

**(Mis)perceptions of Gender-Based Violence: The Framing of Incels in News Media**

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## ABSTRACT

Emerging groups such as the involuntary celibate (incel) subculture are finding new ways of reproducing real-world harm and violence against women making international headlines. Media portrayals of gender-based violence (GBV) are often problematic and at times inaccurate representations of the phenomenon. This qualitative content analysis of incel depictions in news articles published in Canada, the US, and the UK demonstrates that news media framing of the incel subculture is varied and multidimensional. The findings indicate four salient incel frames: “humanized” incels, “debilitated” incels, “sinister” incels, and “cyber” incels, each constructed using distinctive scripts that capture particular elements and describe both incel members and the subculture as a whole. More broadly, these frames can be organized into two distinct interpretations, the personalized and the politicized approach. The findings of this analysis reveal a tendency for the media to frame the incel subculture as a group of strange outcasts and ‘weirdos’, as well as potentially dangerous individuals. Pathologizing incel members as deviant others, distinct from ordinary men, can be problematic as it suggests that explicit sexism is confined to these small groups rather than being symbolic of wider societal perspectives and behaviours.

## Introduction of Thesis

The emergence of misogynist and anti-feminist groups has escalated in response to the rise of the feminist movement (Marwick & Caplan, 2018). One particular group, known as involuntary celibates (incel), has emerged from this increased internet access finding new ways to promote gender-based violence (Hinson et al., 2018). The literature on incels, as chapter one will show, refers to them most commonly as a subculture. In keeping with this, my research will therefore refer to incels as a subculture, defined by Hebdige (1979) as a group with certain cultural features that enable it to be distinguished from other groups and the wider society from which it has emerged. Baele et al. (2019) claim that the incel subculture consists of individuals who believe that their lack of sexual intimacy with women constitutes a form of oppression, resulting in misogynistic sentiments that advocate for violence against women. While not all incels are necessarily violent, there has been an increase in incel-related acts of mass violence over the last decade. Traditional understandings of gender-based violence<sup>1</sup> (GBV) have yet to investigate how this type of violence can be understood on a larger scale, including the overlap between online and real-world spheres (Hinson et al., 2018). With their emergence from the digital sphere to the real-world, incels attract attention because of their extreme views on women, making international headlines. In doing so, the public is becoming more aware of their existence, but most people do not have a thorough understanding of the group's beliefs.

My thesis attempts to address this issue by examining how the news media have constructed the incel subculture, using the theoretical tradition of framing theory to uncover how this specific form of GBV is being represented to audiences. To this end, this thesis seeks to shed

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<sup>1</sup> Gender-based violence refers to harmful acts directed at an individual based on their gender. Women and girls are at the highest risk of experiencing it. It can take physical and emotional forms, such as: name-calling, hitting, pushing, blocking, stalking/criminal harassment, rape, sexual assault, control, and manipulation (Canadian Women's Foundation).

light on how incels are being presented in the media and to map the various discourses being used to discuss incels in the news media. For this reason, the following research question was used to guide my research: *How are incels being portrayed by the news media?*

Chapter one of my thesis presents a review of the existing literature on the incel subculture and media frames. This chapter contextualizes my research providing an overview of the group and their beliefs, as well as previous research on media frames and their implications. The literature shows that extensive research has been conducted investigating media frames in relation to individualized forms of GBV, but that a gap exists in the research on framing of the incel subculture and representations of more collective forms of GBV. Chapter two outlines the theoretical framework that informs my research. Using Goffman's framing theory as a reference point, I employ a frame analysis of news articles discussing the incel subculture. Additional concepts that were employed retrospectively are discussed as they further enable the mobilization of framing theory and help organize and interpret the findings. These concepts are scripts, keying, and othering. Chapter three describes the methodological approach adopted for my thesis. This chapter begins with an overview of the research question and objectives driving this thesis followed by an explanation of the research design and the approach I took to collect and analyse my data. This involved a qualitative content analysis of news articles under the constructivist paradigm. Chapter three concludes with a brief discussion of the limitations of my project.

Chapters four and five present the analysis, discussed in the context of the theoretical framework outlined in chapter two. Chapter four focuses on the findings in relation to coverage and details the four frames that emerged from the data. These are "humanized" incels, "debilitated" incels, "sinister" incels, and "cyber" incels. Each frame is further divided into scripts that describe a particular aspect of the frame. There are four main sections in this chapter, each dedicated to one

of the four frames. These sections describe the scripts within each frame and discuss the different elements that contribute to it. Specific ways of describing incel members or their crimes determine which frame is being employed. For example, the use of the term terrorism to describe incel-related violence indicates the presence of the “sinister” incel frame. In sum, this chapter reveals that there are four dominant frames employed by the news media when covering the incel subculture, all of which contribute to understanding how incels are being presented in the media.

The fifth chapter examines how the four frames outlined in chapter four overlap in the data, and the implications these overlaps have on the interpretation of each frame. It was common for multiple frames to be employed within a single article in the dataset. Certain frames, such as the “humanized” and “debilitated” incel frames, complimented each other well while others competed against one another. Ultimately, the findings point towards the conclusion that there exist two distinct representations of the incel subculture, the personalized versus the politicized interpretation. Each of these perspectives carries with it a set of assumptions tied to defining the problem, the ideal outcome, and what audience reactions should be.

Finally, in the conclusion of my thesis, I overview the main findings of my research to argue that the news media are not neutral in their portrayal of the incel subculture, commonly framing the group within a political context. The findings are then situated in the broader field of criminology followed by a review of the research contributions this thesis has made. In its concluding remarks, this chapter provides suggestions for future research in the area, including research stemming from the findings of this study as well as areas that could not or were not examined here due to various constraints.

## CHAPTER 1: Literature Review

Gender-based violence is understood as a pervasive phenomenon within society, taking on new and unseen forms. For example, the proliferation of the internet brought with it cyberstalking and online harassment, non-consensual posting of sexual content, and gender-based discriminatory memes. A portmanteau for “involuntary celibate”, the term “incel” has been defined by Senior Lecturer in Criminology Simon Cottee (2020) as an exclusively male and misogynistic subculture in which members’ hatred is fueled by their lack of romantic and sexual gratification. The term “involuntary celibacy” was first used by a female student at Carleton University. She coined the term as the name of a website she created in 1997, envisioning it as a virtual self-help group for both men and women who could not find sexual partners (Cottee, 2020). Criminologist Simon Cottee (2020) has studied the subculture and claims that the turn towards a more hateful rhetoric did not happen until the early 2000s, when incels began forming communities across multiple social media platforms, particularly Reddit and 4Chan. Since membership is self-identified among incels with varying degrees, referring to them as a subculture is the most accurate way to describe the incel phenomenon as a whole, in a way that also acknowledges the individuals of which the subculture is made up.

Over the last decade, self-identified members of this group have been tied to several violent attacks leading to over 50 deaths in North America alone (Tomkinson et al., 2020). This subculture has been associated with considerably high levels of harm often motivated by sexist beliefs. It is rare for mass violence<sup>2</sup> to be associated with gender-based violence given the types of crimes that are usually included in the category of gender-based violence (e.g., intimate partner violence and

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<sup>2</sup> An intentional violent criminal act that results in physical, emotional, or psychological injury to many people (Office for Victims of Crime, 2016).

sexual assault) (UN Women). When looking at the ways mass violence is constructed in the news media, previous studies have shown that there is minimal analysis of the perpetrators gender and how that may have influenced the attack (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). Even though most mass attacks are committed by men, we rarely look at why that may be and how that may have contributed to the violence (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). The most common factors that have been identified in previous research to explain individuals committing violent attacks are their race, religion, and mental health (Huff & Kertzer, 2018). These are the narratives we are most familiar with, but how did they come to be? One of the most influential sources for circulating and, in some instances, creating these narratives is the media (Busselle & Shrum, 2003). Whether it is an intentional thing or not, the media control which stories receive coverage and how that coverage is presented to its audience. The media act as one of the main sources of information for the public; this indirectly gives them power to influence the public's beliefs and attitudes (Busselle & Shrum, 2003).

Research over that last two decades shows that the incel subculture is growing online, establishing “ideologically cohesive echo chambers” that allow individuals to unite and find common ground (Hoffman et al., 2020, p.579). Echo chambers refer to situations in which beliefs are amplified or reinforced by communication and repetition inside a closed system that is insulated from rebuttal. Theorists have argued that without a way to relate and discuss their beliefs with one another these individuals would have had no way to recognize themselves as incels and learn the culture and particular idioms that cement the incel worldview (Hoffman et al., 2020). Social media has also been a focus for researchers investigating the incel subculture arguing that it has enhanced the ability for individuals from around the world to meet online, where they are able to relate to each other's problems and solidify the incel ideology<sup>3</sup> (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020).

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<sup>3</sup> Ideology in this thesis is used in a descriptive sense to refer to a system of beliefs.

So many deaths have been associated with incels by the media over the last decade, making it an important site of inquiry.

The literature in this chapter investigates the role of the media in producing and contributing to certain narratives and the associated implications. More specifically, it aims to examine how the media represent various forms of collective and individual types of gendered violence, and the factors that influence these constructions to lay the groundwork for this thesis and outline the theoretical gaps and concerns it intends to address. The first section of my literature review presents an introduction to the incel subculture, as it represents the focal point of this thesis and therefore, it is important to clearly identify what types of individuals make up the subculture, what they stand for, and why they are making headlines in the first place. Section two presents literature exploring the consequences of media framing to further strengthen the reasoning behind why this type of research is necessary. Finally, section three demonstrates how various forms of gendered violence have been constructed in the media and the greater implications of these constructions to contextualize media portrayals of gendered violence, the central theme of this thesis. The literature review concludes by arguing that there is a need to investigate how the media have constructed the incel subculture because other media constructions on topics related to GBV have been argued to be problematic by contributing to its normalization within society.

## **1.1 What is an Incel**

In order to research gender-based violence at the level of mass violence it is important to note the types of organizations and communities involved. One emerging entity with ties to several violent incidents in recent years is the incel subculture. First, it is important to understand what is meant by subculture. The concept of subculture has been used by various theorists to describe

groups that exist within larger societies that are defined by the fact that their members share distinct cultural characteristics. One of the pioneering theories in the study of subcultures is Cohen's (1955) work on delinquent subcultures among lower-class youth, followed by Becker's (1963) theory on deviance and labeling which understood subcultures as alternative systems of norms and values. Hebdige's (1979) work on youth subcultures was particularly influential as it conceptualizes subcultures as symbolic forms of resistance and identity formation. He argues that subcultures emerge as a response to social, economic, and political conditions expressing resistance to the dominant cultural norms and values. Hebdige (1979) also emphasizes the importance of style as a communicative tool within subcultures to create a symbolic language and challenge mainstream ideals. The categorization of incels as a subculture comes from their distinct set of beliefs, values, and online communities that differentiate them from broader society. Incels exhibit shared cultural practices, norms, and distinct linguistic codes within their online communities, as chapter one will show. Researchers have examined their online forums and found that incels create a sense of identity and belonging through the development of their own jargon, memes, and rituals (Farrell et al., 2020). They argue that incels form a subculture through shared experiences of loneliness and a collective sense of marginalization (Helm et al., 2022).

They also share a set of beliefs and norms that comprise the incel culture. For example, O'Malley et al. (2020) define incels as members of an online subculture who share a set of misogynistic beliefs who are unable to find romantic/sexual partners despite desiring them. The group's core principles have been argued to lie in shared loneliness, hatred, insecurity, and misogyny (O'Malley et al., 2020). The online space where they congregate has been examined by many, most notably for its hateful rhetoric against women, feminists, and their male supporters (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). Hoffman et al. (2020) argue that social media fortified their formation

helping the subculture establish itself by uniting disparate individuals from around the world for a common purpose. The forums they participate in act as an assembly point where individuals can interact and reinforce each other's beliefs. Without the internet facilitating their ability to relate to each other, Hoffman et al. (2020) argue that it is unlikely that these individuals would have been able to recognize each other and find the common ground that would ultimately lead to the formation of the incel worldview.

Media and communications researcher Dr. Sian Tomkinson and colleagues (2020) claim that the incel subculture threatens violence against both women and men because incels believe that women's sexual freedom has corrupted society. Tomkinson et al. (2020) conclude that this is what makes incels different from everyday misogynists whose hatred is usually aimed at women alone. Cottee (2020) finds that the incel subculture is made up exclusively of heterosexual males, a finding in line with the incel ideology that is inherently anti-women. According to a survey of the "INCELS.CO" forum conducted in 2020 by Cottee, most users are young middle-class males who live with their parents and have never had sex with a woman. This study also found that over 80% are from North America and Europe, with a substantial number from minority groups (Cottee, 2020). Tomkinson et al. (2020) find that members self-identify as 'beta men' because their non-hegemonic masculinity limits their access to sexual partners.

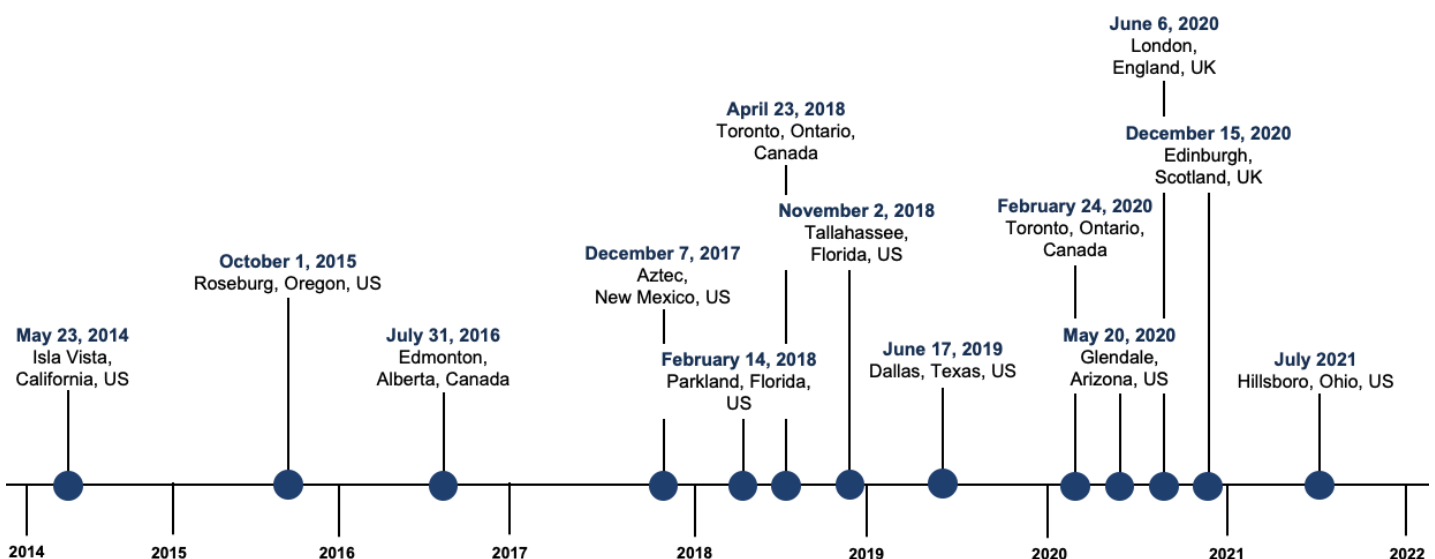
### *1.1.1 Incel Violence*

As this subculture continues to grow, experts in the field of extremism believe that their ideas and beliefs have solidified into a high-risk ideology (Tomkinson et al., 2020). For example, May 2014, in Isla Vista, California, a college student named Elliot Rodger stabbed his two

roommates, Weihang Wang and Chen Hong, and his friend, George Chen, a combined total of 134 times, before beginning a hit and run and shooting spree that killed three others and wounded 14, ending with Rodger committing suicide (Witt, 2020). Rodger referred to this as his “Day of Retribution” for a lifetime of romantic and sexual rejection in a 141-page autobiographical manifesto he released, titled ‘My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger’ that embraced radical incel views (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020, p.279). According to Witt (2020), Rodger has since been referred to as ‘Saint Elliot’ and ‘The Supreme Gentlemen’ in online incel forums where his actions have been praised by members. Incels have even celebrated the anniversary of the Isla Vista killings as ‘Saint Elliot Day’.

While the exact number of incel-related violent attacks is unclear given that incel groups are typically anonymous, incels have been responsible for an estimated 90 fatalities and injuries since Elliot Rodger’s attack in 2014 (Tomkinson et al., 2020). It has been estimated that seven mass shootings in the past decade involved a person who participated in or identified as “incel” (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). The figure below maps out these incidents, starting in 2014.

**Figure 1**



Timeline of violence committed, suspected to have been committed, or plotted by men who have self-identified as involuntarily celibate, or whose statements align with incel ideologies.

Two recent attacks in Canada have been associated in the media with the subculture. The first occurred in 2018, when Alek Minassian drove a rented van into a crowded sidewalk in Toronto, killing 10 and injuring 16. He stated in a Facebook post prior to the attack that, “the incel rebellion has already begun!”, and he referred to Elliot Rodger as the “Supreme Gentleman” in that post (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). Early analysis of the media coverage of this attack has found that the media did highlight the fact that he was part of the incel subculture, but rarely described it as a terrorist attack, an interesting finding in the context of whether incels should be regarded as a terrorist organization (Beale et al., 2019; Kanji, 2018).

In February of 2020, a 17-year-old was arrested for killing a woman and injuring two others when he attacked a massage parlour in Toronto with a machete. The young man reportedly self-identified as a member of the incel subculture and law enforcement officers later identified this as his motivation for the attack. In May 2020, the charges were upgraded from two counts of first-degree murder’ and one count of attempted murder to first degree murder – terrorist activity and attempted murder – terrorist activity, becoming the first incel related incident where the perpetrator has been charged with terrorism (Boisvert, 2020). Both Minassian and this second man admitted that they had been inspired by the incel ideology yet only one was charged with terrorist offenses. These additional charges sparked debate over the definition and application of terrorism laws to incel attacks, in line with previous debates surrounding their position as a terrorist organization. Given how recent this latest attack was, minimal research has been done to analyze the response and implications of such charges.

With the rise of incel related attacks in recent years, many scholars have debated whether the incel subculture poses a serious threat to society. Several academics and researchers have argued that the recent incel attacks are clear examples of violent extremism that indicate a growing

threat to the public and their ability to congregate online is cited as a reason for additional concern (Tomkinson et al., 2020; Hoffman et al., 2020). Hoffman et al. (2020) argue that “the violence demonstrated by incels in the past decade, coupled with extremely violent online rhetoric, suggests this particular threat could soon match, or potentially eclipse, the level of lethality demonstrated by other domestic terrorism types” (p.576). Other scholars have argued the opposite, that it would in fact be a mistake to categorize incels as violent extremists since the group does not advocate violence as a necessary solution to their problems (Cottee, 2020). Either way, the incel subculture continues to make headlines, which carry with them media-related implications.

### *1.1.2 Ideology and Beliefs*

Many scholars argue that incel beliefs are built upon an underlying set of attitudes that have been long studied by gender scholars, including hostile sexism, masculinity threat, gender role stress, and toxic masculinity (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). A common narrative put forth in academia to explain the incel worldview is that they feel as though the intimacy they have not experienced is something owed to them, something that is rightfully theirs but is being withheld by women (Witt, 2020). Menzie (2020) argues that incels’ perspective on the sexual market can be explained using the “80/20 rule”, according to which 80 percent of women select from just 20 percent of the male dating pool, focusing on the most attractive and/or wealthiest men. This perceived sexual relationship deficit is said to form the basis of the incel worldview, which attempts to rationalize the deficit and justify hostility against women and sexually active men (Cottee, 2020).

Research on incel forums has found that incels have a distinctive understanding of social hierarchies. Baele et al. (2019) claim that incels have developed their own categorical structure of the world: a social hierarchy with three tiers based exclusively on physical attractiveness. The top

level represents a minority of alpha males (referred to as Chads) and attractive females (Stacys). The middle is comprised of average looking betas, or 'normies', and at the bottom is the exclusively male and minority group of incels (Baele et al., 2019). 'Stacys' are resented by incel members because they are desired yet unobtainable. 'Chads' are envied because they possess what incels lack, sexual partners. Menzie (2020) argues that this combination of resentment and envy is what fuels their hatred of the 'Stacys' and the 'Chads'.

In their research on incel forums, O'Malley et al. (2020) found that incels commonly categorize themselves into two distinct categories: the 'redpilled' and the 'blackpilled'. Those who recognize that the world is hostile toward them but have not yet accepted their fate represent the 'redpilled' and those who not only recognize the hostility but accept it identify as the 'blackpilled' (O'Malley et al., 2020). Cottee (2020) explains that those who consider themselves the 'blackpilled' form an elite status group within the subculture, self-identifying as the most committed members claiming to see the world as it is, "without illusions or the distortions of wishful thinking" (p.95).

According to Cottee (2020), the core attitudes that lie at the heart of the incel subculture are misogyny, victimhood, and fatalism. Misogyny is defined as a form of male hostility towards women and a way of acting that ensures male dominance over them. Cottee (2020) claims that incel members believe themselves to be victims who have been triply wronged. First by genetics, resenting the fact that they were not born a Chad, second by the women who reject them, the Stacys, and third by society at large for the contempt it exhibits toward them. According to incel forums, they view themselves as fundamentally excluded from the rest of society. Finally, fatalism for incels means rejecting the goal of sexual intimacy with women and recognizing that, however

hard they try, they will never be able to have sex with a woman (i.e., taking the black pill) (Cottee, 2020).

Echoing O'Malley et al. (2020) and Cottee (2020), I define incel as a subculture that directly targets women because of their role in the perceived marginalization and subjugation of men. In response to this growing belief, O'Malley et al. (2020) find that it is common in their online forums for members to encourage and condone violence against women by making direct calls for violence and by indirectly supporting sexual violence against women generally. This violence is further normalized by the incel perception of Alek Minassian, the perpetrator of the Toronto van attack in 2018 and Elliot Rodger, the perpetrator of the 2014 Isla Vista attack, as part of the subculture's lineup of "saints" who "fight back" and "risk their life for the cause" (Baele et al., 2019, p.18). Since women and society are both seen as inferior within the incel ideology, violence against them is accordingly both advocated for and reinforced as courageous (O'Malley et al., 2020). Researchers have argued that the reinforcement of violence within the incel subculture is encouraged through their key values and beliefs that stem from their perceived injustice of the sexual market, the natural evil of women, the legitimacy of masculine identity, and the oppression of men (O'Malley et al., 2020).

While the intensity of the incel ideology is distinct to the subculture, it is reminiscent of other online communities within the manosphere. The manosphere is a term used to describe a network of online communities, forums, and subcultures that focus on discussions related to masculinity, men's issues, and gender dynamics (Ging, 2019). It encompasses a range of groups, perspectives, and ideologies, often with differing levels of intensity and goals. Some of these groups include Men's Rights Activists (MRAs) who advocate for men's rights in areas such as family law, custody rights, intimate partner violence, and workplace issues, arguing that societal

systems and laws are biased against men (Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016). Pick-up Artists (PUAs) are a group that focus on strategies and techniques for attracting and engaging with women romantically and sexually (O'Neill, 2018). Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) is a movement that emphasizes men's independence from women and social expectations. Members of this group often reject long term relationships, marriage, and co-habitation focusing instead on self-reliance (Ging, 2019). Anti-feminist groups are common among the manosphere, criticizing feminist movements and challenging the notion of patriarchy given the belief that men face their own set of challenges in society (Ging, 2019). Extensive research has been conducted on the manosphere theorizing the variety of masculinities that characterize this digital space. What is believed to unite these individuals is a preoccupation with male hegemony as it relates to heterosexual gender relations (Ging, 2019). According to Ging (2019), involuntary celibacy is one of the newer and more toxic assemblages of the manosphere, representing a new form of hybrid masculinities, in contrast to older variants of antifeminism. While the manosphere is a conglomeration of different groups with distinct ideologies, they share a common goal of defeating feminism and keeping women out of social and political spaces.

## **1.2 Consequences of Media Constructions**

The media play a vital role in the formation of ideas about people, places, and things, especially in contexts in which people have little or no personal experience. It is understood in the field that media attention lends legitimacy to the voices and frames that help society understand its surroundings (Kearns et al., 2019). However, the media are not value-free, they typically portray a picture of reality based on certain predetermined criteria and values to maintain particular

interests (Samaie & Malmir, 2017). Coverage disparities (e.g., Muslim terrorists receiving more coverage and harsher judgment) often create feedback loops that perpetuate biases in both media coverage and public perception (Kearns et al., 2019). Perceptions of violence may be influenced by these disparities. For example, Kearns et al. (2019) found that homicides receive a disproportionate amount of news coverage relative to both the actual risk of being victimized and the frequency of the crime. This is one of the reasons why studying media constructions of crime and violence is so important.

Violence is widely recognized as one of the most prominent topics in the news media and holds a somewhat privileged position; however, it is a rare occurrence in the everyday lives of the audience (Kearns et al., 2019). In a recent study of 56 different cities in the United States, crime was found to be the most prominently featured subject in the local news, and in some cities, it even accounted for more than 75 percent of all news coverage (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000). This focus is particularly important to think about because research has shown that most of the public's knowledge about crime and justice is derived from the media (Dowler, 2003). Why this is so, is up for debate, but many argue that stories about crime provide the necessary ingredients to successfully market the news because crimes are events with a powerful impact on ordinary people, fused with drama and emotion, and attention getting visuals (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000).

The resulting misperceptions beg the question, how does the media come to affect attitudes and opinions? There is a lot of discussion in media studies about this process but one of the most important contributions to the field is the explication of the role of accessibility in judgment and decision making (Busselle & Shrum, 2003).

Recent work in the field of media studies has investigated such processes and suggests that one way that media exposure may influence judgment is by enhancing the accessibility of

judgment-related constructs, which in turn can influence what information is used in the process of judgment construction. These constructs are often referred to in the field as exemplars (Busselle & Shrum, 2003). In this case, accessibility refers to “the ease with which something (e.g., an exemplar, trait, concept, attitude) can be retrieved from memory” (Busselle & Shrum, 2003, p.257). Accessibility has been found to influence judgment in two different ways. In the first, accessible information may be retrieved and used as a basis for judgment. Within the second, accessible information can have an effect through the use of the availability heuristic<sup>4</sup> (Busselle & Shrum, 2003). Using these two explanations, the effect of media consumption on exemplar accessibility can be understood. The first approach can be seen through studies that involve experimental manipulation of exemplars that appear in the news. For example, a study will manipulate an exemplar pertaining to a particular issue (e.g., a robbery) as well as provide base-rate information. They will then assess the effects of the manipulation on judgments. These types of studies have shown that the presence, number, proportion, emotionality, and the severity of negative exemplars influence judgments even when base rate information (e.g., population statistics) are present (Busselle & Shrum, 2003). The subsequent judgments then take the form of personal opinions with regard to the extent to which the issue is a societal problem, perceptions of others’ opinions about the extent of the problem, and the attribution of responsibility (Busselle & Shrum, 2003).

The second approach to understanding the relationship between media effects and exemplar accessibility can be understood using the role of television viewing as a route to increasing exemplar accessibility. This approach builds on the availability heuristic, a type of

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<sup>4</sup> The availability heuristic, also known as availability bias, refers to the process of using a mental shortcut that relies on immediate examples that come to a person's mind when evaluating a specific topic, concept, method, or decision (Busselle & Shrum, 2003).

cognitive bias that enables us to make fast, although sometimes incorrect, assessments. In a series of studies conducted by Shrum and colleagues, participants were asked to provide various judgments about the frequency of topics that are portrayed more often on television than occur in real life (e.g., violent crime). They found that individuals who spent more time watching television gave higher estimates of these topics occurring in real life than those who spent less time watching television (O'Guinn & Shrum, 1997; Shrum, 1996; Shrum et al., 1991). These studies support the assumption that media exposure increases the accessibility of exemplars which influences how judgments are constructed. The data indicated that for events that were frequently portrayed in the media but infrequent in real life, greater exposure to television content dealing with these events increased the accessibility of judgment-related exemplars, thus influencing how individuals formed opinions about said events (Busselle & Shrum, 2003). The explanation for this is intuitive, when direct experience is lacking, individuals are forced to retrieve examples from elsewhere and the media provide many examples of most topics, most notably those relating to crime and violence.

The influence news media have on its audience has significance within various levels of society. For example, Yanovitzky (2002) argues that bringing media attention to issues is important in gaining attention at a policy level. This is because policymakers rely on the media to determine which issues the public cares most about. If an issue like intimate partner violence is not receiving much attention, policymakers may infer that the subject is not a top priority for the public (Yanovitzky, 2002). At the level of public consumption, coverage patterns and framing can influence attitudes and opinions. For example, mental health researchers have long suspected that news media portrayals of violent people with mental illness contributes to negative public attitudes towards people with serious mental health conditions like schizophrenia (McGinty et al., 2014).

One study that conducted a frame analysis of media coverage on the Matthew Shepard murder found that the media's framing of the case functioned to alleviate the public of its guilt associated with the motives of the murder, reaffirm the dominant set of discourses that stigmatize LGBTQ2+ members, and hamper efforts to create public policies to prevent this type of violence in the future (Ott & Aoki, 2002). Another study that investigated visual framing effects of news coverage on police use of deadly force found that audience interpretations varied significantly depending on the race of the individuals in the attached image (Henderson et al., 2022). Depending on the race of the suspect that police officers interact with, the public holds the police to a different standard. These findings show just how important media frames can be in shaping public opinion.

Although consumers decide for themselves which media sources to read or listen to, the content, tone, and allegiance of news coverage is determined by the journalists and editors who create them. For this reason, it is important to conduct research analyzing the different ways the media frame their stories, the content of those stories and the effect those stories are having on their audiences. Since headlines involving incels are a rather modern phenomenon, there is limited information regarding how they are presented in the media and how those representations contribute to the public's understanding of the subculture.

### **1.3 Violence Against Women and its Presentation in the Media**

In addition to understanding what incel means, and why media representations matter, there is a need to review how the media have constructed other topics related to GBV and the implications these constructions have had. Looking at how other forms of GBV have been constructed in the media contextualizes the topic of this thesis within the broader field of media

studies and GBV. Under the umbrella of GBV, there exists a wide variety of types of violence, all occurring at varying levels of society. GBV can take place in interpersonal forms of violence and more collective ones. The United Nations General Assembly (1993) *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women* defined GBV as an issue of fundamental human rights, acknowledging that this is a problem that occurs across various levels of society – private family life, the community at large, and the state. IPV is recognized as a large problem in North America as nearly half of all murdered women in the United States are murdered by an intimate, or formerly intimate, partner (Brock, 2003). According to police-reported data, which only account for the incidents that actually come to the attention of police, Statistics Canada (2022) finds similar issues as 2021 marked the seventh consecutive year of increase for intimate partner violence in Canada, 79 percent of victims being women and girls. Messing et al. (2014) conducted a study on intimate partner violence and found that 44 percent of women whose partners had been arrested for domestic violence also reported intimate partner rape and sexual assault. In Canada, police-reported intimate partner sexual assault increased 22 percent between 2020 and 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2022). Women experience IPV, stalking, and rape at higher levels than men, accounting for 74 percent and 90 percent of stalking and rape victims (Smith et al., 2018).

### *1.3.1 Individual Forms of Violence Against Women*

How the media cover an issue can have serious implications for public opinion. Research has been conducted looking into the ways different types of GBV are covered in the news media and the implications these constructions may have on audiences. Lloyd and Ramon (2017) studied the representation of intimate partner violence in newspapers in the UK and found that media

coverage can influence consumer attitudes and behaviours about topics relating to GBV. For example, they found several instances in which news coverage of domestic violence took on a victim blaming frame, which can be incredibly triggering for those currently suffering from domestic abuse. Carlyle et al. (2008), who also studied the framing of intimate partner violence in news media, found that the media often employ episodic framing, which refers to coverage that focuses mainly on the individual and often ignores social factors that help perpetuate violence. One potential implication of portraying GBV as an individual issue without discussing the underlying causes, is that victims may be more likely to feel blamed for their own victimization and refuse to report their abuse (Lloyd & Ramon, 2017). Another problem researchers have identified with the current framing of IPV is that by denying the normalcy of it, media representations allow the public to distance themselves from the issue (Carlyle et al., 2008). One study found that the use of nominalizations (e.g., ‘battery’ or ‘violence’) detract attention from the agent of such violence resulting in diminished responsibility on the person who committed the abuse (Siefkes-Andrew & Alexopoulos, 2019). These framing techniques are not overt, yet they can have substantial effects on those consuming the stories.

When looking at news media coverage of sexual assault cases, similar issues persist. Some scholars believe that misrepresentations of sexual violence in public discourse are a direct result of how the media portray the issue (Benedict, 1992). They argue that media coverage of exceptionally violent cases shifts responsibility away from social systems and the underlying patriarchal attitudes that foster and support the larger problem of male violence (Cuklanz, 2000). One study that looked at media coverage of sexual assault cases on U.S. college campuses found that one of the major problems is the way journalists use language to show support for or doubt the victim. The findings suggested that although most stories did contain language of support,

nearly 40 percent of the articles included verbs of doubt or doubt for the victim's statement (Siekfes-Andrew & Alexopoulos, 2019). Another notable finding from this study was how often journalists included the accomplishments of the perpetrator. While this may simply be an effort to provide background information on the parties involved, it is likely that this has an influence on readers' perceptions of the story and the individuals involved (Siekfes-Andrew & Alexopoulos, 2019). Pollino's (2020) analysis of the news coverage surrounding Christine Blasey Ford's testimony that she had been sexually assaulted by Brett Kavanaugh during the Senate Judiciary Committee to confirm him to the Supreme Court revealed that the media present a hegemonic narrative that reinforces gendered stereotypes. As the literature above shows, the news media can be responsible for perpetuating dangerous narratives (e.g., victim blaming) that contribute to the ongoing issue of gender-based violence.

IPV and sexual assault are two of the most recognizable forms of GBV. However, GBV has a multitude of different forms, with varying degrees of harm and injury. This section has explored representations of individual forms of violence against women, where there is generally a single perpetrator and a single victim. Although analysis at the individual level is important, it is also important to recognize that gender-based violence can occur at a more collective level. The following section discusses how more collective forms of GBV are represented in the media, as they represent the types of GBV that most closely resemble the incel subculture. Reviewing the implications of which could provide insight into how the incel subculture is being constructed and interpreted by audiences.

### *1.3.2 Collective Forms of Violence Against Women*

Defining collective forms of gender-based violence can be difficult, what criteria allow it to be labelled both collective and gendered. For the purposes of this thesis, collective gendered violence includes any form of violence that has several male perpetrators and several female victims. One example of this type of violence is wartime sexual violence, or war rape. Rape perpetrated by soldiers is documented as a pervasive phenomenon during wartime. A variety of sources support this claim, such as accounts provided in the literature of war during ancient times and studies of recent conflicts in Darfur, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda (Zurbriggen, 2010; Holmes, 2014; Crawley & Simic, 2012). In her study on media representations of women during violent conflict, Holmes (2014) uses the Rwandan genocide and eastern Democratic Republic of Congo as case studies. Her study consists primarily of news articles and documentaries produced by the BBC. She analyzes how Western media represent African women in ways that depict them as helpless victims without any agency (Holmes, 2014). Similarly, debate over the ethics of awareness-raising campaigns and the underlying assumptions of humanitarianism were brought into question after the Kony 2012 campaign. The Kony 2012 campaign attempted to shine a light on a Ugandan cult and militia leader but was highly criticized for offering oversimplified, misleading narratives about the conflict, and for portraying Africans as either helpless victims or brutal killers (Crawley & Simic, 2012). These types of narratives are common when Western media attempt to cover issues that are so far from home.

The gravity of the Rwandan genocide brought significant attention to the conflict both in the form of news stories and media awareness campaigns. During the Rwandan genocide of 1994, Hutu extremists killed almost a million Tutsi and moderate Hutu in an effort to ethnically cleanse the population (Holmes, 2014). As seen in other instances of mass violence, perpetrators used sexual violence as a weapon, and raped, tortured and mutilated between 250,000 and 500,000

women and girls (Crawley & Simic, 2012). Crawley and Simic (2012) conducted a study analyzing how the Rwandan genocide was framed within an exhibition titled “Intended Consequences”. The exhibit consisted of a series of portraits of women that were raped during the conflict and the children born from it. The exhibit’s title, they claim, suggests that the crimes against these women were carried out primarily in order to impregnate them. Crawley and Simic (2012) argue that this notion constructs rape as a crime of biology, that framing genocidal sexual violence in terms of ‘ethnic cleansing’ and ‘racial hygiene’ perpetuates certain myths about identity and increases the stigma suffered by the children born of rape. Similarly, Holmes (2014) argues that the BBC’s approach to the Rwandan genocide fell into the trap of a sensationalist representation of violence confirming rather simplistic stereotypes of race, gender, and ethnicity, ultimately failing to get at the complex dynamics of the genocide. Collective forms of gendered violence, as shown here, are often framed in ways that perpetuate the politics of victimhood and reinforce the assumptions of patriarchy (Crawley & Simic, 2012).

Another form of collective violence that is more commonly discussed in Western media is human trafficking. It is important to note that women and men can be both victims and perpetrators of this crime, however, 71 percent of human trafficking victims are women and girls, typically used for marriage and sexual slavery making it a highly gendered form of violence (United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, 2016). In Canada, there were 2,688 detected victims of human trafficking between 2011 and 2021, with 96 percent of victims being women and girls<sup>5</sup> (Conroy, 2022). That being said, it is fair to assume that there is a gendered aspect to human trafficking that must be recognized. Media studies examining coverage of human trafficking argue that the media offer an oversimplified version of the issue, rather than addressing it as a global issue and getting

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<sup>5</sup> Between 2011 and 2021, there were 2,349 persons accused of human trafficking in Canada, the large majority of whom were men and boys (81%) (Conroy, 2022).

at the root causes of the problem (Rodriguez-Lopez, 2018). One reason that has been cited to explain this is the media's tendency to sensationalize stories, focusing on sex or crime, rather than explanatory articles about the causes of trafficking in order to draw greater readership (Barnett, 2016). Human trafficking effectively grabs media attention because the victims tend to be women and children which fits the audiences' picture of victimization (Rodriguez-Lopez, 2018). Recent studies of trafficking in magazines and news articles have shown that the presence of men is usually non-existent or very limited. This includes trafficked men, men who bought sex and men who sold trafficked women (Rodriguez-Lopez, 2018; Barnett, 2016). This raises questions about how thorough these stories really are when they focus on only one person in the triangle of worker, purchaser, and trafficker (Barnett, 2016). A common argument among media scholars suggests this type of framing constructs trafficking as a women's problem, one that can be resolved by either rescuing or punishing women (Barnett, 2016). Media representations of human trafficking have produced the image of an "ideal victim" in public discourse, where victims are usually young, innocent, and vulnerable women (Rodriguez-Lopez, 2018). The criticism often raised with this image is that it does not cover the whole spectrum of trafficking, ignoring the fact that a victim can also be someone who accepts sex work in their own country or city, and is later faced with conditions different from what was initially agreed upon, that now constitute exploitation (Rodriguez-Lopez, 2018). The stereotypical ideas put forth in the media of an "ideal victim" oversimplify the complexities of human trafficking and theorists argue that this leaves potential victims unprotected. Barnett (2016) found that news articles frequently reinforce hierarchies and divisions between women and men, among women, and among 'good' sex workers who deserve help and 'bad' sex workers who do not. The implications of which suggest that the problem of trafficking is one of individual vulnerability, that can be remedied by charitable efforts, ignoring

the larger cultural, political, economic, and educational systems of gender discrimination (Barnett, 2016). For these reasons, it is important that media stakeholders and journalists become aware of the implications involved with the way they depict human trafficking, and all other topics relating to GBV, as the mass media can shape public opinion and public policy. Collective forms of gendered violence are ongoing and organized, making their coverage less random, as opposed to individual forms of gendered violence that occur as isolated events.

The literature has shown how representations of individual and collective forms of violence in the news media can affect audiences and contribute to wider societal issues like GBV. Understanding the potential consequences of framing gendered violence in certain ways shows just how important this type of research can be in helping to understand how public opinions are shaped. The negative implications associated with representations of other forms of GBV help to contextualize the problem my thesis attempts to address. The literature on these constructions and implications can be used as a foundation for understanding how GBV is managed in the media and supplies the necessary provisions to recognize the importance of my research.

#### **1.4 Conclusion**

The incel subculture is a rather contemporary phenomenon, formed in the early 2000's, whose academic interest is picking up. As a group with a distinct set of beliefs about women and society, they provide a unique opportunity to investigate gender-based violence on a larger scale. The intersection between mass and gender-based violence is subtle, even more so for those investigating academic inquiries. As seen in this chapter, there is a substantial body of research available for those interested in representations of smaller scale forms of gendered violence, as

well as those interested in understanding the ideology behind the group, however, a significant theoretical gap exists for those trying to understand how mass forms of gender-based violence are being represented in the news media. Incel traits and attitudes can serve as a reference point for our understanding of mass violence as a gender-based phenomenon (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020, p.289). Research is needed to better understand how they are managed and treated by the media, as the media play a significant role in shaping public opinion. A focus on news media constructions offers a way to explore how we are coming to understand incel violence specifically, and to see how other factors shape that understanding. The current literature positions me to examine the ways in which the news media have constructed the incel subculture. Given that research has been done on media constructions of other forms of gendered violence, as seen with IPV, sexual assaults, and war time violence against women, my project aims to examine how the incel subculture is being characterized and described in the news media. My research seeks to contribute to the gap in the literature by examining media constructions of mass forms of gendered violence specifically through the incel subculture as a prime example of those responsible for this type of violence. Therefore, my thesis seeks to answer the following research question: *How are incels being portrayed by the news media?*

## CHAPTER 2: Theoretical Framework

The theoretical approach that I have adopted for my research is rooted in framing theory. I decided to use framing theory to better understand how representations of the incel subculture are being constructed in the media because it is known for helping to reduce the ambiguity of intangible topics, like media constructions, by contextualizing the information into easily digestible packages for the audience to understand (Shaw, 2013). The use of this theory emerged as a good fit after I had collected the data and begun the coding process. Primarily, framing theory suggests that how something is presented to the audience influences the choices people make about how to process that information (Scheufele, 1999). Framing theory was first posited by Bateson (1955) in his study of animals playing where he observed how they could flag ‘playful’ fight as opposed to ‘real’ fight through a set of signals that framed the action as ‘play’. Inspired by this, Goffman (1974) further developed the notion of framing with his work on the interaction order whereby members of a group use shared rules and expectations to coordinate and make sense of their daily social relations. Since then, framing theory has developed into a larger field of study that has been used within several disciplines. Given that my research is primarily focused on media frames, Goffman’s original conceptualization of the frame is used as it allowed me to theorize the various ways in which the news media have framed the incel subculture. Drawing from different concepts that hold similar underlying assumptions, I was able to characterize each frame and explain how they function to promote meaning.

This chapter begins with an introduction to framing theory and explores how it has been used in practice, most notably in the study of politics, social movements, and the media. Next, the theoretical underpinnings of framing theory are discussed with emphasis on the main theories and theorists with significant work in the area. Once the theoretical foundation is set, I introduce the

concepts of keying, scripts, and social categorization that enabled me to operationalize framing theory in my analysis. I also provide an exploration into other representations and frames that have come about in relation to similar topics. This includes representations of gender in the media as well as representations of violent extremism and how they shift depending on certain variables. Finally, I provide an overview of the limited research that has been conducted on the incel subculture in the media to situate the gap that my research is attempting to fill.

## **2.1 Framing Theory in Practice**

Framing theory is a broad theoretical approach that has been used in most social science disciplines. In the fields of social psychology and economics, Tversky and Kahneman's (1981) research into how the framing of problems influenced decision making was foundational. Other disciplines have found more specific uses for framing theory, for example social movement researchers who turned the general ethnographic method into a more specified tool for understanding the dynamics of activist movements (Shaw, 2013). Media and political scholars emphasized the role frames played in mass communications to guide audiences towards preferred conclusions by highlighting certain aspects and hiding others (Shaw, 2013). Social movement studies and political communication research are two of the most prominent areas that consider the role of frames. Research in these areas has strayed away from Goffman's original work as the role of intentionality has been reconsidered. In social movement and political communication studies, scholars argue that intentionality is in fact the element that enhanced the overall relevance of frames. They believe that frames could be deployed intentionally to create a change in attitudes (Weaver, 2007).

In the political arena, George Lakoff (2004) argues that to persuade a political audience, the facts must be presented through a rhetorical frame. Framing in politics is used to present the facts surrounding an issue in such a way to create the appearance of a problem that requires a solution. Without the frame, Lakoff believes that the facts of an argument become lost on an audience (2004). One example of how framing functions in politics can be seen in the buildup to the Gulf War. The conservatives were successful in framing the debate to be about whether to attack sooner or later, rather than the possibility of not attacking at all (Entman, 1993). After 9/11, the Bush administration's initial response was to frame the acts of terror as crime. Within hours this was replaced by a war metaphor, resulting in the "War on Terror" (Zhang, 2007). The difference between these two frames lies in the implied response. Framing the attack as crime implies bringing criminals to justice through the process of a trial and sentencing. Framing the attack as war suggests a greater enemy requiring military action (Zhang, 2007). In the realm of politics, the examples are endless, and are commonly researched under an agenda-setting framework.

First developed by McCombs and Shaw in 1972, agenda setting theory argues that the news media do not necessarily tell us what to think, but instead tell us what to think about. Though some scholars argue that framing and agenda-setting are synonymous, others believe there is a distinction (Weaver, 2007). According to Weaver (2007), framing selects certain aspects of an issue and increases their prominence in order to elicit specific interpretations and evaluations of the issue, whereas agenda-setting introduces the issue to increase its salience and accessibility. The first study to use this theory looked at the 1968 US presidential election, more specifically finding that the issues voters felt were most important to the country closely matched media coverage of the election. Agenda setting theory is built on the premise that increased media coverage of an

issue leads to increased perceptions of salience of that issue. It is based on the cognitive process known as accessibility, grounded in mnemonic models of information processing that assumes that “individuals form attitudes on the strength of considerations that are most salient, and thus most accessible, when making decisions” (Moy et al., 2016, p.5). The more frequently and prominently the media cover an issue, the more instances of that issue become accessible in audience's memories when forming opinions about the topic. This is not only true for the saliency of the issue itself but also how that issue is being interpreted by audiences. Both frame analysis and agenda-setting theory share a focus on the relationship between public policy issues in the news and public perceptions of these issues.

In sociology, framing theory, in addition to resource mobilization and political opportunity processes, has been regarded as a central dynamic in understanding the process of social movements (Snow & Benford, 2000). Social movements tend to carry distinct beliefs and ideologies and operate as a large part of the meaning making process for both participants and opposers (Snow & Benford, 1988). When evaluating the mobilization of social movements, sociologists consider them successful when the frames projected align with the frames of participants (Snow & Benford, 1988). A study of climate activist mobilization on regulating BPA found that the co-construction and dissemination of frames (i.e., using both experts and activists) can generate highly salient messaging points and contribute to the movement's success (Lubitow, 2013). This type of framing is often referred to as collective action frames, where the goal is to garner bystander support, motivate people to act and demobilize antagonists (Caraway, 2018). They are action-oriented frames “that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement” (Snow & Benford, 2000, p.614).

Of the prominent areas that have adopted framing theory, media and communication research has been responsible for a significant portion of its development. As the media maintain a fourth estate role in democratic societies, media researchers use framing theory to analyze imbalances and underlying power structures that mediate various political issues (Lumsden & Morgan, 2017). For example, a story about the environment can be framed quite differently depending on the political leanings of the media outlet. The approach I adopted for my research closely resembles those taken within the field of media and communication studies.

Research on media framing has been extensive covering topics from election campaigns to sex offenders. Many theorists support the idea that there are five main types of news frames/framing effects consistently identified throughout earlier studies in the field. These are attribution of responsibility, conflict, human-interest, economic consequences, and morality (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). One study that looked at the framing of European politics found that the use of certain news frames depended on both the type of outlet and the type of topic (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). The most significant differences were not between the media format (television vs. print) but between the types of news outlets. Serious newspapers more commonly employed responsibility and conflict frames, whereas sensationalist outlets more often used the human-interest frame (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). While my research differs in that it does not look for predetermined frames, there are still commonalities between the frames I have identified and those already defined in previous research. For example, the “humanized” incel frame closely resembles that of the human-interest frame, wherein an emotional angle is shown within the presentation of an event (Neuman et al., 1992). Previous studies on media framing and gender issues have shown how violence against women is legitimized through the ways in which the media frame their stories by positioning victims (Jermyn, 2001). One study looking at media

framing of trolling and online abuse found that media representations reinforce the normalization of online violence against women as an extension of gendered violence (Lumsden & Morgan, 2017). Kitzinger (2004) argues that media coverage can “decontextualize abuse, encourage racism, promote stereotypes of women (as virgins or whores), blame victims, and excuse assailants” (p.14). The themes and findings identified in previous studies of media framing and gendered issues reflect the issues examined in my research and reinforce the suitability of framing theory for such inquiries.

## **2.2 Defining Frames and Framing**

### *2.2.1 Frames*

The study of framing and its role in the social world has had effects across a broad spectrum of the social sciences. Goffman’s interpretation of this theory defines frames as “schemata of interpretation” that help people organize what they perceive happening around them (Goffman, 1974). He understood the idea of the frame to mean a set of cultural definitions that enable people to make sense of objects and events, a definition which makes sense to apply to a sub-cultural group like incels (Goffman, 1974). For example, individuals in advertising may attempt to frame certain products as pleasurable by associating them with recognizable symbols of positive things. Goffman argued that framing is an important means by which people translate social reality into subjective thought, that is, how they structure their interpretations about certain events or issues (Luo & Ling, 2023).

Since its inception, the term ‘frame’ has been defined and redefined several times. While no single definition has been outlined, there are certain features that recur throughout its use. For example, in the context of analyzing news, frames can become “conceptual tools which media and

individuals rely on to convey, interpret and evaluate information” (Neuman et al., 1992, p.60). They are recognized as setting parameters in which the public discuss events and issues (Tuchman, 1978). Frames are used to help audiences “locate, perceive, identify, and label” the vast quantities of information around them (Goffman, 1974, p.21). While consensus over a definition is lacking, studies have consistently identified the significance of frames by focusing their research on how they shape the public’s interpretation of events and issues (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Graber, 1993; Iyengar, 1991; Neuman et al., 1992). For example, Neuman et al. (1992) analyzed coverage of 150 television and newspaper stories on five prominent social and political issues: drugs, AIDS, South African apartheid, the Strategic Defense Initiative, and the stock market crash of October 1987. After analyzing audience responses of more than 1,600 people, they found that news media are far more effective at raising the saliency of issues and promoting learning than is generally assumed (Neuman et al., 1992).

The process of framing can be understood as twofold in that there are two competing elements that must be accounted for. On one hand, frames represent how social issues are presented by the media and on the other hand, they influence how audiences interpret the information presented to them (Luo & Ling, 2023). Robert Entman, another prominent scholar within contemporary framing theory, argues that the process is even more complex suggesting that frames have four levels; (1) frames shaped by the beliefs of the communicator (journalist), (2) frames manifested through “keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences”, (3) the reader’s own frames that help determine what will be concluded and (4) the general culture of a social group, described by Entman as “commonly invoked frames” (1993, p.7). In contrast to Goffman, who defined frames in less intentional terms, Entman defines framing as the process of “select[ing] some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in

a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, p.52). What this means for media studies is that frames can be conceptualized as filtering devices where only select pieces of information make it through and others are left behind or reorganized to fit the elements within the frame.

Framing theory is frequently used in research on policy issues, reinforcing its use in this project. Seeing as every issue has multiple potential dimensions, framing is a useful tool for policy actors to select and emphasize particular aspects of an issue. Different interest groups use framing to strategically highlight certain aspects while downplaying others in order to steer the debate in a favorable direction. Frames can be used to try and manipulate the scope of a conflict to the benefit of an actor’s position. For example, Klüver (2009) examined how various interest groups lobbying the European Commission regarding the reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from cars framed the same proposal in different ways. Automobile manufacturers highlighted the negative impact this legislation would have on the productivity and number of jobs in the automobile industry while environmental groups and manufacturers of electric cars emphasized the positive effect of the proposal on climate protection (Klüver, 2009). Framing strategies are often used to gain advantages in a policy debate. This process isn’t always used as deliberately as in policy debates, but it offers a good illustration for how framing strategies function.

Another aspect of framing theory that captures the flexibility of frames is Goffman’s concept of “keying”. He initially proposed the idea that social actors draw upon numerous primary frameworks to make sense of daily life, which together constitute part of shared culture (Johnston & Alimi, 2012). Building off the notion of primary frameworks, Goffman’s concept of keying is used to capture the way primary frameworks can be reworked and transformed to evoke various

interpretations (Goffman, 1974). As social experience progresses, new layers are extended onto primary frameworks through the process of keying.

The term 'key' is a reference to musical keys, of which there are many ways a single piece can be transposed. Whether a frame is played in A Major or Minor makes an important difference in its representation (Luhtakailo, 2013). This analogy helps to explain how frameworks are transformed through interaction and experience, building upon them while also maintaining the primary structure at the core. The idea is that primary frameworks can be altered, or played in a different key, resulting in a different interpretation of what is going on (Goffman, 1974). Sometimes these changes are subtle and other times drastic. Important to note is that the basic structure of the frame stays intact, and modifications occur on the outer layers changing the meaningfulness that is conveyed, as they are the most accessible elements of interpretation (Johnston & Alimi, 2012). "Is a fight we see on the street a real fight, a mockery between friends, or a staged scene to distract people from pickpockets at work?" (Luhtakailo, 2013, p.34). Analyzing frames in terms of Goffman's frame analysis means asking 'what seems to be going on' considering the different elements at play while also considering the context. Keying is interpretation that directs focus or even switches the meaning of something in a given situation.

### *2.2.2 Scripts*

While framing theory sets the groundwork for my research, alone, it is insufficient to complete my analysis because it does not help explain how the meaning of frames come to be interpreted. The concept of scripts is used to operationalize the theory in practice by providing

another level to the analysis. Each script within a frame highlights a particular aspect helping to breakdown the meaning behind each frame.

In addition to the use of framing theory in my research, I employed the use of scripts to breakdown the components of each frame and better detail its workings. In the field of media studies, reporters and journalists are, to a certain extent, thought of as storytellers (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). In that sense, a script refers to an established sequence of events and components to the story that have been “internalized as a structured mental representation of the event” (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p.60). Essentially, scripts, similarly to frames, structure interpretations of events through repeated exposure and include various types of cues, like metaphors or symbols. Scripts include a shared understanding of what is to occur next, helping explain the actions taken. Therefore, scripts are one way to structure and strengthen the discourse of media frames, as they represent cognitive shortcuts that make the news easier to interpret (Navarro & Higgins, 2022). This process reflects the cognitive process of accessibility that underpins both frame analysis and agenda setting theory. For my research, four distinct frames were identified each representing a distinct perspective on the incel subculture. Within these frames, scripts represent the subthemes that emerged each anchored to a particular element of the frame. Frames represent the bigger picture representations; they are compositions of various connected elements that shape the interpreted meanings. Each script is dedicated to one of these elements, describing the role they play within the bigger picture. I have employed the use of both frames and scripts to not only understand how incels are being defined but what pieces make up these definitions.

While scripts are not essential to the process of conducting a frame analysis, they provide a straightforward way to conceptualize and understand human behaviours. Two scholars with prominent work in scripting are Gagnon and Simon with their notion of sexual scripts. In their

book *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality*, they introduce sexual script theory to enable a better understanding of human sexual activity. Just as scripts do, they argue that sexual scripts create an anticipated sequence of how certain situations might unfold just more specifically in the context of sexual behaviour (Morrison et al., 2015). Gagnon and Simon (1973) argue that “sexual scripts are cognitive schema that instruct people how to understand and act in sexual situations” (Masters et al., 2013, p.409). These scripts are developed through social and learned interactions (Gagnon & Simon, 1973). The theory suggests that scripts can be layered through three dimensions: cultural scenarios, interpersonal scenarios, and intrapsychic scenarios (Gagnon & Simon, 1973). Cultural scenarios, according to Gagnon and Simon (1973), are those adapted from media and societal representations of sexuality. For example, a woman should get married and have children at an earlier age is a cultural script. Interpersonal scenarios represent the outlet through which individuals act out cultural scenarios and negotiate sexual encounters. A woman might grow up believing she is someone who knows what she wants but the message passed on through cultural scripts recommend that she be coy and shy in bed. Finally, they describe intrapsychic scenarios as a composition of the other two that inform an individual’s own fantasies and desires (Navarro & Higgins, 2022). Considering the previous example, over time, as the woman approaches interactions with men shyly, she will eventually have this behaviour affixed in her brain. She has internalized the behaviour even though it contrasts her initial understanding of who she is.

For the purposes of my research, I am interested in this theory at the level of cultural scenarios as I am exploring frames and scripts at a cultural and social level rather than an individual one. Now that a theoretical understanding of scripts has been made, we can look to examples of

how social scripts function in society. The following sections will highlight the various social scripts that drive masculinity, misogyny, and extremism.

Understanding representations of gender in the media is crucial because individuals come to understand gender roles through the process of socialization which, as discussed previously, is largely informed by the media (Gurkan, 2022). For example, in western cultures, hegemonic masculinities portrayed in TV and film afford white, heterosexual, cisgender men institutional privileges that often coincide with social dominance over women which is then internalized by young men (Brunson, 2021). Whether it be an action film with a muscular male hero or a romantic “chick flick” with a scrawny male fawning for the attention of a pretty woman, the film industry can instruct audiences on how and how not to be a ‘man’ (Consalvo, 2003). This process can also be found in literature. For example, magazines are often categorized down gender lines (e.g., *Popular Mechanics* is understood to be a men’s magazine, and *Bon Appetit* a women’s magazine), suggesting what men and women should and should not be interested in (Milani, 2015).

Beyond the simple question of how men and women should act, there are cultural scripts for violent gendered interactions as well. From IPV to sexual assault, common narratives are put forth in news media when covering misogynistic violence. For example, Buiten and Salo (2007) argue that certain news discourses normalize misogyny and GBV by sidestepping the gendered nature of the problem in favour of a discourse that implies it is normal for men to commit violent crimes against women. It has also been argued that the agency of perpetrators of GBV is often rendered invisible in some news reports when the report focuses on the immediate circumstances in which the violence occurred instead of the perpetrator’s intention (Buiten & Salo, 2007). Mainstream representations of IPV have been found to reinforce gender norms and affirm the clichéd imagery of a physical masculine act against a weak and helpless woman (Wolf, 2013). The

media fail to accurately portray the complexity and systemic nature of GBV, a crucial finding in relation to my research.

Within the field of media studies, the topic of violent extremism and its representation in mainstream media has been extensively reviewed. In the case of extremism, it has been found that there are many factors that can influence how individuals react to a story. Studies examining representations of international and domestic extremism find substantial differences, where the former is typically politicized, and the latter described as mentally ill individuals (Kanji, 2018). One study compared the news media framing of two similar attacks in Sweden, the first was directed towards individuals with immigrant backgrounds at a school and the second involved a truck that drove through a crowded pedestrian street. The findings show that the perpetrator of the second attack was highly politicized and consistently presented within a terrorism frame while the first was more commonly psychologized and framed as a mentally ill school-shooter (Svensson Glaser, 2018). Post 9/11, the terrorism frame mostly includes acts committed by individuals supporting an Islamist ideology, leaving other types of attacks, including incel related violence, difficult to define.

Different motivations have also been found to contribute to the varying representations of violent extremism. As mentioned in chapter one, religious, political, and ideological extremism receive different levels and types of coverage from the news media. A national field study used the tragic events of 9/11 as an opportunity to examine the role emotions play in shaping attributions (Small et al., 2006). The study primed anger and sadness in participants to evaluate how they evoke various responses. The results found that participants primed with anger generated more causal attributions (i.e., greater blame) than those primed with sadness (Small et al., 2006). The findings imply that media coverage of terrorist or extremist attacks can differentially activate emotions

depending on the framing of content. The cultural scripting of extremism is relevant to my research as one of the largest debates surrounding the incel subculture is whether they constitute a terrorist organization or not. Understanding how extremist scripts function can help experts better identify emerging threats and ideally prevent tragic attacks.

As shown above, representations of gender and violence in the media have been researched extensively; however, there is little research that looks specifically at incels. Representations of incels in the media are limited. The rare occasions they have been represented in television and film; they are portrayed as oafs (Brunson, 2021). There also seems to be a lack of research identifying if or how media representations of men, masculinities, and misogyny are affecting the discourse surrounding incels. Of the limited research that does exist, one study explored how varying depictions of incels (extreme vs neutral) affected public perception of the group (Ostermann, 2020). The findings revealed that individuals shown the nuanced depiction were far more likely to show empathic concern towards incels versus participants shown the violent depiction, who were more inclined to attribute their attacks to politically charged motivations (Ostermann, 2020). One other study discussed the frequent mislabeling of incels in the media. For example, the perpetrator of a shooting in Hanau, Germany who had written a manifesto full of white supremacist ideals that included a section where he expressed prolonged loneliness and involuntary abstinence was quickly labelled an incel in the media even though his manifesto did not fit the incel narrative (Jasser et al., 2020). It was suggested that this type of mislabeling is problematic as it provides an overly simplistic understanding of what an incel is that does not provide the public with an accurate picture. There is a significant gap in research on media representations of the incel subculture, a gap that my research attempts to fill. Filling this gap is important because with a comprehensive understanding of how the media are portraying the

subculture, we will be better equipped to promote strategies for more neutral media portrayals, ideally equipping the public with a better understanding of the subculture in order to recognize incel members and neutralize potential threats.

For my research, scripts play a significant role in helping to contextualize my findings. However, scripts alone cannot further interpretations and understanding when frames are overlapped or modified. Therefore, I also employed the concept of othering in order to enhance the analysis and interpretation of the frames identified in my data.

### *2.2.3 Othering as a form of Social Categorization*

Another concept that contributes to the understanding of meaning each frame produces is othering through social categorization. This concept furthers the analysis by explaining how each script is characterizing the incel subculture. In combination with scripts, these two concepts mobilize the two different levels of framing theory. Scripts provide clarity and organization to each frame, and help contextualize findings, while social categorization gets at the content within each frame.

As we have seen, frames and social scripts allow us to define what is happening during certain events or various forms of behaviour. This can tell us what actors are involved in said events or behaviours, and how we come to define or understand them. In some areas of sociology, it is believed that all human knowledge is dependent upon classification, a process that uses the specification of similarities and of differences (Jenkins, 2000). Social categorization is understood as the process through which people categorize themselves and others into differentiated groups (Kreuger, 2001). The process of categorization simplifies people's perception of the social world

by detecting similarities and imposing structure on it (Kreuger, 2001). For example, “I or we can be similar or different to them. They can be similar or different to me, to us, or to each other” (Jenkins, 2000, p.7). Categorization is an essential feature to social identification because it “satisfies the basic human need for cognitive parsimony,” without which, the social world may not be manageable at all (Hogg & Abrams, 1989, p.72). This concept of social categorization is relevant to my research as I am examining how the news media are constructing and classifying the incel subculture. While categorization is a broad idea, I employ the specific concept of othering, as it narrows in on the way we classify groups that are seen as starkly different from our own. Othering helps explain the different ways each frame has classified the incel subculture as it is a concept commonly used to explain how society deals with undesirable subjects.

Othering refers to the categorization process whereby “an individual or groups of people attribute negative characteristics to other individuals or groups of people that set them apart as representing that which is opposite to them” (Rohleder, 2014, p.1307). The notion of ‘the other’ is widely used in social theory, where ‘the other’ represents those who are positioned outside of the dominant group and are often subordinate to the dominant group (Rohleder, 2014). For example, Edward Said (1978) observed how notions of cultural ‘others’, which in this case meant those of Asian descent, were a construction of western fantasies which westerners could position themselves as superior to. Simone de Beauvoir (1997) wrote about women as representing the ‘other’ sex, where women are positioned as the opposite of men in patriarchal society and come to represent that which is inferior to them.

In their research on representations of poverty in British newspapers, Chauhan and Foster (2014) put forth three distinct representational pathways through which the other can be developed: othering through representational absence, othering through representations of difference, and

othering through representations of threat. Given that the incel subculture inherently represents something different from society, and that debates about whether they constitute a terrorism threat are well underway, these pathways are well fitted to conceptualize the different ways the media are defining the subculture.

Othering through representational absence stems from the idea that the most common ways in which the public sphere deals with threatening and anxiety provoking information is through absence and denial (Chauhan & Foster, 2014). This type of othering can be identified through the use of partial constructions of an issue, where certain elements are ignored or avoided. Gervais et al. (1999) underline the significance of representational absence as the absences hamper the acknowledgement and understanding of the issue and reduce the likelihood of finding resolutions. Othering through representational absence enables the threat to be externalized (Chauhan & Foster, 2014). Othering through representations of difference is more easily identifiable as the other is constructed through the portrayal of stark differences between the other and the self. The outcome is a clear distinction between the self and the other, where the other represents the issue, or those responsible for it (Chauhan & Foster, 2014). The final pathway, othering through representational threat, occurs when an issue is represented as having close associations with criminal behaviour or terrorism. Terrorism presents an unpredictable, clandestine, ever-present, and indiscriminate threat to all social groups precipitating the strongest type of othering (Chauhan & Foster, 2014). While all three types of othering were present in my data, othering through representations of threat was by far the most prevalent as discussions involving the incel subculture and terrorism are long underway.

## 2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has set the groundwork for the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis while exploring how other studies have investigated similar topics in the past. The theories and concepts outlined above work cohesively to enhance the analysis portion of my research. The overarching framework for this thesis draws on framing theory, however, alone this theory is insufficient to describe exactly what is going on in the data. To operationalize framing theory in my research, I employ the use of scripts and othering. Scripts assist in the contextualization of frames, identifying the various elements that make up each frame. Othering as a form of social categorization is used to describe how the four frames work to characterize the incel subculture for audiences. These theories and concepts aren't without limitations, the most notably being the inherently subjective nature of frames, however, subjectivity is not a concern for the paradigm under which I am conducting my research, as is discussed in the following chapter. With the supplemental concepts included, the overall framework outlined in this chapter enables a fulsome analysis.

## **CHAPTER 3: Methodology**

Since research on representations of the incel subculture is limited, and the aim of this thesis is to better understand how the news media are portraying incels, a qualitative approach was used to enable a detailed analysis of the various frames and scripts being used when incels are discussed in the media. The following chapter outlines the research question guiding this thesis as well as the methodological approach applied. The goal of this thesis is to investigate how the news media are portraying the incel subculture. This research is important as the incel subculture is a growing part of what feminists call the manosphere, a term used to describe a range of misogynistic online communities where “men’s perspectives, needs, gripes, frustrations and desires are explicitly explored” (Farrell et al., 2019). In this digital space, discourse often revolves around men’s rights activism, varying from anti-feminism to more explicit, violent rhetoric towards women. This chapter begins by outlining the questions guiding this research followed by a discussion of the theoretical paradigm underpinning the project. Next, the research design is outlined including the various processes of sampling, coding, and analysis. Finally, the chapter concludes with a section devoted to the limitations of this study.

### **3.1 Research Question & Objectives**

As previously discussed, the overarching theme of this thesis is representations of gender-based violence in the media. Looking specifically at the incel subculture provides a unique opportunity to contribute to the discussion on gender-based violence by exploring how it is represented on a larger scale. The manosphere is well known for its association with masculinity and men’s issues at various levels. From pick-up artists to fathers’ rights activists, there is a broad

spectrum of online movements promoting men's rights. The incel subculture is a part of the this, exhibiting more explicitly violent rhetoric, and preaching some of the most severe hate speech online. As shown in the literature review, these individuals pose an increasingly greater threat to the real world, rather than an issue confined to the online space. Accordingly, it is important to investigate how the subculture is being framed in the news media as frames can have a significant effect on public opinion and public policy, as shown in Chapter one. For this reason, the research question guiding this thesis is as follows: *How are incels being portrayed by the news media?*

To answer this question, I explored what type of language is being used, how it's being used, and how these uses configure differently to describe the subculture, their crimes, and the individuals involved. Is the subculture being discussed in connection to other forms of violence (for example, white supremacy or Jihadist terrorism)? If so, how are these connections being drawn? Finally, how does coverage of the incel subculture include discussions of the gendered elements at play? With these questions in mind, the theoretical objectives of this thesis are to better define how incels are being presented in the news media and to map the various discourses being used to discuss incels in the news media.

### **3.2 Paradigmatic Reflections**

A research paradigm is the philosophical framework underpinning a research project. It offers a set of beliefs and understandings through which the theories and methods of the project operate. There are three main components of a research paradigm: ontology; epistemology; and methodology. Every research paradigm is made up of a different combination of ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions. Ontology refers to the researcher's view of the

nature of reality or being. Epistemology refers to the nature of knowledge within this ontological reality, and asks questions about knowledge, beliefs, and truth. Finally, methodology looks to answer how we go about discovering the answer or reality, including the process of data collection and analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 2003).

This thesis was conducted within the constructivist paradigm, which assumes a relativist ontology, a subjectivist epistemology, and a naturalistic set of methodological procedures (Lincoln & Denzin, 2013). Constructivism considers knowledge a social construct that results from exchanges and interactions between individuals and the settings in which they are formed (Creswell, 2014). It argues that we only come to understand reality through our social interactions with others. It stresses the important role perceptions play in informing one's social construction of reality and argues that our opinions about truth are based on these perceptions (Guba & Lincoln, 2003).

Under the constructivist paradigm, reality is understood through social constructions and is ever changing. It is produced by the individual, through our own beliefs, experiences, and internal processes. The ontological assumptions of this paradigm stress that there are multiple truths because there are multiple realities (Guba & Lincoln, 2003). It emphasizes the "pluralistic and plastic character of reality – pluralistic in the sense that reality is expressible in a variety of symbol and language systems; plastic in the sense that reality is stretched and shaped to fit purposeful acts of intentional human agents" (Lincoln & Denzin, 2013, p.236). Within this approach, subjectivity is valued and is the way to know or understand things. The epistemological underpinnings of constructivism argue that the researcher and reality are always tied together as they are embedded within each other. In this sense, constructivism is dialogical, where knowledge

is produced by interactions between investigators and respondents (Guba & Lincoln, 2003). Researchers must interact with the specific reality of study and with the people apart of that reality.

The methodology based on this approach posits that, in order to understand how the world works, we need to examine how people construct and interpret social reality. Understanding a certain phenomenon must be grounded in the experience of those who live it. The goal within this paradigm is to produce rich and thick descriptions that bring deeper and more complex understandings of the phenomenon. The methodological process involves interacting with participants, where the researcher can begin to understand the social constructions and categories that individuals use to understand and live in their world (Guba & Lincoln, 2003). Those constructions are then interpreted and put together to construct a larger and more informed picture of reality. It is an inductive process that involves a high degree of reflexivity (Guba & Lincoln, 2003). The researcher must acknowledge how their own beliefs and experiences contribute to their construction of meaning and understanding of the situation.

The assumptions of this paradigm are in line with my research as it investigates how the media are constructing incel violence. This question presumes that there are multiple realities and that I am interested in exploring the reality constructed through the news media's interactions with the public about the issue. Although I am not interacting directly with individuals, I am interacting with documents that are produced by individuals. Since these documents come directly from the source I am interested in studying, the media, I was able to see how they are constructing the issue. My research fits nicely in this paradigm as the focus of my question and project is constructions. I am interested in how the media are constructing a particular issue, the incel subculture, and the implications of those constructions for the people living in this reality.

### 3.3 Research Design

Taking the goals of this thesis into consideration, I chose to use documents as the source of my empirical material as they provide suitable data that allowed me to answer the research question outlined at the beginning of the research process. In qualitative research, documents are regarded as self-descriptions that are produced by settings, organizations, and people to represent themselves to themselves as well as to the world (Gaudet & Robert, 2018). They act as “a reservoir of indicators and testimonies about a reality that interests the researcher”, in the case of my research, news articles are the conduit through which I can access information about the reality of media frames (Gaudet & Robert, 2018, p.43). The process of analyzing documents includes coding content into themes that are later analyzed. It is a systematic procedure that can elicit meaning, understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009).

When conducting qualitative research, documents can be particularly useful as they produce “rich descriptions of a single phenomenon, event, organization, or program” (Bowen, 2009, p.29). Since my research is focused on news media representations of the incel subculture, it was most fitting to produce a dataset composed of news articles referencing the subculture. I opted to conduct an analysis of documents as I believed it would capture the data necessary to achieve my research goals. While I did consider including an additional form of analysis that would capture audience reactions to specific frames, I determined that this type of project would be too large and intensive given the requirements and restraints of a master’s thesis.

Documents, and news articles more specifically, are an efficient, cost-effective, and non-obtrusive datatype (Gaudet & Robert, 2018). Their accessibility was especially relevant during the past two years in which the COVID-19 pandemic has made certain research designs far more

difficult to pursue. Given the nature of this thesis, using documents as the empirical material allowed me to include a wide variety of sources in the dataset. Because of this, I was able to include in my analysis how different countries and news organizations were framing the issue.

### **3.4 Data Sampling & Collection**

When conducting a document analysis, it is expected that the researcher draws upon multiple sources of evidence (Bowen, 2009). After identifying my research question, the next step in the research process involved collecting my data. Many different types of sampling techniques exist, however, for my research I employed the technique of purposive sampling. This technique involves the use of deliberate decision making to identify data that meets the quality and content needs of the study (Etikan et al., 2016). It is a form of non-probability sampling that focuses on finding data best suited for the purpose of the research. Since I had already decided what type of data I was looking for, I started the collection process using the Factiva database accessible through the University of Ottawa's library. Factiva, owned by Dow Jones & Company, is a research tool that provides access to over 32,000 sources such as newspapers, journals, magazines, etc. For my initial search, the only parameters I set were that the articles be written in English and the term 'incel' be included. This search returned thousands of articles indicating that I would need to set stricter parameters to narrow down my search. I decided to narrow the parameters to articles published in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom as they are all predominantly English-speaking countries with similar cultural and legal systems.

After reviewing some of the articles from the initial search, I determined that in order to avoid a dataset full of articles that focused on a single event, I would have to identify a date range

that did not include any mass casualty events relating to the incel subculture. For this reason, the time frame for my search was August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020, to July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021. After returning this search, I still had slightly over 1,000 articles, too many for the restraints of a master's thesis. At this point, I decided that the best way to identify a manageable dataset would be to take a sample of articles from the results. Factiva returns results based on frequency of search term. I read through each article from the top search result down and when I began to read articles with only one reference to the search term incel, it was clear that the mention was as an aside only. Accordingly, I cut off my sample as the mention of incels was merely an aside in the articles. This resulted in a dataset of 81 articles. If after reviewing these articles I had yet to reach a point of theoretical saturation, I would return to the database and take more articles, but in the end, this was unnecessary as the 81 articles had easily reached the point of saturation.

The final dataset included 81 articles from 33 different sources spanning 3 countries. The most common sources were the Toronto Star, Mail Online, and The Independent (9, 6, and 5 respectively). Of the 33 sources, 26 were newspapers, 6 were news agencies/newswires, and one was a journal/magazine. The average word count was 1,051, while the shortest article was 300 words and the longest, 14,105 words. Considering the gendered nature of this study there were twice as many male authors as there were female authors with 46 articles written by male authors, 23 by female authors, and 12 articles without an author listed.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

The analytical technique employed for this thesis was a qualitative content analysis. After the collection process was complete, I reviewed the final dataset and determined that a content

analysis would be best suited for answering my research question. Broadly speaking, content analysis is a method used to determine the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within a qualitative dataset (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). It involves a two-phase process with multiple steps. Phase one involves the coding of data which begins with a review of the data to determine preliminary codes and then coding the content accordingly. Phase two, the interpretation phase, involves analyzing similarities between codes, identifying themes or patterns across codes, and finally drawing interpretations (Roller, 2019). Content analysis is a highly flexible, systematic, and rigorous approach to analysis which fits well in the constructivist paradigm. This type of analysis is also useful for quantifying qualitative data, an element I wanted to include with word counts of key terms. I chose to employ this method as it fit the parameters of my paradigm while also allowing me the flexibility for modifications throughout the process. This method is also commonly used in research investigating frames (Molder et al., 2021; Liu, 2019; Aubrey & Hahn, 2016; Wendorf Muhamad & Yang, 2017; Siefkes-Andrew & Alexopoulos, 2018).

Employing an inductive approach, I went into the analysis phase without a clear picture of what I was looking for. I first began by reading through the data and noted anything that stood out to me. After the initial reading, I had determined that there were three broad categories I would likely have to focus in on. These were, how incel crimes were being portrayed, how the incel subculture was being characterized, and finally, how individual members were being described. Upon a second reading of the data, I began to code the contents according to these broad categories. Subthemes began emerging that narrowed in on particularly salient aspects of how the incel subculture was being portrayed, for example repetitive use of certain terms. Once the data had been sorted into these codes, I reviewed each code in search for similarities, patterns, and anything that stood out. At this point in the analysis, I had sorted my data into several different codes without

any sort of logical organization. In collaboration with my thesis advisors, we reviewed the data and the codes I had identified in search of the best way to organize and conceptualize the themes I had pulled out. Professor Valerie Steeves, one of my co-advisors, forwarded an article<sup>6</sup> that employed a similar research design with the use of scripts in combination with frames to structure the analysis. We decided moving forward that identifying scripts within the larger frames would help structure the findings I had identified in my data. Redefining the typology of framing theory to include scripts allowed me to organize the analysis in a coherent and logical way. I was able to review the data once more and sort my codes accordingly. Once my analysis had taken on a manageable form, it became clear that there were four main frames being used to discuss the incel subculture: (1) “*humanized*” incels, (2) “*debilitated*” incels, (3) “*sinister*” incels, and (4) “*cyber*” incels. I then reviewed the data one last time, according to these four frames, and identified the different scripts each frame had employed. Once the data had been coded for the final time, I conducted word counts of key terms to identify the saliency of each frame.

During the final reading of the data, as I reached the final 10-15 articles, I felt that I had attained a point of saturation as there was no longer anything new being added to the codes. Theoretical saturation is a core principle that is used in qualitative research and refers to the point in the research process when the data is no longer providing new information (Saunders et al., 2018). Once this point is reached, the researcher can be certain that their dataset provides a full understanding of the phenomena. Reaching this point in my project reassured me that my dataset was complete, and I did not need to return to Factiva to include additional articles.

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<sup>6</sup> Navarro, J. C. & Higgins, E. M. (2022). Media frames and the sex offender: A qualitative content analysis from six major metropolitan areas. *Journal of Crime and Justice*, 1-18.

### 3.6 Limitations

Conducting a content analysis of documents was beneficial as it inherently involved fewer ethical concerns. However, there are limitations to this type of research, for example, documents are rarely written in an objective fashion. This concern is exacerbated when looking at news articles as media outlets are not neutral, their political leanings and thus news framing depend greatly on their executive members and funding. While this type of bias is a concern within other paradigms, in constructivism, subjectivity is valued as the way we come to know or understand. Part of my inquiry was to explore how the construction of the incel subculture changed between news outlets, countries, and other factors. One particularly relevant concern within the constructivist paradigm is reflexivity, where the researcher acknowledges their role in the research (Watt, 2007). Qualitative researchers are an essential part of the research process; therefore, their prior experiences, assumptions, and beliefs can influence the research process. For example, my experience as a young woman influenced my decision to pursue a research topic that investigated a gendered subject. It also influenced my decision making throughout the process and required a conscientious effort to write as a researcher rather than simply a woman discussing incels. Another area that required constant reflexivity was ensuring the project stayed within the boundaries of the constructivist paradigm. My previous experience as a researcher was conducted within the positivist paradigm, therefore it was important that I acknowledged the influence this had on my decision making as I was now using a non-positivist method. Throughout the research process, I have strived to acknowledge how my role in the process shaped the outcome and how I have handled various internal pressures.

Another limitation of this type of research is a concern over generalizability. Some theorists criticize this method by arguing that since the categories within a content analysis are obtained from the very material being analyzed, their generalizability cannot be presumed beyond the given data (Krippendorff, 1989). On the other hand, if the categories are derived from a broader theory, there is a risk of ignoring a lot of the symbolic richness of the data in hand (Krippendorff, 1989). Finding a compromise between these two concerns can be difficult to achieve. While these limitations do exist, my intention for conducting this research was to contribute to the study of media framing and gender-based violence therefore, I did not expect my findings to be generalizable to all other frame analyses.

## **CHAPTER 4: Framing the Incel Subculture**

The findings of this analysis reveal that the media tend to frame the incel subculture as a group of strange outcasts and ‘weirdos’, as well as a group of potentially dangerous individuals. This can be problematic because pathologizing incel members as deviant others, distinct from ordinary men, suggests that explicit sexism is confined to these small groups rather than being symbolic of wider societal perspectives and behaviours. The findings of my project reveal two dominant interpretations through which the media has constructed the incel subculture, personalization, and politicization. Each of these perspectives is the combination of various frames and scripts that each appeal to different qualities. In this chapter, I outline each of the four frames along with their scripts, and detail how they function to produce meaning. The following chapter then examines how these frames can be deployed together to alter meanings and ultimately arrive at the conclusion that the news media employ two distinct techniques in their coverage of the incel subculture.

### **4.1 Description of Incel Media Coverage**

The final dataset consisted of 81 newspaper articles that mentioned or discussed the incel subculture. The articles were published in a total of 33 different sources from 3 different countries, see tables 1a and 1b below for the breakdown of articles by source and country. Table 1a below lists the number of articles per country, Table 1b lists the news organizations by the number of articles in the dataset. The Toronto Star had the most articles in the dataset with a total of nine, most of which covered the Alek Minassian trial that took place within the period the data were collected.

#### **Table 1a: Countries by Number of Articles**

Country	Frequency
UK	46
Canada	23
US	12

**Table 1b: News Organizations by Number of Articles**

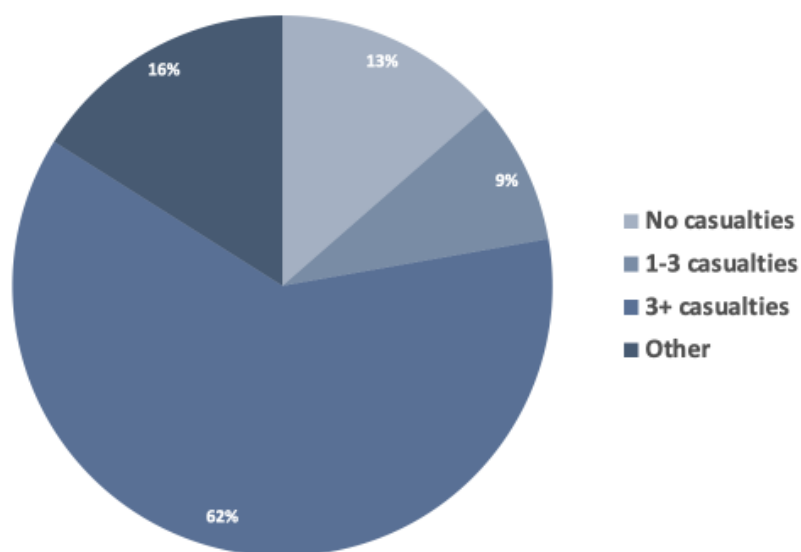
Source	Frequency
Toronto Star	9
Mail Online	6
The Independent	5
The Times	4
The Sun	4
Daily Star	4
The Telegraph	4
U Wire	4
Postmedia	4
Press Association	4
Edinburgh Evening News	4
The Globe and Mail	2
The Vancouver Sun	2
The Irish Examiner	2
The New York Times	2
The Toronto Sun	2
The Mirror	2
The Guardian	2

Source	Frequency
Newsrx	1
Forbes	1
USA Today	1
Daily Mirror	1
US Fed News	1
Sunday Mail	1
The Washington Post	1
Reuters	1
The Canadian Press	1
Winnipeg Free Press	1
The Edmonton Sun	1
New York Daily News	1
Irish Daily Star	1
Montreal Gazette	1
The Scottish Sun	1

When analyzing the level of coverage, I first focused on the scale of incidents covered. For example, 84% of the articles in the dataset discussed specific events tied to the incel subculture rather than discussing them more broadly. I coded each article into four different categories based on the event or focus of the article. The four categories were no casualties, 1-3 casualties, 3+ casualties, and other. I separated the articles based on level of injury as it was a logical fit for breaking down the different types of incel related stories covered in the news media, given that most articles covered specific incidents. The 3+ casualties' category included articles that focused on mass casualty events/plots with more than three victims. Most commonly this included the

Toronto van attack (11 deaths, 15 injured), a plot to murder “3,000 sorority girls” in Ohio, and a terrorism plot in Edinburgh involving an arsenal of weapons. The 1-3 casualties’ category included articles with a focus on events with three or less victims. Most notable in this category is Danyal Hussein’s murder of two women in London. The no casualties’ category included stories of events without any fatalities. This mostly included articles about stalking and harassment. Finally, the other category was used for any article that either discussed the incel subculture more generally or mentioned them while covering other stories (e.g., The release of the film *Saint Maud*, claiming it to be “cinema’s first female incel”). However, it is worth noting that many of the articles categorized as ‘other’ mentioned either Elliot Rodger or Alek Minassian (both perpetrators of events with three or more victims, in Isla Vista, California and Toronto, respectively).

**Table 2: Number of Articles by Scale of Incident Covered**

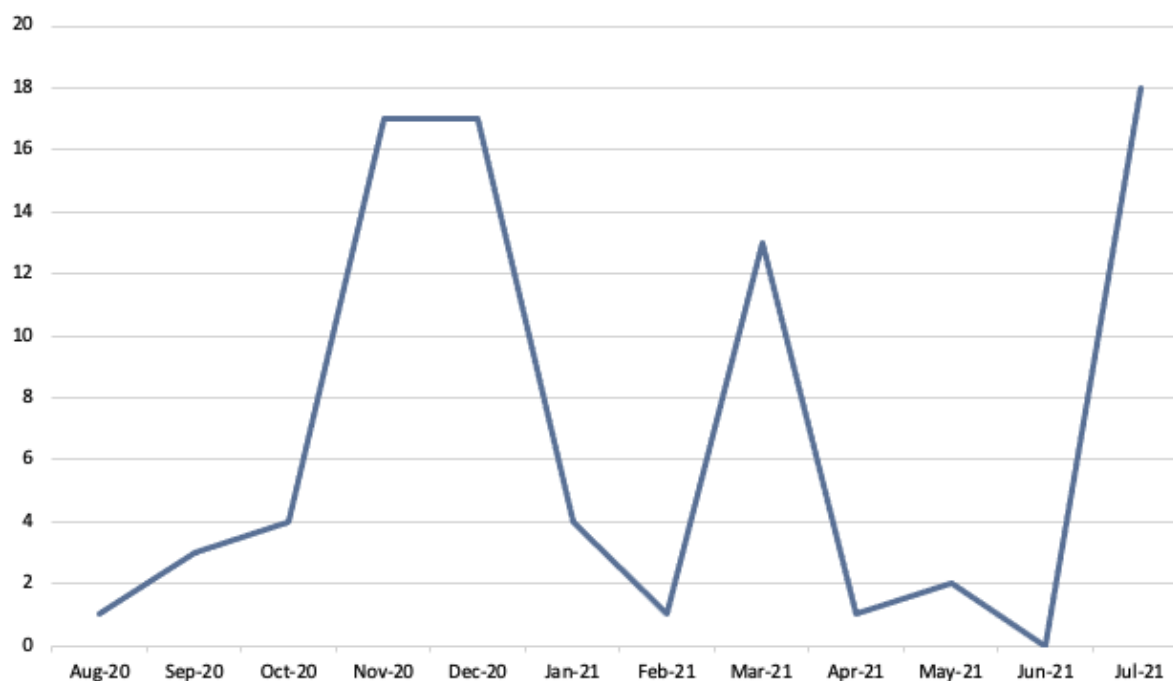


As Table 2 shows, only 16% of the articles in the dataset discussed incels more broadly or in relation to an entirely different topic. This indicates that 84% of media stories in the dataset use

episodic framing. This refers to articles where a particular individual's experience or a specific event is used to illustrate the issue (Iyengar, 1990). For example, articles focused on the Alek Minassian trial. In addition, 62% of the articles in the dataset referred to events with three or more victims. This is consistent with other research (Carlyle et al., 2008; Siefkes-Andrew & Alexopoulos, 2019) where media coverage of gender-based violence tends to focus on large-scale events in spite of the fact that every day, small-scale gender-based violence is more prevalent. In comparison, small and medium scale events with 3 or less victims combined only made up 22% of the data (13% and 9% respectively).

Next, I created a timeline of coverage to see if and how news frames changed over time. This is in keeping with Wallace's (2018) research which suggests that frames are not static and can respond to shifts in the social and political context. The table below provides a timeline for the articles in the dataset.

**Table 3: Number of Articles Per Month**



As shown in Table 3, there are three main peaks throughout the year, November and December 2020, March 2021, and July 2021. Each one of these periods is associated with a major incel-related event. The first peak, November and December 2020, was when Gabrielle Friel went on trial “accused of, with the intention of committing acts of terrorism, conducting online research in an attempt to acquire a firearm, in relation to spree killing, mass murder and expressing a desire to commit such a murder”. In March 2021, Alek Minassian, perpetrator of the Toronto van attack, was tried and found guilty. Finally, July 2021 marked the arrest of Tres Genco for plotting a mass attack in which he sought to “slaughter up to 3,000 sorority girls out of hatred, jealousy and revenge” at an Ohio college campus. This again suggests that news media coverage of the incel subculture is episodic, as the times in which they received the most coverage correlated with discussions of large-scale events.

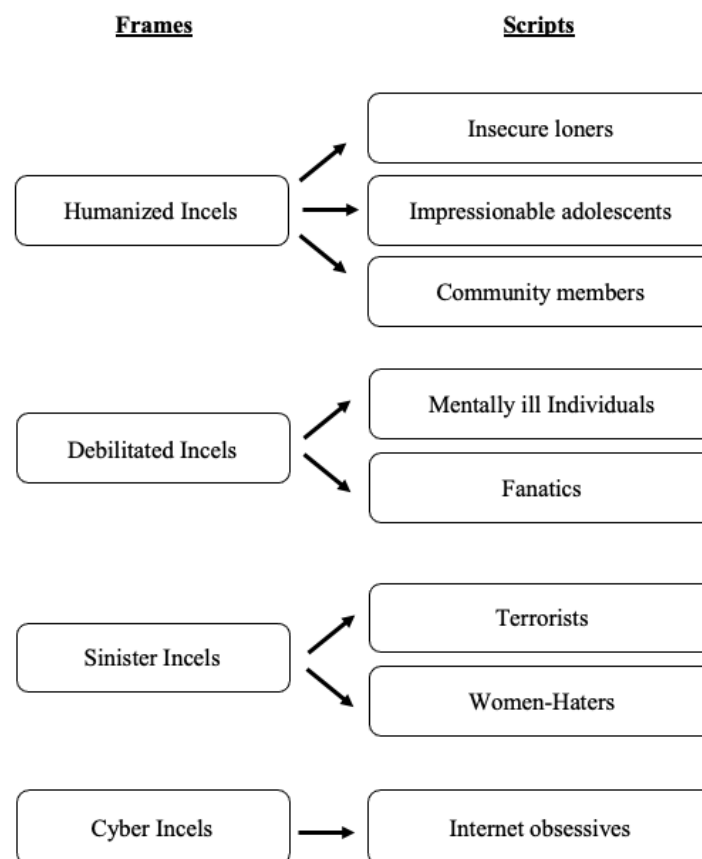
#### **4.2 Description of Incel Frames**

The following step included conducting a content analysis of the articles in the dataset to identify how the news media were constructing the incel subculture. The content analysis revealed four distinct conceptual frames, which were then broken down into scripts, used to construct the incel subculture in the dataset. To reiterate from the theoretical framework, a frame refers to a conceptual tool used to convey, interpret, and evaluate information (Neuman et al., 1992). The media use frames to condense large quantities of information into more digestible packages (Navarro & Higgins, 2022). Media frames are constructed by the collection of selected parts to build a story which has the ability to structure reality and can be made significant through routine exposure (Cohen, 2002). An integral part of my analysis on media frames are scripts, understood as sequences of expected events and actions that are stored in a person’s memory (Huesmann,

1998). As noted in previous chapters, scripts are one way to structure media frames, as they represent cognitive shortcuts that make the news easier to interpret by an audience (Navarro & Higgins, 2022).

During the analysis of my data, I identified four salient frames: (1) “*humanized*” incels; (2) “*debilitated*” incels; (3) “*sinister*” incels; and (4) “*cyber*” incels. Each frame was structured using distinct scripts that described the incel subculture from different perspectives and evoked various meanings. The findings below describe each of these frames in the order presented above, as some frames overlap in ways that produce alternate meanings. Many articles in the dataset employed more than one frame, sometimes working together and other times working against each other. Here, I will describe the four frames and how their various scripts are used within the data. Once the foundation for these frames is identified, the following chapter will explore the different overlaps between frames and various interpretations that arise.

**Table 4**



#### 4.2.1 “Humanized” Incels

The “humanized” incel frame was the most distinct of the four frames as it presented a positive perspective of the incel subculture as opposed to the other three frames that take on a more negative tone. This frame was underpinned by three main scripts: (1) *incels as “insecure loners”*; (2) *incels as “impressionable adolescents”*; and (3) *incels as “community members”*. Each script within this frame contained emotion-evoking properties and “softer” language. It is important to note however, that these frames are not exclusive and multiple frames can appear within the same article, this is also true for scripts. The “humanized” incel frame was anchored to an overarching theme of redemption, with subthemes of relatability, vulnerability, and accomplishment combined to position incel members as redeemable individuals.

The first script employed within the “humanized” incel frame was the “insecure loner” script. This script was characterized by its emphasis on the romantic lives of incel members. Connecting incel motivations to an absence of love and feelings of loneliness exemplifies a technique known as personalization (Varma, 2020). This technique produces a feeling of relatability between the perpetrator and the reader that is anchored in the common experience of romantic rejection that both incels and regular people have felt. Emphasizing emotional commonalities capitalizes on what Hoffman (2000) refers to as ‘familiarity bias,’ which makes people more likely to empathize with people who are like them. For example, articles describing incel members as ‘lonely young men’ (News.com.au, July 23, 2021) who are ‘romantically insecure’ (Postmedia, February 3, 2021) and who just ‘want love’ (The West Australian, December 17, 2020) provides the grounds for audiences to identify with members and empathize with them because of this relatability. The outcome of this technique is typically compassion (Varma, 2020). This elicited response, built on relatability, is the foundation for the first script in this frame.

The incels as “insecure loners” script also employed a range of descriptors depicting their humanity by referring to a shared set of human emotions and using softer more compassionate language stemming from a place of understanding rather than judgement. For example:

It's important not to over-generalize a group of people who believe in these archetypes, said James Cantor, a psychologist who researches human sexual interest. "The broader phenomenon," as Cantor puts it, typically includes **young men** who are **romantically and socially insecure** and use these **oversimplified archetypes** to **navigate life and cope** with **social deficiencies** (Postmedia, February 3, 2021).

This quote provides a good example of how the language in this script is employed. Terms like ‘insecure’, ‘cope’, and ‘deficiencies’ describe incel members as individuals who are struggling in their lives. They are being described as individuals who lack an understanding of social norms and hierarchies, especially when it comes to dating. This script positions incel members as “sad individuals” who need help. This need to be saved and ultimate redeemability underpins the “humanized” frame and can be found in all three scripts it employs.

The second script in the “humanized” incel frame is the “impressionable adolescents” script. Like the previous script, this script employs similarly emotive language in the terms used to describe incel members; however, it is distinguished by its emphasis on the vulnerability of young men. Although the “insecure loner” script also relates to notions of vulnerability, its focus is not on how incels’ “deficiencies” make them vulnerable but instead how their deficiencies make them relatable. In contrast, the “impressionable adolescents” script centers on vulnerability as part of an ‘innocence of youth’ rhetoric. For example:

Imagine a world in which some men actually enact such fantasies... a world in which **vulnerable men, lost boys, and confused, scared teenagers** are swept up and **preyed upon** by such communities (The Irish Examiner, September 8, 2020).

Emotive language, including words like ‘vulnerable’, ‘lost’, ‘confused’, and ‘scared’, and describing incels as being ‘preyed upon’ drives home this subtheme of vulnerability as it describes these individuals as lost children in need of protection. In addition to the emotive language, terms like ‘teen/teenager’, ‘student’ and ‘young’ were routinely employed to describe incel members. The focus on their age in combination with emotive language evoked a sense of guardianship in the articles that used this script. However, the articles predominantly discussed the actions of Alek Minassian (age 25), Gabrielle Friel (age 22), Tres Genco (age 21), Danyal Hussein (age 19), and Elliot Rodger (age 22), all of whom were adults at the time of the attacks. While the term ‘teen/teenager’ was commonly used in the dataset, only one of five (Hussein) was still a teenager.

The focus on their youth was also frequently used in conjunction with the concept of radicalization. For example:

So many **boys and young men** are being **groomed**, yet these groups are not even on the police radar, never mind counter-terrorism radars. These are **not all isolated, loser weirdos, which gives a sense of distance, of harmlessness** — it could be your son’s football coach, your neighbour (The Irish Examiner, September 5, 2020).

Police believe **the teenager** underwent "**a form of radicalisation**" by **an online cult** that hails another female-hating British killer as its "patron saint" (The Daily Star, July 7, 2021).

Terms like ‘groomed’ contribute to this script as they resonate with ‘innocence of youth’ narratives. The term groomed is typically associated with child grooming where an abusive adult befriends and establishes an emotional connection with a minor to lower the child’s inhibitions and facilitate abuse. Applying this language to incel members frames them as innocent and vulnerable victims; on one side you have the young impressionable teenage boys being groomed, and on the other, the online cult of killers who prey on the vulnerable. While both sides are

technically a part of the incel subculture, the terminology employed in this script is focused on the individual perpetrators and their vulnerability.

The “impressionable adolescents” script in conjunction with notions of radicalization suggests that a rehabilitative approach is needed, so the articles that mobilized this script tended to call on family and friends to recognize when someone in their life could be at risk and to get them help. For example:

Mr Campbell [Scotland's Assistant Chief Constable for Organised Crime, Counter Terrorism and Intelligence] added: 'We can't do this alone and **we also need the help of families, friends and the wider public.** I know it can be a big step, particularly when we are referring to terrorism. **But if you think that a family member or a friend is being radicalised, displaying extremist views or becoming involved in terrorist activity you should contact Police Scotland.** 'Officers will work alongside other public protection partners to safeguard that individual and the public. **'By working together effectively, we will also help to safeguard individuals who have been identified as being vulnerable to radicalisation or being drawn into extremism.'** (Mail Online, January 12, 2021).

This call for help draws on the perpetrator's youth, the association between youth and vulnerability, and a response built on rehabilitation.

While the previous scripts described incel members as insecure and vulnerable individuals, the third script in this frame, incels as “community members”, instead focuses on situating them in wider society. By community members, I am not referring to their participation in the incel subculture but their role in regular everyday life, where they live, learn, work, and play. This script frequently told the stories of incel members from their own perspectives, a technique known as “profiling” (Varma, 2020). Journalists often employ this technique by placing a spotlight on an individual's background and daily activities (Varma, 2020). Three main components make up this script: (1) quotes from family members and friends describing the individual; (2) the terms used

to reference the individuals; and (3) the inclusion of information about the individual’s personal history. The following table provides examples for each component.

**Table 5: Examples of “Community Members” Script**

1. Quotes from family & friends	“Joseph Pham, 25, <b>who took a computer class with Minassian</b> at Seneca, described him as <b>“socially awkward.”</b> At the time of the attack, he said: “He kept to himself. He didn’t really talk to anyone.”	The Sun, March 3, 2021
	“ <b>Another classmate said he had a “significant social or mental disability”</b> claiming he had several physical ticks including shaky hands and tapping his head.”	The Sun, March 3, 2021
2. Descriptions of Incel members	“ <b>Military trainee</b> allegedly researched ‘how to plan a shooting’ and carried out surveillance at a university”	The Independent, July 22, 2021
	“ <b>The software development student</b> pointed his wallet at officers and shouted "Kill me! Shoot me in the head!" before eventually surrendering.”	The Mirror, March 3, 2021
	“ <b>A student</b> accused of terrorism idolised one of the leaders of the “incel” movement who who shot six people dead, a court has been told.”	The Times, December 14, 2020
3. Information from personal history	“During the trial, a complicated portrait of the defendant emerged: <b>He grew up in a Toronto suburb, biking and bowling, and was intellectually advanced, but autism spectrum disorder socially stunted him, hindering his formation of close emotional bonds. He developed tics and was bullied,</b> but had a loving family and a few friends.”	The New York Times, March 4, 2021
	“ <b>And he was accomplished:</b> A couple days before picking up the rental van to complete his grisly plan, <b>he handed in the final assignment for his college degree in computer programming,</b> and was set to start a software development job with a reputable company.”	The New York Times, March 4, 2021
	“ <b>Genco attended military training in late 2019, hoping to get his wish as a soldier.</b> ”	The Daily Star, July 22, 2021

The defining feature of this script is building a sense of understanding and even camaraderie between the reader and the perpetrator. Including quotes from individuals who knew them personally constructed incel members as ‘normal people’ with ambitions, friends, family, etc. This script also focused on the individuals’ accomplishments rather than their names and crimes, by referring to them as ‘military trainee’, ‘college graduate’, and ‘intellectually advanced’. Including information about their personal histories, often in ways that were not relevant to the story they were trying to tell (e.g., biking around a Toronto suburb), also situates the incel member as a part of the community.

Articles using the “humanized” incel frame consistently worked towards establishing these individuals as redeemable. By this, I mean counteracting the negative connotations between these individuals and the incel subculture with an emphasis on their positive qualities. The findings show that all three scripts in this frame were commonly found within the same articles, typically coalescing to form a single conclusion; that incel members are redeemable. The “insecure loner” script emphasized their needs, the “impressionable adolescent’s” script identified their vulnerabilities, and the “community member” script put a spotlight on the fact that they are members of the general community. This positions the incel member as a victim and obfuscates the structural causes of gendered violence by making it an issue about individual men.

#### 4.2.2 “Debilitated” Incels

The two scripts underpinning the “debilitated” incel frame are: (1) “*mentally ill individuals*”; and (2) “*fanatics*”. Unlike the “humanized” incel frame, with its complementary scripts pulling in the same direction, the two scripts that make up the “debilitated” frame competed against each other. On one hand, the “mentally ill individuals” script had an empathetic tone,

describing incel members as individuals who suffer from mental illness and focusing on the effects that mental illness can have on the incels life. This script is exculpatory; the individual's mental state diminishes their responsibility for their actions. On the other hand, the "fanatics" script constructs these individuals in a much less sensitive way employing terms with negative connotations. In relation to the other frames identified, the "mentally ill individuals" script connects to the "humanized" incel frame while the "fanatics" script shows similarities with the "sinister" incel frame. In contrast to the exculpatory theme, the "fanatics" script constructs the ramifications of their mental state as condemnable. While both scripts are inherently tied to the mental health of incel members, they are distinct from each other as the "mentally ill individuals" script portrays mental health problems as something biological and thus inevitable while the "fanatics" script attributes the problem more socially, as a choice made by the individuals.

Mental health related themes were common in the data. The most prominent example would be articles that discussed the Alek Minassian trial and his attempt to plead not guilty with a defense of not criminally responsible due to his autism. Articles employing the "mentally ill" script were not focused on the question of guilt, but on responsibility:

Since the defendant had already pleaded guilty to 10 counts of first-degree murder and 16 counts of attempted murder, the six-week trial, carried out over Zoom, **focused on his state of mind, and whether his disorder had rendered him incapable of understanding his crime was wrong** (The New York Times, March 4, 2021).

That Minassian really is autistic, and the fact that he speaks in an unemotional way as he describes his deadly attack, doesn't answer the court's primary question. **At issue is whether autism**, a condition shared by millions and which is not usually associated with violence, **made him incapable of knowing any better** (Postmedia, November 27, 2020).

In this script, the question was whether Minassian could be held criminally accountable given his mental state at the time of the crimes. Experts were frequently quoted, describing how his mental state made it impossible to know what he was doing was wrong. For example:

Westphal told court that **Minassian's autism caused a deep empathy deficit that prevented him from understanding the emotions or feelings of others and caused him to see other people as objects.** Westphal, who specializes in autism, was called to the stand by Minassian's lawyer, Boris Bytensky, to **bolster Minassian's plea of not guilty and to argue for a verdict of not criminally responsible because his autism caused him to not know it was wrong for him to kill** (Vancouver Sun, December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020).

In addition to the discussion around autism, this script included references to anxiety, depression, suicidal behaviours, and addiction. The incel subculture was also referred to collectively as people who suffer from mental health problems, as in this quote:

Incels display very high levels of **mental health issues.** They display high levels of a history of bullying. This is **a movement that is desperately sad** (The Guardian, March 3, 2021).

The vernacular used in this script reflected the language used in the “humanized” incel frame. Once again, the use of emotive and empathetic language constructed an exculpatory frame as their mental health problems are to blame. Referring to them as individuals who ‘suffer from’ mental illness also implied that they too were victims who were suffering.

In contrast, the “fanatics” script did not portray incels as individuals suffering. This script is the first of several that exemplifies the concept of othering. In this case, othering is occurring through representations of difference (Chauhan & Foster, 2014) to clearly distinguish the ‘self’ and the ‘other’, where the ‘other’ is deficient and problematic and the ‘self’, for all its differences from the ‘other’, is separated from the issue (Jenson, 1992). For example, in their study of representations of poverty in British newspapers, Chauhan and Foster (2014) found an implicit

tendency to distance poverty from general society and portray it as a problematic ‘other’. In British newspapers, poverty appeared as an affliction scarring societies that were remarkably different from the UK. Similarly, the data show that the news media are framing incels as fanatics, othering ‘them’ as an isolated group different from ‘us’, the rest of society.

This script is included in the “debilitated” incel frame as it includes negative interpretations of mental health problems and their associated stereotypes. Fanaticism is often tied to negative connotations of mental health, including ‘deranged’, ‘obsessive’, and ‘delusional’ (Smith et al., 2007). In the dataset, there were nine descriptors associated with fanaticism: cult; crazed; crazy; obsessed/obsessive; devoted/devotion; sick; maniac; radical; and fringe:

"Elliot Roger, in particular, has become some sort **of founding father, a cult figure**," he [Dr Stephane Baele, expert on incels] said (Edinburgh Evening News, December 10, 2020).

An **internet obsessive** has been convicted of having weapons including a crossbow and machete but cleared of plotting to carry out 'a spree killing' inspired by the 'involuntary celibate' movement (Mail Online, December 15, 2020).

The most common way incels were linked to fanaticism was with frequent references to the subculture as a cult. Existing literature in the academic fields of religion and sociology leave little doubt that the term ‘cult’ has become laden with negative connotations among the public, the media, and even many academics (Olson, 2006). The repetitive use of this term in the data constructs the individuals involved as deviants. Some authors have even argued that the term has become a social weapon to use against groups who are seen unfavourably (Richardson, 1993). Cults are often portrayed in popular culture as dangerous groups, from fictional cults commonly depicted under the horror genre (e.g., Rosemary’s Baby, Midsommar, etc.) to television series and films based on true stories (e.g., Waco, Devil in Ohio, etc.). The modern-day interpretation of a

cult is commonly tied to satanic practices and deadly rituals, therefore, with the reader's understanding of a cult already primed to mean something dangerous, labelling the incel subculture as a cult portrays them as something menacing and threatening to the rest of society. In addition, references to the subculture as a cult were overtly laden with evil descriptors like "**Sinister** incel cult", "**Sick** cult", "**Dark** incel cult", "**Killer** cult", and "**Twisted** incel cult". The result of this type of othering language positions incel members as condemnable individuals. This script contrasts the "mentally ill individuals" script as well as the "humanized" frame as it is the first to portray incel members in a negative light.

#### 4.2.3 "*Sinister*" Incels

The "sinister" incel frame presented the most negative characterization of the incel subculture. This frame employed two scripts; (1) "*terrorists*"; and (2) "*women-haters*". Both scripts used othering language and linked the incel 'other' to threats. Predicated on a theme of fear, the "sinister" incel frame was the only frame to construct the group as a severe risk to society. While both scripts positioned incels in a similar way, they characterized incel motivations differently. As its name implies, the "terrorist" script positioned the group as a terrorist organization with a distinct ideology and violent tendencies. The "women-haters" script also positioned the incel subculture as a dangerous group, but within this script, the group is conveyed not as an organization with ideological goals but as a disorganized group of very dangerous and angry men who feel they have been cheated out of what is rightfully theirs.

The "terrorist" script was the most dominant script within the data. The term 'terrorism/t' appeared in reference to the subculture itself, incel crimes, individual perpetrators, and other general references for a total of 178 times. For example:

Incel violence is **ideological violence** against civilians, to prove **an ideological point** or create **psychological fear. That makes it terrorism** (The Guardian, March 3, 2021).

"It's an absolute scandal that only one **incel terrorist** has ever actually been charged with **terrorism**" she [Laura Bates, founder of the Everyday Sexism Project] says (The Irish Examiner, September 8, 2020).

In today's political climate, terrorism, both domestic and international, is heavily primed in the media. In the field of media studies, priming is the process in which the media attend to some issues and not others, altering the standards by which people evaluate an issue. It is based on mnemonic models of information processing which assume that individuals form attitudes on the strength of considerations that are most salient, and thus most accessible when making decisions (Iyengar et al., 1982). Terrorism is primed in the media to elicit a range of negative emotions (Small et al., 2006), some have even argued that terrorists have become the ultimate out-group (Baele et al., 2019). This suggests that references to terrorism resonates with a long list of negative attributes tied to the construction of the other.

The term 'terrorism/t' was the most prevalent term used in this script, however, ideology/ideological was another term with a high reference count (n=88). In comparison, 'violence against women' was used only nine times, and 'male supremacism/t' only six. Given the misogynistic motivations behind incel violence, it is worth noting that these terror references were never used in conjunction with any type of gendered description (e.g., misogynistic extremism). In fact, rather than associating the incel subculture with gendered forms of terrorism, the data frequently discussed the subculture in comparison to Islamist extremism and other far-right extremist groups.

It becomes nearly impossible for law enforcement agencies to interdict would-be attackers and stop the violence before it occurs — **as we have seen with terrorists inspired by the Islamic State** (The Mirror, July 7, 2021).

What started as a support group for the dateless has since become **a murderous movement** that has left global law enforcement taking **its ideology as seriously as ISIS** (Irish Daily Star, July 8, 2021).

These findings align well with the representations of extremism identified in the theoretical framework as terrorism in today's world has become difficult to define when no connection with Islamist ideologies can be found. It is evident that discussions surrounding terrorism commonly employ references to these ideologies to set the tone for a terrorist frame.

Unsympathetic language was used in this script, framing the subculture in simple yet direct terms, such as 'a murderous movement', 'incel killer', 'deadly misogynist hate group'. Not only did this script construct the group as a dangerous terrorist organization but it also criticized others for describing them more compassionately. For example, some explicitly rejected the "mentally ill individual" script:

This **is an ideology**. It's not a psychological disorder," she [Alex DiBranco, Executive Director of the Institute for Research on Male Supremacism] said. "**There's a lot of undue sympathy**" (The Guardian, March 3, 2021).

Table 6 below shows that the narrative of this script is supported by academics and experts. In fact, the vast majority of academics quoted in the dataset made claims in line with the "terrorist" script. These experts did not only label the incel subculture as a terrorist organization but repeatedly brought up the lack of attention this group has received from authorities and society more generally.

### **Table 6: Examples of Spokespersons**

Name	Position	Quote
Dr. Josh Roose	Senior Research Fellow at Deakin University in Australia	Roose calls the incel way of thinking “ <b>incredibly dangerous</b> ”, and says <b>anti-women extremism needs to be taken seriously</b> .
Jacob Ware	Terrorism expert	While only one of those attacks was fatal, “ <b>the fact those incidents weren’t worse is more luck than good counterterrorism</b> ,” said Jacob Ware. “2020 was a bad year for incel violence.”
Dr. Colin Clarke	Terror expert of the US global security think tank the Soufan center	Clarke branded the incel movement <b>America's newest domestic terror organisation</b> . He said: "We are seeing incels all around the world now and Scotland is the latest place.
Alex DiBranco	Executive director of the Institute for Research on Male Supremacism	Incel-related violence “seems to be increasing,” said Alex DiBranco, one of the authors of a recent report on misogynist violence. And, despite growing attention, “ <b>It’s still not being taken as seriously as it needs to be.</b> ”
Stephane J. Baele	Senior lecturer at the University of Exeter	Baele found that the <b>incels are linked to the broader, misogynist online "manosphere"</b> populated by pick-up artists and men's-rights activists, but they have developed their own <b>niche with specific explanations for how society works</b> , including a sexist social hierarchy closely linked to physical appearance, where incels are at the bottom. In his view, <b>incel beliefs clearly constitute an ideology, with a clear political dimension.</b>

Employing the “terrorist” script enables countries like Canada, the US, and the United Kingdom, countries with direct experience of incel violence, to distance themselves from the subculture and protect their reputation. This is consistent with Noor et al.’s (2019) argument that othering through representations of threat stems from the need to protect in-group standing.

The “sinister” incel frame also included the “women-haters” script. Like the “terrorist” script, the “women-haters” script is anchored to a theme of fear. However, within this script, individuals were described as having uncontrollable rage and being socially deficient instead of strategically organized. See, for example:

**A sexless loner and misanthrope** who harbours a very specific **horror and/or resentment** of female sexual agency (The Telegraph Online, October 9, 2020).

**The twisted killer** was reportedly **full of rage** that he had "**never even kissed a girl**" (The Daily Star, July 24, 2021).

Unlike the “terrorist” script, which constructed the incel subculture as a group with a distinct ideology and political aims, the “women-haters” script granted them less agency. By this, I mean that the “women-haters” script lessened the sense of accountability for their behaviour as it presents them as having little control over their actions and the subsequent consequences. The focus was not on their organization and beliefs, and instead painted them as a group of emotional individuals who resent the rest of the world for taking away something they believe is rightfully theirs. Both scripts present the incel subculture as a threat, however, the “terrorism” script presents their use of violence as strategic, whereas the “women-haters” script presents it less politically, simply as an outcome of their rage.

Within this script, danger was emphasized through a focus on incel rage. Articles regularly contained terms describing incel members as consumed by raged, such as ‘angry virgins’, ‘homicidal rage’, and ‘sick women-haters’. Incel crimes were also described using language that emphasized a motivation built on rage (e.g., ‘rampage’, ‘massacre’, ‘revenge attack’), as opposed to the “terrorist” script that described them in more politically fuelled terms (e.g., ‘terrorist attack’). Quotes from the perpetrators commonly expressed anger towards women and the world:

I will **slaughter out of jealousy, hatred, and revenge**... I will take away the power of life that they withhold from me, by showing there is more than just happiness and fulfillment, there is all encompassing death, the great equalizer that will bear all of us into its seductively calm velvet of silence and serenity,' his manifesto read, according to the indictment (Mail Online, July 22, 2021).

The posthumous influence of Elliot Rodger stems from a series of YouTube videos and a 137-page manifesto," which outline his motivation for his attacks, court was told. In them, Roger complains that **he is seeking revenge on the world** because **despite being a "supreme gentleman" he is "still a virgin"** (The Vancouver Sun, November 13, 2020).

One important term within this script, given the focal point of their rage, was 'misogyny'.

The group was commonly referred to in ways that emphasized the connection between misogyny and danger, using terms such as 'violent', 'toxic', 'militant' and 'deadly' to describe their misogynistic tendencies. Ultimately, the "women-haters" script was characterized by its focus on the groups misogyny while highlighting the rage that fuels it. Interestingly, even though gender is at the core of the way the subculture defines itself, the "women-haters" script was the only one to include gender at the forefront. The other scripts only subtly mentioned gender, if gender was mentioned at all, but did not define the problem around it.

#### 4.2.4 "Cyber" Incels

The fourth and final frame that emerged from the data was the "cyber" incel frame. This frame employed a single script, "internet obsessives". Among the four frames, the "cyber" incel frame was the least common. It appeared in a total of 23 articles; however, it was only the primary frame in 10 of them. Even though this frame was the least common, it played a significant role in shaping how other frames produced meaning. The secondary nature of this script is developed further in the next chapter once its foundation has been established.

Similarly to the two previous frames, the “cyber” incel frame employed othering language. However, this frame is distinct from the previous frames as it conceptualizes incels as a single entity rather than focusing on individual members and their traits. This frame is so poignant as it touches on societies already existing fears about the cyber world. As technology continues to progress, identifying and preventing groups like the incel subculture is bound to get more complicated. This fear of the unknown is at the heart of the “cyber” incel frame and is why it was the only frame to employ othering through representational absence, where the absence is marked by a partial construction of the object or problem, a response common when dealing with anxiety provoking topics (Chauhan & Foster, 2014).

Regarding the “cyber” incel frame, the language used categorizes incels as an online problem, isolated to the cyber space. The “internet obsessives” script is defined by the ways that it described the incel subculture with a heightened focus on the online nature of the movement. For example, this script frequently referenced the various online forums and chatrooms dedicated to the incel ideology. Some articles employed this script more overtly than others by clearly identifying the subculture as an online issue.

The ideology **mainly exists online** but has been linked to a series of terror attacks in Canada and the United States (The Telegraph, January 12, 2021).

More so than any other extremist groups, the incel community is **a product of the internet**. They were **born on the internet** (The Globe and Mail, November 28, 2020).

Other references were less direct yet still described the group as “the online incel community”. A word search in the data for the term ‘online’ yielded over three hundred results, however, note that this count includes all references to the word, including journal titles (e.g., Mail Online), and some less relevant usages. From that larger query, there were 69 references specifically describing it as

an online community or subculture. Also present in this script were references to the various topics discussed in online incel forums.

Westphal said Minassian frequented **morbid internet forums** that **compared and ranked mass murderers, giving each a "scorecard" based on grim metrics such as kill count and killed-to-injured ratio** (Vancouver Sun, December 3, 2020).

Genco's alleged plans **spilled out of the online incel community** and caught the attention of police (Mail Online, July 22, 2021).

Experts say the incel community now numbers at least tens of thousands. Alex DiBranco, founder of the Institute for Research on Male Supremacism, said "misogynist incels" were **growing steadily more extreme online** (The Times, July 23, 2021).

Terms like 'spilled out' construct the subculture as an online entity and evokes a sense that these real-world events are outliers. 'Growing steadily more extreme online' avoids the issue of real-world gender-based violence that is connected to the incel subculture. This type of linguistic avoidance is at the heart of the "cyber" incel frame and exemplifies the process of othering through representational absence. Linguistic avoidance is a technique that enables the author to avoid certain terms in their writing or distort language to produce a less sensitive or controversial image of the issue (Romito, 2008). This technique contributes to this form of othering, marked by its partial construction of the issue. When dealing with threatening and anxiety provoking information, the most common way that society copes is through absence and denial (Chauhan & Foster, 2014). Gender-based violence is a complex, dynamic, and pervasive issue yet the data reveal serious absences in taking this into consideration. For example, articles consistently prescribed the issue as an online problem without any mention of the ways online harassment can occur and the real-world consequences of it. Similarly, focusing primarily on their online presence with little mention of real-world events externalizes the threat by creating the 'other' whose

existence is never fully acknowledged. The “cyber” incel frame consistently worked towards framing the incel subculture as an exclusively online problem.

While these four frames vary in their scripts and underpinning themes, they were rarely employed alone. Within the data it was common to find overlapping frames in a single article. While each frame is defined by certain characteristics and scripts, the use of certain frames in conjunction with others enabled the production of alternate meanings. The following chapter explores these connections and how the various combinations of frames result in different outcomes.

## CHAPTER 5: Overlapping Frames and Alternate Meanings

Differences in media framing have been shown to influence public perceptions of violence and threats (Betus et al., 2020). Building on the existing body of research, the main goal of this thesis was to explore how the news media are framing the incel subculture. Contemporary social issues like the incel subculture and gender-based violence, and the media's framing of such issues, have major implications for policymakers, the public and most importantly the progression of gender equality and the fair and equitable treatment of women. By employing a qualitative content analysis of news articles, this thesis analyzed news media constructions of the incel subculture. The analysis identified four frames that were saliently used to construct incel members in the media. The "humanized" incel frame drew upon scripts of deficiency, vulnerability, and familiarity, each interconnected by a theme of redemption. The "debilitated" incel frame involved two competing scripts both centered on these individuals' mental state. The "sinister" incel frame used two scripts predicated on a theme of fear, and finally, the "cyber" incel frame used a single script focused on the digital nature of the subculture. While these four frames produce various meanings, when employed in conjunction with each other, alternate meanings arise.

After having coded and reviewed the data, I went through it one final time to produce counts for each frame to see which frames were overlapping and how often they overlapped. For this process, I designated one frame as the primary frame in each article based on which frame had the greatest number of coded instances and noted any secondary frames that were also present. When looking only at the counts in which the frame was the most dominant of the article, the results are as follows; "sinister" incel frame (54%), "humanized" incel frame (20%), "debilitated" incel frame (14%), and "cyber" incel frame (12%). The "sinister" incel frame was by far the most common of the four frames as well as the most dominant. When looking at total counts, including

primary and secondary designations, the trend is similar; “sinister” incel frame (52 articles), “humanized” incel frame (32 articles), “debilitated” incel frame (30 articles), and “cyber” incel frame (18 articles), however it is worth noting that the count including all references for the “debilitated” frame increased the most, indicating that this frame more commonly took on a secondary or supporting role.

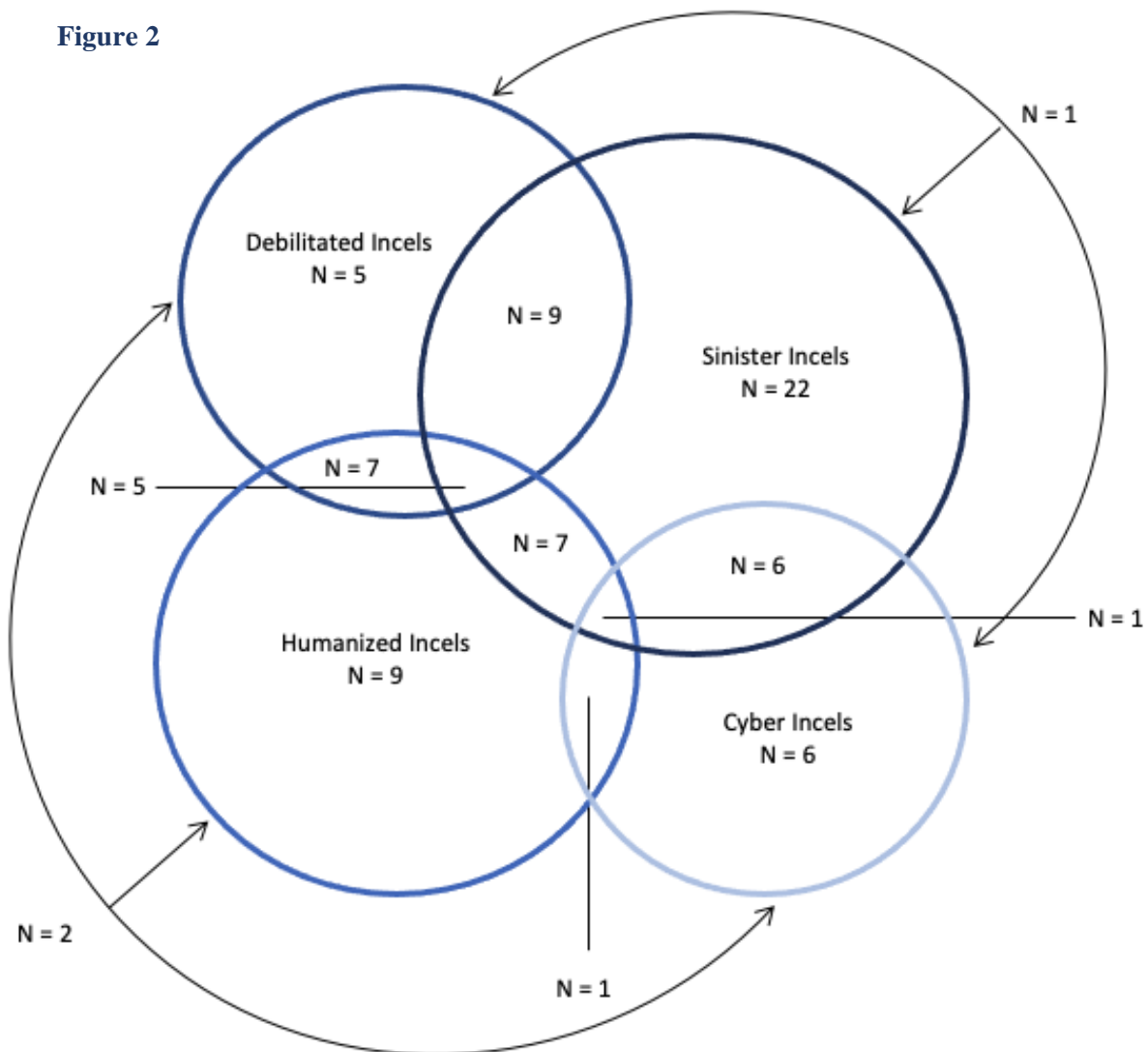


Figure 2 demonstrates where the overlaps occurred and how frequently they occurred. Just under half (48%) of the articles employed more than one frame and only one article in the dataset

employed all four frames. After reviewing the individual frames and the various ways they overlapped, there are two dominant interpretations that the frames identified in my data exemplify: politicization and personalization techniques. These techniques are known for their use in journalism to evoke various reactions (Varma, 2020). These two competing interpretations are complex as they don't just encompass the who, what, and when of the issue, they also have implications for audience reactions. Political and social issues are often connected and thus can be framed to lean one way or the other depending on the desired outcome. Empathy in journalism manifests in personalization techniques, defined by Hall (1973) as "the isolation of the person from his [or her] relevant social and institutional context" (p.236-237). In contrast, politicization techniques shift journalism from evoking pathos to accounting for politics (Varma, 2020). Unlike personalization techniques aimed at establishing humanity through relatability, politicization techniques focus on elements of the issue at a political level. That is, referencing political actors in coverage or calling on larger governmental bodies to respond to a situation. The table below outlines their differences at the various levels of interpretation. The dichotomy between these two techniques can be found throughout my research as the findings in the previous chapter show.

**Table 7. Personalization versus Politicization**

	<b>Personalization</b>	<b>Politicization</b>
Appeals to	Empathy	Solidarity
Anchors narrative to	Individual	Community
Ideal outcome	Compassion	Government intervention
Invites audience to	Engage emotionally	Call for action

On the personalization side, incels were described in individualistic terms, attributing blame towards a lack of social structures aimed at supporting young men suffering from mental

health problems. This perspective includes the “humanized” incel frame as well as the “mentally ill individuals” script of the “debilitated” incel frame and in particular circumstances, the “cyber” incel frame. The other side depicted a politicized interpretation of the group, ideologizing their motives and attributing blame to the subculture itself. Within this perspective is the “sinister” incel frame, the “cyber” incel frame and the “fanatics” script of the “debilitated” incel frame. The following chapter explores these overlaps and how they contribute to these two constructions.

The personalized construction of the subculture mainly consisted of the “humanized” incel frame and the “mentally ill individuals” script. As outlined above, each of these frames uses an emotional approach in their depictions while focusing on details of the individuals themselves. Whether it was their participation in wider society or history of mental health problems, the thing these frames had in common was a focus on the details of incel individuals rather than the subculture. The overlap between the “humanized” incel frame and the “debilitated” incel frame bolstered the theme of redemption that the “humanized” incel frame is centered on. The “mentally ill individuals” script helped to further the construction of incel members as vulnerable individuals by adding an additional layer of understanding. Articles employing the “humanized” incel frame frequently included references to the individuals’ mental health problems. This was true for all three scripts within the “humanized” incel frame. The outcome of these frames being employed together can be explained using the concept of psychologization (Betus et al., 2020). Both the “humanized” and “debilitated” frames interpret the subculture through individualistic and psychological terms, as opposed to political or social ones. This reflects similar findings in media studies of mass shooters. As information regarding the perpetrator is released, a common narrative arises, that the individual was suffering from a serious mental illness. For example, following the attack at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018, President Trump attempted to explain

Nikolas Cruz's actions using mental illness (Osborne, 2018). This has become the dominant narrative to explain mass shootings, especially when the perpetrator is White (Duxbury et al., 2018).

When employed together, the “humanized” and “debilitated” incel frames commonly included quotes from psychologists who described incel members as troubled individuals with significant mental health problems. Although this overlap was minimal, occasionally the “cyber” incel frame contributed to this perspective through the proposition that individuals suffering from mental health problems are more vulnerable to online radicalization, as in this example:

Dr. Rebecca Chauhan told the court that after three sessions with Minassian in September 2018, **she concluded his autism left him vulnerable to becoming hyper-focused and "indoctrinated" by the writings of incel hero Elliot Rodger** (The Toronto Sun, November 20, 2020).

The ‘writings’ referred to in this quote are Elliot Rodger’s manifesto that is available online and commonly quoted on incel forums. The overlap demonstrated here resembles Goffman’s notion of keying as the layering of the “cyber” incel frame with the “debilitated” frame slightly altered the interpreted meaning. In line with the themes of the “humanized” incel frame, this overlap contributes once again to the psychologization of incel members, contributing to the personalized construction.

This type of framing positions the perpetrator as an otherwise good person suffering from extreme life circumstances (Duxbury et al., 2018). It casts the offender as a victim of society and illness, portraying them as sympathetic characters to “facilitate blame diversion by recasting a moral failing as a medical one” (Duxbury et al., 2018, p.773). With most of the news coverage on mass shootings and gun violence focusing on mental illness, previous research has found troubling

implications for the social stigma ascribed to people with mental illnesses (McGinty et al., 2016). Results from an experimental study in the United States found that respondents who read a news story describing a mass shooter as mentally ill reported a higher perceived level of danger from persons with serious mental illnesses when compared with respondents randomly assigned to a control group (McGinty et al., 2013). It is likely that similar outcomes can be expected when the “debilitated” incel frame is interpreted.

The politicized construction mainly involves the “sinister” and “cyber” incel frames, as well as the “fanatics” script from the “debilitated” incel frame. Both the “sinister” incel frame and the “cyber” incel frame contributed to the ideologization of their motives. The “sinister” incel frame was by far the most salient frame within the data, more specifically, the “terrorist” script. This script overlapped with the “cyber” incel frame as a common argument within the “terrorist” script was the threat that their ability to congregate online poses:

Expert Jacob Ware, a terrorism researcher who studies its followers, said: “The Incel movement has benefited from **the same social mobilisation and online communication tools that have propelled the Islamic State and violent far-right extremists** to increasing prominence and attention (The Mirror, July 7, 2021).

The way that these two frames are connected within the data suggests a politicized understanding of the subculture and their motives. Articles employing these scripts presented the subculture as having an organization with strong communication networks, a particular hierarchy, and strong ideological beliefs. Granting the subculture that type of status politicizes them as they are no longer a ‘fringe’ internet group but a serious threat requiring government intervention.

On its own, the “sinister” incel frame already portrays the incel subculture as an organized and dangerous entity however, the interpreted threat level multiplies when the “fanatics” script is

layered on top. The concept of terrorism alone is concerning, adding to it the idea that these so-called terrorists are ‘crazy’, ‘sick’ and ‘twisted’ individuals enhances their unpredictability. A feeling well documented as significantly increasing people’s discomfort and unease towards a topic or individual (Grupe & Nitschke, 2013). Popular culture has also contributed to increasing people’s fear towards mental illness through its consistent depiction of horror villains as mentally ill (e.g., Michael Myers, Hannibal Lecter, etc.). Mental illness has become a common horror trope, including horror films and video games that take place at some form of psychiatric institute or whose main antagonist has recently escaped from one. This link between horror and mental illness reinforces and perpetuates negative stereotypes about people with mental health problems as dangerous and unstable. When news media describe the incel subculture as ‘sick women-haters’ or ‘twisted killers’ the reaction from audiences is likely a heightened fear of the group. The combination of these frames and scripts contributes to a politicized interpretation of the incel subculture as the threat they pose is now so great it requires serious government intervention.

Another key factor that reinforces these depictions is the use of spokespersons (Frost & Phillips, 2011). This factor plays an important role in distinguishing which direction a frame leans in terms of a political versus personalized approach. Articles with politicized perspectives of the subculture tended to incorporate the voices of experts, academics, and state actors. When quoted in the data, experts and police promoted an ‘us versus them’ mentality when characterizing the incel subculture. This is in line with the types of othering language that was discussed previously and outlined in the theoretical framework. On the other hand, the optimistic tone of the personalized perspective could be the result of relying on non-state actors like psychologists and members of the public. One of the main indicators used for identifying which type of frame is being employed is by looking at the chosen spokespersons, “who gets to speak in the news

ultimately decides what audiences may hear from the news” (Strömbäck et al., 2013, p.33). However, the exact nature and scope of their influence remains an unresolved issue since the process of frame building is dynamic and highly contextual, and since journalists may seek out sources that fit a particular and preselected narrative (Strömbäck et al., 2013). While the exact nature of their influence is unknown, there is consensus that their influence exists.

One particularly interesting finding when observing the overlap between frames was how frequently the “humanized” and “sinister” incel frames were employed in the same article (15%). As two frames with conflicting interpretations, I did not expect to find such an overlap however, it is important because it shows how the construction of meaning is contingent and variable. One potential explanation for the use of differing and competing frames may be that “a memory mechanism might have driven frame deployment” (Navarro & Higgins, 2022, p.14). Past research has demonstrated that the incorporation of recent, local, or sensationalized historical events is one technique for how frames are constructed and employed, therefore it is fair to suggest that a collective memory mechanism is likely focused on a single, localized event to promote frames (Cohen, 2002). For example, frames that politicized the subculture often included recent collective memory of incel related attacks (e.g., Elliot Rodger) whereas frames that psychologized the subculture rarely mentioned past events instead focusing on the individual and depictions of their life beforehand. The overlap between the “humanized” and “sinister” incel frames could be the result of this type of frame deployment.

Within the findings, all four frames included diagnostic and prognostic framing properties, where problems are identified, blame is assigned, and the occasional solution is recommended (Benford & Snow, 2000). However, “consensus regarding the source of the problem

does not follow automatically from agreement regarding the nature of the problem” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p.616). As illustrated by the competing perspectives, the politicized perspective attributes the issue to poor counterterrorism measures while the personalized perspective suggests the issue lies in poor social support for those suffering from mental health problems. Either way, these frames have the potential to act as a motivating factor for the public to catalyze support for certain policies or endorse politicians with similar views.

The politicized perspective inherently ties the problem to wider societal issues; however, this can be problematic as the media have consistently employed othering language to describe the incel subculture. Pathologizing incel members as deviant others, distinct from ordinary men, can be problematic as it suggests that explicit sexism is confined to these small groups rather than being part of wider societal perspectives and behaviours. Gender-based violence is all too common and past research has proven that it is not the product of a small group of disgruntled men (Chan, 2022). Similarly, in some ways, the personalized perspective minimizes the overall weight of this subculture by presenting individualized constructions of incel members rather than framing them as one small part of a much larger phenomenon.

As previously discussed, the foundations of media framing do not suggest that the media tell us what to think, but simply what to think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Agenda-setting theory, one of the most prominent framing theories in media studies, first used to study the 1968 presidential election in the United States, found that the issues voters felt were most important to the country closely matched media coverage of the election. Agenda-setting theory is built on the idea that increased media coverage of an issue leads to increased perceptions of salience of that issue. Since the data has shown that the media’s coverage of the incel subculture mostly occurs

after a mass casualty event in which the perpetrator has ties to the group, the media's framing of the incel subculture is creating ties between the group and mass violence, likely producing an association between incel members and violence reinforcing the perception that they are a dangerous group. In addition, the salience of the politicized perspective suggests that the media construct the incel subculture in a politicized fashion, ideologizing their beliefs and emphasizing the risk they pose to society.

Similarly, as the findings related to coverage show, incel related violence is consistently being discussed within the realm of violent extremism. Only 9% of the articles in the dataset discussed small scale events related to the group. In the case of the incel subculture, violent extremism and domestic or everyday gender-based violence cannot be interpreted as mutually exclusive forms of violence. In doing so, incel members continue to be prescribed as lone-wolf actors, as seen here:

In this **lone actor model**, it becomes nearly impossible for law enforcement agencies to interdict would-be attackers and stop the violence before it occurs -**as we have seen with terrorists inspired by the Islamic State** (Daily Star, July 7, 2021).

Describing incel related violence in terms of lone-actor extremism presents these instances of violence as isolated cases of aggression rather than patterns of GBV. There is a significant underemphasis for gendered ideologies in extremist arenas (Stampnitzky, 2017).

The findings of this analysis reveal a concerning tendency for the news media to frame the incel subculture as a group of strange outcasts and 'weirdos', as well as potentially dangerous individuals. This type of framing tends to obscure the fact that misogyny and male supremacy do not originate from and are not exclusive to a small corner of the internet (Jasser et al., 2020). Misogyny has always been a part of our society going much deeper than this one small group of

men. Gender-based violence is a serious issue that threatens the lives of women and girls around the world. Women face consistent sexual harassment, gender pay gaps, and the ‘second shift’. Media constructions of the incel subculture as a dangerous ‘other’ only contribute to the problem by avoiding its real causes.

One additional finding that did not fit into any of the identified frames but warrants further investigation, is how the use of the term incel is being used in discussions of non-incel related topics. For example, there were a few articles within the dataset that referenced incels but discussed topics with very little connection to the incel subculture. One article, published in the films section, made references to Joaquin Phoenix’s *Joker* and Robert De Niro’s *Taxi Driver* as reminiscent of incel ideals. The article was written about a new film, *Saint Maud*, introducing “cinema’s first female incel,” which is itself an oxymoron (The Telegraph Online, October 9, 2020). In addition to these types of references, incel is quickly becoming a catch-all term used to refer to all young men with anti-feminist beliefs, as seen with the mislabelling of the perpetrator of the shooting in Hanau, Germany as an incel even though the beliefs outlined in his manifesto did not align with the incel ideology (Jasser et al., 2020). Mislabelling TV and film characters, perpetrators of violence, or anyone who may show anti-women sentiments as incel or incel-related is cause for concern. This process has been explored before as seen in the theoretical framework on the term trolling and how its trivialization has contributed to the normalization of violence against women online (Lumsden & Morgan, 2017). In order to avoid trivializing how deeply misogyny, male entitlement, and white supremacy remain entrenched in our society, we have to strive beyond the simplistic use of the incel label (Jasser et al., 2020). Mislabelling things as incel is problematic because it disguises the true extent and impact of the issue and enables it to continue (Lumsden &

Morgan, 2017). This finding indicates that further work is required in feminist media studies to acknowledge the specific consequences involved in trivializing the incel subculture.

## CHAPTER 7: Conclusion of Thesis

While examining news media constructions of the incel subculture, my thesis shines a light on the various representations through which the public is coming to understand this group. Set out with the objective of addressing the gap between representations of mass violence and representations of gendered violence, my thesis reveals how the media often refrain from portraying these types of violence as connected, reinforced through the disconnect uncovered in nearly every construction of the incel subculture. Of the four frames and eight scripts that emerged from my data, only one script used a gendered perspective to describe the subculture. The “humanized” and “debilitated” incel frames worked towards portraying the incel subculture along empathetic lines, classifying them in individual, personalized terms rather than collective ones. In contrast, the “sinister” and “cyber” incel frames emphasized their collectivity, zeroing in on the nature of the group as a whole. The findings reveal a distinct line between the personalized and politicized perspectives, each with their own prognosis.

To this end, I argue that the news media are not neutral in their portrayal of the incel subculture, most commonly framing the group within a political context whereby they are described as a dangerous terrorist group posing a substantial threat to society. To make this argument, I employed a frame analysis, using the concepts of scripts, keying, and othering. More specifically, these concepts helped demonstrate how the media categorize the incel subculture as something starkly different from the rest of society.

Since the media and news are a primary source of information on crime for much of the public, frames created by the media may diffuse into the national discourse on the incel subculture. As these frames are available to a wide audience, there is a possibility for them to culturally resonate with readers and shape public perceptions of the group. This research is by no means

suggesting this to be intentional on the part of the media as questions of intentionality fall beyond the scope of this project. Instead, this work is meant to highlight some of the channels through which gender-based violence is framed in the media and the potential implications of these frames.

An important consideration of this thesis was to contextualize the findings within the broader theme of gender-based violence. The findings from my research indicate a disconnect between discussions of the subculture and discussions of violence against women more generally. While the focus of this thesis was the incel subculture, the findings have considerable implications for the issue of violence against women. The incel subculture and various gendered elements are inherently connected yet there is an absence of this connection within the data. Considerations of gender disappear when labels like lone actor, terrorist, and mass killing are employed. Framing the subculture as an isolated threat outside of the larger issue that is gendered violence is concerning. The incel subculture should be treated as one part of the larger male supremacist movement. Only once the issue is properly conceptualized can we work towards finding solutions.

## **7.1 Research Contributions**

This thesis attempts to address multiple gaps in the discipline of media studies and in doing so make important contributions to the field. Existing research on media framing and gender-based violence has primarily focused on individual forms of violence. My thesis extends research in this area by examining media frames of gender-based violence at a larger scale using the incel subculture. By looking at the incel subculture, my project not only investigates how the incel subculture is framed in the media, an important finding on its own, but it also contributes to the larger body of research on representations of gender-based violence in the media. By exploring the

intersect between media frames of mass and gendered violence, my research furthers the understanding of a relationship that has yet to be fully explained.

The theoretical framework underpinning this thesis is framing theory, which at its core suggests that how something is presented to an audience influences the choices people make about how to process that information. Framing theory is commonly used in research that examines media constructions as a way to contextualize findings. This thesis extends framing theory as it integrates an additional layer through the concept of scripts. Analyzing how the media have framed the incel subculture through frames and scripts adds to the theoretical development by reaching beyond frames alone. The inclusion of scripts within each frame enabled an additional level of analysis. Not only does my research examine which frames the media have used to portray the incel subculture, but it also identifies what exactly each frame includes.

This research is important for the field of criminology as it provides an original theoretical approach to examining news media frames as well as an investigation into a unique topic. The findings from this project can be included in larger discussions of gender-based violence in the media. Similarly, the theoretical approach can be applied to other projects also interested in exploring media frames.

## **7.2 Future Research**

There are several avenues through which future research could take form. In building off the findings of this project, future research could look specifically at the affect these frames have on reader perceptions. This would contribute to the question of possible implications of these frames. Also worth investigating, would be how the frames identified in my project compare to

other types of gender-based violence in the media. The applicability of these frames would be tested and ultimately determine the generalizability of my findings.

Future research in the same area could also narrow in on specific variables. For example, my research included several different newspaper formats as well as sources from around the world. Future studies could focus on newspapers from a single country or compare frames between countries with first-hand experience of incel violence and those without. Similarly, media representations of the incel subculture could be studied along the lines of local and national newspapers, or digital versus print news outlets. Although newspapers continue to be one of the primary sources through which the public gets information on crime, there has been a decline in the use of print media in recent decades that parallels an increase in the use of other media sources (Pew Research Center, 2019). It may be worthwhile for future studies to examine whether there are different interpretations between those who consume information digitally or in print. Future research could also examine how frames change depending on the media type, or instead, what other types of frames are being constructed. A greater understanding of how these variables factor into news frames would enhance overall understanding in the field by specifically contextualizing certain types of frames.

Only through acquiring a holistic understanding of how media frames of gender-based violence function could we begin to truly understand and limit the effect of media representations on public perceptions of gender-based violence, thereby advocating for its cessation.

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## Appendix A – Articles in the Dataset

- Agence France Presse. (2021, July 21). US 'incel' man charged with plotting to shoot female students.
- Agency Tunic Afrique Press. (2021, July 30). Ohio resident indicted with hate-crime charge after planning to carry out mass gun-firing at female-students.
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