

Putting the 'Cult' in 'Subculture': Investigating Group Identity Formation Among Incels

by

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Abstract

In this study, I analyze the group identity development of incels. Incels are a group of men who gather in online spaces to vent frustrations about feminism and an inability to attract a romantic partner. The theoretical framework of this study includes theories of hegemonic and hybrid masculinities as well as the theories of style in subcultures, and theories of cults. I performed content analysis through hidden observation of the 15 most recent posts from 12 new users and 12 prolific users of the incels.is forum. The sample from incels.is consisted of 360 posts. I also analyzed the 5 top posts of all time and all related comments from the r/IncelExit Subreddit. The findings suggest that new users to the forum join with preexisting self-esteem issues and hateful views and seek a place to express themselves with minimal judgement. The social dynamics of the forum are consistent with literature on subcultures, as low-ranked users must adequately perform the incel identity to be accepted in the community. Social connections seem to be a major factor that keeps users on the forum longer and posting more. The findings suggest the incel community can be described as a subculture with cult-like qualities.

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Introduction

Incels (an abbreviation of ‘involuntary celibate’) are a group of men who are unable to attract romantic or sexual partners despite desiring one. Incels believe that feminism and other socially active men are to blame for their celibacy and failure to attract a loving partner (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020; Witt, 2020; Glace et al, 2021). Incels believe that women exclusively desire ‘alpha males’ who are dominant, assertive, confident, and good looking, and that the men with these attributes have sexual access to many women. Conversely, ‘beta males’ supposedly fail to live up to these standards and have access to fewer sexual partners (Witt, 2020; Menzie, 2020, Glace et al, 2021).

Incels view themselves as being excluded from the ‘sexual economy’ entirely. This is typically viewed as something comparable to theft by incels, as many within these communities believe that sexual access to women should be a right for men. In turn, incels view themselves as being below ‘alpha males,’ ‘beta males,’ and women in the social order (Witt, 2020, pp.680-681). In this way, incels view themselves as being excluded from society entirely and attempt to shift perceptions of incels by portraying themselves as victims of society that have no choice but to lash out in defense of their own masculinity (Witt, 2020, pp.680-681). Elliot Roger famously wrote an incel manifesto before going on a stabbing, shooting, and hit-and-run spree killing six and wounding fourteen individuals (Witt, 2020). Roger himself and his actions have been idolized and idealized by many members of the incel community. This, in combination with the fact that at least six North American mass shootings have been linked to the incel community (Witt, 2020) is quite troubling and has inspired several researchers to carry out studies investigating incel forums (Menzie, 2020; Witt, 2020; Glace et al, 2021). In this thesis, I will contribute to this body of literature with a study on the group identity development of incels.

Theories of Masculinity: Hegemonic and Hybrid Masculinities

In recent years there has been a growing interest in researching the manosphere and the various groups of men that belong to it (Ging, 2017; Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). The manosphere has been conceived as the digital online manifestation of the contemporary Men's Rights Movement (MRM) and is comprised of several male-only groups such as men's rights activists, Involuntary Celibates (Incels), and Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) (Ging, 2017; Wright et al, 2020), among others.

Much of the literature focused on the manosphere and incels more specifically draws upon Connell's (1987) theoretical framework of hegemonic masculinity in some way. Hegemonic masculinity is a theory of masculinity that reproduces white patriarchal power. The theory describes a system of fragmented and hierarchical masculinities where some forms of masculinity are considered to be superior to or more desirable than others. The hegemonic masculine subject that sits on top of this system of hierarchies is said to have a social identity comprised of attributes that constitute some sort of privilege such as whiteness, high socio-economic status and being healthy and able-bodied. Hegemonic masculinity is not conceptualized as being normal in the statistical sense, but a form of masculinity that is aspired to by many men and routinely performed by a minority of men, facilitating their dominance over women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, pp.846-848).

According to this theory, hegemonic masculine traits include aggression, violence, and competitiveness. Failure to live up to these traits results in a loss of social capital as well as being relegated to a position of subordinated masculinity and being denied access to 'real' manhood (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt). The position of men in these hierarchies of masculinity depend on their social status as well as their ability to access different forms of

power and capital, making the pressure to display and performs masculine traits very high (Witt, 2020). Displays of sexuality and violence are critical to performances of masculinity. Incels typically believe that these performances of masculinity are the most attractive to women and, because they fundamentally lack these traits, that they will never have access to hegemonic masculinity, and therefore will never have access to women's bodies.

Interestingly, incels have been found to uphold aspects of hegemonic masculinity in their discourse. In an ethnographic content analysis on incel forums, Glace et al (2021) drew upon the concept of hybrid masculinities to theorize that some incels have developed a masculine performance which appears to subvert and undermine hegemonic masculinity but actually upholds it. The authors of this study drew upon a theory of hybrid masculinities by Bridges and Pascoe (2014). According to this theory, there are three key mechanisms which are involved in the performance of hybrid masculinities, which involve discursive distancing, strategic borrowing, and fortifying boundaries.

Firstly, through discursive distancing, men distance themselves from hegemonic masculinities while still upholding masculine power and dominance over women. In incel communities, this usually manifests in claiming male victimhood while still explicitly criticizing or rejecting feminist ideas. According to Glace et al (2021, p.289), incels engage in discursive distancing through their claims of a lack of female interest as well as claims that they lack traditionally attractive features such as height, facial features, and penis size. Despite this, incels were often found to criticize women for not performing patriarchal forms of femininity, particularly finding issue with women's unwillingness to provide all men with sexual access or with their desire to be more included in the workplace or achieve other forms of equality.

Secondly, through strategic borrowing, the language of non-dominant or marginalized groups is used to diminish one's own position of power. Incels were found to use language and share content that suggested that it was only a few men that hold power over women, rather than all men. This is used to justify their point of view that men are the marginalized gender. Similarly, perceptions of incels as a problem population are compared to racist perceptions of Black or Islamic populations. Additionally, some are even further disenfranchised by the lack of recognition of their self-reported marginalization as compared to these ethnic minorities (Glance et al, 2021, p.289).

Thirdly, through fortifying boundaries, incels frequently use hegemonic standards to police masculinity and demean men who do not live up to hegemonic masculinity, including themselves. Incels distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity and demean self-identified feminist men by describing them as effeminate. Even though incels believe women to be the dominant group in society, they still commonly used comparisons to women when referring to men to imply weakness (Glance et al, 2021, pp.289-290). 'Alpha males' are also frequently ridiculed in incel forums for the perception that their lack of intelligence is one of the main reasons they can be easily manipulated by women. While some men in incel communities expressed an explicit desire for romantic and sexual connection, there are many in the community that believe their disinterest in romantic relationships makes them superior to the men that seek relationships with women. While incels distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity, they still police masculinity and frequently ridicule men who are seen as out-group members.

Incel Discourse

Menzie (2020) carried out an ethnographic content analysis on various incel forums on reddit to provide insight specifically into the gender discourses within these forums. Reddit has been described as an online community of communities – a website where thousands of user-created forums can be publicly accessed. The predominant form of data collection was hidden online observation without any participation in discussion threads. According to Menzie (2020), incels use a series of terms to describe and contextualize a perceived sex deficit that is supposedly experienced by most men. The terms investigated by this study included ‘Stacy,’ ‘Becky’ and ‘Chad’ as ways to label other gendered actors in the real world.

According to Menzie (2020, pp.73-76), incels label women as ‘Stacy’ if they are believed to have high amounts of erotic capital. Erotic capital can be understood as having conventionally attractive physical features, as well as the ability to leverage these features for personal gain. They are perceived as being unwilling to pursue relationships that do not benefit them sexually or financially. Incels see women labelled as ‘Stacy’ as being able to easily convert their erotic capital into financial gain by manipulating men who they deem worthy, typically ‘alpha males’ with traditionally masculine traits. According to Menzie (2020, pp.76-77), incels resent ‘Stacy’ because of her success in the sexual marketplace and because she is seen as being unattainable to incels.

‘Chad’ is typically understood as a male counterpart to ‘Stacy.’ ‘Chads’ are men who are seen as having the most erotic and financial capital. Incels believe that highly attractive men who are effectively able to perform hegemonic forms of masculinity are those who are the most desirable in the eyes of women. According to Menzie (2020, pp78-79), these men are viewed, paradoxically, as powerful figures with unlimited access to sexual partners but also as exploited

figures who are too stupid or disinterested to realize that he is being manipulated by women for their financial gain.

While ‘Chad’ and ‘Stacy’ are seen to control the sexual economy, ‘Becky’ is also seen as someone who benefits from incels’ perceived social hierarchy (Menzie, 2020, pp.77-78).

‘Becky’ is a woman who is attractive enough to be uninterested in dating an incel, but has less erotic capital than ‘Stacy’ and typically has a less feminine presentation. ‘Becky’ is seen as needing to ‘work harder’ to gain the attention of ‘Chad.’ She is less able to financially exploit men, but it is still assumed that this is her goal. Incels claim that ‘Becky’ is typically a woman that uses feminism to justify and insist on her participation in the workforce. However, feminism is seen by incels as a way for ‘Becky’ to strategically rationalize her rejection from ‘Chad.’ In this way, incels have internalized the idea that a man’s social role is to be a provider for his wife and that women chose their partners solely based on the financial and social benefits that he may provide for them.

Red Pill and Black Pill Ideology

The groups that make up the manosphere all have their own distinctions from one another, but much of the discourse of the distinct groups centers around or originates from red-pill ideology (Ging, 2017; Wright et al, 2020). The red-pill term is a reference to the 1999 film, *The Matrix*, where the protagonist is given the choice of a red or blue pill. If the protagonist chooses the red pill, he will be able to see the world how it truly is. The blue pill gives the option of continuing a life of delusion. Red-pill ideology claims to reveal to men the bitter truth that feminism is leading to the downfall of masculinity and men within the social order and that feminism has led to women’s social domination and financial exploitation of men. According to Ging (2017, pp.639-641), this is the sentiment that unites the distinct groups that fall under the manosphere.

Those belonging to the manosphere typically view gender as being genetically or biologically determinant. Hence, women are typically seen by those that are a part of the manosphere as irrational, hyperemotional, hypergamous, and hard-wired to pair with ‘alpha males’ (Ging, 2017). Men belonging to groups in the manosphere typically claim that their ‘rightful’ dominant position over women has been stolen by feminists.

According to Menzie (2020), incels measure their own failure to attract a partner against the perceived success of ‘Chad’ and believe they have nothing to offer in exchange for erotic capital due to their poor genetics and social skills. Incels typically see this as a predetermined and fixed reality. Becoming aware of this perceived reality is referred to as swallowing the ‘black-pill’ in incel forums. The black pill is an idea that is an extension of red-pill ideology but is unique to incels. Taking the black pill seems to serve as a turning-point in the identity formation of those who identify as incel, according to an ethnographic content analysis of incel forums carried out by Glace et al (2021).

The black pill signifies the realization for a self-identified incel that they do not and will never have anything to offer in exchange for a woman’s erotic capital or for sexual access to women. Because of this exclusion from the sexual economy, incels place themselves below men, women, and other marginalized groups in the social order, and have been found to frequently appropriate the language of social justice movements to describe their experience (Glace et al, 2021). According to black-pill ideology, the sole factor which defines structural power is access to women’s sexuality, resulting in incels’ belief that they are a genuinely marginalized group of people. Because of this belief, mass shooters like Elliot Rodger are viewed like martyrs for their actions, which are in turn viewed as a form of liberation from the oppression of the sexual

economy (Ging, 2017). The perception of these figures positions them as victims of society rather than perpetrators because of the belief that they are entitled to sex simply for being men.

Subcultures, Identity, and Cults

In his book, 'Subculture: The Meaning of Style,' Hebdige (1981) explains how subcultures separate themselves from dominant culture. Hebdige explains this through the concept of style. Style is defined, in this context, as a system of symbols that are used to challenge dominant culture and symbolically separate a group of individuals from it. According to Hebdige, hegemony occurs when a single ideology becomes dominant in a society. This hegemony can cause conflict when members of a society do not agree with the dominant ideology. This causes people to form subcultures, which all have their own unique ideology.

Style is defined by Hebdige (1981, pp.15-19) as an aesthetic nonconformity. In this way, the point of style is to demonstrate a significant difference between a particular group and the dominant culture. Style is also the primary way of communicating group identity to other group members. This implies that one must have knowledge of the subculture to effectively recognize other group members and to effectively present yourself in a way that communicates group membership. Subcultures create style through the adoption and adaptation of symbols seen by the group as meaningful. As chaotic as some subcultures may seem, they rely on these systems of style, symbols, and language to align their members and give the group structure. Subcultural styles are described as mutations and extensions of existing codes.

According to Hebdige (1981, pp.15-19), subcultures are a form of expression that allows its members to communicate dissatisfaction with dominant society. It is also said to provide a way to display tensions between different classes or groups within a society. Subcultures are said

to call attention to societal issues they deem important through their participation in the group. In the case of incels, this dissatisfaction comes from their perception of women having too much power in modern society. According to Hebdige, groups that engage in this form of cultural rebellion invite backlash from dominant culture, which typically galvanizes the countercultural identity. Subcultures and style are described as a form of resistance to ruling ideology.

According to self-categorization theory (Hogg et al, 1990, pp.78-83), group members perceive themselves in terms of a shared traits that define their in-group, in contrast to an outgroup. Individuals tend to categorize themselves as part of a group when self-perception and group-perception are closely aligned. According to self-categorization theory, individuals conform to positions perceived as normative for their group because reflecting agreement for positions held by other similar individuals provides group members with subjectively valid evidence about the outside world. Polarization occurs when members of a group conform to norms which define their own group in contrast to others. Hogg et al (1990) conducted a quantitative study to test self-categorization theory. In this study, the authors found that, consistent with self-categorization theory, members of an ingroup confronted by a risky outgroup will conform towards more cautious behaviors. Conversely, when members of a risky outgroup are confronted with caution, they will conform towards more risky behaviors.

Cults have been defined as a group of people who are followers of an unorthodox, extremist sect or false religion who often live outside of conventional society under the direction of a charismatic leader (vocabulary.com, n.d.). They are often defined by a religious devotion to a leader or to a philosophical ideology. According to Davis (2018), there are four main techniques that cults use to recruit and retain their members. This includes selecting emotionally vulnerable, isolated people who may live in adverse socioeconomic conditions, as these people

are most susceptible to their influence. Once the target has been identified, they isolate them from any existing social connections and from the dominant culture of the society in which they live. They also engage in love-bombing, where their members are flooded with affection, flattery, and validation. These practices in combination allow cults to keep control of their members, making them believe that other cult members are the best friends they have ever had. According to Dittman (2002) cults also instill an us-versus-them mentality in their members to foster hatred and distrust of outgroup members.

The current study aims to analyze the expression of identity and identity formation on incel-related forums. New users, prolific users, and former users of incel forums were observed in online spaces to try gain a greater understanding of how incel identity is expressed by individuals with different levels of exposure to the incel community. For this analysis, I used theoretical concepts of hegemonic and hybrid masculinities, subcultures, and self-categorization theory as the framework for my analysis.

Methodology

The methodology of this project involved content analysis of forum posts on Incels.is as well as on the r/IncelExit subreddit. This is a method that has been used for analysis of incel discourse in past studies (Glance et al, 2021; Menzie, 2020). Typically, researchers have used thread-based content analysis on these forums, as they have typically focused on the discourses of the entire community. My study investigated identity formation in incel communities, so I used an approach more focused on individual users and their post histories. To do this, I primarily carried out the content analysis based on data gathered from a popular incel forum known as Incels.is. Users on Incels.is are ranked according to the number of posts they have made on the forum. For example, users with 0-499 posts are ranked as recruits, users with 500-999 posts are ranked as

officers, while on the other end of the spectrum, users with 10,000+ posts are ranked as paragons. On the Incels.is forum, I focused on those with the recruit rank, as they represent a new member who still can provide a reasonable amount of data, and those with the paragon rank, which represent a prolific user who has a significant connection to the incel identity.

The posts from these groups were compared to the most popular posts from the r/IncelExit subreddit, which is a forum intended as a support group for individuals trying to leave the incel community. In this case, the most popular posts will be used, as the forum is less active and has fewer users compared to Incels.is. Reddit also does not rank users in the same way as Incels.is, making it more difficult and time consuming to identify the most prolific users. In the analysis, I compared the way incel traits and beliefs are expressed by different users in distinct stages of the incel 'life cycle.'

The sample consisted of 360 posts from the Incels.is forum. Due to limitations of the forum, I was only able to access the fifteen most recent posts that a user has made. Because of this, the sample consisted of the fifteen most recent posts from a selection of twelve prolific users and twelve low-ranked users. To select the prolific users, I accessed the forum's top user rankings according to post volume and selected every second user for sampling. To select low-ranked users, I accessed the forum's new user list and selected those who had a minimum of fifteen posts. While studying the posts from a low-ranked user has the potential to show us the perspective of someone new to the community, recent posts from a prolific user have the potential to show us the perspective of an individual who has the firmly internalized the incel identity. On the r/IncelExit subreddit, the top five posts of all time and their comments will be analyzed. On this forum, posts are measured by how many 'upvotes' or 'likes' they receive. The

top posts were chosen as this was the best way to select posts containing ideas and sentiments that were supported by a general consensus.

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis through hidden observation. Hebdige's (1981, pp.15-19) concept of style refers to an aesthetic nonconformity that separates an individual or group from cultural hegemony. Since incels operate in an online space their options for identity expression are limited. Because of negative media coverage and public opinion (Byerly, 2020), incels' only option for identity expression is to post on incel forums. Here, the individual displays incel identity to others through repetition of, and agreement with incel ideology, and through explicit demonstration of incel traits through forum posts.

Themes of specific interest included discursive distancing, and hostile sexism, as in the study by Glace et al (2021). Indicators of hostile sexism included slut shaming, dehumanizing, and demonizing women. Indicators of discursive distancing included references to a lack of female interest and hegemonic masculine traits. Other themes of interest included group belonging, and nonconformity with dominant society. Indicators for group belonging included appreciative comments about the community, casual interactions, banter, policing incel identity, and discussion of forum discourse. Indicators of nonconformity included references to isolation, as well as demonizing and demeaning dominant culture. After finding out how these themes emerge differentially among different users of the forum, I analyzed the findings while considering how the operations of cults can apply to the patterns on display within the incel community. The main themes considered in relation to cults were the recruitment of emotionally vulnerable individuals, isolation from dominant culture and the fostering us-versus-them mentalities, love-bombing and validation, and retainment of group members through social dependence.

Findings

Prolific users of the incels.is forum and low ranked users were similar in that both groups made an abundance of posts in which users engaged in discursive distancing, fortifying boundaries, hostile sexism, criticism of outgroup members and references to the ‘clown world.’ However, the behaviors of these groups on the forum differed in some interesting ways. For one, lower ranked users on the forum were much more likely to engage in hostile sexism and discursive distancing, doing so two to three times more often than prolific users. Low ranked users were also more likely to ask questions about incel beliefs and more likely to explicitly reflect agreement with other users, especially when engaging in hostile sexism or when expressing their frustrations around their perceived lack of sex appeal and female interest. Low ranked users were also more likely to be subject to suspicion by other members and forced to defend themselves. Users with new accounts were often accused of being members of law enforcement or ‘fakecels’ by other users on the forum. To my understanding, a ‘fakecel’ can refer to an individual who is simply posing as an incel, or one who wrongfully believes they are an incel due to temporary low self-esteem or a ‘dry spell’ in one’s romantic life.

Conversely, prolific users were more likely to question the authenticity of other users, and to make statements policing inceldom. These included references to ‘fakecels’ and ‘truecels.’ To my understanding, a ‘truecel’ is an individual who has fully accepted black-pill ideology as truth. These individuals have given up on any hope of finding a partner or being included in dominant society and have actively decided to stop pursuing sex and relationships with women. Prolific users were also more likely to criticize or ridicule former members and other incel forums. Additionally, prolific users were more likely to have made recognizable social

connections with other users on the forum, and as a result were more likely to engage in casual interactions and banter with other forum members.

The posts on r/IncelExit, a subreddit dedicated to supporting men leave the incel community, came from a variety of sources, men and women included. Some former incels shared stories of why they joined the community and what inspired them to leave. These individuals all mentioned having poor self-esteem, social skills, and inexperience with women as being major factors leading them to the community. Rather than having a sudden epiphany leading them to leave all their beliefs behind, these individuals left the community because of a desire to better themselves and pursue self-improvement. Users who had left the incel community tended to express that they experienced a long period of isolation after leaving the community.

Analysis

Social Dynamics on Incels.is

The sampled data from these three groups paints an interesting picture of the incel community. One particularly interesting finding was the fact that the low-ranked users from the sample engaged in hostile sexism and discursive distancing more often than prolific users. This suggests that new users who join the forum already have very hateful views towards women and have extremely low self-esteem. In this way, the community does not necessarily ‘convert’ anyone, as new users have presumably already internalized harmful views of women and of themselves. Rather, the forum acts as a sort of safe space to express these views and have them reaffirmed by other users. This is partially supported by former incels’ posts on r/IncelExit,

where they express their poor social skills and sexual inexperience initially led them to join the incel community.

When taking into consideration that low-ranked users from the sample were more likely to be forced to defend themselves on the incels.is forum, and prolific users were more likely to question other users' authenticity and police incel identity, it seems likely that low-ranked users engage in hostile sexism and discursive distancing at higher rates because it is necessary for them to prove themselves as incels when they are new to the forum. This is potentially supported by the fact that low-ranked users from the sample were much more likely to explicitly express agreement with other users, especially during discussions that contained hostile sexism and references to lack of female interest. In a thread that asked users if they thought they were capable of raping someone, one low-ranked user responded “I will someday. I don’t want to spend my money on some ugly ass STD spreader. If I rape, I can choose my target and get someone nice looking. Not only will I get sex I can enact revenge on the fucking bitch that I do it to” (23/01/2022). It seems like new users must convincingly express opinions showing their hatred of women, as well as their inability to attract a partner before they are accepted by the larger community on the forum. This potentially results in newer users making more extreme statements in their posts to forums. This behavior is also consistent with the self-categorization theory described by Hogg et al (1990, pp.78-83) as well as the concept of style defined by Hebdige (1981, pp.15-19).

In some cases, the policing of incel identity carried out by prolific users can possibly show that the incel community is more segmented than has been expressed in past research. For example, one prolific user posted a screenshot of a former member of the incel.is forum, where the former member complained on a separate forum about being banned from incels.is for not

believing in the ‘dog-pill’ (the belief that women are more willing to engage in intercourse with dogs than with men). Another prolific user made a post openly condemning an incel on the forum for pointing out that other incel forums exist and for suggesting that incels.is users can post to other forums. This suggests that incel forums are quite insular, and that members of these forums are quick to reject potential members whose views do not totally align with their own. However, more research would have to be done in this area to come to any reliable conclusions about the relationships shared between separate incel communities.

My dataset revealed that the low-ranked users and the prolific users of the incels.is forum both regularly got into disagreements about the sexual market value of men specifically. Despite both groups regularly expressing frustrations about lacking traditionally masculine traits and not getting attention from women, both groups got into disagreements about what traits specifically are more important in determining a man’s sexual market value. Low-ranked users and prolific users got into these disagreements an equal amount. While some users believed that facial structure was the most important feature determining a man’s sexual market value, others believed height was more important, while some believed that wealth, penis size, race or attitude were more important. One user made a post claiming to have used his vast wealth to have sex with dozens of attractive prostitutes, but also stated that this brought him no happiness and that he still considers himself an incel due to his inability to form a meaningful connection with a woman. This post was met with a mixed response by various users of the forum, who either expressed agreement, or frustration and dismissal. It is possible that many incels consider the trait which they believe they lack most to be the most vital to sexual market value, as this can act as justification for the isolation they experience, keeping them part of the community for longer.

While many disagreements occurred surrounding men's sexual market value, some agreements did arise too, but were much less common. Interestingly, incels seems to be quite likely to form social connections with other forum users when agreements were made in discussions surrounding this topic. One low-ranked user, 'digital-me,' had found himself in a disagreement about men's sexual market value. In this discussion, 'digital-me' claimed that "... being an asshole improves one's SMV more than just jaw or height" (01/03/2020). This came in response to a user saying that incels' main barrier to making romantic and sexual connections was their looks. Another user backed up 'digital-me,' expressing that people who think looks play a significant role in men's sexual market value are misguided. In response, 'digital-me' let the user know that he had 'followed' their account, expressing interest in this user as an individual and in seeing what this user had to say in the future. This seems to suggest that beyond casual and hostile sexism, and beyond shared feelings of isolation, at least some incels make social connections with others based on recognizing other users with closely aligned core beliefs about dominant society and the sexual market value of men. Some users would even tag others in discussion posts for their input, possibly hoping they would back up their own point of view in cases where disagreements had arisen.

It appears those who make more meaningful social connections on the forum are more likely to stay there for longer and make more posts on the forum. This is supported by the findings that low-ranked users are more likely to express feelings of isolation, and that prolific users are more likely to engage in casual interactions and banter on the incels.is forum. In one specific post, a user posted a link to an article entitled 'Inside the Incelosphere: Where the Lonely Get Lonelier' and wrote "Me and the boys of incels.is don't get lonelier though" (23/01/2022). Posts like this are an indication that at least some members of these forums find

real value in the community that they find there, even if the beliefs the forum encourage may hinder their ability to make meaningful social connections in real life. As a further indication of this, one prolific user ‘Bacchus,’ made a post after coming back from a ban stating he “...came back because [he] was lonely” (15/05/21).

Casual interactions on the forum took several different forms. In some cases, members had discussions about politics that did not necessarily include remarks that mocked or criticized dominant society. These interactions also included sharing experiences of experimentation with drugs and advice surrounding drug use and addiction. Members of the forum also frequently shared, or asked for, music, videogame, and movie recommendations, and often had discussions about art. Certain users even shared digital art and music of their own creation to some of the casual discussion boards. Casual interactions on the forum also included self-disclosure from some members, who discussed religious beliefs, political affiliations, and, at times, details about their past or upbringing. These casual discussions did not include any mention of women, feminism, or male outgroup members such as ‘Chads’ or ‘soyboys.’

The interactions that I coded as banter also did not include jokes made at the expense of women or outgroup members. These instances of banter often included harmless jokes about pieces of media, or just included jokes relating to a particular discussion, where nobody in particular was the butt of the joke. For example, where one user wrote “I am a defense-cel that carries. I carry a Glock 17” (23/01/22), a prolific user, ‘embers,’ replied “You must be rich bro! I can only afford a Glock 16” (23/01/22).

In some cases, banter that occurred between users that were more familiar with each other was slightly more toxic. In these cases, users often made jokes that attacked the masculinity of other users, though in a seemingly lighthearted manner. For example, one prolific

user, 'super-saiyan' finds himself the victim of these jokes when another user states, "having gay sex but saying no homo and XD is super-saiyan behavior" (22/01/22) and "super-saiyan trait: putting words in ppl's mouths while putting dildoes into theirs" (22/01/22). The user 'super-saiyan' had a light-hearted response to both remarks, replying with a laughing emoji in both cases. These types of interactions were particularly common among prolific users, presumably because they have made more significant social connections on the forum and built up a rapport with certain users.

Interpersonal relationships made by users on the forum contribute to the feeling that this is a very insular community. The seeming animosity towards former members of the forum and other incel forums suggests that the incels.is forum in general is particularly hostile to outgroup members, as even incels who were not accepted by members of this forum are treated with a surprising amount of animosity. As mentioned, outgroup members who do not believe in black-pill ideology are referred to, disparagingly, as the 'clown world' due to their perceived stupidity for failing to see the world as incels do. Some members also seemingly had a fervent desire to have members of dominant society see their way of thinking and have the beliefs of dominant society flipped upside down. One user on the forum, for example, wrote "Imagine how people would react to a 10/10 saying that women are subhuman and need to be kept in cages" (28/02/20).

Low-ranked and prolific users of incels.is equally made disparaging remarks about outgroup members and dominant society and this ill will even extended to close family members of some users. For example, one low-ranked user, 'short-man' posted an anecdote where he described getting incredibly angry when his younger sister told him that he should try to go outside and put himself out there more, interpreting this as being made fun of. He ended his rant

on the topic by saying that “she will be pregnant when she’s 17 or some shit probably” (23/01/22).

Shared Victimization

Posts made on r/IncelExit also seemed to suggest that a major factor keeping the incel community together is a shared sense of victimization. This has been documented in the study by Glace et al (2021), where the use of social justice language was explained as a way for incels to express their perceived marginalization in their imagined matriarchal dominant society. A common sentiment among those who discussed leaving the incel community include accepting themselves as they were and working to better themselves, seemingly without a victim mentality.

Conversely, comments from those who do not seem to have left the incel community on r/IncelExit frequently undermined the positive sentiments made by other users. For example, on the post where a former incel describes how he ended up getting married four years after leaving the community, one incel simply replied by asking how tall he was. On another r/IncelExit post where a man gives online dating advice, incels in the comments aggressively denied the possibility of the advice being helpful, saying the advice does not work for incels, or people who are short, ethnic, and so on. One incel even called the advice ‘snake-oil’ and criticized the original poster for setting incels up for heartbreak and disappointment. These comments were made despite multiple men and women complimenting the post for having particularly good and reasonable advice. The contrarians in these comments displayed a lack of trust of outgroup members as well as a strong victim mentality.

The Cult of Incels.is

Taking all of this into consideration, the incel community as a whole appears to be quite cult-like in the way it operates. According to Davis (2018), one important aspect of a cult is recruiting members who are emotionally vulnerable, lonely, and living adverse socioeconomic conditions. While incel forums do not necessarily recruit their members, the findings of this study suggest they attract individuals who have extremely low self-esteem, with hateful views that are likely to result in isolation in their real lives. Additionally, the fixation that many incels have on money providing access to women's bodies suggests that many of them do live in adverse socioeconomic conditions, consistent with the statement made by Davis (2018).

Another important part of a cult's recruitment is love-bombing, where an individual is flooded with affection, flattery, and validation (Davis, 2018). While incel forums do not necessarily provide members with affection and flattery, the findings of this study suggest that they do provide members with validation when they express their feelings of isolation, social and romantic frustration, and hatred towards women. However, this validation may only come when established members of a forum believe a new member is adequately performing the incel identity. This process of trying to prove yourself to the established forum members is arguably comparable to another common cult practice, where the cult isolates a recruit from existing social connections such as family members (Davis, 2018). By proving one's internalization of the incel identity, they are driven further and further away from dominant society.

According to Dittmann (2002), cults also often foster and instill an us-vs-them mentality in their members. This is evident in the references made to the 'clown world' by both low-ranked and prolific users alike. This is also arguably a major factor that contributes to the control that incel communities have over their members. According to Davis (2018), "after convincing you that they're the best friends you've ever had and bombarding you with the cult's ideology, the

cultists' next job is to make sure they hang on to you." Once members have proven themselves and found other members who share similar beliefs, the relationships they form with other users are a major factor that keeps individuals coming back to the forum. The shared feelings of victimization and the ability to vent about this victimization is also a major factor in incel communities keeping their members. These feelings of victimization are caused by insecurities regarding a lack of masculine traits, often validated by incels' closest connections on the forum, and by preexisting feelings of isolation and social ineptitude, which are arguably both exacerbated by prolonged exposure to the incel community and black-pill ideology.

Much of this information points to members of incels.is also having a very high cost of leaving the community. Since many members make seemingly meaningful social connections on the forum, renouncing black-pill ideology comes at the cost of all these connections. In some circles, even attempting to find a relationship with a woman could result in ostracization, as the black pill comes with the realization that an individual will supposedly always be undesirable to women and that this is an immutable fact. Being aware of incel discourse and the 'clown world' means being aware that those who leave will inevitably be, directly or indirectly, demonized and mocked by all their former 'friends.' Two former incels who posted to r/IncelExit about their experience renouncing black-pill ideology also support the idea that there is a high cost of leaving the incel community. Both users mentioned how leaving the community, and social media in general, made them very isolated for a prolonged period. This suggests that the incel community creates, perhaps unintentionally, a social dependence among frequent users of incel forums.

Limitations

A significant limitation of this study was the fact that I only had access to the 15 most recent posts of any given user of the incels.is forum. Having access to a user's entire post history and using a different sampling method may have given me different results that were potentially more reliable. Another limitation is that many of the commenters and users on the r/Incel exit subreddit were not necessarily former incels, which limited my analysis of the expression of former incels. Additionally, the analysis in this study is based on my interpretation of performances given by users of online forums and may not be entirely accurate. It may potentially be more reliable to interview current and/or former incels when researching a topic such as identity development. This may be a desirable route to take in future research.

Conclusion

In this study, I aimed to investigate group identity formation by analyzing the way current and former users of incel forums expressed themselves online. To do this, I gathered data from new and prolific users on the largest current incel forum, incels.is, and from popular threads from a support group for former incels on reddit, r/IncelExit.

The data suggested that those who join the forum already have hateful views towards women and extremely low self-esteem. Findings from r/IncelExit backed up the idea that men who joined incel communities already have low self-esteem and insecurities about their social skills and masculinity. Low-ranked users on incels.is were also found to explicitly reflect agreement with other users more and were forced to defend themselves more from skeptical users. Low-ranked users were also more likely to express feelings of isolation. Conversely, prolific users were found to police the boundaries of inceldom at a higher rate than low-ranked users. They also engaged in far more casual interactions and banter when compared to low-ranked users of the forum. This suggested that a major factor that kept individuals on the forum

was the social connections that they made with other users. I argue that these connections were made based on shared beliefs about the incel identity and the attributes that give men higher sexual market value. The social connections made on the forum, in conjunction with this hatred of outgroup members contribute to the high perceived cost of leaving the forum.

I argue that incels.is operates in a comparable way to a cult due to its appeal to emotionally vulnerable men who are forced to prove their hatred of women and isolation to be validated for their hateful views towards women as well as their self-deprecating attitude. The social connections made on the forum validate these harmful views and attitudes and simultaneously isolate the members from outgroup members and dominant society. These social connections in conjunction with hatred and distrust fostered for the dominant culture keep individuals on the forum by creating a high perceived cost of leaving it. The findings of this study suggest that the incel community can be described as a subculture with cult-like qualities.

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