalists, male honour is located in women's bodies, in the case of incels, their individual and collective failure and victimhood is realised in the lack of access to women's bodies. The absence of women comes to signify the absence of real masculinity and becomes a target of intense focus as a symbol of failure. The constitutive lack (Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008; Stavrakakis, 1999) becomes articulated as a lack of women and sex, and therefore as a lack of respect and recognition from others. Women, while presented as inherently inferior to incels, also gain the power of denying incels the life they feel they were promised (A2). Women, and the lack of women, gain an instrumental rather than intrinsic value in incels' lives, continuously marking their position as losers in a masculine hierarchy.

### 5.3 Victimhood dictating the political implications of incelhood

In the articles included in this thesis, and especially in A3, I demonstrate the diversity of how incels understand what is 'political' in the first place. Rather than seeking to define incel political views as right- or left-leaning, I discuss incels' understanding of their political agency and possibilities on a broader level, focusing on questions of agency, potential for mobilisation, and victimhood.

In incel discourse, incelhood equals victimhood, and therefore no better future can be articulated as motivation for political mobilisation. Incel attachment to and use of victimhood as a political claim defines the possibilities of agency and mobilisation in incel communities. While many political movements with completely different worldviews and goals, from feminism to white supremacy, have successfully harnessed the affective power of injustice and victimhood, incel communities seem to attach to non-agency and passiveness as an integral part of their victimhood identity.

While political movements often provide their (potential) supporters with hope of changing things for the better (e.g. Mouffe, 2005; Pilkington, 2016), the incel worldview offers the opposite. It states that nothing can be done about incels' individual and collective suffering, that there is no hope of changing things for the better, and that even worse is yet to come (A2). While, and through, highlighting this failure and hopelessness, incel communities can also provide individuals with a certain sense of relief (A3); being an incel can constitute 'a comforting symbolic wound without having to make, or being unable to due to mental health issues, any changes to one's life' (Johanssen, 2023, p. 198). The incel narrative explains that, despite neoliberal cultural narratives of meritocracy, affecting one's own life as an incel is

impossible. The possibility for action and enjoyment has been stolen by society and women (see A2), and the control over their own lives is in the hands of others. This 'external locus of control' (Brzuszkiewicz, 2020) both allows and forces incels to 'lay down and rot', admitting that any effort to change one's life is futile.

In addition to a relief from attempting change, the incel worldview also provides individuals with a sense of superiority: it posits that incels are the only ones to truly and honestly see the way the world *really* operates (Maryn et al., 2024). This logic, echoing *ressentiment* and similar to conspiracy theories, places incels as logical, rational observers of a social world where non-intellectual others ('normos' or 'sex-havers') act driven by physical needs, not understanding the system they operate in (see Tirkkonen & Tietjen, 2025). In this sense, incels' outsider identity, while involuntary, becomes moral superiority: while suffering, incels still see the world for what it truly is and are brave enough to accept the *blackpill*; to acknowledge the unpleasant truth instead of looking away.

As we show in A2, nostalgia and victimhood work to construct inceldom as a political identity instead of a private experience, interweaving personal and political grievances (see Pilkington, 2024). Still, the political nature of inceldom is not constructed as agency; it acts 'less as a call to political action and more as a channel for the collective venting of anger' (Ging, 2019, p. 11). Incel nostalgia explains why incels as a group find themselves victimised in modern Western societies, and victimhood as a nodal point organises discourse to justify incel claims of suffering and injustice. The catastrophic narrative of increasing oppression under feminism and women articulates incels as passive, and therefore innocent victims deserving of sympathy and recognition (see Maly et al., 2013) and paints all other claims of suffering or victimhood as false (A3). The backwards-looking, hopeless nostalgia incels engage in does not become restorative and action-fuelling because of incels' strong attachment to victimhood.

For the interview participants in A3, inceldom is not primarily a political identity, and no political mobilisation or action is presented as related to it. The sphere of politics is defined very traditionally as party politics, and incel identity is distanced from it. Incels are presented as isolated or excluded from society and politics, as marginalised figures rather than a movement with political agency. Similar to how the mainstream often individualises misogyny to a property of incels or other problematic men rather than a systemic issue, incels also articulate their role as private individuals separate from any real-world effects misogyny might have.

The victimhood narrative and antagonistic, grievance-based identification can motivate sporadic violence as revenge, but it cannot promise a better tomorrow, no matter incels' actions, and therefore giving up and suffering is the only option for *truecels* to engage in. Giving up and accepting the permanence of suffering also proves true inceldom to others in the community and, as such, sanctifies the sufferer as an innocent martyr.

#### 5.4 Incel violence as proof of incel victimhood

Violence is negotiated on multiple levels in the incel discourse. On one hand, many incels see violence as a justified form of revenge against a world that treats them unfairly (O'Donnell & Shor, 2022; Witt, 2020; A1). In a *ressentimentful* narrative, incels frequently discuss violence against women as positive and justified as a response to their victimisation and idolise perpetrators of violence considered incels or incel motivated (e.g. Lockyer et al., 2024;

Zimmerman, 2024; A1). On the other hand, violence is often discussed by incels as unfairly connected to them to discredit and demonise incels in the public and academic discourse (A1; see also Pilkington, 2016), thus evoking ideas of victimhood and injustice.

Through claiming ultimate victimhood, incel discourse presents incel violence as purely reactionary and resulting from the provocation and oppression they face. As we show in A1, while stances on violence differ, both pro-violence and anti-violence posts use incel victimhood as the central element in interpreting it. This way, victimhood works as a nodal point in discussions on violence, too. Even when violence is presented as political, it is simultaneously depoliticised by centring victimhood: the victims of violence were complacent in incels' suffering and therefore deserving of violence, and the incel perpetrators have been unwillingly driven to violence by their continuous victimisation caused by 'them' (Jeffery & Candea, 2006; A1).

While often purposefully aiming to shock, incels also see outside presentations of them as violent, misogynist, or dangerous as further proof of their victimhood, solidifying grievances and constructing strict ingroup and outgroup boundaries (see Pilkington, 2016; A1). The incels who do not applaud mass violence often distance themselves from it categorically. Using the logic of difference, they claim that in reality, perpetrators presented in the media as incels are not actual incels but fakecels, and their demands are not legitimate (Andersen, 2025; A1). This, too, is used to argue that incels are unfairly stigmatised by outsiders. Paradoxically, as we show in A1, the perceived unfair labelling as violent is also used to justify violence as revenge. Incels' own victimhood claim thus constructs them as the ultimate victims even in cases where actual victims of incel motivated or incel adjacent violence have been physically harmed or killed. In our data in A1, violence is disagreed on, but many incels present the victims of violence as complicit in incels' oppression and therefore deserving of violence. Thus, even through opposing views, incel mass violence becomes a sign and a symbol of incels as being oppressed and victimised by outsiders, and not vice versa.

Despite the prevalence of violent content on incel forums, incels' relationship to it is not straightforward. Incels often state that violent rhetoric is unserious, merely ironic, and meant to either provoke outsiders or to let out frustrations in a peer setting. Like in many extremist communities, claims of irony are also used to justify violent content and to strategically make it more acceptable (Chang, 2020). However, as demonstrated in A1, incels themselves are also unsure about when material is posted ironically and when in seriousness. This demonstrates the ambiguity of ideology formation, negotiation, and dissemination in loose online communities; different individuals can interpret the same material in completely different ways, either as intended or unintended by the original poster.

In addition to analysing the way incel discourse works to justify and legitimise violence, my research also shows that violence is rejected and argued against by many incels. This is visible both in incel forum discussions (A1) and in interview material (A3). While the reasoning behind anti-violence stances differs from moral judgement to more practical worries of further stigmatisation, it is clear that mass violence is debated rather than agreed on among incels. Still, victimhood as a nodal point manages to surpass these differences and to discursively unify incels regardless of their views on violence.

Overall, incel discourse on violence is often used to present incels themselves as passive victims with no agency. In some of the interviews included in this thesis (A3) and in other interview research (e.g. Andersen, 2023), incels construct other men as violent and dangerous, 'harmful others', and themselves as harmless, victimised, and wrongfully labelled. In many ways, incels have become symbolic of violent misogyny in public discourse (see DeCook & Kelly, 2022), but in their own discourse, the aggressive and dominant 'Alpha men' that women mindlessly desire are the real danger. In discussing situations where women face physical violence from intimate partners, incels often still centre themselves as the victims of the situation. They argue that the abused woman deserves her fate for actively making poor life choices (A3), but incels do not deserve their celibacy and loneliness, as there was nothing they could ever have done to change it. This is another demonstration of how victimhood forms the basis of incel self-understanding: incels are being blamed for misogyny they argue is misplaced and have become the scapegoats in public discourse (see Pilkington, 2016; A3).

To understand incel violence and risk better, it is also necessary to examine what we consider to be risky or problematic in the first place. In the case of incels, the risk of violence is often connected to spectacular forms of mass violence. However, the intimate partner violence and sexual violence that incels promote and celebrate, and the harassment, threats, doxing, and image-based sexual abuse incels engage in, often remain less noticed (Kelly et al., 2024). On a practical level, connections between different forms of gendered violence need to be acknowledged in designing interventions and planning preventative measures (McCulloch et al. 2019).

The spectacular forms of mass violence incel perpetrators have engaged in are often recognised by officials and public as misogynistic violence that needs to be prevented. The more normalised forms of violence, mentioned above, are often seen as a private issue stemming from individual problematic and violent men rather than being recognised as systemic (see Applin et al., 2023; Montesanti & Thurston, 2015). Rather than seeing the incel phenomenon as an isolated outlier, it needs to be contextualised as a part of a broader system of misogyny (see DeCook & Kelly, 2022; Jasser, 2026). This makes the issue much more difficult to solve: incels are but one node in the cultural, political, historical, and societal structure of misogyny. As Tranchese and Sugiura (2021) note, inequality is preserved and renewed through normalised actions in the mainstream, not in the fringes. Incel misogyny is dangerous, as evidenced by several violent attacks committed by self-identified incels, and needs to be reacted to and prevented. But there is a tendency to treat incels as more significant than they actually are, and for the violence seen as normal to become invisible. As Gerrand et al. (2025, p. 455) note, different forms of violence receive different responses and levels of concern:

despite the intense focus on incels as a potential terrorist threat, it is important to consider that incel-inspired attacks have resulted in approximately 59 fatalities worldwide (Hoffman et al. 2020), compared with 51,100 women killed by their male partners or family members in 2023 alone (UNODC 2024).

In addition to violence against women, restrictive gender norms and the violence used to uphold them can also be seen as forms of structural violence against men and boys (see Galtung, 1969; Wagner & Condello, 2025). Patriarchal power structures result in violence or the threat of violence against boys and men who do not conform to normative gender

expressions (Applin et al., 2023), as evidenced by the experiences of violence, humiliation, marginalisation, and bullying recounted by individual incels and resulting from performing masculinity and manhood 'wrong' (A3). This structural violence of constricting masculinity norms limits the agency and space that boys and young men have for self-realisation and identity exploration. Incels recognise the structural nature of this violence and mistreatment in their victimhood constructions, and this is also what draws many men into incel communities that offer support and understanding in dealing with these experiences. However, the misogynistic conclusions incels make about the causes of these issues are moulded by their *ressentimentful* narratives about women's excessive power over men and feminism as oppression. As I show in A3, the incel worldview directs incels to blame women for the violence directed at them by other boys and men. Incels attach to and keep rearticulating rigid patriarchal masculinity ideals, thus upholding the very structures that limit and hurt them.

### 5.5 Incels and the framework of extremism

In many ways, the incel worldview and the narratives propagated in incel online discussions match common definitions of violent extremism, presented in chapter 2. They construct a clear outgroup (both women specifically, and non-incels more broadly) and argue that incels are suffering because of the outgroup's actions and existence (Postigo-Fuentes, 2025). They also often state that violent revenge is justified because of their victimhood, although this differs between individuals and communities (A1; A3), and violent, dehumanising rhetoric against women is common in incel discussions. There have also been several violent attacks connected to incel ideology. It seems clear, therefore, that some individuals participating in incel communities become radicalised into violence, and that the misogynist incel ideology and normalisation of violent rhetoric in incel communities are a part of this process. Despite this, there are several difficulties in defining phenomena, communities, or individuals as extremist or radicalised.

Incel communities differ from many extremist communities and movements in the sense that in addition to some degree of acceptance of the violent misogyny prevalent in incel online communities, identification to inceldom requires an identification to involuntary celibacy as a life situation. Not all incels report a complete lack of sexual or romantic experiences (Murphy, 2023), and some emphasise feelings of victimhood, inferiority, and marginalisation more than celibacy itself (A3). Still, if an individual does not see involuntary celibacy as a personally relevant issue in some way, incel communities will likely not appeal to them, even if they already share similar misogynistic views. Inceldom is also constructed in connection to a very explicit, self-deprecating 'loser' identity; being the ugliest, most hopeless incel means also being the truest victim, and therefore the most innocent to the situation. Incels aggressively gatekeep the community, strictly differentiating between actually hopeless 'trueincels' and 'fakeincels' who they see as posers and pretenders (Pettersson et al, 2025; A1).

In public discourse, 'incel' often becomes synonymous with misogyny, and various misogynist views are named 'incel-like' or 'incel-adjacent'. As I argue in the articles included in this thesis, and as other scholars have demonstrated (e.g. Chang, 2020; DeCook & Kelly, 2022; Sugiura 2021), this binary view of misogyny can be problematic. Misogyny is a systemic, deep-rooted cultural and societal structure, and presenting incel misogyny as exceptional risks obscuring the strong connection to mainstream structural misogyny incel ideology is built upon. As Lisa Sugiura (2021, p. 69) notes: 'Pathologising groups such as incels as "deviant others", distinct

from “ordinary men”, is problematic as it suggests that explicit sexism is confined to these small groups rather than being symbolic of wider societal perspectives and behaviours’ (see also Chang, 2020; DeCook & Kelly, 2022; Gentry, & Sjoberg, 2022; Harrington, 2020; Jasser, 2026; Pearson et al., 2020). The online and offline spheres of misogyny are closely connected and feed into each other (Rothermel, 2020). Presenting incels as extreme and deviant allows for the mainstream to portray moral superiority and to distance itself from misogyny that, in reality, is widespread and structural.

Pearson (2019) uses the term extremism while simultaneously criticising its application to specific groups. According to her, exceptionalising certain men as ‘extreme’ or ‘toxic’ works to shift the focus from structural to individual level, and to present the problem as being particular men rather than patriarchy. This framing, she argues, ‘does nothing to disrupt existing gendered relations’ (p. 1259). In the same vein, in the case of incel communities, Sugiura (2021) demonstrates how exceptionalising incels as deviant or exceptional works to construct other men and the broader society as good, safe, and ‘normal’, conveniently othering incels and ignoring the connections to broader systemic misogyny and gender norms (see also Gentry, & Sjoberg, 2022).

In addition to this normalisation of the mainstream, naming and labelling also often simplify complex phenomena (see Pearson & Winterbotham, 2017). Terms like ‘radicalisation’ and ‘extremism’ tend to direct attention to endpoints and transitions between categories rather than a holistic view of individual processes (Bailey & Edwards, 2017; Pilkington, 2024). Structural factors are often left in the background, while the individual level of radicalisation to extremism is emphasised. Although psychological perspectives on individual radicalisation trajectories are necessary to understand the different vulnerabilities and pathways to extremism, the idea of an individual’s pathological transformation from ‘normal’ to ‘abnormal’ has been criticised for ignoring the phenomenon’s structural aspects, as well as its ambiguity and fluidity that flees clear-cut definitions (Pilkington, 2024; Rahimi, 2025; A1).

Perhaps the difficulty of defining incels neatly into one category or another also reflects the changing nature of extremism in itself. Understandings of political, ideological, and extremist action in general are in flux: mixed, unclear, and unstable (MUU) extremist ideologies are becoming more common, political views are becoming more fragmented, and political and non-political content blend together on social media (e.g. Collins, 2024). This complexity, fragmentation, and mixing of different ideological elements is increasingly visible in incel online spaces, too (Brace et al., 2023).

## 6. Conclusions: Acknowledging different levels

As I have demonstrated in this thesis, incel discourse uses victimhood in various, complex ways to justify incels' misogynist worldview. The contradicting, affective ways victimhood works to motivate belonging shows that it is central enough to allow combining contrary and even opposite views into itself. It acts as a nodal point that collects and structures the incel discourse around it, defining all other topics in relation to it. It also acts as an empty signifier, uniting different ideas, demands, and individuals into a discursive unity and thus constructing incels as a community (Laclau, 2005). I have also analysed victimhood as a floating signifier, whereas it is contested and competed for, in a discursive struggle over which groups get to use victimhood and suffering as political claims.

While the centrality of victimhood in incel discourse has been recognised before, my research shows its complexity by illuminating angles and viewpoints not previously researched. I show the diversity of incel negotiations on violence, the varying views on an ideal society, and the ambiguity individual incels have in attaching to these competing and contradictory narratives. I also demonstrate the affective and antagonistic, but ultimately pessimistic nature of incel victimhood; rather than motivating political efforts in either parliamentary or violent extremist forms, it dictates a deterministic hopelessness that leaves incels with a political non-agency. This view constructs political violence as possibly justified as revenge, but ultimately useless in making any broader societal change.

Incel communities are one way of reacting to a perceived failing at masculinity. The 'solutions' manosphere actors and communities provide men are short-term and individual, at best. They feed into the reactionary, gender conservative projects that end up upholding narrow masculinity norms and increasing, rather than dismantling, the gendered pressures young men face (see Gerrand et al., 2025). In this way, the patriarchal system incel and manosphere actors draw from and feed into does victimise boys and men. This is not just an individual problem or vulnerability; the paths into incel communities are structural, cultural, and communal. The structural nature of the issue does not mean that individuals and communities should not be held accountable for their actions, or that incel rhetoric and violence would be acceptable. But it does mean that a deeper analysis is necessary, and that the current 'deeply neoliberal and individualist' responses to the problem (DeCook & Kelly, 2021, p. 14), centred around detecting or treating 'problematic' or 'risky' individuals, are only treating symptoms of the broader issue (see also Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021; Chang, 2020).

As many researchers have noted (e.g. Chang, 2020; DeCook & Kelly, 2021; Ging, 2019; Sugiura, 2021), and my articles also demonstrate, incel misogyny cannot be understood separately from the mainstream. Incels are a product of much broader gender systems, a symptom stemming from a long history of misogyny. As discussed in this thesis, this connectedness poses difficulties in terms of definitions. Calls for specificity in distinguishing between misogynistic and non-misogynistic incels and violent and non-violent incels demonstrate the need for careful consideration in language used (Czerwinsky, 2023). However, as I have shown in the articles included in this thesis, drawing lines between misogynistic and non-misogynistic or violent and non-violent incels inside misogynistic incel communities is difficult, both for outside observers and self-identified incels themselves. Misogyny is systemic and exists as a continuum rather than a binary, and the intensity of individuals' violent or misogynist views fluctuate in time, making specific definitions difficult or

even impossible (A3; see also Pilkington, 2025; Miller-Idriss, 2017). The diversity of views and different levels of attachment to the incel ideology need to be more carefully acknowledged in future research on incels.

The varying level and depth of individual incels' misogynist views (A3) further calls into question the academic and public focus on incels as a key concern when it comes to misogyny (see DeCook & Kelly, 2021; Gerrand et al., 2025). To many of the interview participants in A3, inceldom had become a social stigma that prevented them from discussing their difficulties with others. But for many, their past or present misogynist or sexist views did not substantially differ from mainstream gender conservative and essentialist views. If these individuals had adopted similar sexist and misogynist views, but never adopted the incel identity, would they have been seen as a safety concern or a problem that requires societal measures?

Patriarchal gender norms and ideals produce the masculinity pressures incels struggle with. If sexual prowess and conquest were not seen as a sign of 'normal', respectable heterosexual masculinity, there would not be such need to seek support for feelings of inadequacy from incel communities (A3). If intimacy, support, and affection were more broadly seen as an acceptable feature of men's non-romantic and non-sexual relationships, heterosexual relationships would not need to be seen as the only avenue to alleviate the loneliness and need for intimacy incels lament (see Smiler, 2014). Acknowledging the complexity of the issue at hand requires recognising incel victimhood claims as both sincere and strategic, both concealing existing gendered power structures and vocalising actual suffering masculinity norms produce.

When ideologies and views formerly considered extreme become increasingly mainstreamed, the contingency of extremism as a signifier becomes visible (see Krzyżanowski, 2020; Miller-Idriss & Pilkington, 2017). While never completely marginal, currently, misogynistic, male supremacist views are being normalised in mainstream politics and media globally (Gerrand et al., 2025; Roose & Cook, 2025). The mainstreaming of violent misogyny makes drawing the line between 'moderate' and 'extreme' even more difficult. If, as Schmid posited in 2014, 'extremism can only be defined with regard to a benchmark that, in the present situation, is constitutional liberal-democratic Western societies' (p. 20–21), then what does the mainstreaming of ideas previously labelled extremist mean for the concept presently? When mainstream politicians openly argue for removing women's suffrage, women's health and reproductive rights are violated by state actors across the world, and vocalising blatantly, violently misogynistic views leads to political and monetary success, it is clear that the issue is not limited to specific online communities.

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