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Understanding Travis Bickle: The Incel Prototype

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In *Taxi Driver*, the 1976 film directed by Martin Scorsese, the protagonist Travis Bickle has a startling character arc. He can be confusing, seemingly full of contradictions. He is appalled by violence, but he commits it. He expresses Biblical fury around sexuality, but he frequents porn theaters. He refers to himself as "God's lonely man," but he repeatedly sabotages his chances for connection. While these traits may conflict with one another, that conflict paints a picture of an eerily familiar man. The man who never seems to get his life together but blames the world. The man whose trajectory gets defined by perpetual rejection.

This depiction is no accident. Paul Schrader wrote the film after going through a divorce. He was spending most of his time alone and found himself feeling frustrated and isolated. Travis' character reflects that authentic feeling. Schrader was not only reflecting on his own feelings but on the concept that anyone can fall into a cycle of isolation and delusion based on sexual rejection. This community did not have a name back then, but in the twenty-first century, it does. Through the modern lens, Travis' behavior may make him an early incel.

The term incel was first used by a university student known as "Alana" who created the website "Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project" as an outlet for people to discuss their sexual inactivity in a safe, anonymous space. Like the modern incel community, the focus was on having the freedom to express feelings and ask advice on dating and social issues. There is no way to tell when precisely this switch occurred, but as time went on the incel community became increasingly male. At this point in time, the term almost exclusively refers to straight, cis-gender males who are sexually inactive, not by choice.

This is the official definition, but the modern incel movement is defined by many social codes and beliefs. One of these beliefs is the concept of "Otherness." In the essay "What do incels want? Explaining incel violence using Beauvoirian Otherness," Filipa Melo Lopes

explains this phenomenon. She starts by talking about how incels define themselves, as well as the inconsistencies in that logic. They are "losers in a biologically determined hierarchy structuring society" yet they "blame attractive women for actively bringing about this immutable situation" (Lopes 2). This outlook makes it possible for the community to maintain that their situation is not the fault of the incel, but it is also unchangeable. So, the incels believe they are damned to an eternal hell of un-datability, perpetuated by the women who will not take a chance on them.

Lopes then highlights the two common explanations for the development of incels. One is the objectification of women, the inability to see them as whole human beings who are worthy of consideration, and the other is a sense of entitlement to love and sex from these men. Lopes believes these points do not account for incels' ambivalence towards women. She used Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the "Other" to fill this gap. This concept initially refers to men's perceptions of women, and it captures the contradictory feelings of incels towards women. They simultaneously "put women on pedestals of desirability and throw them down to the depths of repulsion" (Lopes 4). This comes from the fear that they do not understand women, so they cannot control them. As Lopes says, these men tend to be insecure and long for sovereignty over their lives and environments. If women are not the Other, but like them, then they are a competitor for power. Instead, women become the granters of power. Lopes describes this through the importance of recognition from women. When ignored by a woman, the incel "has not been anointed by them as a living god, secretly destined for greatness" and so he retreats into an online sanctuary where "he can experience a clear acknowledged mastery over a virtual world and renew his sense of sovereignty" (Lopes 25, 26). The woman must be the Other so that the incel can be the hero in his own story.

This mentality comes across in Elliot Rodger's manifesto "My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger." Rodger was a young man who identified as an incel. His views about himself and the world led him to eventually kill six people on his college campus, before turning the gun on himself. Rodger wrote this manifesto before performing this atrocity, and it reflects the core of the incel mentality. He routinely refers to women as "goddesses" who can grant power to lonely men like him. Rodger gets rejected time after time and eventually blames the women. His final act of violence expresses a last effort to be the hero in his own story. Rodger expresses that he wants to be remembered for his dedication to the cause and his bravery in fighting for it. This manifesto reflects Rodger's need for validation from the female Other and his desire to express sovereignty and power in his life and community (Rodger).

The need for sovereignty also relates to Ari Ben Am's and Gabriel Weimann's essay "Fabricated Martyrs" in which they analyze the phenomenon of martyrdom among underground movements. They break down how these groups form and the use of propaganda within them, citing martyrdom as a critical component of far-right and incel propaganda. They say that "the martyr serves as a symbol for a movement or ideology, as a source of encouragement for action and unity due to the sacrifice of the individual, as well as serving as a figure to be idealized by encapsulating the ideals of the ideology or movement and 'humanizing' them" (Am and Weimann 134). The martyr brings the movement together by solidifying ideology and gives the remaining members something for which to fight. This is especially important for a primarily online movement because it creates a tangible event to rally around. It is also arguably more impactful for an online movement since it can be a more sizable risk. In this situation, "these lone wolves take their hatred and terror from the realm of cyberspace to the physical world" (Am and Weimann 134) thus, becoming even more critical in the movement.

However, sometimes the quest for martyrdom can backfire. In a community so focused on hierarchies, those who die for the cause are sometimes viewed as weak. In fact, Rodger had hoped to become a symbol of the movement through his actions, but he was mocked by the movement itself. After news broke of the mass murder and his manifesto was published, the social media pages of the already dead Rodger were flooded with messages that he was a "beta" and worse. It seems that this community only celebrates martyrdom in a hypothetical sense. The violence against others gets celebrated, but the martyr's death does not. This is the paradox of martyr propaganda, and it accurately reflects the hierarchy of power in the incel community.

When analyzing Travis himself as he fits into the incel movement, the context of his life and his era is crucial. It is established early in the movie that he is from somewhere in the Midwest and moved to New York City after serving during the Vietnam War. This is a particular era in American history that breeds a unique form of masculinity. As a man from middle America adjusting to life after the war, Travis struggles with how rapidly life changed. The 1950s nuclear family values that he grew up with are fading away in favor of a grittier type of world.

In one of the first scenes of the movie, Travis is in his apartment lamenting about the state of the city. He delivers one of his many monologues by saying, "Thank God for the rain which has helped wash away the garbage and the trash off the sidewalks" (Taxi Driver 5:16-20). This may be literally referring to physical trash, but it expresses Travis' more complex feelings about New York City and its values. In the popular consciousness, the relative cleanliness of a city is often associated with its moral cleanliness. Travis is appalled by the physical garbage on the street, but he is also clueing us into his darker beliefs.

Shortly after this scene, in one of his most chilling monologues, Travis drives his taxi around the city and says, "all the animals come out at night" then spouts a long list of both racial

and sexual slurs before saying, “someday a real rain’ll come and wash all this scum off the streets” (Taxi Driver 6:05-22). Travis reveals what he considers to be the real garbage. The city may be physically dirty, but that is only a manifestation of its moral decay. By using the phrase “real rain,” the possibility of violence is also implied. Rain is often a symbol of extreme cleansing. This goes as far back as the Bible, where God floods the earth with rain to wash away the sinful people and start fresh. Travis’ monologue evokes a similar righteousness.

In his essay “Religious Forces and ‘Morality’ Policies in the American States,” David Fairbanks draws the correlations between religiosity and moral panic in the 1970s. He does this primarily by comparing laws in more and less religious states. Fairbanks makes a connection between laws criminalizing gambling, liquor, tobacco, and other drugs and states with higher religious populations, particularly those that are majority Protestant. He says that “all the coefficients between the Protestant indicators and the liquor and gambling scores are in the right direction and high enough to be considered significant” (Fairbanks 414). As a Midwestern-born man, Travis would have been born into an area with a higher religious population, likely Protestant. That upbringing would engrain in Travis the more conservative morality common of the time.

Fairbanks also concludes that there was a negative correlation between socially conservative laws and economic growth. He argues that “existing state policy literature has shown that economic development leads to greater demands on government and an increase in the types of services and regulations provided by government” and morality policies “represent a set of activities in which economic change has conventionally been associated with the curtailment of government activities” (Fairbanks 417). These contrasting philosophies lead to more economic growth in areas with fewer morality policies. Since this was the state in the

seventies, Travis' disdain for the city reflects the middle American view that the city is a corrupt place—dirty inside and out.

He is also more likely to seek change through policy since that is what he has observed in his life before New York. When presidential candidate Charles Palantine takes a ride in Travis' taxi, he takes the opportunity to tell Palantine, "you should clean up this city here because this city here's like an open sewer. You know, it's full of filth and scum" (Taxi Driver 29:32-39). Travis could be arguing for the same morality policies that he likely saw in the Midwest. He is pressing his moral judgment on the city and acting as the righteous hero. This interaction further reveals his tendency toward broad solutions, sweeping generalizations, and self-righteousness.

The other area in which Travis asserts morality is through his relationships with women. With both Betsy and Iris, he shows a desire to control their sexuality. When he meets Betsy, he insists on taking her out to lunch and immediately presumes to know her. Travis tells Betsy:

> I think you're a lonely person. I drive by this place a lot, and I see you here. I see a lot of people around you, and I see all these phones and all this stuff on your desk. And it means nothing. Then when I came inside and met you, I saw in your eyes and the way you carried yourself that you're not a happy person (Taxi Driver 21:50-22:11).

This declaration shows that Travis thinks he knows what Betsy needs. Not only does he see her as the Beauvoirian Other, but he also feels a need to control her. He wants to tell Betsy precisely what she should be doing and with whom she should spend her time.

Later, this is made even more apparent when Travis takes Betsy to a movie, only to reveal it is actually a porn theater. Betsy is immediately appalled, and Travis feigns ignorance. However, his actions could be interpreted as a means to control her sexuality. As a morally

upright man in a city of scum, Travis is a safe place for Betsy to express her sexuality. With her blonde hair and overall delicate appearance, Betsy resembles the typical Western virginal symbols. Travis attaches to her delicate persona and immediately feels entitled to protect it. After all, he symbolizes her equivalent of masculine virtue according to his rules.

Travis also asserts moral control over Iris. She is only twelve years old, and he does not express romantic interest in her. However, he does show an interest in her life decisions. They meet when she tries to get a ride in Travis' taxi but is taken out by another sex worker. Travis is appalled by her youth and tries to find her. He makes himself a sort of caretaker for her, despite her insistence that she does not need help. In their most pivotal scene, Travis tells Iris what he thinks she should be doing:

> You can't be living in a place like this. It's a hell. A girl should live at home.
>
> Didn't you ever hear of women's lib?
>
> What do you mean "women's lib"? You're a young girl. You should be at home now. You should be dressed up. You should be going out with boys. You should be going to school. (Taxi Driver 1:25:07-23)

Despite the audience's personal views on Iris' situation, it is undeniable that Travis does not listen to her. It is entirely possible that Iris is safer in New York than she was with her parents. Whatever the situation may be, she made the decision to leave. Iris is a minor, which makes the situation more complicated. However, she is still a person who can assert her own agency. Travis has no legal or mental right to control her life. Travis' efforts start small, with just visits to check on Iris and convince her to leave, but eventually, they become more disturbing. In the final act of the film, Travis commits mass murder in the brothel and "saves" Iris in the process. He believed

in his own righteousness so strongly that extreme violence was justified. These actions show a savior complex in Travis that is directly tied to his own masculinity.

Travis' view of masculinity directly ties to growing concerns of the era and the impact of the Vietnam War. In "'Things Worth Dying for': Gender and the Ideology of Collectivity in Vietnam Representation," Susan Jeffords analyzes the Vietnam War's lingering influence on depictions of masculinity. She argues for "an even broader and more efficient structure within which the imagery of collectivity is articulated, one which can recognize Vietnam narratives as emblematic of the operation of cultural narrative as a whole—the construction of gender" (Jeffords 80). Jeffords does this by analyzing Vietnam narratives and how they portray collectivist and individualist sentiments. She points out that differences among men in Vietnam, such as race or class, are labeled as "social"; therefore, they can be overcome. When those differences can be overcome, the soldiers come together as one and the same. Many of these narratives focus on a group of men from different backgrounds weathering the cruel circumstances of war together as a unit. They learn to disregard differences. Vietnam becomes the great equalizer.

However, the same is not true of differences between men and women in these narratives. These differences are labeled as "natural"; therefore, they cannot be overcome. Jeffords argues that "it is most important that these differences be marked in sexual terms. Since women are perceived through a prism of sexuality, their difference is made to appear 'natural' whereas the differences between men—class, race, and ethnicity—are made to seem circumstantial" (Jeffords 86). In this reading of Vietnam masculinity, men define women through sexual terms. When sex is involved, there is a barrier between them that makes those differences impossible to overcome. Since women's value comes from sexuality, men's value to them also comes from sexuality. This

refocuses all relations between them as primarily rooted in sexuality. Furthermore, since Vietnam equalizes men in each other's eyes, the only differentiator among men becomes their sexual success. If women view them as masculine saviors, they can claim superiority.

This era also saw a lot of change in perceptions of masculinity. The war started in 1955 and went on for twenty years. The country, and the world, went through massive developments in that time. One of these developments was the role of men in American society. In the essay "Men's Roles and Men's Lives," James Harrison analyzes the reciprocal nature of how gender roles changed in the 1970s. He discusses "sex-role transcendence" which he explains by saying "in this view, personality traits are neither 'masculine' nor 'feminine'; the association of specific personality trait with one or the other sex is a consequence of social role, and social role expectations are understood as culturally specific: The expression of specific traits is situationally determined and not sex linked. Thus, the construct *m/f* becomes unnecessary for psychological research and theory" (Harrison 328). By recognizing that more fluid and androgynous sexual roles were coming into the mainstream at this time, we can better understand the norms at play. Traditional conceptions of sex were being challenged, and the old guard and new guard were fighting over how to respond.

Many men expressed fear or disdain for these changes. Harrison notes that "many books about men written during the 1960s predicted dire social consequences unless the sexual revolution was curtailed traditional sex roles were strongly reasserted," and he even concludes the essay by saying that "until we have a new paradigm securely in place, all claims to 'new knowledge' about what is meant to be male or female in modern society should be treated with much more than the usual dose of skepticism" (Harrison 329, 336). This essay illuminates the fear that taking away the gender binary would lead to social decay. It also highlights that many

men feared losing their control. Harrison acknowledges that sex role changes are reciprocal. Therefore, the fear of women becoming less feminine reflects the fear that men could become less masculine.

These fears are also reflected in the popular films of the decade. The 1970s were filled with movies that examined masculinity. These male protagonists were often not as classically handsome or charismatic as their Golden Age predecessors, but they exhibited feats of gritty masculinity. They were more morally ambiguous, but they were in control. In 1976, the year *Taxi Driver* was released, some of the top-grossing movies included *Rocky*, *Silver Streak*, *The Enforcer*, and *Network*. These movies all have male protagonists who deal with morally ambiguous situations. Their masculinity is more similar to that of a vigilante than a superhero. These protagonists are responding to the changing appetite for less conventional men, but they still assert a type of domination. As morally gray or gritty as these men may be, they often have a raw sexual magnetism that draws women in. They simultaneously give in to changing sex roles and reaffirm the most traditional dynamics.

Through this framework, we can analyze Travis' relationship to sexuality. By analyzing his savior complex, we see that he views himself as the gritty hero of his own story. However, that savior complex also centers itself directly around sexuality. Travis is attracted to Betsy primarily because of her "virginal" appearance. When they go on their first date, Travis immediately attempts to create some kind of magnetism between himself and Betsy. He frames himself as someone meant for her and someone strong enough to absorb the evils of the world. Travis first expresses that belief when he talks about Betsy's colleague:

> I would say [the colleague] has quite a few problems. His energy seems to go in the wrong places. When I walked in and I saw you two sitting there, I could just tell by the

> way you were both relating that there was no connection whatsoever. And I felt when I walked in that there was something between us, that there was an impulse we were both following. (Taxi Driver 25:09-26).

In this scene, Travis is telling Betsy whom she should and should not associate with. He embodies the gritty protagonist who can see what the innocent woman cannot.

However, what differentiates Travis from similar protagonists of the era is his own arc and relationship with sexuality. Despite some initial attraction, he is unsuccessful with Betsy and other women. Throughout the film, Travis avoids sexual encounters. The sex workers repulse him, and he shows no genuine sexual interest. Even with Betsy, they have a very chaste relationship until he takes her to a porn theater on a date. This seems to be self-sabotage, but there are more nuanced behaviors happening as well. Travis frequents the same porn theater, but his relationship to sex is distinctly different from the other patrons. He watches with his eyes partially covered and does not show any signs of the typical pleasure associated with the situation. Travis interacts with sex in the same way a young boy learning about it for the first time might. He shows equal levels of interest and disgust but never indicates a desire to participate. When he takes Betsy to the theater, this could be a plea to save him from that paralyzed state. He lets Betsy into his voyeuristic world and hopes that she can take him out of that hell.

It is pivotal in understanding Travis to acknowledge that his downward spiral speeds exponentially after that rejection. He begins to ruminate even more on the filth of the city. He obsesses over Betsy's affection. He also begins to care about Iris. In this section of the movie, Travis' isolation grows. His only substantial interaction is with other taxi drivers at a diner. He attempts to open up to another taxi driver Wizard, but he struggles to articulate his thoughts:

I got… It's just that I got a… I got a…

Things got you down? It happens to all of us.

Yeah, they got me real down. Real… I just wanna go out and, you know, like really, really, really do something.

Taxi life, you mean? (Taxi Driver 46:41-47:09)

Wizard does not fully understand what Travis is trying to articulate, and that leads Travis to stop trying. He feels even more rejected and misunderstood. From this point in the movie until the end, Travis' only meaningful interactions are with Iris. The trajectory of sexual rejection to social isolation is arguably what most defines Travis' character arc. The less he associates with others, the more willing he is to go to extreme lengths for his goals. He also becomes ever more confident that the issues he sees are not his own fault, but something he needs to avenge.

At the climax of the movie, these factors all add up as Travis goes on a killing spree in the brothel. The fact that he takes out his aggression on the brothel speaks to his sexual frustration. While he was there to save Iris, it is also important to note that this was not his initial plan. Prior to coming to the brothel, Travis went to a rally for Senator Palantine. Since he was unsuccessful, we cannot be certain of his movies, but it is arguable that Travis was going to murder Betsy. The common reading of this scene is that he was going to murder Palantine, potentially in hopes of getting Betsy's attention. However, Travis has more substantiated reasons to kill Betsy. She symbolizes his sexual rejection and isolation. In the scene prior, Travis was even burning flowers in his apartment that he had gotten for Betsy. He leaves money for Iris, and it seems that this is his final act before admitting defeat. The rally is for Palantine, but once Travis arrives, the camera focuses more on Betsy. The camera surveys that area as if it is Travis'

own gaze. Palantine's speech fades into the background, and the attention shifts to Betsy and a member of security. This scene reinforces the idea that Travis' disdain stems from sexual and social rejection. Whether he was going to kill Betsy or not, she was the reason he was there. Travis' relationship to Palantine only exists as an offshoot of his relationship to Betsy.

So, once this plan fails, Travis pivots. If he cannot squash his own sexual rejection, he will deny others that satisfaction. Saving Iris through violence is as much about Travis' own sexuality as it is about his desire to help her. Earlier in the movie, we see that Travis intended to give Iris money to go home. He could have just given her that money to save her. Instead, however, he forced the situation to go in his favor. In the end, Iris got saved, Travis washed the city clean, and he was celebrated as a hero. Travis may not get the girl, but he makes sure no one else can either.

When we see the thread of sexual rejection throughout the film, the parallels between Travis and the incel community are clear. Many of his characteristics relate to Vietnam-era masculinity, but where he differs from that mold is where we see his incel tendencies. Had Travis succeeded in his first mission at the rally, his story might resemble that of incels who have used violence, like Elliot Rodger.

While the precise terminology of the incel was not in existence at the time, many reviews of the *Taxi Driver* allude to behavior and characterizations that would be considered incel-like. In her review, Pauline Kael described Travis as an "American underground man." This label expresses his isolation, as well as his perceived innocence from the outside. Kael further identifies this as sexual in nature. She says that "there is practically no sex in [the film], but no sex can be as disturbing as sex. And that's what it's about: the absence of sex—bottled-up, impacted energy and emotion, with a blood-splattering release." Kael is describing sexual

repression and the impact it can have on men. She also asserts that this phenomenon can happen to any man. Instead, "by drawing us into his vortex it makes us understand the psychic discharge of the quiet boys who go berserk." The term "quite boys who go berserk" evokes images of men like Elliot Rodger whose internal frustration explodes with violence.

Similarly, Roger Ebert's review laid out more directly the incel parallels. He describes Travis' world as "populated with women he cannot have: Unobtainable blond women who might find him attractive for a moment, who might join him for a cup of coffee, but who eventually will have to shake their heads" and "men who can have these women -- men ranging from cloddish political hacks to street-corner pimps who, nevertheless, have in common the mysterious ability to approach a woman without getting everything wrong." The world Ebert describes is strikingly similar to the world of Stacy's and Chad's that the incel community labels. This framework positions the incel as the nice guy who gets overlooked in favor of more classically masculine men. They see this rejection as society's failure, as opposed to their own. To this point, Ebert points out that the camera drifts away from Travis when he is on the phone with Betsy being rejected, but it locks in on him in the final killing spree. Scorsese says that this is to show the pain of Travis' rejection and denote that we should feel embarrassed for him. Ebert deduces that "Scorsese finds the rejection more painful than the murders," showing the central role of sexual rejection in the narrative.

However, Gene Siskel had a much different take on *Taxi Driver* and its protagonist. He was disturbed by the ending and thought that it "imbues the film with too much importance" and "takes itself too seriously." Siskel was more interested in the potential love story between Travis and Betsy. He described having a "momentary thrill as [he] thought the film was going to turn away from its obvious violent layer toward an aggressive male-female love story." By dismissing

the second half of the movie, Siskel is inadvertently portraying Travis' charm. He is pivotally relatable at his core, and that is what draws people like Betsy initially in. Any man can become Travis, just as any man can become an incel, with the right circumstances.

This reaction calls back to the case of Elliot Rodger. In his manifesto, he referred to himself as physically repulsive and beyond the attraction of women (Rodger). However, in online incel or incel-like communities, users often point out that Rodger was not as unattractive as he thought. One user even described him as a "pretty boy." Similarly, Travis is a reasonably attractive man with some charm. He is charming enough to momentarily seduce Betsy—and apparently, Siskel. Just as incels are formed by attitudes rather than physical appearance, Travis was formed by rejection and isolation, later leading to the same attitudes of the incel.

In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in Travis among film critics. These critics recenter Travis in modern terms. One such critic is Lindsay Zoladz with her article "God's Lonely Men: *Taxi Driver* in the Age of the Incels." She analyzes Travis in the context of the Donald Trump era and the rise of online incel communities. Zoladz describes misremembering the ending of the film and believing that Travis died at the end, until rewatching shortly before writing her review. She reflects on that fallacy in a literal and metaphorical sense by saying that "the truth is that of course Travis did not die. In a very real sense, he lives still. We even have a word for guys like him these days. He's an incel." As someone who has lived through real life incel violence, it is easier for Zoladz and other contemporaries to see why the end is so pivotal. Where Siskel lived in an era when aggressive love stories went relatively unquestioned, the violence of people like Elliot Rodger has forced modern critics to question these same stories. Through the modern lens, *Taxi Driver* appears

ahead of its time by depicting how and why "quiet boys" can "go berserk" when we least expect it.

The modern incel community has been primarily relegated to online forums. These forums used to be in public spaces like Myspace and Reddit, but after Elliot Rodger's mass shooting, petitions to remove them from those platforms began. In 2017, forums explicitly related to incels or with mentions of violence towards women were officially banned (Hauser). The community was forced to find increasingly private areas of the internet, but there are remnants of the movement on websites like Reddit. The Reddit thread r/ForeverAlone is known in the community as incel coded but without the official title. On this thread, people share the heavily sanitized versions of incel beliefs. The thread includes posts like "if you're conventionally unattractive, you will be rejected regardless of if you have those traits or not" or "having female friends is effectively the worst thing you could do for your self-esteem." These iterations of the community are more self-deprecating than violent. Users express many of the incels' common frustrations.

Some users have mentioned Travis as someone they relate to and who could be a member of the FA (Forever Alone) community. One user said, "it's a bit disturbing how much I relate to Travis Bickle," and another said "I recently watched the movie *Taxi Driver*… The protagonist is definitely a FA." The way the community talks about Travis parallels the way they talk about Elliot Rodger. They fear his violent actions, but they relate to his frustrations. They adopt Travis as a member of the community gone too far. By incels' own definitions, he is one of them. Whether or not one believes Travis is an incel, as long as the community adopts him, he must remain a part of the discussion surrounding them. It is evident from the behaviors of incels we have studied why they may be drawn to Travis. He shares many of their beliefs, and he gets what

he wants in the end. He could be a way for these men to live out their own fantasies without dealing with the consequences. However, what remains to be determined is what to do with this information.

Travis did not appear out of thin air, and neither did incels. There are real societal issues that lead to these kinds of behaviors and beliefs. One of the most common explanations is mental health. A study published in *Current Psychology Reports* found that 95% of incels reported feelings of depression and 93% reported feelings of anxiety (Sparks, Zidenberg and Olver). Another common explanation is a lack of socialization. The same study found that one third of participants reported having at least one friend. Traditionally masculine traits like boldness and aggression have also been blamed for bringing out frustration in these men. Likely, it is a combination of these and more.

Whatever the reason, incels do not exist in a vacuum. There are real-life circumstances that lead certain people down that trajectory. By analyzing Travis, we can better understand how that trajectory gets created. He is an archetypal expression of all of these issues. From sexual rejection to isolation to insecure masculinity, Travis is the worst version of this story. He is cast aside by society until he has nowhere else to go but inside his own delusions. We can learn from Travis if we pay attention to how he came to be. For that to happen, he cannot be simply a "psycho" or a "creep" or any other term used to ignore the parts of society we would rather not think about. Instead, if we think of Travis as a normal man who was knocked down and refused to get up, we can open up a discussion. As Ebert said, "we almost want to look away from his life. But he's there, all right, and he's suffering." If we don't look away and stare Travis right in the eyes, then maybe we can understand more of the "quiet boys who go berserk."

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