Communication Papers
Media Literacy & Gender Studies

From "Alpha" to "Asset": Social Media Platforms and the Commodification of Masculine Anxiety

Received: 24 May 2026; **Accepted:** 1 June 2026
Commentary

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Research at the intersection of masculinity studies and social media increasingly centers upon the so-called Incel community. Deriving their name from a portmanteau of "involuntary celibate," the group is defined loosely as "an online subculture of men who identify with their perceived inability to establish sexual relationships," and have recently risen in prominence/notoriety for their grievance-based activism and denigration of women (Costello et al., 2025, p. 1815). Studies focused upon the group have emphasized the frequency of mental illness diagnoses among its members (Moskalenko et al., 2022). More relevant for my approach, however, is a study conducted by William Costello, Joe Whittaker, and Andrew G. Thomas, who approached the community via the application of the 3N (needs, narrative, and network) theoretical model. These scholars suggest that, based upon their findings, ideological adherence and poor mental health are considerably more predictive of harmful beliefs and attitudes than the networking that takes place within such online communities (which has received considerable attention) (Costello et al., 2025). In this brief analysis, then, I hope to consider noteworthy shifts in the ideological foundations of the Incel community—namely, changes in how they conceptualize manhood.

One largely overlooked site of such research involves connections between the evolving gender identities of Incels and the neoliberal era within which such transformations are occurring. Scholars trace the early impact of capitalism upon manhood, citing as a product of the 19th century the concept of the self-made man, an anxious achiever who was compelled to earn his masculinity: "Manhood had to be proved, earned, demonstrated. And the place to do so was in the workplace" (Kimmel, 2003, p. 703). Wendy Brown has subsequently extended this work into our current, neoliberal era. Utilizing the conceptualization of homo economicus—who, as Foucault theorized, is "an entrepreneur of himself"– she contends that neoliberalism and its attending view of the human subject essentially as a rational actor within the free market is no longer isolated to economic theory; it instead now stands as the dominant, organizing principle of late capitalistic society (Foucault, 1988, p. 17). As she argues in Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution, "market values are crowding out all others and… vulnerable, precious, or sacred things, including democracy itself, are being increasingly and inappropriately subjected to markets" (Brown, 2017, p. 79). This marketization of all human experience renders individuals mere units of human capital driven by competition and the need to enhance their stock value via self-improvement. As is demonstrated in current male-focused platform media, the marketization of the subject has predictably and dramatically shifted masculinities from the predication of manliness upon financial success (the self-made man) to the commodification of the body (the neoliberal man). A succinct review of the current round of influencers gaining traction in this social media niche will illuminate this trend.

The Looksmaxxers—male Incel content creators who emphasize physical transformation and the marketization of the body—signal a shift away from earlier predominant discourse trends in the Manosphere. Unlike the pick-up artists who dominated the field previously, the Looksmaxxers do not package and sell behavioral advice; instead, they commodify the body itself. As a result, platform

media in this vein has moved dramatically away from products meant to improve male behavior and towards those that, they assert, physically enhance the male body. They subsequently market what Foucault conceived of as technologies of the self, which "...permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault, 1988, p. 17).). Exploiting an algorithm that directs insecure men to their channels, this subset of the Incel community market technologies of the self to men who, occupying the lower rungs of Raewyn Connell's (1995) patterns of masculinity—complicity, subjugation, and marginalization—seek to join the coveted final pattern, hegemony. The accumulation of digital performative capital is central to this quest for hegemony. As Lin (2025) explains, "Within platform capitalism, creators do more than brand themselves—they actively construct and refine their personas as datafied assets, calibrated for algorithmic visibility and valuation" (4). The Looksmaxxers exemplify the impact of this strain of capitalism upon masculinity. A core tenet of their philosophy is after all the idea that men must, to gain access to the coveted hegemonic pattern of masculinity, accumulate digital performative capital via the constant monitoring and modification of what they view as the most consequential batch of assets they and their followers possess: their bodies.

Prescribed alterations to this asset portfolio range from the realm of health and grooming to cosmetic procedures. Influencers in the community recommend, for example, skincare routines, haircuts, wardrobe updates, sleep, diet, and exercise, but often also venture into the more serious realms of orthodontics, injectables, and plastic surgery. Perhaps the most famous figure within the community, Braden Peters (known as "Clavicular"), has advocated taking anabolic steroids, using methamphetamine for its appetite-suppressing properties, and "bonesmashing," (a dangerous, self-administered attempt to reform the body through small, repeated hits with a hammer or one's fist). Exploiting and cultivating anxieties among its male audience, this segment of the Manosphere promotes a new, profoundly neoliberal ideal of masculinity that treats the body as an asset subject to the trends of the market.

This neoliberalization of masculinity is reflected in the market-oriented rhetoric deployed by these platform personalities. Influencers such as Dylan Leam, Kareem Shami, and Clavicular prescribe bodily alterations as methods for improving one's capital. They, exemplifying the ideologies of the neoliberal man, describe the male subject as an asset portfolio of sorts: he must strengthen his marketable assets—which are subject to competition and capable of both appreciation and depreciation—for his life to improve. Such assets, alternatively labeled "data points," the Looksmaxxers contend, increase in value via self-optimization and depreciate if no action is taken. Using the language of what they view as cold market rationality, they assign scores for height, status, and looks to arrive at an individual's supposed sexual market value (SMV). Their goal is to enhance their "metrics" (interpupillary distance, jawline definition, etc.) and to thereby ascend what they describe in

1 Though, it must be pointed out, the technologies they promote deal strictly with physical appearance.

business terms as the corporate ladders of dating and social interactions. Those nearing the masculine ideal are praised for their strong “real estate.” These figures, then, utilize market terminology to lend credence to the ideological shift in gender identity they signal.

This approach of course has significant repercussions beyond the borders of the male body. These influencers borrow the concept of ROI (return on investment) from economic theory and apply it to all relationships and actions. Besides their ranking of technologies of the self-according to the perceived increase in value of their bodies, they similarly apply a marketized rubric to their valuations of others with whom they share relationships and sexual experiences. Clavicular, for example, recently argued that it is not important to bring female sexual partners pleasure since “the amount of extra effort that’s required to do that is just not going to really have much ROI” (Impaulsive, 2026). They also use business terms to frame and shape their relationships to women as a class more broadly. Members of this community assert that women are attracted to a minority of men (the hegemonic pattern of masculinity), and that this group therefore monopolizes—weaponizing another business term—the sexual marketplace. Anger, then, is stoked and rationalized through the use of capitalistic terms, in this case that of a monopolized market. These young men view the world in the reductive language of capitalism and simplify human interactions to the basic terminology of investment, value, and cost, limiting the opportunity to pursue a fulfilling life. Their rhetorical choices illustrate the subservience of contemporary masculinities to neoliberal logic.

The results of this discursive colonization in which neoliberalism increasingly escapes the bounds of economics and permeates every aspect of society are profoundly negative. As this brief analysis illustrates, the intrusion of neoliberalism into all facets of 21st-century societies has contributed overwhelmingly to what many consider a crisis of masculinity. Exploiting an algorithm that traffics their content to insecure men, the Looksmaxxers sell technologies of the self that are frequently harmful—the uses of methamphetamine and bonesmashing techniques being a case in point. The roots of these physical dangers are of course ideological ones: as these digital media creators illustrate, neoliberal logic, now duplicated throughout culture, hollows out the human subject. Rendering the individual a mere asset whose worth is to be estimated according to superficial criteria and whose relationships and experiences are reduced to the profit gained from the exploitation of another person, the discourse surrounding the Looksmaxxers and the Incel community more broadly illuminate the dire impact of neoliberalism upon contemporary masculinities.

These trends illustrate how masculinity is being reconstructed and marketed in digital culture to prey upon male anxieties in much the same way media have and continue to engender and exploit beauty-related anxieties among women. Looksmaxxers frequently foreground and critique appearance-based hierarchies, mimicking earlier radical feminist analyses of the beauty industry. But unlike their feminist predecessors, these influencers weaponize such critiques, treating problematic, appearance-based power systems in the same manner they view the

free market: as natural and inevitable. A feminist critique of these standards would consider these phenomena in light of objectification theory, which, as Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts (1997) outline, proposes that this reduction of the male body to a mere object/portfolio of assets prompts the male audience members to internalize an observer's perspective of their bodies. But, as a subset of a misogynistic community that benefits financially from ascribing to all women an outsized valuation of physical appearances, this newest wave of Manosphere figures quietly recommends that its audience accept this harmful ideology. Far from critiquing the beauty industry, these figures reduce the male body to quantifiable metrics (midface ratio, hunter eyes, canthal tilt, etc.) and then, having convinced their followers that potential mates value only these physical attributes, sell them a cure steeped in pseudoscience and sexism. As this brief analysis demonstrates, the contradictions endemic to this ideology are disguised via the application of market-oriented rhetoric.

In The Beauty Myth, Naomi Wolf (1990) outlines her idea of an "iron maiden," which she defines as an impossible standard of beauty exploited to psychologically punish women for their inability to achieve it. The Looksmaxxers market to the Incel community a masculine equivalent of the iron maiden, an "iron man" of sorts, which they describe as the "Chad." This idealized conception of manhood is, like the iron maiden, unattainable and thereby enables this wave of influencers to capitalize on their followers' resulting anxieties. As is clearly illustrated, the key deception of this social media niche—that the Looksmaxxers are rational altruists seeking to equip their followers to compete in the social and sexual marketplace—is delivered in the language and logic of neoliberalism. In this way, these platform creators are transforming masculinity, objectifying their followers by tying manhood to the body as a portfolio of assets. The impacts of this ideological shift as it proliferates across digital media are only beginning to be felt.

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