

Victoria Munoz
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Professor Brandeise Monk-Payton
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Adding Fuel to the Fire: How Digital Media Has Transformed Inceldom

I've seen the movie trope time and time again. Boy meets girl. Boy instantly falls for girl. Girl rejects boy. Boy makes another advance. Girl rejects again. And again. And again. This "Rejection Affection" trope has plagued every sitcom, romcom, and drama and has even grown to have its own charm. Despite the several rejections, the typical storyline ends with the girl finally giving in and assuring the audience that her "no" had always been code for "convince me".

Problematic yet ubiquitous, this plot ends with a happily ever after, but most importantly culminates in the male's achievement of affection, sex, and/or love. Outgrowing my complacency in cheesy, distorted rom coms, I now know real life is no movie, and more often than not "rejection affection" does not result in a happy pair, but rather further rejection from the disinterested party. What happens after one encounters harsh rejection? You seek comfort, particularly comfort within people who know and feel your pain. In the late 1990s, a lonely teenager sought out this comfort through a dial-up modem. Immune from the awkwardness of in real life (or commonly referred to as "IRL" online) conversations about love and sex with other male teenagers, the early internet's forums were the beginning of an online community for young boys who found dating, and consequent mass rejection, cumbersome.

In the early 1990's, a digital community was created as a welcoming place which included and valued female members' input on their male counterparts' romantic dilemmas. Branding male romantic troubles as "involuntary celibacy", this was the digital beginning of the

subgroup now known as “incels”. A quick look at social media, news headlines, and subreddits, lets one know that the once innocent, and pleasant community is now associated with an image of pure, misogynistic rage.

Currently, the vast majority of the incel community is structured around five interconnected, normative orders: the sexual market, women as naturally evil, legitimizing masculinity, male oppression, and violence. There were three main factors for this quick transformation from an innocent forum to a group that many now consider domestic terrorism: the digital feminism wave, male entitlement, and lastly, algorithmic-fueled groupthink.

According to Shruti Jain, a Junior Fellow with ORF’s Centre for New Economic Diplomacy, the digital revolution has bolstered feminist activist movements by encouraging inclusion and promoting attainability. Blogs and social media have contributed to the democratization of feminist movements by increasing accessibility, diversity in the female experiences shared, and the promotion of personal leadership. Swift dissemination of feminist knowledge through a digital community has made feminism attainable and more present online than ever. Within the general digital feminism wave, there has been a sex positive digital movement led by feminist influencers. Whether the sex positive accounts are led by sex workers, sex educators, authors, certified therapists, etc., the digital sex positivity movement and the respective content has made many women, including myself, feel more comfortable openly discussing their sexuality and being empowered by it.

A wide body of research led by Queensland University of Technology has shown that gender advances, such as sexual liberation in this case, invariably generate resistance, which more often than not, ardently comes from the online incel community. The online stance coined “blackpill” claims that society is dominated by women and rejects individual-level attempts to

achieve a sexual relationship with women since only change at a societal level has the possibility to be effective. Black pill proponents believe that genetically determined looks/attractiveness is the sole trait women place value on when picking a sexual partner. This framework results in a fundamental rejection of women's sexual emancipation, labeling women (or "femoids/foids" as coined on forums), as shallow, cruel individuals who are the enemy to incels.

The rise of digital feminism and sex positivity enraged incel communities, but what added fuel to the fire was their sense of male entitlement. Despite categorizing their unattractiveness as a personal failure, incels have major social entitlement, believing that the world owes them sex, and that there is something wrong with a society in which women don't give their bodies to them. The rampage over women's sexual autonomy provoked by fundamental male entitlement has been disseminated through digital media. The expeditious nature of the internet allows for harmful ideas and viewpoints to be effortlessly shared. One dangerous notion originating on incel forums is "taking the rape pill": the understanding that for civilization to survive, "femoids" need to be treated as subhuman objects whose purpose is to obey, and bear the children of, "supreme gentlemen" (forum's synonym for incel). The creator of this concept, The Larson Network, even has a site called Raping Girls Is Fun which currently has close to 500 members. On the site, the forum users share anecdotes about the women they say they have assaulted/harassed and suggestions on how to commit rape most effectively.

The Larson Network's sites fall under the "manosphere," a loose group of websites united by their belief in various male-dominant ideologies. Radical websites such as these were an important factor in the extreme evolution of "inceldom". Manosphere ideals include "men's rights" activists and pickup artists, or PUAs, men who teach other men that they can sleep with women by insulting them and manipulating their psychology. Whether the site is promoting

emotional abuse to pressurize women into sex, praising and analyzing convicted serial rapists' methods, or supporting mass violence acts such as Canadian incel Alek Minassian driving into crowds of pedestrians resulting in 10 deaths, incel communities are now considered as a domestic terrorist threat to the public, but particularly towards women.

The danger of the internet is not solely that it connects like-minded individuals who hate women, but more importantly the manner in which it takes neutral, impressionable users and feeds them dangerous views to internalize as their own through the usage of algorithms. Incel forums such as Larson's sites have radicalized members of the incel community and are subtly finding their way onto the screens of America's young boys. 70% of young men today have been exposed to manosphere ideologies in some form. YouTube is one of the more effective channels of this women-centered hate; YouTube channels such as "Sandman" and "Turd-Flinging Monkey" hold views in the tens of millions. Whether young boys stumble upon these ideas on incel forums, or if they run across them "repackaged and brushed up for a mass audience" on social media/YouTube, young users are being instructed to despise, oppress, and fear women.

One quick search such as "why am I a virgin at 23?" or "upset that no girls like me" will have any user in an algorithmic rabbit hole and will lead to new, catered content to feed insecurities and transform those into rage. In Jessica Johnson's "The Self-Radicalization of White Men", digital communications are taking advantage of user's paranoia and are actively feeding into it. In his sociological study of "American masculinity at the end of an era," Michael Kimmel argues, "white men's anger comes from the potent fusion of two sentiments—entitlement and a sense of victimization". Machine learning and algorithms catch on to this entitlement, victimization, and paranoia, and delivers content that heightens the three.

Not only do algorithms strengthen incel communities, but also the publicity originating from “trolling”. In Whitney Phillips’ piece “The Oxygen of Amplification”, trolling is stated to describe an enormous range of online behaviors. The ambiguity of the term allows for dangerous rhetoric and mass movements to move in silence. The imprecise category of trolling allows for violent bigots such as incels to hide behind a mask of “I was just trolling/joking”. Incel forums are notorious for utilizing irony and trolling to be provocative and even “humorous”. Although some trolling accounts may not be serious about their bold claims, the provocative content might empower incel users to act boldly and dangerously outside of the online community.

It is difficult to justify the responding to/amplification of these trolling accounts, but it’s equally difficult to ignore them. Besides ethical reporting of incel trolling and false/dangerous information, one possible solution to diminish the influence of the incel community is to encourage open, healthy discourse amongst young men. Loneliness, rejection, and sexual insecurity are all universal experiences. When we allow for these experiences to be held in the hands of internet strangers, we allow for them to be transformed into misogynistic rage. Incel communities’ prey on young, insecure boys that feel their only option for advice on how to grapple with difficult emotions is the internet. If we go back to the origin story of Inceldom, it was merely a nervous, awkward teenage boy seeking community and the answer for “what it means to be a man”. Online hypermasculinity has placed a constricting box on what it means to be a man, and incel forums/channels will instruct them that it means successful sexual conquests (whether consensual or not), mass violence, being a “Chad” (code for empty, attractive man who all women want to have sex with), etc. These internet answers highlight the dangers of not allowing young men to have a “IRL” healthy mentor(s) to talk about their insecurities and complex feelings with.

Incel communities are overwhelmingly young men and boys with a loaded history of isolation and rejection who turn to the internet to make sense of the pain. On top of that, many incels have autism and experiences with trauma. These are nowhere near a justification for incel communities' rhetoric and actions, but rather serves as an explanation we can utilize to prevent further incelism spread. Feminist-influenced sexual liberation, male entitlement, and predatory recruiting all have contributed to the radicalization of incelism, but without digital mediums, these three topics would not have been as easily detected, interconnected, and proliferated. We cannot stop the virulent nature of dangerous rhetoric within digital media, but we can proactively teach young boys that the internet is not equipped to make sense of their complex, valid feelings on love and sex for them.

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