

Incel Culture: Fueled by Gender Narratives in Advertising

Paige G. Abid

Tombras School of Advertising and Public Relations

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

ADVT 510: Advertising and Communication Theory

Dr. Minjie Li

October 31, 2025

Incel Culture: Fueled by Gender Narratives in Advertising

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, conversations surrounding issues of gender, identity, and representation in advertising and mainstream media have become more prevalent. However, some of the most concerning issues stemming from gender identity receive limited exposure. In particular, *Incel culture*, a virtual community of men who identify as involuntarily celibate and blame women for their perceived inability to form heterosexual relationships (Whittaker et. al, 2024), has led to a rise of misogynistic violence and extremism threatening women worldwide. Tragedies from incel-related crises, or “acts of targeted violence based on anger over perceived and actual experiences of sexual exclusion,” force communities to question how and why some men are driven to such extreme ideologies (Speckhard et al., 2021). This presents an opportunity to explore how gender narratives and constructs of gender roles, hegemonic masculinity, and heteronormativity have been, and in some cases still are, perpetuated by advertising and media.

Constructing Gender Through Advertising

Gender, like race, can be identified as a social construct. Distinct from biological sex, gender is how sex is perceived and portrayed, often contingent on societal and cultural influences. Similarly, gender roles are sets of expected behaviors, attitudes, and characteristics that are culturally defined by concepts such as masculinity and femininity. Although gender roles have changed over time through societal movements like feminism, the advertising industry has played an influential role in shaping society's perceptions of them.

In the late 1950s into the 1960s, the majority of ads portrayed men as leaders, decision-makers, and breadwinners, while women were commonly seen as housewives, mothers, or sex objects. For example, a 1953 Hoover Vacuum Cleaner advertisement features a woman, assumed to be a wife, smiling at her brand-new vacuum cleaner. The ad reads “Christmas morning she’ll be happier with a Hoover,” implying that if a man buys his wife a vacuum, she will be happy. Why was a woman's happiness measured through her caliber of home cleaning supplies? Why would a woman's happiness depend on what a man buys for her? Because the men responsible for the advertisements wanted society to view women that way. These advertisements also reinforce hegemonic masculinity, which can be described as:

“a set of values, established by men in power that functions to include and exclude, and to organize society in gender unequal ways. It combines several features: a hierarchy of masculinities, differential access among men to power (over women and other men), and the interplay between men’s identity, men’s ideals, interactions, power, and patriarchy” (Jewkes and Morrell 2012, 40).

The hierarchical gender roles subsequently linked masculinity with a power advantage and an inflated sense of ownership over women. To a group of men, like incels, who don't fit into the assumed roles of the hierarchy, feelings of rejection, invisibility, and overall insecurity run rampant.

When masculinity is portrayed as a measurable trait through factors such as attractiveness and income, it’s no wonder that some men may feel isolated. Advertising did not form male insecurity. It simply provided a narrative: If a man purchases a particular product or performs in the right way, he will be rewarded with female attention. When their perception of heteronormative reality inevitably fails, some men blame women, instead of the system.

21st-century Gender Roles

The turn of the 21st century introduced a more fluid approach to gender in Western culture, yet advertising didn't necessarily reflect it. Men's products like clothing, deodorant, and cologne continuously advertise men as affluent, heterosexual, and dominant. They also consistently objectified women. A 2008 study of print media found that across 58 different magazines, 51.8 percent of advertisements featuring women portrayed them as sex objects. In men's magazines, they were objectified 76 percent of the time (Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008). Digital media constructed similar narratives. For example, a popular 2006 LYNX body spray commercial featured an average teenage boy using Axe's LYNX deodorant on a beach. Once he sprays it, hordes of skinny women in small bikinis flock to him. These advertisements can result in shame, insecurity, or resentment for all gender identities when they don't match the heteronormative sexual appeals.

The problem arises when real men compare themselves to toxic masculinity. Not everyone has a muscular physique, earns high wages, or dates models. For impressionable minds, constant exposure to the same hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity becomes reality. Heteronormativity is the societal belief that heterosexual relationships are considered the societal norm and viewed as superior. This belief can create unrealistic standards of masculinity, often related to sex and power. Failure to meet said standards results in many men feeling inadequate. Within this context, incel forums are formed and allow a community of men feeling isolated and excluded from heteronormative narratives to feed off of each other's insecurities. Studies have shown that incel communities give language to those insecurities through a three-tiered hierarchy based on physical attraction: "the hyper-attractive Chads and Stacy's who have their pick of the sexual marketplace, followed by average-looking "betas" (or "normies"), and then at

the bottom of the pile, physically unattractive men who cannot find a mate (incels)” (Whittaker et. al, 2024). These stereotypes are the same images advertising has sold for decades.

Incels simply take hegemonic masculinity narratives and heteronormativity literally. They believe women owe attraction to men who meet the ideal, and when women don't, men are justified in feeling wronged. This instills a competitive nature in gender identity and leaves women as commodities. These gender roles have led to blatant sexism and misogyny.

Advertising and Modern Masculinity

Today, toxic masculinity is being challenged in media and advertising through vulnerability and authenticity. Some brands have started to challenge these norms. For example, Gillette's "We Believe" campaign calls out male harassment, bullying, and toxic expectations of masculinity. New Dove Men ads show fathers at home spending time with the kids, normalizing a tender side of manhood. Some backlash on these campaigns reveals how deeply rooted hegemonic scripts are. When advertising challenges toxic gender roles, it exposes just how much men have relied on them for identity, validation, and a sense of superiority.

A 2025 viral Netflix series called Adolescence brought the consequences of incel culture to mainstream media. The 4 part series tells the story of a 13-year-old British boy named Jamie, who murdered his female classmate. The idea for the series came to actor and creator of the show Stephen Graham after “a “spate” of violent acts committed by teenage boys against teenage girls in Great Britain” (Ivernson, 2025). As the show unfolds, the audience gets a view into the motives behind Jamie's murder, even citing common incel language like the 80/20 rule, “which claims that the top 80% of women only go for the top 20% of men, leaving the bottom 20% of women for the bottom 80% of men” (ADL, 2020). Winning 7 Emmy awards, the show was not

only a massive international success because of the phenomenal storytelling, but also the way it stresses the emotional impact of the young male rage on communities across cultures. Actor Ashely Walters, who plays head Detective Inspector, reflects on the meaning of the show, saying “the fact is, we are dealing with the harsh reality of what is going on, and I hope it does make people stand up and think about what they’re doing or what they’re not doing.”

For young men who feel outcast from society's heteronormativity, incel forums provide answers. As Putnam and Reeves of The New York Times put it, “many boys and young men are unwoven from the fabric of our society,” and “lonely, detached young men can become susceptible to reactionary voices, mostly online, who turn legitimate suffering into dangerous grievances” (Putnam and Reeves, 2025). These dangerous communities of the “manosphere” offer certainty, blame, and hierarchy. Women become the enemy, “Chads” become oppressors. Advertising alone did not cause this crisis, but it played a role in the expectations that incel ideology mirrors.

Conclusion

In the past seven years, more than 53 people have lost their lives and hundreds have been severely injured in Incel-related attacks (The McCain Institute, n.d.). Incel culture isn't a phenomenon that happened overnight. It developed from the mainstream messages of gender men have been forced since childhood. The advertising industry socially constructed masculinity around dominance and sex, teaching men that their worth depended on performance. This very mold of gender created by men in advertising is now harming them. If advertisers have the power to shape rigid ideals of manhood, they have the power to break it. Ethical storytelling and inclusive representation don't confine men to sex or status, but show the true nuances of masculinity. Men are caregivers, partners, brothers, and sons, and it's time the world of

advertising starts acknowledging the emotionally complex humans they are. By embracing diverse voices and challenging outdated, misogynistic narratives in media, advertisers can make gender equity the new norm.

References

- Anti Defamation League. (2020, July 29). Incels (involuntary celibates) . adl.org.
<https://www.adl.org/resources/background/ncels-involuntary-celibates>
- Iversen, K. (2025, March 24). Adolescence: Stephen Graham explains the “poetry” of that final scene. Netflix Tudum.
<https://www.netflix.com/tudum/articles/adolescence-stephen-graham-interview>
- McCain Institute. (n.d.). Incel and Misogynist Violent Extremism. www.mccaininstitute.org.
<https://www.mccaininstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/ncel-and-misogynist-violent-extremism-read-ahead-materials-august-2.pdf>
- Putnam, R. D., & Reeves, R. V. (2025, August 15). *Boy Crisis of 2025, Meet the ‘Boy Problem’ of the 1900s* . The New York Times.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/15/opinion/men-boys-crisis-progressive-era.html>
- Signorella, M. L., Bigler, R. S., & Liben, L. S. (1993). Developmental Differences in Children’s Gender Schemata about Others: A Meta-analytic Review. *Developmental Review, 13*(2), 147–183. <https://doi.org/10.1006/drev.1993.1007>
- Speckhard, A., Ellenberg, M., Morton, J., & Ash, A. (2021). Involuntary Celibates’ Experiences of and Grievance over Sexual Exclusion and the Potential Threat of Violence Among Those Active in an Online Incel Forum. *Journal of Strategic Security, 14*(2), 89–121.
<https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.14.2.1910>
- Stankiewicz, J. M., & Rosselli, F. (2008). Women as Sex Objects and Victims in Print Advertisements. *Sex Roles, 58*(7–8), 579–589.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-007-9359-1>
- Whittaker, J., Costello, W., & Thomas, A. G. (2024, May 22). Predicting harm among incels (involuntary celibates): The roles of mental health, ideological belief, and social networking (accessible). GOV.UK.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/predicting-harm-among-incels-involuntary-celibates/predicting-harm-among-incels-involuntary-celibates-the-roles-of-mental-health-ideological-belief-and-social-networking-accessible>