

Anal sexuality and male subcultures online: The politics of self-deprecation in the deep vernacular web

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Abstract This article focuses on the prominence of dirt and excrements in online male subcultures. It offers an understanding of both the computer nerd cultures of the 4chan forum and Incel (acronym for "Involuntary celibate") forums that is grounded in their displays of anal sexuality. The article traces the development of this sexuality from the sadistic-aggressive acts of discharge characteristic of 4chan to the masochistic displays of self-deprecation in Incel forums. Whereas the former serve to draw boundaries between the subcultural sphere and that of the cultural mainstream, the latter take the provocative performance of sexual immaturity towards a point of catastrophic loss of control. These performances have political implications, in which the fantasy of being out of control in particular moves Incel culture close to right extremism in that, it is argued, it anticipates a fatalistic act of vengeance against those who are given the blame for one's castrated state. It is in this respect, I argue, that Incel culture must be seen as an extreme variation of online male subcultures.

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Introduction

His case study of the Wolfman gave Sigmund Freud (1918/1925) the opportunity to sharpen his conception of anal psychosexuality. As I will argue in what follows, Freud's observations still prove valuable today as



heuristic devices for the interpretation of contemporary male online subcultures, or what Marc Tutters (2019) has recently called *the deep vernacular web*, which sees itself in opposition to the culture created by and on commercial “Web 2.0” social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc.). In particular, Freud’s text – together with later theorizations of anal sexuality – offers a poignant understanding of the experience of male powerlessness in a neoliberal context. This context is created by the demand, implicit in the affordances and use cultures of social media, for individuals to become successful entrepreneurial selves (Bröckling, 2016; Bratich and Banet-Weiser, 2019).

In his study, Freud (1918/1925) recounts how, at a young age, his patient’s anal discharge function was first tied to a sadistic desire that articulated itself in stubbornly proud acts of soiling the bed and taking extraordinary delight in anal jokes (p. 76). This proclivity, however, eventually changed to a passive attitude, resulting in an anxious identification with the mother, who was plagued by abdominal pains. Losing control over his excretory function thus took on the meaning of not being able to “go on living like this,” as was the patient’s mother’s repetitive plaint (p. 77).

The two positions observed by Freud – the active-sadistic and the passive-masochistic – subsequently taken by the patient in relation to excrements and defecation refer us to two sets of psychosocial meaning. The first, i.e. the provocative acts of soiling the bed, can be understood as an ambivalent mix of creative playfulness and aggressive, controlling and manipulative tendencies that feed into notions of molding and controlling one’s environment and relationships. The second position, i.e. the loss of control over defecation, is more directly linked with castration anxieties and painful feelings of powerlessness, tied to ideas of being effeminate in a social context in which a traditional, strong masculinity dominates.

These two positions within the scope of anal sexuality serve me in this article as frame for a – necessarily brief¹ – discussion of male online subcultures, as well as the fate of their peculiar psychosexuality. Specifically, I shall be looking into the political dimension of this sexuality in the infamous 4chan forum and its evolution in more recent Incel culture, i.e. a subculture in which men proudly identify as “INvoluntary CELibate” and hence paradoxically with an unwanted state and stigma.

4chan was launched in 2004 with the intention of building a space for sharing Japanese anime and pornography. However, it swiftly turned into a major hub for abject images from a broad spectrum of sexual preferences. With the radical anonymity warranted on the site, 4chan has not only become a counter project to corporate social networking sites that require – and police – real-name identification of their users; it has also turned into a fertile ground for such *ad hoc* interventionist political movements as, for example, the Anonymous group that coordinated its attacks on Scientology, Visa and Paypal from the site (see Coleman, 2014). Moreover, since 2014, Alt-Right activists have been recruiting

on several 4chan discussion boards (Coleman, cited in Wendlin, 2018), particularly on “/pol” (Tutters, 2019, p. 40). It is the affinity between male subcultures and a volatile political extremism that I trace in the transformation of scatological themes and anal sexuality from 4chan into Incel culture on its diverse forum pages.²

When it comes to Incel culture, the paradoxical and defining act of taking one’s perceived inability to attract women as a provocative marker of a socially deplorable identity would be inconceivable without the prior existence of 4chan. Indeed, the point of isolating 4chan and Incel culture as two related moments in an infinitely more complex subcultural landscape is to show the evolution from one to the other. In this respect, no other contemporary subcultural variation represents the move from a proud mode of self-deprecation to thanatotic nihilism in a clearer form than Incel culture. It is this nihilism that finds a home in the extremism of the Alt-Right (Krüger, 2019).

Reviewing the modes of interaction and the materials shared on 4chan and the forum pages pertaining to Incel culture (see footnote 1), one can establish a proximity to dirt and faeces as a red thread that joins the two together by way of functioning as the (most poignant) articulation of their logic of an overflowing symbolic production. This in turn makes it possible to point to similarities and differences between the two subcultural variations, to understand their development and, ultimately, to obtain a sense of their socio-political trajectory.

Parallel to the dynamic Freud finds in the Wolfman, my argument runs as follows: While an aggressive anal sexuality proves characteristic of male online subculture on the influential 4chan forum where, throughout the 2000s and early 2010s, it manifested itself in the provocatively abject play with excrements (Coleman, 2014; Phillips, 2015), a more sombre, suffering and self-loathing variety of this sexuality dominates the more current Incel forums. Whereas, in the latter, direct confrontations with faeces are no longer a major ritualistic practice, the paradoxical forms of self-deprecation that have become characteristic there nevertheless point towards their deep roots in anal sexuality. To feel unable to control oneself and to take destructive pleasure in letting oneself go is the ritualistic self-performance of men who perceive themselves as not only too unattractive to date women but as too abject and deplorable to find a meaningful place in society.³ In this respect, being rejected by women becomes only the most painful stigma that represents a broader state of rejection and is a stand-in for general social dynamics that divide people up into “useful” and “useless,” “fit” and “unfit.” It is this socio-symbolic form of assessing oneself and others as worthless, I argue, that aligns male online subcultures with extremism (cf. Nachtwey and Heumann’s (2019) discussion of anomy).

In the following, I first present some central psychoanalytic statements on anal sexuality (Freud, 1918/1925; Klein, 1946/1997; Meltzer, 1966) so as to connect them with characteristics of the figure of the so-called “computer nerd” (Bucholtz, 2001; Kendall, 2011; Almog and Kaplan, 2017): a social type that



represents the kind of deficient masculinity that 4chan celebrates and by which Incel culture subsequently becomes haunted. I then offer brief analyses of the anal sexualities of 4chan and Incel culture. What comes to the fore in these sketches is the dangerous vision that Incel groups in particular cultivate of themselves, specifically that of *rotting alive* and being *foul beyond repair*. The quasi-political attitude resulting from this self-image is that of people who are finished with life and who feel that they have nothing left to lose.

My findings are in line with what Lovink and Tuter (2018) identify as a traditional Frankfurt School position. The authors observe of the phenomenon of Alt-Right memes that “Adorno would have diagnosed the symptoms of this very psycho-social situation of male existential resentment concerning loss of power which the Frankfurt School considered as the conditions of possibility which give rise to fascism” (n.p.). In contrast to their assessment, however, my reading is one, I hope, that *does* leave “room for engagement with popular culture” (n.p). Indeed, what gives my findings concerning self-deprecation and fatalism increased urgency is that they mark the logical endpoint of the sub(pop)cultural opposition to mainstream cultural practices of self-optimization (see King *et al.*, 2019).

Psychoanalytic Approaches to Anal Sexuality

How can we grasp the meaning of faeces and defecation on a psychological and cultural level? The psychoanalytic literature of the first generation especially is rich in theorizations of anal sexuality. Sigmund Freud (1908/1924), Ernest Jones (1918) and Karl Abraham (1923) focused their efforts particularly on the characterological aspects of withholding faeces – a function that they saw as associated with questions of control and power, especially in relation to economic and financial issues. While these aspects also play a part in the context of this article, the subcultures observed here rather point to the opposite of withholding, specifically a lack or loss of control that can be experienced as joyful or painful.

While I have already indicated the importance of Freud’s (1918/1925) case study of the Wolfman in this respect, Melanie Klein (1946/1997) has also shed light on the discharge function and particularly its aggressive and self-depleting aspects. In her discussion of “projective identification,” excrements are phantasmatically discarded and deposited in the mother in order to hurt and control her (p. 8). However, this aggression comes to haunt the aggressor in return. As Bob Hinshelwood (1991) explains, possible consequences of projective identification are “depletion and weakened sense of self and identity, to the extent of depersonalisation; profound feelings of being lost or a sense of imprisonment” (p. 179). As I show below, Klein’s theory is particularly helpful in understanding the function of women and the depleting effect that misogyny

has on the members of male online subcultures themselves. Hence, projective identification offers a psychodynamic understanding of the effects of the harassment tactic of “brigading” (Tutters, 2019, p. 44) – a practice in which the social media accounts of women who speak out against online chauvinism are spammed with a deluge of slurs, insults and threats. While none of the attacking men might count themselves as misogynists, it is the act itself, no matter how ironically performed, which turns them into misogynists – not only *de jure* but also *de facto*.

Twenty years after Klein’s contribution, Donald Meltzer (1966) took up several of her and Freud’s thoughts and brought them together in his article on “The relation of anal masturbation to projective identification.” This article is relevant here in that it ties Freud’s and Klein’s observations to social concerns by elevating them to the status of a psychosocial type. Meltzer suggests that, under severe pressures from outside (he offers weaning practices, toilet training and sibling rivalry as examples), children can take flight into an anal-masturbatory character organization. This organization arrests their psychosexual development at a premature level that is based on the eroticization of the anal region. It is this premature organization that becomes perpetuated, instead of a fully developed phallic one (p. 336). Similar to Freud’s Wolfman, Meltzer sees this organization as based on projective identification with an ailing, lacking mother. As grown-ups, states Meltzer, people with this character formation frequently show a keen intelligence and are able to master complex intellectual tasks. At the same time, however, they are plagued by feelings of impotence and pseudo-potency and most of all by the thought of being an impostor and a fraud (p. 336). In particular, male patients, he writes, are frequently haunted by their passive, female and homosexual identifications.

Anal Sexuality and Nerd Masculinity

What Meltzer describes in his article from the mid-1960s can today be aligned with descriptions of the social type of the computer nerd, which has been a blueprint for the fashioning of male sexuality on 4chan and its spinoffs. Readers may have encountered this figure in US high school and college movies and TV series, e.g. *Can’t Buy Me Love* (Rash, 1987). Typically, the nerd is the pale, unathletic, thickly bespectacled, socially awkward and insecure teenage boy with bad skin and braces, who hides from the malice of the “sports jocks” and would never dare to ask a girl out. He is bad with people but good at playing computer games and solving math problems (Almog and Kaplan, 2017). The very scriptedness of this type has turned it into a ready identificatory foil on which members of online subcultures rely to live-action role play or “LARP” (Urban Dictionary, 2009) a deficient masculinity.



Ran Almog and Danny Kaplan (2017) argue persuasively that the core of nerd masculinity lies in a tense and painful combination of being privileged and feeling inferior at the same time (p. 31). The nerd is protected by a (frequently) white, middle-class upbringing and gifted with logical thinking and technological know-how, but he is unable to take part in the social rituals of his peers: sports events, parties, night clubs and romance are significantly less accessible to him and often hold little attraction. He is resourceful and intelligent but cut off from the sexual experiences of mainstream masculinity (p. 34), and it is this combination of superior intelligence and inferior masculinity that builds a bridge to Meltzer's anal-masturbatory character.

In what follows, I bring to the fore the central psychosexual dimension of this "nerd masculinity." While Meltzer's article has been criticized for the stereotypical harshness with which it builds up a character type that has clear affinities (and chauvinistic attitudes) to homosexuality (Reiche, 2000), this harshness resonates with the ways in which members of male online subcultures use the nerd stereotype to diminish themselves. Whereas Meltzer conceived of the anal-masturbatory character formation as a largely unconscious phenomenon, its making on 4chan is celebrated ironically, provocatively and hence consciously. However, this awareness has not stopped it from unfolding a detrimental psychic power and a sense of imprisonment on Incel forums.

Crapflooding: Anal Sexuality and Nerd Culture on 4chan

A powerful example of how Meltzer's definition of the anal-masturbatory character becomes manifest in 4chan nerd culture can be found in Angela Nagle's (2017) study of online subcultures. Here she quotes from what might be interpreted as an ode to 4chan's channel /b/: the "random" channel without a fixed discussion topic that for a long time had a reputation for being the most radical expression of 4chan culture (see also Milner, 2013).

/b/ is the friend who constantly talks about your mum's rack. /b/ is someone who would pay a hooker to eat his ass, and only that. /b/ is the uncle who has touched you several times. /b/ is still recovering in the hospital, after trying something he saw in a hentai. /b/ is the pleasure you feel guilty of when you tried playing with your anus during masturbation. /b/ is wonderful. (p. 33)

What is here ascribed as characteristic of 4chan culture in general is that the overall form of the transgressive sexual practices listed above – incest, prostitution, sexual assault and the seduction of minors, as well as niche pornographic genres – become mirrored by, as well as subsumed in, the act of stimulating one's anus while masturbating: an act that is as boundless (the

mixing and hybridizing of male and female positions) as it is solitary (masturbation). This combination of boundlessness and solitariness accompanied 4chan from its very beginnings. Christopher Poole, who founded 4chan as a teenager in 2004, had pleaded with its users not to post “stupid stuff,” but hackers and cyberpunks soon started to flood its forum pages with abject pornographic and exaggeratedly gross images (Kushner, 2015) – a now widespread practice known as “crapflooding” which earned 4chan the byname “asshole of the internet” (Urban Dictionary, 2008). “Goatse,” a photo in which a man’s anus is spread open further than seems humanly possible, is one prominent example of crapflooding; “Tubgirl,” the image of a woman showering herself in a fountain of her own diarrhoea, is another. Both the quality of these images and the quantity in which they are circulated have the potential to overwhelm and repulse the uninitiated, so that boundlessness and solitariness take on a self-replicating effect.

Hence, as a first step in the interpretation of 4chan, we can note that the function of the various genres of disgusting texts and images in this context – and particularly those with anal and faecal content – is to keep others out. As Internet ethnographer Gabriella Coleman (2014) suggests, these materials must be understood as functioning as a litmus test for group membership and allegiance – a way of Internet trolling with the intention of determining who belongs on 4chan and who does not (p. 42). As Poole himself put it: “If you, for example, are very offended by something like Goatse, chances are you’re not going to ever come back to 4chan” (Poole, quoted in Kushner, 2015). In a parallel to what Freud found to be the first phase in the Wolfman’s pathogenesis, this relational function of anal sexuality can thus be understood as using faeces so as to manipulate one’s environment in order to erect thresholds and limits and set up hierarchies of power.

While such abject images thus serve first and foremost to draw borders between a subcultural inside and a mainstream cultural outside, it is interesting to inquire further into the effects that the faecal materials have on this “inside,” i.e. on the members of 4chan themselves. I would argue that they function as a willed form of self-defecation. For example, posts in such frequent threads as “Should not post” or “Rate my girlfriend,” in which, as the titles suggest, intimate images are circulated that were not meant for public display (or at least are contextualized as such), one typically finds a deluge of snapshots of young women striking erotic poses and – sometimes playfully, sometimes shyly – baring breasts and/or buttocks in mundane domestic settings, with laundry baskets and stacks of toilet paper framing the imitations of pornographic genres. Strewn across these posts, however, one can also always find heavily disturbing images, such as close-ups of the medical removal of a haemorrhoid, a sewed-up perineum (the space between vagina and anus, which frequently gets torn during childbirth), severe cases of elephantiasis, and other kinds of bodily swellings and serious deformations.



As self-entitled “shitlords” (Urban Dictionary, 2017), members of 4chan not only post and consume these abject images; they are also closely identified with them. It is they themselves who are captured in the deformations and aberrations that continuously surface from the pornographic and masturbatory material. By virtue of the mundane settings in which it is frequently taken, this material is in turn imbued with a sense of secrecy and forbiddenness. It claims to be that which should not be posted and viewed but nevertheless is, and this again points to the immature and lacking sexuality celebrated on 4chan. Therefore, in accordance with Meltzer’s vision of anal masturbation, what is performed on 4chan time and again is a desire that is structured along the lines of phallic heterosexual norms but haunted by feelings of impotence and inadequacy in relation to it.

Following the above logic, those who are thus kept on the outside of 4chan are people who are defined as “normal” by virtue of their being repulsed by the deformed sexuality on display on the platform. These “normies” (Urban Dictionary, 2016) are first and foremost women who merely serve as masturbatory objects but are also men who, as a result of the subcultural act of distinction performed on 4chan, appear to have a more fully developed phallic sexuality and thus are seen as able to enter into heteronormative sexual relations with women. Hence, as much as the “shitlords” might try to flood their realm with excrements so as to keep “normies” out, the resulting subcultural norm of anal masturbation inevitably proves to be inferior to the normal, mainstream sexual culture it seeks to counter and transgress. To the contrary, this mainstream norm rather becomes affirmed and reproduced. Even if the abject images of bodily deformations that are strewn across the pornographic materials serve as constant reminders that one is consuming porn from the perspective of a “reject,” what remains intact throughout is the sense of the strong appeal of a mainstream paternal ideology in which women remain objects and men conform to traditional masculine ideals. Hence, despite the pride that users of 4chan take in their discursive acts of self-defecation, what shines through the irony with which these acts are performed is the reality of a narcissistic wound.

It’s Over/It Never Began: Incels and the Performance of the Loss of Control

It is this narcissistic wound that thus emerges gradually from the identification with faeces and anal sexuality on 4chan. *I am shit*, implies the 4chan member, who seeks the proximity of the cultural mainstream – *Here, smell me!* – to trigger a reaction of shock and disgust. In Incel forums, however, this identification turns tragic and starts to attach itself to a melancholy state, manically repeating a loss that it does not want to acknowledge. In what

follows, I unfold this sense of loss with regards to two kinds of materials: (a) the Incel mythology which can be accessed via the elaborate vocabulary that Incels use amongst each other; and (b) typical themes and motifs from discussion threads which must be seen as continuations of the anal-masturbatory sexuality cultivated on 4chan.

While online dictionaries of Incel words have already been compiled by others (see e.g. Squirrel, 2018), I will shed light only on those parts of this vocabulary that relate to the sense of castration that I see as its central characteristic. Basically, what becomes repeated in this vocabulary is the abject-masturbatory vision of oneself in relation to heteronormative/ heterosexual norms that was first established on 4chan. This can most readily be gathered from the set of characters with which the Incel world is populated: “Alpha,” “Beta,” “Stacy,” “Chad” and “Cuck” – *dramatis personae* that bear the marks of nerd culture in that they playfully resemble the paper-cut characters of vintage video games.

According to Incel mythology, “Alphas” are attractive, healthy and strong men. They are “Chads”: good-looking, well-trained, genetically superior (indeed, there is a racialized, social-Darwinist dimension to Incel folklore (cf. Wendlin, 2018, p. 106)) and prone to have sex with “Stacys” – beautiful, fertile and sexually arousing women who, on a scale from 1 to 10 (which Incels and other male rights groups use to rank women), receive at least a 7 or 8. By contrast, “Betas” are conceptualized as a genetically inferior category of men. They are ugly, sickly, deformed, underdeveloped and unfit for the “Stacys.” The relationship between “Alphas,” “Betas” and “Stacys” is captured in the formula “AF/BB”: “Alpha fucks/Beta bucks,” which means that “Betas” are always and automatically imagined as in the position of the cuckold (“Cuck”) – so desperate for the attention of “Stacys” that they finance the latter’s luxurious lifestyle even though the “Stacys” betray them with “Alpha” men.

Already at this point, one can see how Incel mythology reproduces 4chan’s basic relational set-up: a vision of pornographically scripted sex with hyper-masculine men and hyper-feminine women, who are secretly watched by a deformed, masturbating homunculus.⁴ Tellingly, it is only the women who are blamed for this tilted, triangulated relationship. While “Chads” are frequently acquitted for naively taking their good fortunes for granted, the acronym “AWALT” – “All women are like that” – inevitably points to the real culprit in the “Beta” men’s intolerable situation. This inevitability is also elevated to a hereditary matter, in which “hypergamety,” a word borrowed from ethno-sociology, insinuates that it is in the very nature of women to be constantly on the lookout for a genetically better male, going from sex partner to sex partner until their “SMV” (their “sexual market value”) declines. At that point, they are rejected by “Alpha” men and turn into “Roasties,” i.e. women who have worn out their reproductive organs.



I am presenting this universe in such an unsparing way not so much to unfold the Incels' conception of women, which appears to be clearly paranoid-schizoid, but rather the anal-masturbatory core of a belief system in which women function as proxies and instruments for the men's own humiliation (cf. Hinshelwood, 1991, p. 179). Adapting the demand-and-supply logic of a cynically calculating market to themselves and their social surroundings, Incels imagine their own sexuality as so underdeveloped and worthless that, at best, they get to be with what they imagine as monstrous "Roasties." Reviewing the discussion threads on Incel forums, what comes to the fore is the fantasy of being unable to compete in any conceivable sphere – a fantasy that is repeated over and over again. This can be seen, for example, when it comes to making friends: "I've said this so many times, if you're friendless and over 20, there is no hope for you to get any"; or enjoying life: "it saddens me thinking of all my brocels here in pain while normies enjoy their lives"; or self-improvement: "all this work, just to be rejected constantly"; or computer games: "I am literally just a faceless player among many, and yet people hate me in particular for no reason" (Incels.co, 2020). Whatever the men in the Incel forums report having done has turned out to be futile.

Anal themes too find their direct continuation here, for example in descriptions of flatulent scenes: "I farted before getting out of the lift. A beautiful woman went in and I saw her gagging as the doors closed" (IncelTears, 2019). Whereas faecal matters do not play the same salient role as on 4chan, the arrest at the anal stage of sexuality nevertheless becomes articulated by a large number of posts in which the male protagonist invariably brings himself into a situation in which he repulses women (as well as his surroundings in general) and thus robs the ensuing encounter of all potential for normal social exchange. In this way, these scenes again reproduce the logic of the disturbing images on 4chan, with the fart in the above incident, for example, being their equivalent. It is this equivalence which puts the encounter between the man and woman in perspective and gives it meaning.

This foreclosing of social encounters is repeated in a broad range of other posts, which often take the form of anecdotes and field reports. Here Incels frequently stage their being rejected by women, as for example in a video in which a young man approaches two female paramedics at a job fair with a clichéd pick-up line ("Help! I can't breathe ... because you take my breath away") while filming the encounter with his smartphone. As one of the comments to the video states: "Jesus, that was painful. He should go jump in front of a lorry, maybe then the paramedics would touch his corpse" (Incels.co, 2020). Indeed, self-inflicting pain and demeaning oneself by provoking another's refusal is the point of the exercise.

Being an Incel thus means permanently envisioning oneself as "filled to the brim with abject matter" and continuously entrenching oneself in this position by utilizing others. The aim of this repeatedly realized arrangement seems to

gradually lose its connection to ironic performances and to turn utterly thanatotic. Specifically, the aim seems to be to position oneself in a state of lingering decay (“LDAR” [“Lay down and rot!”]) and close to death (in which “rope” and “sui” operate as short forms for suicide). These motifs of rot and decay, I want to argue, represent another way in which anal themes are carried over into Incel culture, in which the frequently posted animated gif images of decaying fruit, rotting animals and even decomposing human bodies as depictions of one’s state of mind corroborate the point. An Incel existence is thus one that is caught in a process of dying away before having come into bloom. It is that condition in which Freud (1918/1925) finds the Wolfman at the beginning of his analysis: “entirely incapacitated and completely dependent” (p. 7). What Incels thus cultivate is the fantasy of lying helplessly and apathetically in their own soil: a form of near-death loss of control and castration. “It’s over,” goes a ritual greeting amongst Incels, to which the one greeted answers: “It never began.”

This, then, is the *psycho-logical* endpoint of the Incels’ performance of abjection – a point at which people need help so desperately they are hardly responsive to it anymore. However, reaching out for help is not on the agenda of the online discussions that Incels have with each other. To the contrary, the intention is to close down the possibility of reaching out for help or not let this possibility arise in the first place. Such an act would mean the end of the community due to the dying down of interest in it on the part of the participants. This brings me to my last point. As solitary and isolated as Incel culture is, it is precisely its members’ isolation that makes sociality between them possible: only “shitlords” can relate to “shitlords” – not because there is no one else but because everybody else is better (off).

(Instead of a) Conclusion

As concerns the social role of victims, Jodi Dean (2009) writes that it serves a twofold purpose: On the one hand, victims tend to be on morally safe ground – after all, who would want to deny them their suffering? On the other hand, the role of the victim suggests being free of political responsibility, because victims tend to be seen as too weak to carry such responsibility (p. 5). In this way, their implied weakness often goes hand in hand with a preference for cruelty and sadism, in which the victims’ demand to be served justice easily leads to the most draconic punishments. As suffering victims, claims Dean, we are never to blame for the violence that is being enacted in our name (p. 6).

I close with these observations because they emphatically point to the dangers emanating from the conditions in which Incel forums and neighbouring online subcultures grow. Incels stage the experience of immaturity and impotence up to a point of a total loss of control. At this point, however, the risk arises that



individual members of the group decide to not only end their own existence but, in the course of an eruption of “hair-raising virulence” (Meltzer, 1966, p. 336), drag down with them some of the people who they blame for their suffering – as happened in Toronto in 2018 and Isla Vista, California in 2014 (Cecco, 2019).

However, rather than averting one’s eyes from the self-styled “shitlords,” it must be acknowledged that this stylization of their victimhood has everything to do with the societies from which they emerge. These societies are held in thrall by the cultures of self-improvement, self-marketing and fierce competition (Bröckling, 2019) that give such men to understand that they have indeed already lost the race for social acceptability. Once one has defined oneself as a reject, it is difficult to break free of this definition. To go against this trend, it is important to create cultural alternatives to those dynamics that time and again refer men back to the paternalistic forms of identity formation that we thought our culture had left behind.

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Notes

1 For a more complete discussion (in German), see Krüger (2019).

2 My analysis is based on the following web pages: [4chan.org/b/](https://www.4chan.org/b/); [reddit.com/r/TheRedPill/](https://www.reddit.com/r/TheRedPill/); [reddit.com/r/MenGoingTheirOwnWay/](https://www.reddit.com/r/MenGoingTheirOwnWay/); [mgtow.com/](https://www.mgtow.com/); [reddit.com/r/MensRights/](https://www.reddit.com/r/MensRights/); [reddit.com/r/inceltears/](https://www.reddit.com/r/inceltears/); [Incels.co](https://www.incels.co). Materials were collected between November 2018 and January 2019 and again between April and May 2019.

- 3 See also the “Pee Your Pants Challenge” (#peeyourpantschallenge) on the social media platform TicToc, in which young people – again almost exclusively male – pee their pants while filming themselves in the bathroom mirror.
- 4 For this constellation, see also the movie *Cuck* (Lambert, 2019), which, although less celebrated than *Joker* (Phillips, 2019), is by no means less successful in its depiction of a masculinity that struggles against failure.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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