

Weaponized Subordination

How Incels Discredit Themselves to Degrade Women

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Abstract

In this article, I analyze weaponized subordination, wherein men strategically use their perceived subordinate masculine status to legitimate their degradation of women. I draw on a qualitative analysis of 9,062 comments made on a popular involuntary celibate (“incel”) discussion board. Incels are an online community of men who define themselves by their inability to participate in heterosexual sex/relationships. Incel forums are characterized by self-loathing, anger, and misogyny, with several incels having committed murders (e.g., Elliot Rodger). I first detail the type of subordination incels argue they experience—a social bias in favor of attractive people they call lookism. Next, I explain how incels perceive themselves as permanently subordinated “failed men.” I then demonstrate how incels weaponize their subordination, using their perceived subordinate status to justify their misogyny. Findings are discussed in relation to hybrid masculinity and conceptualizations of subordinate masculinities.

How do men who see themselves as subordinate participate in the subjugation of women? Involuntarily celibates (“incels”) are a predominantly online community of men who define themselves by their inability to have heterosexual sex and/or relationships. Incels perceive themselves as “ugly, genetic trash” who are dominated (or “mogged”) by other men and rejected by women. Incels view themselves as subordinated due to lookism, a form of social bias favoring the physically attractive. Despite their claims of subordination, incels assault, harass, and stalk women. Incels are also tied to several mass murders, including Elliot Rodger’s murder of six people in the United States (e.g., Witt 2020). Incels simultaneously situate themselves as failed, hopeless losers while celebrating, encouraging, and participating in violence against women.

In relation to masculinities theory (Connell 1995), incels have been described as both too subordinate to be hegemonic and too misogynistic to be subordinate (Ging 2019; Nagle 2017). I reconcile these perspectives by demonstrating how men weaponize their subordination to subjugate women. I explicitly position weaponized subordination as a hybrid masculine practice (Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Demetriou 2001; Messner 2007; Wetherell and Edley 1999) that combines elements of hegemonic and subordinate masculinity (Connell 1995), and not as a type of man or masculine identity. In contrast to previous discussions of hybrid masculinities that analyze how “toughness” is blended with “tenderness” (e.g., Bridges and Pascoe 2014), I argue that incels blend subordination and subjugation, leveraging their perceived status as discredited men to justify their misogyny.

My argument draws on a qualitative analysis of 9,062 comments made on a popular incel discussion board. I first describe how incels see themselves as subordinated by lookism before demonstrating how incels view their subordinate masculine status as permanent. Last, I explain how incels weaponize their subordination to legitimate their interpersonal and systemic violence against women.

Incels, The Manosphere, and Networked Misogyny

Research suggests that incels denigrate themselves and other men (Ging 2019; Glace, Dover, and Zatkin 2021; Pelzer et al., 2021), endorse racism, sexism, and violence against women (Baele, Brace, and Coan 2021; Chang 2022; Ging 2019; Halpin and Richard 2021; Menzie 2022; Nagle 2017; O'Malley, Holt, and Holt 2022; Pelzer et al. 2021; Preston, Halpin, and Maguire 2021), and celebrate mass murderers (e.g., Elliot Rodger; see Menzie 2022; Witt 2020). Incels are part of the larger manosphere—male-oriented websites that endorse men's rights and critique feminism (Ging 2019; Incels.wiki 2021a; Nagle 2017). Despite some differences and confrontations between them, incels and other manosphere communities participate in networked misogyny (e.g., Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019), believe men are the victims of systemic misandry (Marwick and Caplan 2018), and share a “red pill” ideology, which represents men becoming aware of the dangerous influence of feminism (Van Valkenburgh 2021). However, as detailed below, incels are also characterized by a black pill ideology, which emphasizes that they will never establish a romantic/sexual relationship and will be “forever alone.”

Incels' networked misogyny (Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019; Ging 2019; Jane 2018; Mantilla 2013; Marwick and Caplan 2018; Massanari 2017; Moloney and Love 2018) is facilitated by the affordances of their online environment, which organizes members' participation (boyd 2011). For instance, the site I analyze explicitly operates as a male preserve (Matthews 2016), limiting participation to heterosexual men with little or no romantic experience, with rules stating that “female(s) [are] not allowed: [and are] banned on sight, no exceptions,” that members cannot “post gay or trans content of any kind,” and that discussions of “personal romantic or sexual experiences” can “result in a warning or ban” (Incels.is 2021). Situating misogyny as rational, the site hosts an extensive wiki (Incels.wiki 2022b), articles on incel topics (e.g., “hypergamy,” “sexual Marxism”), and a glossary of incel terms (e.g., “war pig,” “landwhale”). See the Online Appendix for definitions of such terms. In this article, I will argue that incels' misogyny rests on their perceived subordination, as they situate themselves as failed men to justify violence toward women.

Hegemony, Subordination, and Hybridity

In this article, I argue that incels participate in both hegemonic and subordinate masculinity. There is considerable debate regarding hegemonic masculinity (e.g., Beasley 2008; Messerschmidt 2019; Yang 2020), with Connell herself (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) stating that it is often reified as a type of powerful man rather than a type of relation. Here, I use Connell's (1995) conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity: a set of practices that advances and legitimates patriarchy, upholds the subjugation of women, and is dominant vis-à-vis other masculine performances. I like-

wise use Connell's (1995) conceptualization of subordinate masculinity: stigmatized, subordinated masculine practices that are "expelled" from hegemony and often explicitly denigrated, mocked, and socially sanctioned. Connell (1995) and others (Flood 2007; Mooney-Somers and Ussher 2010; Pascoe 2007; Solebello and Elliott 2011) argue that participation in heterosexual sex is often used to differentiate between hegemonic and subordinate masculinities, and this is particularly salient for understanding incels. I demonstrate that incels position themselves as subordinate, emasculated, "genetic trash," in relation to men they see as attractive, desirable, and hegemonic (i.e., "Chads"). Whereas Connell (1995) differentiates subordinate and hegemonic masculinity and is skeptical of arguments that combine such practices (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), I argue that weaponized subordination blends these practices, as incels draw on their self-perceived subordination to legitimate their hegemonic participation in the subjugation of women and to buttress masculine hierarchies.

By arguing that weaponized subordination combines hegemonic and subordinate masculinity, my analysis aligns with work on hybrid masculinity (Anderson 2009; Bridges 2021; Demetriou 2001; Messner 2007; Wetherell and Edley 1999). For instance, Bridges (2014) demonstrates how straight men borrow elements of gay culture, combining "toughness" with "tenderness" to distance themselves from stigmatizing stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity, while nonetheless enjoying the benefits of patriarchy. In this sense, advantaged men might strategically adopt practices from men they perceived as beneath them in a masculine order.

Drawing on masculinity theories, Witt (2020) argues that incels perform hegemonic masculinity, Nagle (2017) suggests incels are "too beta" to be hegemonic, while both Ging (2019) and Glace, Dover, and Zatzkin (2021) argue that incels strategically distance themselves from hegemony by situating themselves as victims of feminism (see also Katz and Tirone 2015). In contrast to these studies and previous hybrid masculinity analyses (e.g., Bridges and Pascoe 2014), I do not argue that incels strategically distance themselves from hegemony (or what I call "borrowing from below"), but rather position themselves as subordinate men who adopt hegemonic practices (or what I call "borrowing from above"). Although incels frequently connect masculinity with specific types of men, my analysis does not identify men as hegemonic or subordinated, but instead focuses on perceptions and claims of hegemony and subordination. In this article, I build on previous research demonstrating how subordinate groups might participate in misogyny or "prop up" dominant groups (Ezzell 2009, 2012; Klein 2012; Sumerau 2012). In this article, I also contribute to discussions of hybrid masculinity by demonstrating how men weaponize subordination by using their perceived subordinate status to legitimate hegemonic practices (e.g., subjugating women).

My analysis draws on masculinity theories (Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Connell 1995) but contrasts with other conceptualizations of harmful masculine practices, specifically aggrieved entitlement (Kimmel 2013), manhood acts (Schwalbe 2014), and toxic masculinity (e.g., Haider 2016; Kupers 2005). Aggrieved entitlement addresses men's desire to "reclaim" and "restore" (Kimmel 2013, 20) their advantages and men's anger with

their decreasing status. While incels certainly see themselves as entitled to women’s bodies (Preston, Halpin, and Maguire 2021), they also view themselves as hopeless losers who will be “forever alone.” Moreover, incels routinely situate themselves as dominated (or “mogged”) by both other men and women. As I argue, incel hostility is about not “restoring” but instead destroying. Here, weaponized subordination demonstrates how men react when they believe their status has been permanently lost.

Both manhood acts (Schwalbe 2014) and toxic masculinity¹ (Haider 2016; Kupers 2005) emphasize domination, with the former approach arguing that manhood is about domination and proving creditability as a man, while the latter focuses on the “destructive” aspects of hegemonic masculinity that foster domination (Kupers 2005). In contrast, I argue that focusing on incels’ participation in domination and misogyny omits how such practices rest upon their perceived subordinate masculine status. That is, incels are not just participants in domination, but also view themselves as thoroughly dominated. Whereas both Schwalbe (2014) and Kupers (2005) critique masculinities theory (Connell 1995), I suggest that masculinities theory highlights the multiple and flexible ways that men maintain gender inequality (see also Bridges 2014).

Data and Method

Online communities are important sites of social interaction requiring systematic study (see also boyd 2011; Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019; Jane 2018; Longo 2018; Marwick and Caplan 2018; Moloney and Love 2018). To do this, I analyze 9,062 comments collected from the discussion board on incels.is. I selected incels.is because discussion boards are the primary site of incel interactions, and with nearly 15,000 members (Incels.is 2022), it is the largest active incel discussion board. The members have written more than 320,000 threads and collectively spent more than 1.6 million hours on the website (Incels.is 2022).

Although incels are more diverse than frequently assumed, they are unified by their commitments to misogyny (Halpin and Richard 2021). In 2019, a previous iteration of incels.is completed a survey ($N = 400$), which provides some coarse demographic data of members. Fifty percent of users were enrolled or completed high school, 39 percent were enrolled or completed college, and 11 percent were enrolled or completed graduate school (Incels.wiki 2022a). In terms of age, 8 percent of respondents reported they were 17 years or younger, 64 percent were between 18 and 25 years, 18 percent were between 26 and 30 years, and the remaining 10 percent were above 30 years. Respondents identified as “white” (56 percent), “Middle Eastern” (8.2 percent), “Latino” (8.4 percent), “Black” (8.2 percent), “Asian” (5.4 percent), “Indian” (5.0 percent), and “Other” (8.8 percent). Most users identified as “Middle Class” (59 percent), while 34 percent reported “Lower Class” and 7 percent reported “Upper Class.”

¹ Harrington (2021) has also demonstrated that the term is often not operationalized in research.

As some threads on the board receive few (e.g., 4–5) or no comments, I analyzed threads that received the highest number of comments during a 3-month period in 2019. Most threads sampled received between 100 and 200 comments. I used this sampling strategy to focus on popular topics that generated interest among incels (in terms of quantity of replies). Analyzing threads also allowed me to detail interactions between incels. I coded each thread line-by-line to generate codes and produce operational definitions for each code, resulting in 55 discrete codes that I organized with NvivoTM. Codes used in the article include “the black pill,” “assaulting women,” “masculine order,” and “solutions to the incel problem.” Data were collected as part of a larger project on incels, although I am solely responsible for all parts of this analysis. The study received research ethics board approval.

For data analysis, I used analytic abduction (Halpin and Richard 2021; Tavory and Timmermans 2014), which leverages abduction as a method of inquiry to direct researchers to novel or surprising findings that might expand, refine, or critique theory. In this specific analysis, I attended to the contrasts between incels’ repeated assertions that they are subordinated and disadvantaged men with their enthusiastic support for aspects of hegemony. My analysis continuously attended to how the data might relate to theory, examining how incels’ aggression (e.g., endorsing systemic misogyny) in combination with their claims of being “failed” men might contribute to masculinity theories (Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Connell 1995).

This study has limitations. First, incels’ online discourse might contrast with their offline performances. Future studies could address how incels reconcile their misogynistic online activities with their offline relationships and interactions. Second, I analyze comments made by individuals who are active in the incel community. Future research could examine men who read but do not comment on these websites (e.g., “lurkers”), as well as detail pathways into and out of incel communities. Third, while I discuss race below, this analysis primarily focuses on subordination rather than marginalization (Connell 1995). Future research could detail incels’ engagement with classism and racism (however, see Halpin and Richard (2021) for a discussion of incels, race, and racism).

Findings

I present findings in three themes. First, I demonstrate how incels perceive themselves as subordinated men. Second, I explain how incels perceive their subordination to be permanent. Third, I detail how incels use their perceived subordination to legitimate hegemonic practices, a hybrid masculine practice I refer to as weaponized subordination.

Lookism and Incels' Claims of Subordination

Incels perceive themselves as disadvantaged by lookism, which they define as “prejudice or discrimination based on one’s looks” (Incels.wiki 2021b). Incels suggest that lookism is a structural and interpersonal form of disadvantage, like sexism and racism. Incels use lookism to establish themselves as subordinate men (Connell 1995), seeing their bodies as failed masculine projects in comparison with men they see as hegemonic (i.e., “Chads”).

Incels’ discussions of lookism buttress hegemonic bodily ideals (Connell 1995) while emphasizing that incels have subordinate, emasculated bodies. For instance, incels ubiquitously use height to evaluate men, with User 1² stating that “height comes before everything in the eyes of foids [a derogatory term for women]. It’s over for manlets.” Incels use the term “manlet” to feminize, infantilize, and subordinate shorter men, themselves included. Incels similarly emasculate themselves in relation to numerous physical features, including their weak jawlines (“jawlets”), thin wrists (“wristlets”), or tall but thin frames (“lanklets”). Here, incels use physical appearance to define masculinity (see also Flood 2007; Mooney-Somers and Ussher 2010; Pascoe 2007; Solebello and Elliott 2011) and determine whether a man will be able to participate in heterosexual sex.

Incels see their masculinity as discredited (Goffman 1963) by such physical deficiencies, which identify them as disadvantaged by lookism and explain why women dismiss them. For example, User 2 states that “wrist size is important ... wrist [size] correlates almost perfectly with frame, and you need a strong natural frame to be considered a ‘real man’.” These nuanced physical shortcomings are a masculine synecdoche, with the perceived failings of one body part representing an incel’s holistic exclusion from manhood. Similarly, in a thread on “fake” incels with nearly 200 replies, User 3 states,

I get zero matches on Tinder with professional photographs, the most disgusting subhuman foids on Plenty of Fatties [i.e., the dating site Plenty of Fish] want nothing to do with me ... This is despite me maintaining acceptable hygiene and well above average physical fitness, and having impeccable etiquette. I am an absolute grotesque subhuman.

In this comment, User 3 emphasizes that while he exercises (“physical fitness”) and has good etiquette (despite calling women subhuman foids), he is still too ugly to receive any attention from women.

Incels dismiss the relevance of personality, with users who encourage personality changes being insulted and/or banned. For instance, in a thread on Elliot Rodger with more than 100 replies, User 4 states that “some of these fucks [other users] would seriously get laid if they had better personalities.” User 5 sanctions this comment: “do mods let you guys say shit like this now? You’re joking right?” While User 4 then qualifies his argument by stating self-improvement only works if you are not “repulsive,” he is still critiqued by others:

² I refer to posters as “Users,” and I use numbers to differentiate users.

Are you saying that an upper tier [attractive] normie [normal person] with a very good personality would out slay [have more sex than] a misogynistic nonNT [non-neurotypical] Gigachad [very attractive man]? ... You somehow stupidly believe personality bears any weight on the attraction a foid will have. (User 6)

User 7 likewise tells User 4 that he “doesn’t even know” the “blackpill” and should leave the community. User 4 attempts to defend his point while numerous other users insult him, although he concedes that “I never said personality can be used to compensate for physical ugliness.” Thus, incels assert that lookism determines their masculine status by excluding them from romantic/sexual life.

Incels further demonstrate that personality does not matter by stating that Chads (men they see as attractive, hegemonic archetypes) are appealing to women regardless of their personalities. In a thread that receives over 200 replies, User 8 complains that a YouTube video of a Chad only saying his name has received 1 million views. User 8 also shares screenshots from the video comments, containing replies such as “omg I think I’m pregnant” and “this was the best 1 minute and 9 seconds of my life.” In the thread, incels discuss the Chad’s physique:

Tall, white, long mandible, lean face, godlike eye area, retard haircut, but as [a] Chad [you] can’t do anything wrong. It’s impossible to fuck up. [He has the] perfect chin to philtrum (upper lip) ratio. As I said, he has an average asymmetrical nose but that’s it. He’s young and has a deep voice as well. (User 9)

Chads are not just “godlike,” but as the pinnacle of male attractiveness, they also “mog” (dominate) incels. Users state the Chad in the video “mogs me into oblivion” (User 10) and “mogs me to hell and back” (User 11), while those who suggest he isn’t attractive are ridiculed. Chads are further established as hegemonic archetypes in another thread, with User 12 suggesting that even affluent men “will be mogged” walking “down the street next to Chad from the local high school.” Here, incels situate lookism as trumping other forms of social advantage, with even marginalized men (Connell 1995) “mogging” elite men because of their sexual desirability.

Incels establish hegemonic and subordinate masculinity in relation to lookism. Incels perceive Chads as “gods” who deserve to dominate men and control women, while incels are emasculated subhumans. Although incels respond to their subordination to Chads with both admiration and resentment, their perception of themselves as subordinated distinguishes their practices from other explanations of men’s negative actions (e.g., Kimmel 2013; Kupers 2005). Specifically, incels are not claiming to be domineering men focused on the subordination of others, but instead see themselves as dominated, defeated, and subjugated.

The Black Pill and Incels' Fatalism

Incels “take the black pill” in response to lookism, which is the “fatalistic” acceptance that “physical attractiveness” determines men’s romantic opportunities (Incels.wiki 2021b). Through the black pill, incels situate their subordinate masculine status (Connell 1995) as fixed, seeing themselves as failed men and “genetic trash.”

The black pill contrasts with the red pill, a term manosphere communities use to describe awakening to the destructive influence of feminism (Van Valkenburgh 2021). Similar to aggrieved entitlement (Kimmel 2013) and toxic masculinity (Kupers 2005), the red pill calls for action against feminism, reclaiming male privileges, and encourages men to assert dominance. While the red pill operates as a masculine call to arms, the black pill requires a fatalistic acceptance that lookism relegates incels to permanent subordination (Connell 1995). As User 13 observes, “this is what the black pill teaches us. It teaches that things are predetermined, and that we have little to no control.” In another thread, User 14 states,

Men usually peak in their early 20s, usually 20–23. It levels out at 24 and finally stops entirely at 25. After 25, things ain’t getting better, only worse. If you[’re] destined to go bald then it usually starts then, if it hasn’t already. Your brain has fully developed at this point, so you ain’t getting any smarter. Your height is now fully locked in, you ain’t getting any taller. The bones in your face are now fully formed and locked in ... If you haven’t gotten laid by that point you likely never will. It’s a gradual downhill slide from then on where you finally crash and burn at 30.

Although this quotation explicitly references sex, incels also perceive themselves as equally precluded from having romantic relationships. While responding to a question of whether he would date his looksmatch (a women of equal physical attractiveness), User 15 suggests that if “she was very affectionate, loving, caring, wouldn’t want kids and accept my sexual desires,” then he would say, “fuck it, let’s have a relationship.” However, acceptance of the black pill means his desires are irrelevant because his “looks-matches would never want [him].” For incels, the black pill encapsulates the rejection and stigmatization (Goffman 1963) of being an unattractive man, as well as the perception that “incel” is a fixed and solidified master status (Hughes 1945). Although incels could hypothetically change their status, they see themselves as permanently discredited men who will never participate in heterosexual sex/relationships.

Incels’ fatalism is further shaped by racism and marginalization (Connell 1995). Some incels explicitly identify as white nationalists (see Halpin and Richard 2021), whereas incels identifying as both white and men of color use racist and racialized labels (e.g., Asian men are referred to as “ricecels”). However, incels also argue that men of color are doubly disadvantaged by both lookism and racism, with users arguing that “there is no hope for us ethnics” (User 16) because “whites are the preferred race by both ethnics and other whites” (User 3). Whereas men of color have “no hope,” white

incels are positioned as “volcels” (voluntary incels) because of the dominance of white beauty standards. As User 17 states in an argument with a white incel, “keep being delusional all you want. Bottom line: you’re a white guy who refused to buy a ticket to Bangkok. You’re not an incel.” The implication of this argument is that men “just need to be white” because women of color will accept any white man, including incels. (Below I discuss how these misogynistic arguments frame women.) Incels situate men of color as worse off than white incels because they are hopelessly disadvantaged by both racism and lookism.

The black pill is fatalistic, but it also positions incels as rational, scientific, and objective about their status and the impact of lookism (Preston, Halpin, and Maguire 2021). Incels.is hosts a wiki page on the “scientific black pill” (Incels.wiki 2022c) that contains links to 219 arguments using academic research to “prove” women’s mate preferences are determined by lookism. Incels echo such arguments, with User 18 referencing “countless tinder studies” showing women only interact with attractive men. Those who resist the black pill are situated as deluded. For instance, User 19 argues that incels should “orbit” women (trying to attract someone by investing time, attention, and resources), which results in numerous insults, ban requests, and User 20 calling his thread “propaganda” that “goes against the common social science.” The black pill is fatalistic and inescapable, but accepting the black pill marks incels as enlightened and rational.

Some incels attempt to resist or refute the black pill mitigate by “maxxing,” which is an effort to become more appealing to women through surgery or self-improvement (e.g., working out or “gymmaxxing”). In a thread receiving nearly 150 replies, User 21 states he has “absolutely no respect for incels who aren’t even trying,” noting that for approximately \$32,000 incels can purchase surgeries to improve their hairline, jaw, and penis. Many users are critical of this proposal, with User 22 responding, “we stopped trying because we realized it’s over. If you have to TRY it’s over.” Similarly, in another thread, User 23 attempts to put a positive spin on the black pill by arguing that incels “are ensuring the health of future human beings” by not procreating and that “it is US who GIVE CHAD power.” This positive reframing is soundly critiqued as a “massive cope” (a defense mechanism, User 24) and “the biggest cope I have ever seen” (User 25). Any hope or positivity is treated as an incel false consciousness that prevents true acceptance of the black pill and necessitates elimination. In this sense, the community facilitates active demoralization and the fatalistic acknowledgment that all incels are permanently subordinate men.

Given the fatalism of the black pill and antagonism toward “copes,” many incels discuss suicide (see also Daly and Laskovtsov 2022). In response to User 26 reporting being rejected by many women, others respond, “cope with the rope [i.e., suicide by hanging]” (User 27) and “bro, just rope already” (User 28). Similarly, in a thread with more than 100 replies discussing efforts to escape the incelldom, User 29 describes himself as “a low iq, balding, manlet oldcel” stating that its “not long [until] I rope, I reckon maybe within a year or so.” User 30 sympathizes, “I know how you feel but

you only get one life. Are you sure you are ready to give up on it and go the eternal nothingness?” User 29 replies, “Yeah I’m scared of being dead ... If there was even a hint of an afterlife and the possibility you become some type of astral spirit or energy on different realm I would have roped years ago.” Whereas User 30 discourages User 29’s discussion of suicide, User 31 encourages him to not be afraid of death: “you shouldn’t be scared. If it’s true that there’s no afterlife, you won’t experience anything while dead because you won’t exist anymore.” User 29 does not reply to this last comment and is eventually banned from incels.is.

In contrast to other discussions of men’s negative actions (e.g., Kimmel 2013; Kuipers 2005; Schwalbe 2014), incels view themselves as permanently discredited men. Although I focus on how incels leverage this perceived subordination to justify misogyny (discussed below), their discussions of suicide also reveal how they weaponize subordination against themselves, viewing their inability to have heterosexual relationships as marking them as unworthy of living.

Weaponized Subordination

Incels have been described as both too “beta” to be hegemonic (Nagle 2017) and too misogynistic to be subordinated (Ging 2019). In this section, I demonstrate that both descriptions are apt, as incels weaponize their perceived subordinate masculine status to legitimate misogyny and male supremacy. Here, weaponized subordination is a hybrid practice (Bridges and Pascoe 2014): It leverages incels’ perception of themselves as subordinate (as demonstrated above) to legitimate their participation in hegemony (e.g., denigrating women; Connell 1995).

One way that incels weaponize their subordination is by Chadfishing, creating a fake dating profile with an attractive man’s photo and then mistreating women who match with the profile. In a thread receiving more than 100 replies, User 8 shares screenshots from conversations with numerous women he is Chadfishing:

When Chadfishing these girls are like slaves. I can call them whores and sluts during phone sex and say the most vulgar shit and degrade them and they enjoy it ... They genuinely wanna please Chadfish [because] they don’t want him leaving them, so they say “ok” to everything. I really like that ... Anyways back to [my] Chadfish harem.

Other users applaud User 8, stating that this “proves” women “are toilets” or “cum toilets” who deserve to be degraded because they accept and enjoy such behavior from Chads. User 8 further brags about receiving nude photos and recording women during phone sex with his Chadfish, debasing women as he imagines Chad debases women. However, these actions do not make User 8 a Chad, a “real man,” or restore his masculinity. In response to User 8’s post, User 35 states, “your Chadfish would have had taken the virginity of a dozen women by the end of high school. Fresh pussy,

untouched by work or duty.” User 8 replies, “but that’s not [an] option for me,” adding that he will commit suicide “by next year.” In contrast to men who distance themselves from hegemony by borrowing subordinate or marginalized practices (“borrowing from below”), incels situate themselves as permanently subordinated men but imitate the denigrating and misogynistic treatment of women they associate with hegemonic Chads (“borrowing from above”).

As described above, incels discuss how men of color are perceived as both subordinated and marginalized (Connell 1995); however, such perceptions are also weaponized against women. Incels ubiquitously refer to women of color with racist variations of “whore” (e.g., calling Asian women “noodlewhores”), situating women of color as sexually available to all white men. Women of color are further denigrated during debates over who counts as a “real” incel. For instance, in an adaptation of Chadfishing, User 36 uses a white incel’s photos to create a fake Tinder profile. He then shares screenshots from a conversation he claims he is having with a Saudi woman:

I used a “whitecel” pic on Tinder and I am getting this extremely horny ethnic foid on my ass ... bitch is wetter than the Persian Gulf ... [she] just sent me her nudes ... “whitecel” should leave this forum, as there is hope for them ... [white incels just need to] move abroad [and they can] plough bitches like dogs who crawl up to you.

Several white users argue that User 36 must have created a Tinder profile using a Chad rather than a white incel, while others claim they are “real” incels because they have never received a Tinder match. Such debates reflect weaponized subordination and how subordination operates as a resource for incels. That is, white incels vigorously resist these claims not because they are racist or misogynistic, but because they threaten white incels’ perceptions of themselves as permanently subordinated. Here, marginalization is also weaponized against women of color. Incels congratulate User 36 on “exposing” women of color as “sluts” and “whores,” who are “traitors” (User 37) for pursuing interracial relationships. This sense of betrayal is tied to users’ desires to see the woman physically harmed, with User 38 stating, “what a filthy whore. Her father should bury her alive to teach her a lesson.” Incels acknowledge marginalization, white privilege, and the dominance of white beauty standards, but these are a means to compete for legitimacy while humiliating and subjugating women of color.

The weaponizing of subordination also informs incel violence. For instance, in a thread with more than 100 posts, incels discuss a video of a “Chad” mocking two women while receiving oral sex from them. Users state, “I would share some bullets with them. It’s the least I can do” (User 39), “dumb whores, get raped by boat migrants” (User 40), and “knowing that I will never even get as much as a kiss while others get to live in obscene sexual luxury makes me want to kill everyone who does” (User 41). Such violent desires do not restore or assert their masculinity (e.g., Schwalbe 2014) because incels see themselves as subordinated men permanently unable to participate in heterosexual sex. Instead, their subordinated status is weaponized to justify violence.

Incel violence includes murder and mass murder, such as Elliot Rodger’s murder of six people in Isla Vista, California. Some users endorse these killings, referring to Rodger as “Saint Elliot” (e.g., Menzie 2022; Witt 2020) and using the phrase “Going ER” (“going Elliot Rodger”), or simply capitalizing the letters “ER” to discuss murder or mass murder. Other users are explicitly opposed to acts of violence. User 42 states, “while I have a dislike of society, I will not kill anyone. People need to stop thinking that all incels will shoot people.” In another thread, User 4 claims that Rodger is a “bad example” of an incel, with User 43 adding, “he didn’t kill a single person who bullied him ... the people he killed were way more incel than he was ... and he also mogged the shit out me” (i.e., Rodger is more attractive than User 43). While some incels distance themselves from mass killers, others only critique the choice of victims (e.g., incels, children) and assert that some (e.g., Rodger) are too attractive or dominant to be a “real” incel.

Incels’ weaponized subordination is further demonstrated by User 44’s lengthy discussion of witnessing his college dormmate having sex. Suspecting his roommate (Chad) was about to have sex with his partner (Stacy), User 44 offers to leave the dorm. Chad and Stacy promise they won’t have sex and encourage him to stay, but begin having sex as soon as they suspect he is asleep:

They both laugh and talk trash about me, saying that I look ugly when I sleep. He finally came and the whole room had a stench of dick and cum, and they started laughing about how they were “so smart” ... [later] I go back to my dorm and the slut gets up from bed and goes “hi, I’m (her name)” and reaches out to shake my hand like they weren’t just talking shit about me an hour ago and calling me ugly. Foids are fake as shit ... WTF? Normies need to be shot and killed.

User 44 feels humiliated and disrespected after unwillingly witnessing a sexual encounter. His post and his desire for violence receive avid support from other incels, who state “that’s why mass shooting happens” (User 45) and “this is why I keep a hatchet under my bed, just in case I have to defend myself” (User 35). Emblematic of weaponized subordination, User 35’s post frames Chad and Stacy as aggressors who require violent self-defense. In these comments, such violence does not restore incels’ masculinity (Kimmel 2013) or assert their dominance (e.g., Kupers 2005), but situates their violence as warranted, moral, and necessary because they view themselves as completely dominated and victimized. Weaponized subordination is thus a hybrid practice (Bridges and Pascoe 2014), as incels tightly couple their perceived subordination to their hegemonic desires. However, in contrast with other hybrid practices wherein men taper their “toughness” with “tenderness” (Bridges 2014), weaponized subordination combines subordination with subjugation.

In addition to interpersonal violence, incels desire systemic male supremacy and the elimination of women’s rights (e.g., banning divorce, birth control, and abortion).³ For example, User 46 argues, “women should have all their rights and liberties taken away” and “women should be property.” Incels further suggest that governments or powerful men should distribute women among men to solve the “incel problem.” Incels refer to this approach as “sexual Marxism” (Incels.wiki 2022d), with potential “sexual redistribution” policies including “government funded prostitutes,” “mass legal rape and universal forced monogamy,” and “culturally encouraged volunteer corps of women to sex up incels.” In a thread with more than 150 replies on whether incels would date their looksmatch, User 47 critiques sexual Marxism in favor of a free market approach:

Why don’t we try to be more extreme, more misogynistic? ... We should demand free market brainwashing facilities. Foids are considered private property and you can buy one from a privately owned brainwashing institute ... There are economical issues here as this is extremely pricey. One foid should not cost more than a new car, and just like the car market you can find used cars if you are poor ... [a possible objection is] the richest men will have harems of Stacies [the most attractive women] and poor people will get only ugly roasties [a derogatory term for women]. Again, good point, but our goal is to reduce the costs of the indoctrination process, so that everyone will own at least one foid.

Inequalities between men on the sexual marketplace is the only ethical issue User 47 raises, which is an injustice he is willing to accept if every man can “own at least one” woman. Here, incels will accept their continued subordination in relation to other men, in exchange for the complete subjugation of all women. While this misogynistic dystopia sounds out of touch with reality, other users take User 47’s argument seriously. User 48 states, “I can get on board with this. Basically, the intent of custom sex dolls. Turn human mate choice on its head so that it’s completely in men’s hands.” Expressing slight disagreement, User 49 argues the proposal is “unrealistic,” stating, “the only practical solution to incelism is a regulated sex/marriage market like all traditional societies have. That is NOT unrealistic because it has already been done countless times.” Here, the issue is not commodifying women but instead the most practical means for achieving such commodification.

These “sexual redistribution” policies weaponize subordination by using incels’ status as failed, subordinate men to justify comprehensively eliminating women’s rights and agency. Incels’ acquiescence to state power and dominant men to solve the “incel problem” differentiates weaponized subordination from both toxic masculinity and manhood acts (Kupers 2005; Schwalbe 2014) because incels accept both their subordination vis-à-vis other men and continued masculine inequalities in exchange for

³ Although occurring outside of my data collection period, users also celebrated the U.S. Supreme Court’s overruling of *Roe v. Wade*.

the subjugation of women. Incels do not endorse protest masculinity (Connell 1995) or resist Chads for “monopolizing” women, but instead bring themselves in line with hegemony and masculine hierarchy. Incels propose solving the “incel problem” not by raising their own status in relation to other men, but by making all women subordinate to all men. Even in their most grandiose fantasies of social control, incels remain subordinate to other men.

While this study and others (e.g., Ezzell 2012; Klein 2012; Sumerau 2012) demonstrate linkages between subordination and misogyny, incels leverage their perceived subordination to justify this misogyny while reifying and supporting masculine hierarchies, even if those hierarchies relegate them to subordination. Here, incels are both too “beta” to be fully hegemonic (Nagle 2017) and too misogynistic to be fully subordinate (Ging 2019).

Discussion

This article details the weaponization of subordination, a practice wherein an individual uses their perceived subordinate status to legitimate the victimization of others. Specifically, incels use lookism to situate themselves as subordinate, arguing that their physical appearance and women’s preference for attractive men relegate them to sexual isolation. Incels’ black pill logic emphasizes that this subordination is permanent and they will be “forever alone.” After incels situate themselves as permanently subordinate, they weaponize their subordination to legitimate misogyny, violence, and male supremacy. Put simply, incels strategically discredit themselves to justify their denigration of women.

While incels collectively define themselves as subordinate, weaponized subordination can also manifest in relation to individual identity. Here, men enroll one subordinated dimension of their identity to mask their privilege, legitimate their hostility, and absolve themselves of accountability for their actions (see also Bridges 2021; Hughey 2012). For instance, although Elliot Rodger was from an affluent family and attended a well-regarded university, his video diaries and manifesto focus on his “unfair” treatment and “victimization” (Katz and Tirone 2015; Menzie 2022; Witt 2020). Such a strategy is evident among other incels, with users referencing their affluent backgrounds and their enrollment in prestigious universities, while nonetheless highlighting their perceived oppression and obscuring the considerable social advantages they receive as men (Bridges 2021; Dowd 2010; Martin 2004; Risman 2004). In these discussions, multiple sources of advantage are ephemeral, whereas a single source of subordination is solid and inescapable. In the same way, “incel” might be strategically situated as a master status (Hughes 1945), and other men might also draw on one dimension of identity that they perceive as signaling subordination, marginalization, stigmatization, or disadvantage (see also Bridges 2021; Ezzell 2012; Hamilton et al. 2019; Hughey 2012; Klein 2012; Sumerau 2012); such men may see themselves as victimized by divorce set-

tlements or child custody agreements. Whether part of a collective identity, individual identity, or transitory experience, this strategic self-discrediting becomes weaponized subordination when it is used to rationalize the harming of others.

As a practice, weaponized subordination is analytically flexible and can potentially characterize the actions of various men who leverage subordination to participate in hegemony. Manosphere communities (e.g., Ging 2019; Van Valkenburgh 2021), men who identify as NEETs (No Education, Employment, or Training), members of the alt-right, men who feel attacked by “cancel culture,” QAnon supporters, men who commit school shootings (Klein 2012), men who participated in the January 6th insurrection, men participating in the 2022 “Freedom” Convoys, and men participating in networked misogyny (Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019) might all feel victimized and weaponize feelings of subordination. Specifically, because weaponized subordination rests on the self-perception of subordination, it is a strategy that can be employed both by apparently socially successful men and by those who self-identify as “betamales.” Engagement in weaponized subordination might vary among different groups of men, as the degree to which a group perceives itself as subordinate and the extent to which they believe this subordinate status is fixed might influence their hostility. Weaponized subordination might also vary in relation to the affordances (boyd 2011) provided by online communities, as groups such as incel.is amplify weaponization by operating as a male preserve (Matthews 2016), providing a forum that endorses misogyny, and sanctioning users who disagree with community practices.

Incels’ weaponization of subordination suggests a diversity of orientations to subordinate masculinities, with men responding to their “exile” from manhood in markedly different ways. Connell (1995) cites homosexual men as an example of subordinate masculinity and emphasizes how participation in heterosexual sex can delineate between hegemonic and subordinate masculinities (see also Flood 2007; Mooney-Somers and Ussher 2010; Pascoe 2007; Solebello and Elliott 2011). Incels perform subordinate masculinity, in that they perceive themselves as failed men, define themselves in relation to heterosexual sex, and see themselves as dominated (or “mogged”) by other men. However, whereas other groups have initiated social movements and led anti-stigma campaigns (e.g., Ferree and Martin 1995), incels respond to their perceived subordination by accepting it and using it to dehumanize women. Put simply, incels do not resist their subordination but use it as a weapon. Furthermore, while Connell (1995) observes multiple masculine relations (i.e., hegemonic, complicit, subordinate, and marginalized), the differences between incels and other subordinate relations suggest that there are multiple performances nested within these relations, such that there are multiple versions of subordinate masculinity that respond differently to gendered power relations. Furthermore, incels’ fantasies of powerful men eliminating women’s rights suggest that some subordinate men will accept being dominated by other men in exchange for being able to participate in the subjugation of women. Rather than form a social movement that resists their subordination, these men are more liable to follow movements that undermine women.

The connection between incels’ perceived subordination and their subjugation of women is indicative of hybrid masculinities (Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Demetriou 2001), which blend elements of hegemonic and subordinate relations. Bridges and Pascoe’s (2014) discussion of hybrid masculinity focuses on men’s selective appropriation of traits from subordinate and marginalized groups. In these cases, hybrid masculinities involve “borrowing from below,” as men strategically distance themselves from hegemony. In contrast, incels’ hybrid masculinity involves “borrowing from above,” as they define themselves as subordinate “failed men” while adopting a hegemonic orientation to the subjugation of women. That is, advantaged men “borrow from below” to disguise their hegemonic practices, and incels “borrow from above” to blend their subordination with aggressive misogyny and violence. Weaponized subordination is a distinctly hybrid practice: Incels situate themselves as “genetic trash,” exalt the Chads that mog them, and perform the misogynistic practices they imagine Chads can enjoy. Here, my analysis both complements and contrasts with Ging’s (2019) argument that “betamales” distance themselves from hegemony by situating themselves as victims of feminism. Rather than strategically pushing away from hegemony, I suggest that incels try to pull themselves toward it. Incels’ enactment of hybrid masculinity emphasizes the desire for gender inequality that other hybrid performances strategically hide (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). These offsetting strategies reveal a symbiotic relationship between these two versions of hybrid masculinity. Specifically, advantaged men can selectively appropriate elements of subordinate and marginalized masculinities, positioning themselves against incels and other anti-feminist men while still benefiting from patriarchy. In this sense, dominant men’s hybrid practices might also weaponize subordinate men, using them as a foil to valorize themselves as “one of the good guys” while disguising their own role in gender inequality and the subjugation of women.

As discussed throughout this article, weaponized subordination is distinct from aggrieved entitlement (Kimmel 2013), manhood acts (Schwalbe 2014), and toxic masculinity (Haider 2016; Kupers 2005). These concepts capture how men might work to assert or restore their dominance. The clearest contrast between weaponized subordination and these other concepts is that weaponized subordination demonstrates how men accept their perceived subordinate status vis-à-vis other men (e.g., Chads) and leverage such subordination to justify their hostility toward women. That is, if these other concepts address the aggression of domination, weaponized subordination addresses the aggression of dominated, social losers who are not working to place themselves at the top of a masculine hierarchy but are instead working to destroy women’s social position.

Incels’ comments do not tell us about women, but they do tell us about how incels perceive women. Incels’ depiction of Stacys, the attractive white women who are subservient to Chads, resembles emphasized femininity (e.g., Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). However, incels perceive women as lacking many of the traits of emphasized femininity (e.g., empathy). Stacys are instead situated as a form of hegemonic femininity (Hamilton et al. 2019; Ispa-Landa and Oliver 2020; Schippers 2007). They

are beneath Chads but superior to other women (and some men). Incels' version of hegemonic femininity emphasizes the salience of lookism, as the appearance of other women (e.g., "Beckys," "roasties," "landwhales") marks them as explicitly inferior to Stacys. Similarly, incels' misogynistic feminine hierarchy enacts intersectional domination (Hamilton et al. 2019) to buttress both white and male supremacy. Here, Stacys are elevated while women of color are denigrated, but all women are sexual objects. In this regard, incels' conceptualization of femininity contrasts with notions of hegemonic femininity, as Stacys are dominant but they are not respected or celebrated. In this sense, incels view all femininities as pariah femininities (Schipper 2007); terms such as "Stacy," "noodlewhore," "foid," and "roastie" mark all women as manipulative, shallow, uncaring, promiscuous, and less than human.

Conclusion

In this article, I demonstrate how men weaponize their perceived subordination to legitimate their degradation of women. While I have discussed this dynamic in relation to incels and masculinity theories, others have detailed similar processes (e.g., Collins 1990; Dowd 2010; Ezzell 2012; Feinstein 2017; Hamilton et al. 2019). Weaponized subordination broadly demonstrates how intersectional domination (Hamilton et al. 2019) is legitimated. Specifically, weaponized subordination suggests that groups or individuals will obscure advantages while emphasizing disadvantages, situating themselves as victims to necessitate or justify aggression. In this sense, weaponized subordination is salient in many cases, such as when white nationalists defend their antisemitism by leveraging conspiracies of Jewish social control or when mass shooters situate their terrorism as a defensive response to demographic replacement. As Goffman's (1963) concept of courtesy stigma further suggests, subordination can be weaponized by proxy, wherein advantaged people tie themselves to disadvantaged groups to situate their aggression as both defensive and altruistic. Adults situating their transphobia as protecting children from "groomers" and politicians claiming to defend the working class with xenophobic policies are two such examples. I argue that such strategies are used by incels, allowing them to simultaneously situate themselves as dominated, failed men while actively subjugating women. Incels exemplify how subordination is weaponized, but weaponized subordination is not restricted to incels and is enacted when aggressors leverage perceived disadvantages to situate themselves as victims for the purposes of legitimating their hostility.

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Glossary

Becky	A term for a woman who is attractive, but less attractive than a Stacy.
Betamale	An “average male” whom incels describe as subordinate, unassertive, weak, and “not a leader.”
Black pill	The primary incel ideology and a “fatalistic” version of the red pill. Being “black pill” or “taking the black pill” means accepting that women’s sexual preferences are fixed, that lookism determines sexual and romantic success, and that many men (e.g., incels) will be forever alone.
Chad	An extremely attractive white man.
Chadfishing	A term derived from catfishing wherein someone pretends to be someone they are not online. Chadfishing occurs when incels pretend to be a Chad to interact with women, usually on dating apps such as Tinder.
Cope	Adopting an “untrue belief” in an effort to avoid accepting the black pill.
Going ER	Going “Elliot Rodger” by committing a mass murder.
Ethnics	A term for people of color, including incels. The term is used both by incels who identify as men of color and by those who identify as white.
Foids	A derogatory term for women that is a portmanteau of “female” and “android.” Incels use the term to suggest that women are “not fully human.”
Forever alone	An incel phrase emphasizing someone will be an incel forever.
Gigachad	A man who is even more attractive than a Chad
Gymmaxxing	To improve your physical appearance and desirability by working out.
Hypergamy	An incel term for women selecting the most physically attractive men or by “trading up” and selecting a more attractive man over their current partner.
Incel	³⁴ An involuntary celibate
Jawlets	A derogatory term targeting men who have a “weak” jawline.
Just be White	An incel argument that you only need to be white to be able to establish a sexual or romantic relationship because women of color prefer white men. The term is

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