

“Not Just a Forum, but a Community”:  
Incel Forums as Sites of Validation, Belonging, and Empowerment

by

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**Abstract**

There are few places where the forces of misogyny, violence, and the patriarchy are so shamelessly endorsed than in online incel communities. Made up of men who claim to be involuntarily celibate (hence the name “incel”), incel forums are hubs of hateful and violent rhetorics about women and society. To understand why some celibate men find solace in such a disturbing community, I studied one incel forum using non-participant observation and thematic analysis. My research suggests that incel forums constitute a community of practice (CoP) (Neufeld, Fang, and Wan 2013), participation in which structures incels’ lives in validating and empowering ways. Incels may choose to join the community because it provides them with a meaningful source of identity, gives them a sense of power within the community that they do not believe they possess in the broader society, and offers self-affirming mindsets which blame a misandrist society for their problems. Overall, the incel community is a double-edged sword, providing its members with individual benefits but ultimately further isolating them from the rest of the world. Understanding how to meet incels’ needs for belonging and validation is crucial if we aim to counter their hateful narratives and provide celibate men with healthier alternatives to incel forums that reconnect them to mainstream society.

Keywords: incel, celibacy, misogyny, community of practice, power, belonging, intervention

**Table of Contents**

Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	2
The Identity of Incels .....	3
Incel Ideologies.....	4
Contextualizing Incels .....	6
Methods.....	8
Online Ethnography .....	8
Thematic Analysis .....	10
Communities of Practice.....	11
Findings.....	12
Shared Repertoires .....	12
Joint Enterprise .....	17
Mutual Engagement .....	18
Discussion.....	19
Identification as a Community.....	20
Social Participation .....	21
Conclusion .....	27
Intervention Strategies .....	28
Limitations .....	30
References .....	32

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## Introduction

There are perhaps few places where the forces of misogyny, violence, and the patriarchy are so shamelessly endorsed than in online incel communities. The term incel is a portmanteau of the words “involuntary celibate,” and indeed, an incel’s inability to attain romantic and sexual success constitutes the most basic feature of his identity (Chang 2022, 255). Incels believe that their celibacy is the fault of women and feminism, which set unrealistically high standards for men and strip them of their rightful social power (264). These men congregate in online forums rife with abusive language, misogyny, racism, and homophobia (O’Malley, Holt, and Holt 2022; Chang 2022). While incel activities largely take place online, recent incel terror attacks, like those perpetrated by Elliot Rodger in 2014 and Alek Minassian in 2018 (Cottee 2020, 93), have demonstrated that their hateful beliefs are not always confined to the online sphere.

My study seeks to understand the meaning of the incel community to its members and why it is they engage with incel rhetorics. For rather than offering these men suggestions on how to be more sexually successful, incel forums are spaces of defeatist rhetorics, bigotry, and hate (Cottee 2020). I ask, why is it that some celibate men find solace in a community so entrenched in hateful ideologies? Is it simply that incels participate in the community because they hate women? Or do incel forums provide them with something more? Undertaking such a study helps us understand the nature of misogyny today. Further, by enabling us to understand the features of the incel community which are attractive to its members, it can inform the development of alternative outlets for celibate men which are not so hateful.

After conducting an online ethnography and thematic analysis of one prominent incel forum, I argue that incel forums constitute a community of practice (CoP) (Neufeld, Fang, and Wan 2013) which structures incels’ lives in validating and empowering ways. Through the incel

community's practices, celibate men find a meaningful source of identity, participate in governance and knowledge building, and learn to understand their problems as the fault of a misogynist social order. Incels may choose to participate in this CoP, then, because it contextualizes their experiences of the world in self-affirming ways and gives them a sense of social power and inclusion within the community that they do not believe they possess in the broader society. These findings suggest that there is an opportunity to provide celibate men with empowering online communities through which they can vent their dating frustrations without resorting to misogyny.

A brief comment on my positionality is necessary before I continue. As a feminist woman, I represent the quintessential object of an incel's hatred. Perhaps it will come as no surprise that I am entirely unsympathetic to incels. I find it completely understandable to feel upset at one's struggles in the dating world. However, when this turns to hatred and violence it is no longer justified. Throughout my research, I have made no attempt to mitigate my abhorrence of the incel community. My interpretations of the community's practices are those of a feminist, and I believe this to be an advantage of my work. I do not give incels the benefit of the doubt by assuming that they are misunderstood, lonely, and simply looking for a community. I feel that to do so would ignore the fact that incels participate in the hegemonic institution of misogyny which has functioned to oppress women for millennia (Chang 2022, 266). By grounding my analysis of incels in my personal biases, I am able to recognize that among the reasons incels may choose to participate in incel forums, misogyny is certainly one of them.

## **Literature Review**

As an emerging and highly controversial community, incels have been studied through various lenses in recent years. Scholars often focus on understanding the distinctive features of the community, focusing especially on their violent, misogynistic ideologies (Chang 2022; Cottee 2020; O'Malley, Holt, and Holt 2022). While such studies provide necessary insights into the community itself, it is also important to situate incels within broader sociocultural contexts if we aim to understand and confront the roots of their beliefs (Chang 2022, 266).

### *The Identity of Incels*

At the most basic level, incels are defined as men who are sexually abstinent for reasons they perceive to be out of their control (Chang 2022, 255; Cottee 2020, 94; O'Malley, Holt, and Holt 2022, 4983). While everyone experiences celibacy, only a heterosexual, cisgender man can be considered an incel. To be an incel, one must construct their identity and ideologies in relation to their sexual frustrations, and as Cottee (2020) says, only straight men do so. But while maleness is a key feature of the incel identity, incels do not believe that they align with traditional masculinity. Rather, incels construct their identity in stark contrast to "Chads," who are conventionally attractive, stereotypically masculine men (Menzie 2020, 78; O'Malley, Holt, and Holt 2022, 4992; Cottee 2020, 95). Though incels envy Chads the female attention they receive, they do not wish to emulate Chads, whom they view as stupid and brutish (Menzie 2020, 78; Cottee 2020, 95). As such, incels perceive their own masculinities to be nonnormative.

Aside from their maleness, incels are a relatively diverse group. Generally, they are young men between the ages of 18 and 30, with 82% of the incels responding to one poll falling between this range ("Online Poll Results" 2020). The majority of incels self-identify as white,

ranging anywhere from 55%-63.58% depending on the study (“Online Poll Results” 2020; Costello et al. 2022, 387). Still, this means up to 45% of incels identify as BIPOC (“Online Poll Results” 2020). As an online community, incel forums are used internationally, with members living on every continent except Antarctica. However, it is worth noting that approximately 81% of incels live in Western countries (“Online Poll Results” 2020). Incels also hold a wide range of political opinions (Costello et al. 2022, 387), and as my own research suggests, religious beliefs.

### *Incel Ideologies*

As the phrase “involuntary celibate” suggests, incels believe that their celibacy is almost entirely out of their control (O’Malley, Holt, and Holt 2022, 4983). Incels are quick to identify the characteristics they possess which they feel have made them celibate. These can include aspects of their physical appearance (“Online Poll Results” 2020; Cottee 2020) their race (Menzie 2020, 79), or their insufficient social skills (“Online Poll Results” 2020). However, incels understand the source of their celibacy as the supposedly gynocentric social order which oppresses men by holding them to unrealistic standards (Chang 2022, 254). This belief in a lack of sexual agency causes incels to experience depression and anxiety (Costello et al. 2022). They view their celibacy to be a near-permanent condition with no true remedy, such that attempts to meet social standards of attractiveness are derided and acceptance of their fate is seen as the only valid option (Cottee 2020).

When incels accept the permanence of their celibacy, they are referred to as being “blackpilled” (Cottee 2020, 95). Incels use the suffix “-pill” to refer to a realization about the state of the world as they see it (“Incel Terminology” n.d.). This concept is taken from the film

*The Matrix*, in which characters are given a choice between a blue pill which makes one oblivious to society's problems, or a red pill that brings these problems to their attention (O'Malley, Holt, and Holt 2022, 4987; Cottee 2020, 95; Chang 2022, 255-56). If an incel is "bluepilled," they do not see the flaws in the standards women hold men to, and instead try hard to meet these standards (Chang 2022, 255; O'Malley, Holt, and Holt 2022, 4987). A "redpilled" incel has become aware that men are being illegitimately controlled by women (O'Malley, Holt, and Holt 2022, 4987; Cottee 2020, 95; Chang 2022, 255-56). Yet ultimately, incels idolize what they call the "blackpill," which refers to when an incel truly accepts the permanence of his involuntary celibacy and stops striving for resolution (Cottee 2020, 95). Incels see this refusal to conform to society's oppressive dating norms as the only way to reclaim agency and free themselves from women's control (102). As these ideologies suggest, incel perspectives are centred in narratives of victimhood (100).

Because incels view women as the source of all of their problems, their ideologies are steeped in misogyny. Incels regularly dehumanize and villainize women, describing them as disgusting, mindless, and animalistic (Chang 2022; O'Malley, Holt, and Holt 2022). They especially hate feminism for the role it has played in displacing men's once-elevated position in society (Chang 2022, 254; Menzie 2020, 72). And while the incel community does not always directly advocate violence against women, they do justify it on the basis of women's inherent inferiority and illegitimate control over the social order (Chang 2022, 266; Cottee 2020, 94; O'Malley, Holt, and Holt 2022, 4997). These rhetorics also serve to empower the (incel) male, who is positioned as everything women are not (Cottee 2020, 100).

Opinions differ over whether the incel community is merely hateful or actually dangerous. Cottee (2020), for instance, cautions against overemphasizing the violent

characteristics of the community. He warns that incel rhetoric is often ironic or intended to shock readers, and thus we should not take violent statements as serious signs of radicalization. And in fact, Cottee even suggests that incel forums may be positive outlets which discourage actual violence, though he stipulates that more research is needed to make such a claim (99).

Conversely, Chang (2022) implores researchers to not dismiss incel violence as mere satire. She argues that extremists of all kinds use humour to make their ideologies more broadly digestible so as to attract more members to their cause (256). While some have gone as far as to compare incels to terrorists (O'Malley, Holt, and Holt 2022), overall it must be noted that incel terror attacks are exceedingly rare (Cottee 2020, 97). I nevertheless choose to take incel misogyny seriously, for as a woman I am aware of the insidious effects even sarcastic misogyny can have on society.

### *Contextualizing Incels*

The incel community has proliferated in recent years due to the confluence of feminism, the internet, and neoliberalism (Chang 2022, 259; Ging 2019, 639). Ging (2019) argues that the increasing acceptance of feminism in recent decades has combined with the disproportionate impacts of deindustrialization on men to give men the impression that they are disempowered or marginalized because of their gender (Ging 2019, 639; Menzie 2020). These social circumstances have caused some men to experience a sense of loss (Roose 2020, 194), thus creating space for the emergence of men's rights activism (Ging 2019, 639) and populism (Roose 2020). These two phenomena are highly similar in the ways they function, for both rely on "us versus them" narratives and beliefs in their victimhood in order to justify weaponizing their masculinities to re-establish their senses of power (Roose 2020, 200).

Both populists and men's rights activists (MRAs) utilize the internet as a tool to spread their rhetorics. The internet facilitates social connections and allows for the formation of exclusive spaces which suit a group's needs (Ging 2019). It encourages users to share anecdotes and personal experiences, often resulting in the creation of echo chambers which amplify only those ideas which support the group's rhetorics (643). This means that the narratives pushed by MRAs or by populists are less likely to be challenged on the internet than they would be offline. As such, MRAs have established a considerable online presence, forming what is known as the Manosphere (Cottee 2020, 94; Roose 2020, 200; Chang 2022, 255). The Manosphere is a conglomerate of many online communities, incels included, who are opposed to feminism and express support for violence against women if it is used to restore the masculine identity to its rightful place of power (Roose 2020, 200). Overall, the incel community has taken hold at this particular point in time because the internet allowed men who felt wronged by feminism and neoliberalism to create their own spaces (Ging 2019; Chang 2022)

In his study of the social factors which have contributed to the rise of populist rhetorics, Roose (2020) uses his findings to propose alternatives to populism. In order to intervene in populist rhetorics, he says we must offer alternatives which fill the same needs as populism but in more productive ways. Such an approach to the incel community has also been taken by O'Malley, Holt, and Holt (2022), who suggest that incels should be targeted with deradicalization messages online in order to teach them about healthier masculinities (5001). I intend to take a similar approach to my research. The incel community, like populism, exists in part as a reaction to social change. The ways incels have reacted to feminism are deeply socially detrimental, as they further hateful beliefs about women. But rather than just condemning this reaction, I wish to recommend healthier ways celibate men can react to the changing role of men

in society. For this to be successful, I must do as Roose and O'Malley, Holt, and Holt have done: learn what value the incel community holds for its members and look for ways to recreate these values in less hateful contexts.

## **Methods**

### *Online Ethnography*

In my effort to understand what the incel community means to its members, I conducted an online ethnography of one incel forum. My methodology was primarily informed by Keim-Malpass, Steeves, and Kennedy's (2014) guidelines for conducting internet ethnographies. They present five guiding questions for designing an online ethnographic method (1687), which are as follows:

1. Does your research site constitute a self-identified community which can be studied ethnographically?
2. Should you actively engage with community members or passively observe them? Is covert study ethical in this case?
3. What types of data will be produced and analyzed, and how?
4. Which sampling methods will be chosen?
5. How will the researcher remain reflexive and considerate of their research community during their study?

Based on these questions, I determined to study the forum using non-participant observation. Incels are a self-identified community, so online ethnography is appropriate. I

judged that it was not prudent for me to undertake a participatory ethnography because of my gender. I feared that incels would be hostile towards me as a woman, or that they simply would not have been forthcoming with information. As such, I also did not inform the community I would be studying them. Covert study is widely considered to be ethical when it comes to publicly-available online content, as users post to these sites knowing that they are not private (Langer and Beckman 2005; O'Malley, Holt, and Holt 2022). I felt this was appropriate in my case since the content I studied required no account or password in order to be viewed. Still, I recognize that while users of the forum consented to their content being present on the site, they did not necessarily know it would be used in an academic study. As such, I have chosen to anonymize both the forum and its users in order to provide them with a degree of privacy.

My data consists of my observations of the forum's structure and content as recorded in fieldnotes. I studied the layout of the site in order to understand how it shapes its members experiences of the incel community. I also chose to examine some of the forum's posts. The forum is divided into five main subforums: "Rules and FAQ," "The Incel Awards," "Must-Read Content," "Inceldom Discussion," and "The Lounge." Within each subforum, I studied the threads which had been virtually "pinned" to the top of the discussion board by the forum's moderators. This indicated that these threads were seen as important by high-level community members, which is why I chose to focus on them. Which threads are pinned can change from day to day as new topics become popular points of discussion, so my results represent those threads which were important at the time of visiting the site.

Within each thread, I sampled the twenty chronologically-first posts in order to get a broad impression of narratives and interactions rather than an intensive look at specific topics. Exceptions to this rule were made in the case of two subforums: "Rules and FAQ" and "The

Incel Awards.” “Rules and FAQ” had only thirteen posts overall, all of which were included in my sample. Posts made in “The Incel Awards” subforum consisted mainly of nominations of specific users for each award. As such, they were excluded for the sake of anonymity, and so only the title of each thread was included. In total, my sample included the content of 371 posts made across thirty-six threads.

The forum itself was found through a Google search for “incel forums,” which led to a list of prominent incel forums that included my chosen forum. Other forums were excluded because content was password-protected and thus required additional ethical approval to study, or because they explicitly rejected identification with the incel community. The chosen forum was first established in 2017, and since that time it has attracted 20,498 members and counting. The forum’s members are incredibly active, as they had made 9,820,981 posts across 430,633 threads at the time of writing.

### *Thematic Analysis*

I then analyzed my fieldnotes and the content of the 371 posts included in my sample using NVivo to identify recurring themes. This allowed me to identify patterns of behaviour whose meaning I could then interpret. My analysis consisted of three rounds of qualitative coding loosely following the approach set out by O’Malley, Holt, and Holt (2022). My initial round of coding was inductive, consistent with O’Malley, Holt, and Holt’s methodology. I focused on identifying any instances where multiple posters “describe the same idea, action, rule, or belief” (4989). This ensured I was attentive to themes which were important to the community, rather than those I personally felt were important. My final two waves of coding

diverged from those of O'Malley, Holt, and Holt in that they were deductive. During the second wave of coding, I reorganized my preliminary codes according to my interpretive framework, communities of practice. This involved creating high-order codes related to the three elements of a CoP's practice (which will be discussed in detail below): shared repertoire, joint enterprise, and mutual engagement (Neufeld, Fang, and Wan 2013). This round of coding involved determining which high-order code each preliminary code fell under or excluding it from interpretation as not relevant to my particular study. The final round of coding consisted of refining and recombining my codes to ensure they were comprehensible and meaningful.

### *Communities of Practice*

For groups which fit the criteria, the concept of communities of practice allows researchers to understand the meaning of a community to its members (Neufeld, Fang, and Wan 2013; Fürstenberg 2022, 14-16). A CoP is any group of people who have a common interest, interact with one another in relation to this interest, and engage in practices connected to this interest (Fürstenberg 2022, 14). Incels thus constitute a community of practice. They share a common issue, which is their romantic and sexual failures, and they have a mutual desire for some type of relief from the distress this causes them. They interact regularly on online forums, and in doing so engage in discursive practices regarding the causes of their problems and the best ways to cope with these.

Therefore, it is productive to conceptualize incels as a community of practice if we aim to illuminate how incels construct meaning in relation to their community. Neufeld, Fang, and Wan (2013) argue while CoPs may provide collective benefits to those with common interests, unless

members believe it will provide them with additional individual benefits, a CoP will not succeed (620). As such, CoPs are typically valued by their members because they teach them something meaningful (Neufeld, Fang, and Wan 2013, 620; Fürstenberg 2022, 14). Investigating what it is that incels learn through their participation in the community's practices can illuminate the value this knowledge holds for them and suggest reasons they might have joined the forum.

Participation in a CoP is conceptualized according to three types of practices: shared repertoire, joint enterprise, and mutual engagement (Neufeld, Fang, and Wan 2013; Fürstenberg 2022). In order to analyze how incels participate in their community's practices, I structured my coding according to this typology of practice. Shared repertoire refers to the social infrastructure that shapes the sharing of meaning among members of the CoP. My codes related to shared repertoire included the community's narratives, procedures, technologies, and terminology (Neufeld, Fang, and Wan 2013, 619; Fürstenberg 2022, 14). Joint enterprise emerges out of a CoP's common interests and describes the community's sense of identity and what it means to members. To code for joint enterprise, I looked for instances of identification with the incel community and the construction of group boundaries (Neufeld, Fang, and Wan 2013, 619). The final component of a CoP's practices is mutual engagement, which refers to the actual interactions between members which create and recreate its knowledge systems. My codes included all communication, knowledge sharing, and problem-solving activities within the community (Neufeld, Fang, and Wan 2013, 620; Fürstenberg 2022, 14).

## **Findings**

### *Shared Repertoires*

To begin each experience of the incel community, an incel must first visit the forum. Incel forums are one of the technological tools the incel CoP uses to shape its practices. Forums in general are organized in a particular way so as to best structure discourse. They are often divided into subforums oriented around particular topics. This ensures that related content is grouped together. Within each subforum, there are multiple discussion threads, which consist of an original post and all of its responses. Essentially, a thread is like an online conversation (O'Malley, Holt, and Holt 2022, 4988).

The forum I studied consists of five subforums, each with different rules regarding the types of content which can be posted to them. The "Rules and FAQ" subforum is a place for the forum's moderators to update the community on new developments and share information. Only moderators are allowed to create threads in this subforum, and users are not permitted to reply to threads. The second subforum is titled "The Incel Awards." Here, moderators have established threads where users can vote for which member of their community should win various awards for exemplifying certain incel traits. Next is the subforum "Must-Read Content." On this subforum, one can "discover the most noteworthy and thought-provoking threads." The next subforum is called "Inceldom Discussion," and is a place for incels to discuss anything related to their experiences as an incel (the term "inceldom" refers to the state of being an incel ("Incel Terminology" n.d.)). Finally, there is "The Lounge." Here, users are allowed to discuss any topics, even those which are not related to being an incel. This organization system arranges and compartmentalizes the discussions had on the site.

The forum's governance structure is another type of shared repertoire. At the highest level, the forum is run by moderators. Moderators have the power to make decisions regarding membership and the types of content which can be posted. Occasionally, they make these

decisions without consulting the other members of the forum. One such instance is the implementation of rules banning bluepill content and the sexualization of minors, which were based solely on a vote among the forum's moderators. However, the broader incel community is often included in the decision-making process via polls. Examples include polls in which members voted to disallow non-incels from making memberships on the site, to allow discussions of paid sex, and to ban the use of photos of females in profile pictures.

The forum also sets out specific procedures for incels to follow as they take part in the community's practices. Participation in several aspects of the community requires users to have made a minimum number of posts. In order to join the forum's Discord server (a messaging site), members need to have made at least 400 posts on the forum. The threshold for being nominated for an Incel Award is even higher, at 500 posts. The ability to vote in polls and send private messages to other users also requires a user to be active on the site, though no specific post requirement is noted. The number of posts each user has made is listed beside their username, and users are rewarded each time they make 500 posts by earning a higher rank on the site.

Despite these minimum post requirements, not every type of post is deemed appropriate for the forum. Moderators have banned several types of posts, including content which is low effort, spam, illegal, sexualizes minors, speaks positively about the LGBTQ+ community, or is bluepilled. The forum describes bluepill content as "tired cliches and worn out...platitudes such as 'Just be yourself bro,' 'Man up bro,' 'Just hit the gym and learn to lift bro,' 'Work hard, get a job and eventually a woman will come to you.'" Users are also not allowed to "necropost," which refers to posting an insignificant reply to a thread which has not been actively used in the previous month. The final rule governing incels requires them not to "persecute, harass, or attack others" on the forum. Users who do not follow these rules are subject to warnings or bans.

Incels have their own unique lexicon which signals community membership. This includes the terms “bluepill,” “blackpill,” and “Chad” as discussed above. Incels also affix the suffix “-cel” to adjectives as a way to refer to aspects of their identity that they believe are related to their celibacy. For example, the term “autismcel” is used by an incel who believes his autism prevents him from having sex, while the term “uglycel” refers to an incel who feels he is too ugly for women to desire him. The incel lexicon also includes several derogatory terms for women, including “foid/femoid” (“female humanoid”) and “roastie” (women who have had more than one sexual partner) (“Incel Terminology” n.d.). These terms are used in conjunction with more mainstream gender-based slurs which are directed at women.

Incel narratives make up the majority of the community’s shared repertoires. As has been observed by many of the scholars cited above, incels’ experiences of the forum are shaped by the narrative that men are disempowered in society. Most commonly, incels blame women for their supposed subjugation. One user attributes the existence of incels to feminism, while another states that incels are “oppressed” by women and so it is only natural to have “negative feelings towards those that don't allow them to have their basic needs [sex].” Incel rhetorics depict women as materialistic, promiscuous, and superficial. They believe that women discriminate against unattractive, racialized, neurodivergent, or low-income men.

Users of the forum also believe that lesbianism poses a threat to men’s dating prospects and to society as a whole. They call this the “lesbian-pill,” referring to the realization that lesbianism is one of the social factors preventing incels from being sexually successful. One incel states that:

I see tons of single mothers going the lesbian route because they can't find good looking men to be married to, also tons of young girls on campuses are lesbos nowadays because

it's cooler than having a normie or a chadlite boyfriend and more politically correct in today's world, normies and chadlites will soon be replaced with other foids.

Note here that the terms “normie” and “chadlite” refer to men who are not incels, but who do not rank as high as Chads in the incels’ socio-sexual power hierarchy (“Incel Terminology” n.d.).

Another man argues that “the entire condition of lesbianism is just a mental illness and or manipulative scam based in social engineering manipulations.” While the forum bans LGBTQ+ people from being members, only lesbians are specifically targeted as objects of hate in the forum’s content. Incels frequently blame lesbians for damaging patriarchal society and they regularly use homophobic slurs throughout their discourse.

The entirety of the community’s narrative practices are reflected in its blackpill ideology. As previously noted, the forum does not allow bluepill content. Instead, members take part in blackpill discourse throughout the site. Their blackpill narrative posits that for various reasons (mostly having to do with women), society is deeply flawed and the condition of being an incel is inescapable. Users claim that “we live in a clown society” or that men “just became more emasculated as time went on and everybody started living in this ‘politically correct equality’ universe.” But instead of trying to combat this “clown society,” incels should take the blackpill and do as one user suggests:

Change your standards, not for women, but for life, latching onto normie standards when you clearly aren't one is illogical, the moment you focus on what you can enjoy in this life rather than what you can't enjoy you'll stop wasting time and feel a lot better... We've only failed at life here if we fail to take advantage of the benefits that come with having been incel, and that benefit is KNOWLEDGE.

The blackpill is hard for some incels to swallow, like the man who “can't disable [his] cravings for human relationships.” However, it is positioned as the most logical and beneficial approach to the plight of the incel.

The final narrative the forum constructs is one of welcoming members. The first thing one reads when visiting the forum is the following message: “welcome! This is a forum for involuntary celibates: people who lack a significant other. Are you lonely and wish you had someone in your life? You're not alone! Join our forum and talk to people just like you.” A similar thought is conveyed in the “About Us” section at the bottom of the homepage. It reads: “we welcome men from all walks of life, and from all cultural and racial backgrounds, as long as you are an incel.” These messages tell users that their presence is desired on the forum if they fit the community’s standards of inclusion, that is, if they are truly an incel.

### *Joint Enterprise*

Incels identify with the incel community to a very high degree. In a thread entitled “Introductions,” many incels foreground the reasons for their celibacy at the start of their personal description. This includes details about their physical appearance, race, and (lack of) romantic and sexual experiences. They do so using the community’s terminology, including attaching the suffix “-cel” to the end of their descriptors to linguistically tie these to their incel status. A few incels mention that bullying led them to participate in the incel community, while another asserts that “I don't really get bullied or anything, I just really hate females.” Only after discussing what they believe makes them an incel will users then discuss their personal interests.

Incels also construct firm group boundaries which contribute to creating a sense of the incel identity. They use collective language to refer to the incel community, evident in excerpt such as “*we* welcome men from all walks of life, and from all cultural and racial backgrounds, as long as you are an incel,” and “I want to throw acid on the face of these people and see them suffer like *we incels* are suffering for years” (emphasis mine). This second quote also speaks to the fact that incels use violent and hateful language to enforce their group boundaries and create an enemy for them to define themselves against. Their enemies are either those they blame for their perceived marginalization, including feminists, lesbians, and women in general, or those who they believe have unfairly benefitted from the current state of society, including Chads and normies. The incel identity is reinforced by the use of hateful language and threats of violence against enemy groups.

### *Mutual Engagement*

Blackpill narratives are part of the incel CoP’s shared repertoires, but they are also a way the community shares its knowledge and engages in problem solving. Incels see blackpill ideology as the only way to empower men given the problematic state of society. They deeply value their ability to recognize the “truth” of society, as they believe it frees them from women’s power and makes their lives more enjoyable. Because of this, incels recommend other members of the community become blackpilled in order to improve their lives, such as one incel who says “normiedom is the biggest long con, we [incels] ironically got screwed out of making a shitty deal, but again, we can only make this into a positive with effort and applying the black pill mindset practically.” These practical applications include pursuing sex with sex workers to satiate their physical needs, working hard to improve their wealth, and abandoning ego-driven

desires for romantic relationships. In the responses to this post, many incels report feeling inspired by this user's hypothesis and they continue to debate its applications. If bluepill narratives are useless because they encourage incels to conform, blackpill narratives are an effort at problem-solving because they have the power to radically improve an incel's life through subversion.

Consistent with the site's prohibition on persecution, harassment, or attacks on other incels, incels are less abusive towards one another than they are towards the rest of society. Disagreements over the correct interpretation of social problems or incel ideologies are regular, as the community is quite involved in negotiating and renegotiating its discourses. But this is done using fewer slurs and insults than incels use when discussing their social enemies. Still, one of the forum's moderators seems to disagree, stating that "incel communities tend to act like crabs in a bucket and we try and hold each other down or we typically hate on each other instead of support and help each other." The moderator attributes this hateful style of communication to the suffering incels have endured at the hands of women. It is possible that given the ban on harassment, overtly negative posts were removed from the site, thus making them unavailable for my analysis. Still, compared to the frequency and vitriol with which incels critique outsiders, instances of infighting are relatively minor.

## **Discussion**

My findings suggest that incel forums are a socially maladaptive but individually beneficial response to the feminist movement's progress in recent decades. By engaging in practices which encourage identification with the community, enable meaningful social participation, and externalize blame for their problems, incels are able to offset their feelings of

social injury with a sense of validation, belonging, and empowerment. More broadly, however, by participating in the insular and hateful practices of the incel community, incels become increasingly socially abject. As such, incels may be less capable of reintegrating into society should they wish to do so. Further, it may be more difficult to deradicalize incels using conventional ideologies and techniques, as incels have purposely distanced themselves from mainstream society.

### *Identification as a Community*

The incel community's joint enterprise fosters a sense of group identity and creates a place where incels feel as if they belong. The site's welcome message positions the forum as a community. It reads: "welcome! This is a forum for involuntary celibates: people who lack a significant other. Are you lonely and wish you had someone in your life? You're not alone! Join our forum and talk to people just like you." Similarly, pinned to the top of the homepage is a post explaining changes to the forum. Unfortunately, only the title of the post can be viewed without an account, but even the title is telling: "not just a forum, but a community." These messages speak to the goals of the forum's moderators; they wish to create a community in which celibate men feel as if they belong, are wanted, and are not alone. The forum is intended to be an alternative outlet for those who are otherwise lacking connection in their lives, and it teaches them that while they may feel as if they are suffering individually, there is a large community of men suffering with them.

And it is true that incels do identify with the incel identity and take part in the community's practices. They refer to themselves as incels and often foreground their incel

identities in their personal introductions. This includes introducing themselves according to the reasons they believe women do not want to have sex with them, such as one user who introduces himself as “a heightcel, socialatuismlcel (sic), and STEMcel,” in reference to his stature, autism, and career path. As another example, many incels introduce themselves as “KHHVs,” which stands for kiss-less, hand-hold-less, hug-less virgins (“Incel Terminology” n.d.). It is clear from these introductions that being an incel forms a central part of these men’s personal identities.

While members of the forum do constitute a community, it is not necessarily a supportive community. Members often use abusive or simply rude language when speaking to one another. They frequently disagree over their understandings of discourses. And occasionally, they debate whether certain types of people belong on the forum. For instance, they often discuss what it means to be a “volcel,” or voluntary celibate. Volcels are those who incels believe meet women’s standards of attractiveness, and so could find a sexual partner if they so desired. These types of people, if they were to be found out, would be banned from the forum, as they do not share the same experiences as incels and so cannot relate. Incels enforce the boundaries of their community fairly rigidly, excluding volcels, women, LGBTQ+ people, and “fakecels” (fake celibates). Yet paradoxically, these exclusionary practices ensure that those who are permitted to take part in the community have a space where they truly fit in, as they are surrounded by nothing but like-minded individuals who understand their experiences. For those who are truly involuntarily celibate in the way the community conceptualizes it, there is “no hating on other truecels” (note that “truecel” refers to true incels). As such, the forum enables truecels to feel a sense of community, identity, and belonging as they participate in the forum’s practices.

### *Social Participation*

Next, the ways in which the forum is governed allow incels to have a higher degree of control within their community than they feel they have in mainstream society. While the forum and its content are ultimately governed by moderators, the community is fairly democratic. Decisions regarding what types of content are allowed and how membership works are often made using polls. Through these polls, users can share their opinions on what their community will look like. Moderators honour the results of these polls and will implement whatever rulings the community makes. Because the forum facilitates individual participation in the community's governance, members are able to feel that their needs are represented and heard.

The forum also encourages, and in some cases requires, a high degree of participation in discourse. A user's social power on the forum is determined by the number of posts they have made. With every 100 posts, users earn a new star which communicates their status to other users, and when they earn five stars, they move up a rank. This incentivizes incels to be very active posters if they wish to increase their status on the site. For those who perhaps do not care about their rank in the community, the privileges one is afforded on the forum also correlate to the number of posts they have made. New users are not initially given the right to send private messages or vote in polls. Rather, this is given to them with time. In order to be nominated for an Incel Award, users must have made at least 500 posts. And if one wishes to chat with other users via the forum's Discord server, they are required to have at least 400 posts to their name. As a result of these motivations, the forum's users are incredibly prolific, writing a total of over 9.8 million posts since 2017. Clearly, this is a very effective strategy for encouraging incels to participate.

However, it is not merely participation which is valued in the community, but high-level participation. Intelligent and engaged discourse is required in most areas of the site. The forum

has banned low effort content, which refers to short, irrelevant, or meaningless posts. Only in “The Lounge” subforum is this ban relaxed, as this subforum’s content does not directly pertain to incel narratives. In the two subforums where discussion of incel ideologies occurs (“Inceldom Discussion” and “Must-Read Threads”), meaningful participation in knowledge production is essential. If low effort posts are found among these subforums, the users responsible are subject to warnings or bans from using the site. Intelligent participation is further emphasized by one of the categories in “The Incel Awards,” that being the award for the “Highest IQ Poster.” This refers to the user who made “the most consistently high-effort threads.” We can gather from the community’s emphasis on and enthusiastic participation in high-level discourse that the forum gives incels an opportunity to use their voice and make their opinions known.

The forum’s facilitation of participation in governance and discourse can tell us much about the benefits the incel community provides for its members. Incels report not feeling as if they matter in society. Some say they were bullied as children, others claim to be socially marginalized for various reasons (including their physical appearance, race, or cognitive abilities), while another claims that incels are the “oppressed,” disenfranchised in our supposedly female-dominated world. It may be true that some incels face oppression of various kinds due to their intersectional identities. But as they are all heterosexual, cisgender men, incels possess a great deal of social power that they may simply be oblivious to. Regardless of the actualities of incels’ social power, however, what matters is that they *feel* as if they do not have a voice in society. Considering that the incel forum encourages incels to express their opinions and participate in shaping the structure and discourses of their community, it seems that part of the value incels derive from the forum is a sense of social empowerment.

### *Externalization of Problems*

Finally, the incel community's shared repertoires and mutual engagements teach incels to contextualize their problems in relation to the community's misogynistic narratives. Through the ban on bluepill content, the forum discourages its members from attributing their dating struggles to their personal flaws. Banning bluepill content means members of the forum are not allowed to recommend personal improvement as a solution to celibacy. For instance, they cannot say "just hit the gym and learn to lift bro" or "work hard, get a job and eventually a woman will come to you." By suggesting incels change aspects of themselves, bluepill narratives like these imply that it is an incel's personal characteristics which are responsible for their celibacy. By rejecting bluepill content, then, the forum is rejecting the belief that celibacy is an individualized problem.

Instead, members of the site adopt a blackpill philosophy. Blackpill narratives place the blame for celibacy on society rather than on the individual. More specifically, blackpill narratives blame women for creating a society which is hostile to men. Blackpilled incels argue that celibacy is an involuntary condition caused by women's materialistic, shallow, and overly high dating standards which discriminate against unattractive men. By adopting the blackpill, incels are said to be able to free themselves from the shackles of social expectations. This involves recognizing the permanence of their celibacy and abandoning the goal of obtaining a sexual partner.

It may seem as if this belief that one can never obtain the object of one's desires is rather defeatist. And by extension, it seems as if members would find this aspect of the community off-putting, as it essentially teaches them that they are hopeless. But on the contrary, incels strive towards adopting the blackpill philosophy, because they appreciate that it recognizes the truth of the world as they have experienced it. Incels have long felt disillusioned with society. Many

incels feel as if they are “entitled to a foid,” or at least one whose attractiveness they view to be on par with their own. So the fact that this is not the case strikes them as deeply unjust. Blackpill narratives do not obscure this felt injustice in the ways bluepill narratives do. Rather, the blackpill recognizes that the world is flawed and that incels have done nothing to deserve their celibacy. And by adopting the blackpill, incels are able to “focus on what [they] can enjoy in this life rather than what [they] can't enjoy,” allowing them to “stop wasting time and feel a lot better.” As such, blackpill narratives validate incels’ experiences, reassure them that they bear no responsibility for their dating problems, and provide them with some sense of comfort as a result.

Interestingly, it is possible that some of the flaws incels see in society are in fact systemic rather than individual. For instance, incels frequently claim that it is harder for racialized men to achieve dating success. A study of online dating preferences suggests that there may be a grain of truth to this, as it demonstrates that inter-racial dating is more difficult than intra-racial dating (Hwang 2013). Yet rather than blaming systemic racism for this discrimination, incel narratives position women as the responsible parties. When scholars attribute the emergence of incels to feminism, however, they are not saying that feminism is one of the systemic issues under which incels suffer. For while it is true that feminism has reduced some of the social power men previously held, this power was disproportionate, illegitimate, and oppressive. Yet incels seem to lack either the ability or the will to recognize this. Instead, they distort the source of their problems and position gender equality as akin to misandry. In doing so, incels are able to justify their misogyny as a response to an oppressive situation. This is quite clear when one user says that “people without their basic needs met showing negative feelings towards those that don't allow them to have their basic needs” is very common. Hating women seems only natural when women’s refusal to have sex with incels is cast as a form of oppression.

If incels were to tackle the actual systemic issues which contribute to their celibacy, such as structural racism, they would be required to push against hegemonic social forces. It is possible to gain power through social justice activism, but the path is long and hard. On the other hand, misogyny is an already-established source of social power (Chang 2022). And as we know, incels feel marginalized and crave power. By framing misogyny as an appropriate response to the oppressive structure of feminism, the incel community thus takes the path of least resistance to feelings of empowerment. They recast their participation in the age-old hatred of women as a form of social justice. This gives them access to a deep well of power that, despite what incels might claim, has not been drained by feminists. This is perhaps not a conscious decision on the part of incels, but it nevertheless serves to imbue them with an enhanced sense of social empowerment.

Let me clarify something here. I do not intend to argue that incels adopt misogyny as a way of obtaining power. Many incels are likely already misogynistic in some ways before joining the community. Instead, I mean to suggest that individual incels may find the incel community attractive because it centers and promotes misogynistic narratives which they recognize as a source of power. Incels already possess misogynistic beliefs, they simply look to the community to learn how to use these beliefs to gain a sense of empowerment. And further, I also do not wish to claim that misogyny gives incels actual social power. Their narratives are typically confined to their private online spaces, and only very rarely result in actual exertions of power, such as incel terror attacks. Instead, I argue that by engaging with the community's misogynistic rhetorics, members *feel* as if they have regained some power. Misogyny acts as a kind of social currency within the incel community because it allows incels to tear down their perceived oppressors and affirms that incels are superior to women. By dialogically reducing the

power women have over them through their hateful critiques, incels gain a sense that their marginality has somewhat decreased.

## **Conclusion**

Participation in the incel community of practice has three key benefits for individual incels. First, it provides them with a sense of identity and belonging. They are not just an abnormal individual who cannot find a girlfriend; they are an incel who is suffering from a systemic social issue alongside many others. Second, they are able to participate in knowledge production and exercise social control in ways they feel they are prevented from doing in the wider society. And third, they are encouraged to take part in ideologies that position their suffering as external to themselves and which empower them through misogyny. In these ways, the incel community structures its members lives and mindsets in validating ways.

However, this validation could be very damaging to incels' broader social prospects. The ideologies which incels internalize and the identity they adopt mark them as the Other in society. This is of course intentional; incels believe that they have been rejected by society (or, more specifically, by the women who run society), and so they respond by removing themselves from that which has made them feel unwanted. In doing so, they lean into their extreme beliefs which most in society (hopefully) do not agree with. For while misogyny is still present in society today, it is typically not expressed in such overtly hateful terms as those used by incels (Chang 2022). So in retreating to the incel community to heal from their social wounds and feel empowered, incels do find a place where they belong, but they also isolate themselves from the rest of society.

### *Intervention Strategies*

The community's isolation poses a problem for intervention attempts. If, by participating in the incel community, incels abject themselves from society, how can they be reintegrated into it? When confronted with the community's beliefs, we may feel compelled to try to critique or dismantle their belief systems. But because we do so from the basis of mainstream ideologies with which incels fundamentally disagree, they feel as if we are trying to "gaslight incels into believing [they] are the causers of [their] own incelism." Any attempts to re-educate incels fall on deaf ears and only further prove to incels that the broader world will never be able to understand them.

Incels have a need to feel understood by those they interact with. They want to be able to meaningfully identify with a community of people who experience the same things as them. And they wish to participate in practices which offer them comfort, belonging, and empowerment. In other words, incels need a community of practice. Any approach to rehabilitating incels which does not recognize and meet these needs is doomed to fail, because otherwise, incels have no reason to leave their community and reintegrate into mainstream society. Interventions into the incel community thus must be structured as a community of practice. They must offer a secure and meaningful sense of identity to individuals with similar problems. They must allow members to exert a degree of control over the community and encourage social participation. They must also offer a source of empowerment to their members. And crucially, intervention attempts must do all of this without allowing misogyny and victimhood to take hold in the community. Only in these ways will attempts to redirect the incel community's dating frustrations have a chance of effectively rehabilitating incels.

My work is very early stages. I do not presume to have all the answers regarding how to intervene in the incel community. While I have provided a feminist reading of the value of the incel community to its members, I feel it is also important to include the perspectives of actual incels in developing intervention strategies. Interviews with current and past incels could further develop our understanding of the meaning of the incel CoP to its members. Still, my results suggest that alternatives to the incel community should resemble incel forums in as many ways as possible. Thus, I suggest modeling an alternative community for healthy men as an online forum which creates an identity for its members and gives them a high degree of social control. Importantly, however, among the forum's rules must be a ban on misogynistic and otherwise misanthropic content. It is too easy for celibate men to fall back on misogyny and victimhood to rectify their perceived sense of disempowerment. As such, moderators must carefully review content to ensure it is not hateful. And to offset the loss of incels' source of power, work must be done to establish new narratives of empowerment which help celibate men realize that whether they are at fault for their celibacy or not, their lives can still have meaning, and they can still have a place in society.

As a final note on interventions, I do not mean to imply that all, or even most, incels can be rehabilitated. Incels are by their very nature a hateful and misogynistic community. Many members may be beyond saving, like one individual who claims that he "just really hate[s] females." Still, something must be done about incels. Their misogynistic narratives cannot be left unchecked. Since they do not listen to critiques, a new strategy is needed. My research suggests that offering them a similar community which lacks hateful beliefs is one possible solution that is worth trying. And even if such a strategy proves not to make much of an impact on current incels, perhaps the existence of a supportive community for men struggling in their dating and

sexual lives could prevent future incels from forming by offering them somewhere else to find solace.

### *Limitations*

While my assessment of the incel community indicates that it may contribute positively to its members' lives, this does not necessarily translate to an assessment of the psychological wellbeing of incels. I do not wish to argue that incels are made happier because of their participation in the community. This would be false, as research into the mental health of incels reports that they experience high rates of depression and anxiety, particularly among those who believe in the permanence of their celibacy (in other words, those who are blackpilled) (Costello et al. 2022). Still, I believe that it is possible for the incel community to at once benefit its members in certain ways while harming them in others. Their mental health may suffer because of their membership in the community, but incels can nevertheless feel validated and empowered by participating in it. Further, I take this as another indication that there is an opportunity to provide incels with healthier alternatives to their community, as a different type of CoP could perhaps give incels the same benefits without negatively impacting their mental health.

I also must acknowledge the limited sample size and scope of my research. Due to time constraints, I was only able to survey 371 posts among the 9,820,981 that exist on the site. This represents less than 0.004% of the forum's total content. Though I attempted to offset my small sample size by studying threads which were especially meaningful to the community, it is worth noting that my sample may not be representative of the views of the community as a whole. And by including only the first twenty posts made under each thread, I was unable to study the full

range of reactions to each thread. In order to enrich our understanding of how the incel community of practice creates meaning for its members, future researchers should conduct more in-depth, longitudinal studies so as to better reflect the diversity of experiences within the community.

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