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## **"You Don't Understand... It's Not About Virginity": Sexual Markets, Identity Construction, and Violent Masculinity on an Incel Forum Board**

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# **“You Don’t Understand... It’s Not About Virginity”:**

## **Sexual Markets, Identity Construction, and Violent Masculinity on an Incel Forum Board**



Honors Thesis

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Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work

Advisor: Dr. Jamie L. Small

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## **Abstract**

The “manosphere” is an online collection of antifeminists and men’s rights activists. Incels, short for involuntary celibates, interact in this space and have been labeled as extreme misogynists, white supremacists, and domestic terrorists. I engage with popular sociological theories of masculinity (including hegemonic, hybrid, and inclusive masculinities) to analyze dominant discourses on the website incels.is. The data for this project are comments from 100 threads randomly sampled from 4,532 total threads posted in 2018. Using a grounded theory approach, I first explore how incels think about sexuality as an economy, devising a scheme that places everyone in a sexual hierarchy based on their “sexual market value.” Next, I explore questions of identity, attempting to make sense of who is able to call themselves an incel and who is not. Finally, I draw together ideas of entitlement and victimhood to identify ways that incels perform violence online in an attempt to reassert masculinity. This study ultimately provides a case study to understand ways in which marginalized men still work to reproduce gendered and sexual hierarchies.

## **Disclaimer**

Incels are often described in the media as extreme misogynists, white supremacists, and domestic terrorists. Their language is often vulgar, graphic, and violent.

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Two mass killings within the decade by men claiming to be “incels” propelled the group into the national spotlight. In May, 2014, Elliot Rodger killed 6 people and himself in Isla Vista, California. Before his rampage, Rodger posted a video online titled “Elliot Rodger’s Retribution,” in which the twenty-two year old proclaimed, “I don’t know why you girls aren’t attracted to me... it’s an injustice, a crime.” Four years later in April, 2018, Alek Minassian drove a van through a crowd in Toronto, Canada, killing 10 people. It remains the deadliest vehicle ramming in Canadian history. Before the attack, Minassian declared on Facebook, “The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow the Chads and Stacys! All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!”<sup>1</sup> Since these events, major news outlets (including *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Washington Post*) covered incels and labeled them extreme misogynists, white supremacists, and domestic terrorists.

“Incel,” short for involuntary celibate, is an identity claimed by some men in the “manosphere,” or the online space where antifeminists and men’s rights activists converge. As the name suggests, men who call themselves incels want to have sex and be in intimate relationships with women, but have a perceived inability to do so. Incels point to a host of socially structured reasons for their celibacy, including their unattractive qualities and socially awkward personalities; the feminist agenda that has made it so women can choose to reject ugly men; and society itself, which has systematically denied them the right to sexuality. Ultimately, incels reflect the convergence of antifeminism,

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<sup>1</sup> In this quote, a “Chad” is the term that incels use to describe the most attractive men in society who are sexually active. These men embody those characteristics which are typically associated with hegemonic masculinity—they are physically strong and attractive, they are successful in professional life, and they have sex with women as often as they desire it. A “Stacy” is a woman who conforms to conventional beauty standards, and is powerful because of her looks. She is promiscuous by incel definition, but chooses to only have sex with those who she thinks are also attractive, namely a Chad.

technological advancement, and marginalized masculinities, presenting a unique case for understanding theories of masculinity and its links to sexuality in modern times.

Although it is certainly important to recognize that there are incels who commit violent crimes, it is also important to understand that the vast majority of men who visit sites in the manosphere and call themselves incels do not make national and international headlines. It is easy to make broad assumptions about these men, given the coverage of incels in the media. However, the average incel is not overtly violent. Rather, he is a heterosexual man who posts on clandestine parts of the internet where he can converse with other men who share his experiences and ideology. These comments are not harmless; they often reflect deeply-rooted beliefs about the way society should be organized hierarchically based on social categories (gender and sexuality being the most salient). However, these comments can also provide one starting point to examine a shifting discourse surrounding the intersection of sexuality and masculinity in recent times.

The goal of this study is to utilize discussions on an incel forum board to understand how men who call themselves incels make sense of their identity and navigate their sexual and gendered performances according to incel ideology. I identify three dominant discourses among incels: sexual markets and disparities in sexual market values, identity construction and border patrolling according to “incel traits,” and violent masculine performance in accordance with incel experiences. I conclude this study by explaining its significance for understanding masculinity in a broader sociological context.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In general, there exists little academic literature on online masculine identities and only a handful of articles that explore the incel community from an academic perspective. Schmitz and Kazyak write about the recent commitment in the social sciences to understanding men's rights movements through printed texts, but explain that few studies have been conducted which analyze the online presence and influence of men's rights activists more broadly, and incels in particular (2016). In this literature review, I piece together current theories of masculinity to better understand how incels both affirm and challenge those theories. Ultimately, I recognize that there is not one theory of masculinity which completely explains incel masculine performance; rather, I situate incel performance within several different sociological theories explaining masculinity. Next, I explore the literature on identity construction in the context of gender. I pay particular attention to the construction of gendered identities, noting the importance of performing identities and the work of creating and policing identity boundaries. I then explore the connections between masculinity and sexuality. Recent research points to the importance of heterosexual bravado to performing masculinity. Therefore, I also explore issues around virginity and celibacy as they relate to masculine identities. I proceed to assemble research on how men navigate masculinity online by explaining the manosphere and masculine performance within this space. Finally, I highlight two important studies which have analyzed masculinity among incels.

### Theorizing Masculinity

Masculinity is not composed of a specific set of behaviors, beliefs, and presentations, but rather is variant, culturally specific, and time bound. As such, it is

critical to consider the current social climate within which some men congregate online around incel identity. Some scholars insist that hegemonic masculinity is situated at the top of a hierarchy of masculine performances. Hegemonic masculinity is the currently accepted behaviors, beliefs, and presentations associated with maleness which ensure the proliferation of patriarchy and establishes power of men over women and power differences in relationships between men (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1985; Connell 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Diefendorf 2015; Wilkins 2009). Hegemonic masculine performance is specific to the setting and time in which it exists, dependent upon relationships between individuals, and unattainable to nearly everyone (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Wilkins, for example, argues that, “the elusive idea of hegemonic masculinity creates particular gender dilemmas for different boys and men as they struggle to create socially recognized masculinities” (2009:343). One aspect of hegemonic masculinity is its dependence upon sexuality—heterosexuality in particular. In this framework, it is important for men to flaunt heterosexual bravado among their peers, reinforcing hierarchies over women and among groups of men (Diefendorf 2015; Pascoe 2007).

The concept of hybrid masculinities serves as a newer extension to previous considerations of hegemonic masculinity. This term refers to “the selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalized and subordinate masculinities and—at times—femininities into men’s gender performances and identities” (Bridges and Pascoe 2014:246). In essence, this means that privileged men incorporate certain behaviors into the dominant masculine ideology which have historically been coded as “black,” “gay,” or “feminine,” among other marginalized



identities. According to Bridges and Pascoe (2014), this hybridization leads to at least three main consequences (see also Bridges 2014). First, hybrid masculinities allow straight, white men to distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity, while still reinforcing gendered relations of power and inequality. Second, hybrid masculinities allow privileged men to strategically borrow from subordinate groups in order to more easily disguise their heightened social power and to more rigidly contain these practices within their subordinate identity groups. Finally, by obscuring symbolic and social boundaries between identities, hybrid masculinities further entrench and conceal multiple and intersecting systems of inequality.

Inclusive masculinity offers an alternative theoretical framework which conceptualizes masculine performances as organized horizontally, rather than hierarchically (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). From this perspective, men increasingly accept diverse performances, allowing for contemporary meanings of masculinity to include a broader selection of performances that “count” as masculine. In instances where there is less reason for men to fear being perceived socially as gay (diminished homophobia), there is room for both orthodox and inclusive masculinity to arise (Anderson 2005, 2009). Orthodox masculinity does not remain culturally hegemonic, but men who adopt this performance do remain tactically and emotionally distant from one another (Anderson 2009). Conversely, men performing inclusive masculinity demonstrate emotional and physical homosocial developments by including gay men in social circles and valuing heterofemininity (Anderson 2009). Ultimately, inclusive masculinity theory provides one explanation for the observed decrease in overt homophobia, particularly among all male groups, despite the fact that covert homophobia and heteronormativity

still exist and have significant impacts (Anderson and McCormack 2018). However, this theory is not without critique. Some have pointed out that “inclusive” behaviors function only for straight, white, and middle-class men to secure economic, politic, and social power in the era of gay rights (de Boise 2015; Bridges and Pascoe 2014; O’Neill 2015).

For this study, I recognize the relevance and importance of each of these theories for understanding masculinity. While they are at times conflicting, putting them in conversation with one another allows for the articulation and exploration of the nuances of male identity and experiences. A singular and rigid understanding of manhood is not sufficient to explain all of these nuances. Additionally, each of these theories is helpful in understanding parts, but not the entirety, of incel masculinity. By presenting various theoretical perspectives regarding the social performance of masculinities, I can illuminate the complexities of experiences of incels, and for other male-identifying individuals, who do not or cannot conform to the social expectations of manhood.

### **Gendered Identity Construction and the Politics of Masculinity**

This research understands masculinity, and gender more broadly, as a socially constructed social identity that is culturally bound, mutable, and based on social performance. In West and Zimmerman’s words, gendered performance is “not a set of traits, nor a variable, nor a role, but the product of social doings of some sort... gender itself is constituted through interaction... and [can] thus be seen as ‘natural,’ while it is being produced as a socially organized achievement” (1987:129). An individual’s ability to fit into a gendered category is dependent upon their ability and willingness to act in ways that are consistent with the group to which they aim to claim membership

(Ridgeway 1997; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). Gendered performance is one way that researchers can assess group membership and cohesion.

Critical to understanding social identity construction is understanding the nature of a collective identity. Collective identity is based on the “we-ness” of the group; members are expected to internalize qualities of the group, creating a single, unified experience against which people both inside and outside of the collective can compare their experiences (Cerulo 1997; Lamont and Molnár 2002). Since gender is traditionally conceived as a binary in which everyone is expected to fit into one of only two categories, the meanings associated with “men” and “women” collective identities are critical in this study (Ridgeway 1997; Ridgeway and Correll 2004).

Next, I consider the ways in which membership (whether voluntary or involuntary) within collective identities leads to the creation and maintenance of difference. Among gendered identities, expected performance by members in each group creates difference between masculinity and femininity and among variations that exist within each category. It is through ongoing, methodical, and situated accomplishments of social identities that difference is constructed and maintained (West and Fenstermaker 1995). Thus, it is the “doing” of gender in accordance with expected ways of performing that creates differences between groups based on gender. Literature on boundary creation makes a distinction between symbolic boundaries and social boundaries. Symbolic boundaries are distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practice, times, and spaces, whereas social boundaries are objective manifestations of social difference, indicated by unequal access to and distribution of resources and opportunities (Lamont and Molnár 2002). When symbolic boundaries become widely agreed upon,

they can constrain social interactions and contribute to the formation of social boundaries (Lamont and Molnár 2002). This interaction between symbolic and social boundaries is observable when considering gender. Individuals automatically assign others into gendered categories with associated expectations (symbolic boundaries); people who do not conform to those expectations face punishment and stigmatization (social boundaries) (Lamont and Molnár 2002).

Gendered boundary creation goes beyond the binary creation of maleness and femaleness. At the same time, gendered boundaries exist within these binary categories, resulting in an uneven distribution of power within and across different groups of men. As a result, the performance of masculinity is politicized both in relation to women and other men. Although all men experience power due to the socially constructed meanings associated with gender, it is not helpful to talk about men as a monolithic entity because of the myriad differences and inequalities among men (Messner 1997). As such, men who hold different identities learn to navigate masculinity differently. For this project, it is helpful to acknowledge the difference in experiences, power, and access to resources afforded to white men in particular.<sup>2</sup> Key to understanding white masculinity is the concept of aggrieved entitlement. Many white men still buy into the ideals of traditional masculinity, yet economic and social changes have happened fast and made many men feel cheated, unhappy, and unfulfilled (Kimmel 2013). As a result, white men can become angry that they do not have the same opportunities to access resources and power

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<sup>2</sup> By making this claim, I do not intend to assert that all men who post on incels.is are White. In fact, given the international presence on the website, it is reasonable to expect that the site is actually quite diverse. However, given that the unit of analysis for this project is not the men who post but the posts themselves, and given that the posts are often written from a lens which perpetuates racial hierarchies with Whiteness as the most powerful group, it is helpful to consider how these men are cloaked by anonymity on this website. Essentially, men are able to perform White masculinity within this space, regardless of whether or not they actually identify as White.

to which they may feel entitled (Kimmel 2013). Instead of questioning systems of inequality, white men may attempt to perform an exaggerated masculinity, emphasizing physical strength, self-control, and power. Researchers have, at times, documented a link between aggrieved entitlement and violence, including mass murder and suicide (Kalish and Kimmel 2010; Kimmel 2013; Vito, Admire, and Hughes 2017).

### **Masculinity and (Hetero)Sexuality**

Incel identity is primarily defined by the desire, but perceived inability, to create and maintain sexually intimate relationships with women—hence the term “involuntary celibate.” Thus, in order to make sense of incel masculine performance in online forums, it is imperative to address the ties between masculinity and sexuality. When centering sexuality, masculinity can be understood as a system of sexual discourses and identities that indicate power, dominance, and control (Pascoe 2007). With this understanding, masculinity need not be attached to the male body. For men doing masculinity, discussing heterosexual experiences is about affirming, “much more than just masculinity; they affirm subjecthood and personhood through sexualized interactions in which they indicate to themselves and to others that they have the ability to work their will upon the world around them” (Pascoe 2007:86). “Compulsive heterosexuality,” describes the ritualized interactions which eroticize male dominance and female submission; rather than being about pleasure, compulsive heterosexuality is about affirming masculinity through sexual mastery and dominance (Pascoe 2007).

In light of the importance of establishing sexual bravado for achieving a successful masculine performance, I explore literature on virginity within the context of masculinity. Researchers explain virginity through three metaphors: a gift, a stigma, and

a process (Carpenter 2002, 2005). Interestingly, researchers have pointed out the importance of analyzing gendered power relations in early sexual experiences. A “disempowering” sexual narrative or experience is one that leaves an individual confused about whether and how to act on sexual desires (Carpenter 2002; Tolman 1994). While there were both men and women in this study who ascribed each of the virginity metaphors, it is notable that the “gift” metaphor typically disempowers women while the “stigma” metaphor typically disempowers men (Carpenter 2002, 2005). Regardless of which metaphor an individual compares their own experiences to, it is rare for the experience of virginity loss to be disempowering among both men and women (Carpenter 2002). Despite these narratives of virginity loss, college-age men generally reported feeling more pressure than women to lose their virginity soon (Sprecher and Regan 1996).

A life course analysis of virgin involuntary celibates shows that participants reported a lack of experience at several key transitional points throughout adolescence (Donnelly et al. 2001). Once these individuals felt “off course” in their sexual development, they attributed continued involuntary celibacy to several other factors including shyness, troubles with body image, and precarious living and working arrangements (Donnelly et al. 2001). Consequences for these involuntary celibates include deep unsatisfactoriness with the course of their life and a sense of feeling “off time,” as if opportunities that their peers have had simply passed them by (Donnelly et al. 2001).

### **Navigating Incel Masculinity Online**

Incels exist as one group in the “manosphere,” a loose confederacy of men who are, “united by an antagonism towards women, a vehement opposition to feminism, and the production of hyperbolic misogynist discourse” (Jane 2018:662). The groups that occupy this space are often associated with “cyberhate” and other forms of online harassment that, at times, should not be completely separated from violence that happens in the real world (Van Valkenburgh 2018). This violence is particularly apparent in discussions of sexual violence, which often frame rape as a gender-neutral problem that has been exacerbated by the feminist movements (Gotell and Dutton 2016). There are several different identities that populate this space, including incels, “Men Going Their Own Way,” and “Pick-Up Artists” (Ging 2017; Gotell and Dutton 2016; Jones, Trott, and Wright 2019).

Participants in the manosphere often ascribe to what they call “Red Pill Ideology.” Men who are “red pill” have become enlightened to the true nature of society, where male and female sexual behaviors rely heavily on genetic determinism and women are, among other things, “irrational, hypergamous, hardwired to pair with alpha males and need to be dominated” (Ging 2017:12). Sexuality in this space becomes economized, in that sexual relationships are often understood only in terms of quantity rather than quality (Van Valkenburgh 2018). Under this system, there is little room for pleasure in sexual relationships; rather, sexuality in the manosphere reflects the adoption of neoliberal principles into the understanding of sexual relationships (Van Valkenburgh 2018). However, men in the manosphere often describe women without agency of their own to participate in the sexual marketplace. Red pill ideology insists that women will always choose to have sex with an alpha male but will settle for and financially exploit

beta males if this is not an option (Ging 2017). From this perspective, zeta males (including incels) are left, against their desires, to celibacy. Incels are unique in their beliefs because of a further adoption of “Black Pill Ideology,” which recognizes the many of the same principles of red pill ideology and adds the belief, in understanding one’s position in the world, he also understands that he cannot change his position in the sexual hierarchy. In contrast to some groups in the manosphere that aspire to become alpha males, incel communities, “rail against rather than aspire to the alpha males of jock culture,” adopting a language of victimhood to describe their social positioning (Ging 2017:13).

Given the anonymity that posting on a forum presents, I collect literature on performing identity online--in particular, I look at how people might “do” masculinity online. Participants in the manosphere have learned the importance of developing an online subculture, which includes the use of repeated language patterns and specialized programmatic features (Kendall 2000). As such, individuals in online spaces are still able to reveal parts of their identity (like race, gender, class, sexuality, and age) which shape interactions, despite the absences of often taken-for-granted visual cues present in other social situations (Kendall 2000; West and Fenstermaker 1995). Additionally, race and gender attach meaning to certain bodies (Kendall 2000). Although bodies remain hidden online, references to the bodies behind virtual identities become even more important because, “the assumed congruence between certain types of bodies and certain physiological, behavioral, and social characteristics results in the expectation by online participants that aspects of the hidden bodies—of, in effect, other participants’ “true” identities—can be deduced (if imperfectly) from what is revealed online” (Kendall



2000:260). Thus, the importance of social identities should not be dismissed, despite the perception of anonymity in online spaces.

## METHODOLOGY

This study presents the results of a content analysis of the website incels.is to understand the discourse surrounding incel identity.<sup>3</sup> I take an inductive and qualitative approach to the research process. This methodology makes sense because data from online message boards is readily available to the public. Further, this methodology offers opportunities to examine discourse surrounding manhood and masculinity among incels.

### Data and Sampling

Incels congregate in many different online spaces. Some post on messageboard-style websites like reddit.com, 4chan.com, and 8chan.com. Others post on independent forum boards, like incels.is. Images of this site are included in Appendix I to offer a depiction of the organization on this site. I chose to analyze this site because it has been cited in several popular news sources (Binder 2018; Tolentino 2018; Emba 2019), is easily accessible, and contains content that extends back to the site's creation in 2017. The popularity of this site among incels also points to its importance as a hub of discussion: by January 2020, according to statistics publicized on the site, there were over 163,000 threads containing more than 3,510,000 comments. There were nearly 11,000 members on the site. Incels.is is a discussion based website, where an original poster may create a new thread by giving a title (usually indicating the topic of the discussion) and the first comment. Other users can respond by leaving subsequent comments. There are three main groupings of threads that appear on the landing page of the website: "Inceldom

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<sup>3</sup> A previous iteration of the site was called incels.me. This version of the site was deleted in 2017, and incels.is was created in its stead. The posts on incel.me did not carry over to the new site. After the collection of the data for this project, the IP address for the site was changed to incels.co. However, all of the comments were preserved in this transition. As such, comments tracing back to 2017, the start of incels.is, are still accessible on the site incels.co.

Discussion,” “OffTopic,” and “Meta & Feedback.” For this project, I chose to analyze threads in the “Inceldom Discussion” tab because it is most relevant to discussions of incel identity.

Given the vast amount of information present, I first decided that I would only analyze those threads that had more than 50 comments. This decision is methodologically defensible for several reasons. First, I wanted to ensure that I would be able to capture and analyze discussions. There are many threads on this website that have very few comments, so it would be difficult to capture discourse if these threads were a part of the data set. The majority of threads located in the “Inceldom Discussions” section of this website fall into this category, so this procedure ensures that threads with only a few comments did not dominate the data sample. Second, I wanted to capture only the most important discussions on the website. While there are a number of reasons why one thread may get more comments than another that are not related to the importance of the topic discussed (time of day posted, for example), this is also one of only a few ways to measure the importance of a conversation given the information available on this site. Finally, the time and resources available for this project limited the amount of data that could be collected and analyzed. Only using threads with more than 50 comments narrowed the amount of data to be collected while still ensuring that enough data would be used in the study to make it significant. Finally, anticipating variation in the types of conversations that would occur at various different times of year, I decided that my research study should span an entire year. Accordingly, the data used in this project spans 2018.

## **Analysis**

I downloaded every thread posted in this timeframe with more than 50 comments, which amounted to 4,352 threads each with between 50 and 2,585 comments. I then randomly selected 100 threads to code. Using a qualitative data analysis software (ATLAS.ti 8), I first coded 20 threads (1424 comments) inductively using a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1997; Glaser and Strauss 1967). In this phase, I identified 65 themes and subthemes that occurred frequently in the data or that seemed important and pertinent to this study. Since each thread contained a different topic, it was important to continue to add to my codebook during this beginning phase as new themes emerged in the threads. For the remaining 80 threads, I organized and restructured my codebook to form 13 substantial themes according to the conclusions that I wished to make. These final themes can be found in Appendix II. In total, the 100 randomly sampled threads contained 7,767 comments that I analyzed as a part of this project. In my analysis, I include unedited quotes directly as they appear on the site. Where necessary, I briefly explain important jargon. I cite direct quotes by referring to the screen name of a person posting on the site. I chose intentionally to use the screen names, since they help to situate incels identity within discourses on the website and add to broader understandings of common incel jargon. Further, there is no identifying information associated with these and their names are publicly available and attached to their posts, so there are very few ethical limitations associated with reprinting these names. All screen names that are directly quoted in the results section of this paper are included in Appendix III.

In following with qualitative feminist research traditions, I account for my emotional responses throughout the research process in addition to theoretically informed

observations from the data described above. Kristin Blakely writes that emotionally engaged research requires researchers to ask questions that are unsettling, uneasy, and anxious; sitting with those questions allows the researcher to appropriately address responsibility and representation within their research. Taking responsibility for emotions in the research process, she writes, “involves recognition of ourselves as imperfect or as thinking and feeling, emotional researchers in imperfect contexts... Our research is and can be only partial in its outcomes, data, method, design, and setting, as well as in its understanding of the research participants and the studied subject itself” (2007: 63). Each time I visited data for this project, I took time to free write on the experience. These free-flowing, informal pieces often contained the initial thoughts that shaped my results. They also, however, often contained reflections on personal reactions to the data. Throughout the research process, I engaged with peers and advisors on what I was observing and the emotional response that those observations provoked in me. This reflection—both in isolation and in community—was critical; understanding and managing my emotional response to the data was deeply important when considering how I chose to shape my analysis and discussion. Recognizing this, I offer a research project that is rigorous, academic, and complex, and deeply intertwined with my experiences, emotions, and beliefs.

### **Personal Reflexivity**

Given the graphic, violent, and emotionally charged nature of content on incels.is I feel the need to locate myself within the research process. When I first learned about incels from a reading a New Yorker article, I was shocked, yet captivated. At the time, I was just beginning my study of Sociology and working at a global NGO specifically advocating for sexual rights and access to reproductive health care. I was a sexual

violence peer educator, with a commitment to having conversations about the role that everyone can play in eliminating violence. Incels seemed to lie at the intersection of many interests for me: gender, and masculinity in particular; sexuality; pop culture; and power and privilege. However, the beliefs they held also seemed to be in direct opposition to many of my own.

For me, accounting for this dissonance was important at every step in the research process. I am not under the impression that my own beliefs, identities, and experiences are completely separated from this study. Rather, I maintained an awareness of how my relationship to the comments that compose my data set shaped my analysis. This is not something that is unique to my experience. Kathleen Blee, in reflecting on her field work with white supremacists, writes, “the vast gulf between my beliefs and those of racist group members made intersubjective understanding nearly impossible, but it highlighted the puzzle of how they came to adopt these beliefs. So too did the unintelligibility of their worldviews pull my eye toward how someone could find these ideas plausible and reasonable” (2019: 756). In alignment with this, I recognize that my disagreement with the views shared on incels.is sparked a fascination with understanding the discourse taking place on the site. Simultaneously, however, my disagreement made sympathizing with this group laborious at best.

## FINDINGS

In my analysis, I draw on analysis from 7,767 comments posted on incel.is to explore dominant themes in discussions surrounding gender and sexuality among incels. I first point out the importance of equality sexuality to an economy, where sex functions as currency in a marketplace. As a result, incels describe different sexual classes and place themselves among the sexually poor. There are important nuances surrounding experiences for individuals in each tier of the sexual market and people who hold other social identities that I explore. Next, I shift to consider incels as an identity group. In this section, I draw attention to the qualifications that an individual must meet in order to call himself and incel. I also explore the border patrolling among members, in accordance with dominant incel ideologies. Finally, I relate incel experiences back to broader understandings of masculinity in the United States. I utilize the concept of aggrieved entitlement to explain how incels frame themselves as victims in society. Here I explain an important paradox: incels overtly reject standards of masculinity that emphasize sexual achievement, while still working to reproduce hierarchies in accordance with hegemonic masculinity. They simultaneously claim a victim status as a critical part of the incel identity, while also rejecting that status through violent masculine performance.

### **“The Literal Bottom of Society”**

Incels believe sexuality functions much like an economy. Some are at the top of the hierarchy, and therefore have the most power in the market; these people are the sexually wealthy, meaning they have the most sex and are able to choose when and with whom they have sex. Sexually wealthy men are often called “Chads.” “To be a true Chad,” says Arrogantcel, “you don’t just need to be attractive you must also have some

sort of status. Chad isn't just some pretty effeminate guy, he's also somebody with many friends, knows a lot of people, extremely confident, has a strong will, and is looked at as a "higher" person." Other men occupy the "sexual middle class" in the devised sexual market. Incels often describe men in the sexual middle class using the phrase "alpha fuck beta fuck," indicating that women will choose to first sleep with "alpha" men (those at the top, namely a Chad), and later settle for a "beta" man (those in the middle) who has money. 37YearOldVirgin explains that, "hot girls only get with ugly guys for money or status. This is hypergamy and not genuine attraction." Finally, there are those at the bottom of this sexual hierarchy. Incels place themselves in this category, and insist that they are denied access to sexuality in the marketplace. Incels often assign individuals to a position in a 10 point scale based on where their looks place them within this sexual hierarchy.

Incels insist that sexuality is monopolized by those at the top of this hierarchy, and that the gap between those at the top and those at the bottom is increasing. "Times have changed," says 37YearOldVirgin, "and in the new sexual marketplace there really IS a massively widening disparity between the sexually wealthy and the poor." Another quote by a poster with the screen name Lubricare explains that there is not only a widening sexual wealth gap in the new sexual marketplace, but that even average men may experience disadvantages: "even a normie can become incel in a sexual market like today's. With ever rising standards for men, sometimes I feel the line between normies and incels gets blurry. What was a normie 5 years ago, today could be either roping or wanking until urethra inflammation ensues." Although there exists some disagreement, incels generally agree that blurring the "line between normies and incels" has



disadvantaged all except the sexually wealthy. Blackpill101 says that, “any sub8 male is a truecel in the 2010’s+, since women all truly go for Chads and rarely give a chance to a sub8 male in looks... there’s no point in trying if you’re a sub8 male.”

Regardless of this perceived widening wealth gap and a recognition of the disadvantages that most men have because of this hierarchy, incels insist that their position at the bottom of this hierarchy is worse than any other position. The user Dispair is not articulating anything out of the ordinary when he says, “we are the downtrodden, the literal bottom of society.” Further, it is not uncommon for incels to exacerbate their perceived position in this hierarchy. In a thread titled, “[News] [Dogpill] Irish hag-whore chokes on dog cum and dies,” StoicNihillist says, “It’s still depressing to me though... women would rather fuck dogs than me.”

Race and ethnicity play an important role for incels in determining placement within this hierarchy. There is debate about what qualities are most important in determining position within the sexual hierarchy, but all incels agree that race and ethnicity ranks among the most important. One incel with the screen name Raper says, “race > face > height > frame > penis size.” Rather than challenging racialized standards of beauty, incels acknowledge and reproduce racial hierarchies in their discussions of sexuality. In some instances, the reproduction of these hierarchies is blatant.. Using an inequality expression, a poster with the screen name 13k says, “white > latino > blacks > asian > cats > dogs > a pile of horseshit > arabs > curries.” Incels adhere to a white standard of beauty, wherein whiteness is valued above all other racial and ethnic categories (despite the fact that incels.is draws men from around the world, including countries that are not predominantly white). Incels will often debate the JBW (Just Be

White)<sup>4</sup> theory in their chats. While many refute that this is even possible, let alone helpful in moving up within the sexual marketplace, they do discuss it at length, often bringing up that the advice they get from people outside of the community aligns with this theory. In response to another incel posting about race, TheGoodGuy writes, “I guess you believe in JBW and you are most likely black because blacks envy whites so fucking much and believe ‘JBW’ and then the girls will be drawn to your dick like a fucking magnet.” Incels take issue with interracial relationships, mainly because they allow for greater competition within the marketplace. TheGoodGuy elaborates on this point: “People should stick to their own races and I don't like the idea [of] blacks or ethnics being with white girls, stay with your own damn girls.”

Until this point, I have intentionally excluded women from the discussion of this sexual marketplace, since their position seems to be the most fraught with disagreements and internal contradictions. These disagreements, I believe, are because some participants describe their observations of how they think women currently function in the sexual hierarchy, while others assert their beliefs on the position women ought to hold. Beginning with the former, most incels insist that women are at the top of the sexual hierarchy because they have the power to make decisions. Essentially, incels believe that women can choose to have sex whenever they want and with whomever they want. FeminismsCancer says that this is due to biology: “I’m not PUTTING myself below women, BIOLOGY does that for me. The individual with more options and choice is obviously superior to the individual without any.” Others attribute this to social power

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<sup>4</sup> JBW (Just Be White) Theory for incels assumes that if men act or look “whiter,” then they will no longer be incels. This is more often used to poke fun at advice of non-incels than as a real solution to incelism; it is often used to dismiss advice given to non-white incels.

given to women and not to men (or at least not given to men who aren't Chads). Yoyo insists that, "women live life on celebrity mode." Dominance in the sexual marketplace is often extended to account for success in other aspects of women's lives. For example, in response to a thread titled "[NSFW] girl on reddit fucks 100+ guys before she turns 18," Hunchback explains, "In 10 years she will probably be a doctor, lawyer or maybe even an engineer, a woman with a body like that can't lose." Finally, incels often claim that women exploit their sexual positionality, intentionally excluding some men from the sexual marketplace: "almost every foid out there gets off to the suffering of men, especially incels whether they like to admit it or not," says Sgtpinkie.

When describing the place that women ought to hold in the sexual hierarchy, incels diverge from their previous descriptions. Many incels believe that sexuality should not be equivalent to status in the same way that they assume it to be true for men. In response to a post about a woman who had sex with many men, Alone75 asks, "What kind of challenge is that for a vagina monster anyway? That's like me being proud I managed to take a shit everyday." In addition to degrading women they perceive to be promiscuous, incels assert the belief that women should not have agency over their own sexuality. Existentialhack insists that "Whores should be used but not respected. She exploits her SMV [sexual market value] in order to leave an easy life." In response to both of these points, incels advocate for more control to be placed on women's sexuality, usually through means of social control. For example, Lthelthe says that, "Harlots need to be shamed. This sort of behavior shouldn't be acceptable or celebrated. It needs to be denounced." Others are more descriptive in their controlling mechanisms: "The solution (I think) is... institutional monogamy (aka 1 pussy for 1 dick. Period). And it doesn't

need to be enforced through law or force either. Only social convention and ostracism if [sic] those who deviate,” says 37YearOldVirgin. Ultimately, Incel views on women are generally summed up in an anecdote told by JewsCreatedFeminism:

Browsing through her Facebook profile, she had absolutely everything going for her. Beauty and money and she lied to her family and said she worked at a salon so she could maintain her good girl reputation. She got her cake and ate it to (which really annoyed me), everything was looking up in her life. She would constantly tell me about her vacations and all the stuff guys got her and the constant good news she got. I needed her to feel my incel pain and need to bring her down a peg.

For women, race is less critical for incels in determining position within the sexual hierarchy than it is for men. Rather, race is used as a marker for understanding sexuality and promiscuity. For example, Spicycurry says, “South Asian girls are the biggest traitors in the world. Anyone can get a south asian girl.” Further, Spicycurry also says, “Moroccan woman are some of the biggest whores on the planet. This is not [a] surprise as Morocco is used as a whore house by Saudi Arabian men.” Essentially, a woman’s race and ethnicity functions less as an indicator of position and more as an indicator of whether or not she “matters” in the first place. Incels spend a significant amount of time debating which women “matter” and come to little conclusions. Incel Scum, however, does articulate one common theme among these debates: “The only women who matter at attractive girls between the ages of 18-24... When the girls get older they look for more stable type of males.”

Incels often discuss the possibility of mobility within this sexual hierarchy. Many refer to breaking their involuntary celibacy as “ascension.” However, for most this is only something to theorize about. On the contrary, many insist that, as long as they are truly an incel (a “truecel”), ascension is impossible. Cali\_Incel insists, “There is no escaping the hell we currently reside in even if we try, if you try it will just get worse.” Some argue

that there are physical traits that can be altered in order to move up in position (a process they call “looksmxing”). However, many insist that, for truecels, looksmxing does not actually improve one’s status: “Gymcelling doesn't work. We all know that. You need good genes to succeed at gymcelling, and if you have such genes you'll never need to gymcel anyway because women will be naturally attracted you and you'd have been getting validation for as long as you were getting pubes,” says OrangeFez2311. If someone does ascend, then they must not have been a truecel to begin with; instead, many would label them a “fakecel,” or someone who claims the incel identity but is not actually an incel. In light of this lack of mobility, many incels do not mind justifying misogyny; if they cannot ever ascend, then the logic is that they might as well hate those who are at the top and who are hoarding all of the wealth. Lesbianwalrus articulates this point well: “In life, incels have a choice between being an unfuckable misogynist and being an unfuckable white knight. Regardless of your choice, your celibacy will remain intact.”

### **“It’s Not About Virginity”**

While the basic premise of being an incel is described in the name (someone who is involuntarily celibate), many discussions point out that being an incel is much more than just not having sex. UBERCEL articulates this point very bluntly: “You don't understand the meaning of INVOLUNTARILY CELIBATE. It's not about virginity.” Recognizing this complexity, there are many discussions on incels.is aiming to understand who is allowed to call themselves an incel and what it means to claim such a title.

According to the published rules of the site, women cannot claim incelism or participate in discussion on the site. Because incels believe that women are among the most sexually wealthy in society, it follows that women should be able to have sex whenever they want and, therefore, could not be *involuntarily* celibate. Not only do the rules of incels.is ban women, but many restate this rule in discussions, particularly when they suspect that a woman might be lurking on the site. For example, Bronzehawkattack says, “Femoids aren't allowed because they can't be incel. I agree with both disallowing roasties and the fact that they can't be incel.” Similarly, the rules of incels.is ban gay men from participating in discussions, nodding to the stereotype of promiscuity among gay men. “Scooby [another user] is actually gay, so not a cel,” says Dekim. This rule is often employed to patrol the borders of the website. Just as some incels might suspect that women are lurking on the website, they also may suspect that gay men are not abiding by the rules and participating in discussion. For example, in a conversation with some disagreements about incel ideology, Bronzehawkattack says, “I'm glad this thread is at least outing some of the faggots who don't belong here.”

Beyond excluding broad categories of people, the question still remains of which men allowed to call themselves an incel. One of the most important determinants of whether someone is allowed (by other participants) to participate on the site is their level of acceptance of blackpill ideologies. The “blackpill” refers to the unique beliefs held by incels; these include theories surrounding sexual markets, as described in the previous section. Bronzehawkattack explains the importance of being “blackpilled” to claiming the incel identity: “This guy and many others here believe they belong here simply because they want to go to war with the damn femoids and cucks reeeeeee, and that's literally their

only common goal with those of us who actually claim to be incel. Many aren't even blackpilled.” However, it is difficult, given the online and anonymous nature of the space, to determine who is truly blackpilled. As a result, incels develop other measures to determine whether someone is actually an incel. In this short quiz, Yoyo outlines some of the criterion that can be used to evaluate whether someone can call himself an incel, and outlines the actions someone should take based on their score:

Consider the following and add all the points. The more you get, the more subhuman you are:

- Never kissed a girl (+1)
- Never had a girlfriend (+1)
- Does not have any real life friends (+1)
- Has no hobbies or talents (+1)
- Parents dislike you / Don't talk to you (+1)
- Has been called "ugly" by another person (+2)
- Spend at least 1 hour on this forum a day (+1)
- Masturbates more than once a week (+1)
- Has attempted suicide (+2)
- Not educated / Not in Training / No Job (+1)

Add all the points up, indicate your subhumanity below with totals.

>10 Points = Extremely Subhuman. Rope Now.

Between 6-9 Points = Genetic Trash. No one likes you.

Between 3-5 Points = Below Average, could improve possibly.

Between 1-2 Points = You have hope if you just work a bit.

0 Points = Fakecel out.

The questions posed by Yoyo highlight many of the important characteristics that incels hold. Among the most important is recognizing physical difference (in Yoyo's quiz, this is represented by the question “has been called ‘ugly’ by another person”). Incels are often quick to point out that there are things about their bodies that are different from other men, and which have led to their inceldom. For example, Harvey\_Weinstein\_Here says, “FACE rules all. you either have it or you don't. Chads are not made they are born,” in reference to the fact that an “ugly” face makes someone an

incel. Robtical insists that weight, acne, facial shape, and hair are among the most important physical characteristics: “He has a lot of weight and acne to lose. If he does the nose and chin surgery, he would shoot up at least 2-3 points. His eye area and hair aren't so bad at least.” Others, like MayorOfKekville say that height is the most important physical feature: “Tall or incel. Choose one.” Still others comment on nearly every other aspect of men's bodies that can be critiqued based on culturally specific beauty standards.

While physical difference is emphasized in many discussions on incels.is, many insist that inceldom is a learned social behavior. For example, leeringlurker says that, “blaming everything on one aspect of your body is 80% cope. The biggest problem is probably what's going on in your head.” Men who hold this view insist that it is the experiences with sexuality (or lack of experiences with sexuality) early in life that make him an incel. Leeringlurker proceeds to say that, “the horrible thing about being an incel is the positive feedback loop that happens... if you don't date in HS like everyone else, you lose social skills [sic] everyone else gets... You might get better looking with age and your acne goes away, but you're still stunted socially/mentally.” For this reason, there are disputes over the age at which one can claim inceldom. CopeWithTheRope insists that men who are under 18 cannot be incels, since they have not yet graduated high school or experienced the effects of aging: “18 and undercels think they're ugly now. JFL [Just Fucking LOL]. WAIT TIL YOU START BALDING AND VISIBLY AGE FROM THE OUTSIDE. It's fucking over... if you don't use the small window of opportunity NOW.” Others, predominantly younger members, insist that they can call themselves incels, despite their age. Some return to arguments about biology, stating that many incels who are trying to exclude younger men have also said that inceldom is something passed



down through genetics. Others insist that social ostracization can start young, and men who experience it should be allowed to call themselves incels. For example, superrighteous says, “I feel like I, as a teen, should be allowed to post here considering there’s been a rumor going on since 7th grade that I fucked my dog. People avoid me like the plague.”

Incels often use mental illness as another justification for claiming membership, utilizing the fact that mental illnesses are already stigmatized. Discussions about mental illness often parallel discussions of social isolation and inexperience with sexuality because many incels assume that mental illnesses imply a lack of social skills. For example, BridgeJumper says, “Try being ugly and having schizophrenia, its JFL when incels who are only ugly try to make mental illness seem like its nothing... You can live a normal life while being ugly, you cant do that when you have a mental illness.” In many of these discussions, mental illness is used to position incels with mental illnesses (often referred to as “mentalcel”) at a lower position in society than those who are “just ugly,” implying that these men have more credibility when claiming the incel identity. Simply put, CopingGymcel says, “I’m mentally fucked AND unattractive to foids. You’re much better off if you’re mentally healthy.”

Beyond physical difference and social inexperience, it is not uncommon for incels to comment on race and ethnicity when determining the authenticity of someone’s claim to inceldom. While race and ethnicity were discussed previously as a tool used to locate someone in the sexual marketplace, they are also used to determine the ease with which someone can claim the incel identity. For example, spicycurry says, “STOP THE COPE NOW. The only ones who should be complaining about race are us curries who are

literally at the bottom of the pile.” “Curries” is often used to refer to South Asian men, who are rated among the least attractive racial and ethnic categories by incels. In this quote, spicycurry insists that South Asian men should more easily be able to claim the incel identity, simply based on their racial and ethnic identity. He explains this further by saying, “South asians are by far the most incel race. Egyptians are only ugly because some of them look like Indians. If they look more arab than they do better than the ones that look like Indians with curly hair.” Further, different standards are applied to men of different races. Penis size, for example, is a more important determinant of inceldom for black men than it is for other races, as explained by blackletcel: “penis size is pretty important for blacks, i promise you bbc hoes won’t fuck tyrone if hes not atleast avg.”

Despite so much discussion of what makes someone an incel, all of these “incel traits” are constantly disputed, and therefore often require some proof that one is truly an incel. One way to prove this is by describing the number of times someone has asked a girl on a date and been rejected. The number of “approaches” someone has completed, in conjunction with a description of the qualities that makes someone an incel, is often (but not always) enough to establish credibility. For example, when questioning someone’s incel status, Cynistic says, “I dont think you really have been rejected 2k times. If that really is the case you must be severely deformed.” Further, it is common for incels to use dating apps (most commonly Tinder) to prove their inceldom. By posting a picture of himself and receiving no matches, someone can prove that he is at the bottom of the sexual marketplace. MaxZM98 reflects on using dating apps as a way of proving his identity: “i have been gymmaxxing... if not a single girl will swipe right on tinder, it shows how doomed i am.” If an incel’s credibility comes into question, it is often cause

for other members to demand proof that someone really is an incel. If they are not able to produce sufficient evidence, then they will be shamed on the site. This dynamic occurs in a conversation between TheGoodGuy and FACEandLMS:

TheGoodGuy: I'm incel because girls don't climb into my basement and rape me. I have done 0 approaches because approaching means you're ugly. No man ever approached a woman and ended up dating her. In the history of mankind.

FACEandLMS: On a forum for men who have approached 100s of women and who would just like ONE of those women to say "OK sure, I'll go on a date with you", for you to have the audacity to think that you should be approached shows me that you are the fakecel meme that @13k and @Bagelcel talk about.

When a man is able to publicize on the site the qualities that make him an incel and establish his credibility, many admit that they find solace and even enjoy their time on the site. "Since I found this forum a few months ago," says St. Yams, "it's the friendliest place on Earth! Compared to groups that self-police and prevent you from saying what you want, it's nice to have somewhere unfiltered. Plus the fact that discussion is still so civil and the general culture of belief is pretty similar for all of us." What St. Yams disregards is the ways in which many on the site do police the spaces borders, often according to many of the attributes described throughout this section. Some suspect that gay men are using this site and attempt to ostracize them from it. Others insist that mental illness is not an excuse for someone to be an incel. Jewsel does both in the same comment: "Well, you are severe gaycel, or an extreme mentalcel. Just go to therapy and stop being this loli creepy guy and you would escape inceldom easily." Others insist that race alone does not make someone an incel. For example, spicycurry says, "Arab men can get Indonesian/Pakistani/Black girls without a problem. If you only try for white girls then you are a fakecel." If all else fails and someone is simply saying something that does not align with dominant blackpill ideology, he is often met with swift and general chastising. In response to a comment arguing that non-virgins should be

allowed on incels.is, BlkPillPres says, “Statements like this is what makes me think someone is a larp [an internet troll; someone who doesn’t belong on the site] and isn’t actually incel, because [sic] you know full well you wouldn’t like that shit as an incel.” Perhaps St. Yams is correct in recognizing that incels.is can be a supportive, open, and friendly place—but only if one buys into the dominant narratives and is able to prove that he does belong. If he does not meet enough of the criteria that makes someone an incel, if he does not reflect the ideas of the blakcpill in everything that he types, or if he is not able to establish credibility as an incel, he quickly realizes that he cannot belong on this site without changing aspects of his behavior.

### **“He’s Entitled to Compensation”**

Connecting ideas surrounding sexual hierarchies and identity construction, I aim, in this section, to piece together an understanding of incel masculinity, as articulated in comments left on incels.is. Incels, like other previously privileged groups whose status has changed in recent years, feel a sense of entitlement to the privilege that they are told they should earn simply because they are men. Incels insist that they should have access to the sexual marketplace. When they are not given access to it, they might assume that it is because of the features that they have previously identified about themselves as “incel traits.” Thus, incels reach a predicament, wherein they are told that they should have access to sexuality based on their status as men, but various features prohibit them from participating in their conceived marketplace. As a result, incels feel a sense of aggrieved entitlement, and they often express the unfairness that they perceive. “It’s ridiculous,” says SupremeG, “I should be the one next to her but because of my height, I get rejected.” Despite being a man and feeling entitled to sexuality, SupremeG feels as

though his “incel traits” (height, in this case) inhibit his ability to participate in the sexual marketplace.

This dissonance agers many of the men who post on this forum. CroMagnonBoy, for example, responds to finding out that a woman has slept with many men with anger: “FUCK THIS FUCKING BITCH I TURNED FUCKING 18 AND IM HERE ROTTING THIS IS MOTHERFUCKING BULLSHIT... LIFE IS ALL FUCKING BULLSHIT ALL OF IT.” In this quote, CroMagnonBoy is clearly frustrated and angry about his position in the sexual hierarchy, but also points out his anger towards life and society in general for being organized in a way that denies him sexuality. While anger is most often the response, some demand other forms of compensation for bad positioning that they were dealt at birth. “He’s entitled to compensation from his parents,” says Weirdcel. In response, Letting Go says that it is, “the least his parents should do for bringing him into this world against his will.” This quote indicates that incelism is somehow predestined and, if society were to be organized as it was previously, then it might have been okay. However, modern society denies them sexual access and, as a result, these incels demand other forms of compensation.

The conundrum in incel logic (where many believe that they are entitled, but denied access, to sexuality) is often followed with a claim to victimhood. If incels are unable to access something they have been told they should be able to with no problem, they must be disadvantaged by some unfair and unjust system. FuckingDed indicates that, “normies are still disenfranchised in this feminist society [like incels]. If they are aspie or autistic then their chances can be as low as incel.” Aggrieved entitlement creates an ability for incels to claim victimhood, as is evident in this quote; FuckingDed insists that

he, and other incels and normies, are disenfranchised from society. It is only the lucky few men who are able to participate fully in the sexual marketplace, and this is predetermined by genetics. Total Imbecile insists that, “if you are sub4 you get no gf [girlfriend] and if you are average you get a shot at being cuckold. Its only if you are extremely lucky and good looking that you can actually enjoy life as a man.” Total Imbecile frames victimhood as equivalent to manhood in modern society, except for the few men who are “lucky and good looking.”

Claiming victimhood then allows incels to assign blame to various external actors. “Blaming yourself,” says Kointo, “will only make your attitude worse than if you blame other people. It’ll make you hate yourself, instead of hating the people who actually put you in this situation.” While many incels do talk a lot about self-hatred, this quote is important when locating the source of incel suffering. According to men who claim this identity, it is not their own behaviors or actions that cause their disenfranchisement from society; rather, others are to blame. At times, this blame is directed generally at an unjust society. For example, Suicel responds to the simple question “how are you doing?” by saying, “Alright, I guess. Despite living in this fucks up unjust society.” This quote is emblematic of the way that many incels blame unjust social ordering as the source of their predicament. Others place blame on women. For example, TheRealChincel insists that women hold power in society, and have intentionally structured society such that incels can never succeed:

Women have the power and there are so many different ethnic groups competing that there’s no ability to organize a great social movement. Instead, you see protests over perceived racism and whitecels marching alongside them. Then there’s the convoluted consent law in colleges which leads to a lot of grey areas that can get guys in legal trouble. Everything is fear-based here. I wonder what things were like 50 years ago. It’s all about avoiding landmines and when most guys are ethnics and/or immigrants, they’re just trying to get by. The white guys are marginally better off but they’re busy trying not to get priced out.

Here, TheRealChincel points to “convoluted consent laws” as one way that women have organized society to disadvantage men. Further, he insists that these structures use fear to keep men in their subjugated place, and at times even blinds men from recognizing their disadvantages. Instead, men remain preoccupied trying to compete for a spot in the sexual marketplace before they “get priced out.”

Similarly, incels fixate on feminism as one cause of their victimhood, and are vocal about their hatred of it. Instead of blaming society as a whole or women as a subset of the population, incels may blame the ideas surrounding gender equality that feminism aims to achieve. In fact, some incels, like Lubricare, may even believe that those who hold feminist values are a part of a “femibestialist cult, aka feminism. Which is terrible and problematic.” Others, like VLÖ, claim that feminists are “people whose brains have disintegrated from years of banging their heads on the wall because some internet virgins [i.e. incels] pissed them off so much.” While disparaging the ideas asserted by feminist theories and those individuals who ascribe to them, incels take issue more with the ways that they see feminism working to restructure society. It is not uncommon to see incels theorizing about returning to a “golden age” of sexuality, where women maintained little agency over their own sexuality. They see feminism as the main agent responsible for recent changes in society. Responding to a discussion about feminists, Mainländer says that, “those people are way more fucked up than us. They think saying women shouldn’t have rights is something terrible, but that’s what every religion and uncucked civilized culture preaches throughout millenia.” Thus, incels blame restructuring brought about by feminism as one source of their plight. Some take this one step further. Not only can feminism change societal order, but it also has the possibility to erase any memory of a

time when incels might have had the opportunity to still access sexuality. Evildoer articulates this when he asks other incels to, “watch femoidists... try to rewrite the history as well.”

Incels’ victimhood is caused by their inability to establish sexual bravado, typically associated with masculinity. In response, they often use graphic and violent language in attempts to reassert masculinity. In short, as long as sexual bravado remains unattainable to incels, they can at least seek a masculine status through violence. Surprisingly, it is not uncommon for incels to frame suicide as one solution to their plight. The phrase “cope or rope” appears frequently, indicating that incels must learn to cope with their current position in society, or commit suicide. Many say that the blackpill (i.e. the incel understanding of societal structuring) is too powerful to learn about all in one sitting. Instead, according to Zod, a new member to the site must, “make sure to break the black pill into smaller chunks and digest a chunk at a time, slowly, else you’ll overdose and rope.” More commonly, however, incels insist that the only way to free themselves from their victimhood is through suicide. ToxicAlcoholSyndrome explains that his, “dreams are all really depressing and vivid, so... I’m constantly in a bad mood and know in the back of my brain, I need to rope.” This quote demonstrates the weight of understanding the incel outlook on life—the blackpill is framed as a weight that causes constant suffering, with suicide as the only escape. Importantly, suicide is not framed as an ideal solution. Instead, there are congratulations extended when an incel shares a particularly difficult situation and does not commit suicide. For example, Grotesque says, “welcome. Fellow 38 year old virgin here. Pat yourself on the back for somehow not committing suicide.” This quote confirms that suicide is not ideal, and incels believe that



they should do everything to avoid it. However, they also insist that suicide is the only way out of their situation, with many claiming that it is inevitable for all incels.

Incels are perhaps most famous in popular media for the graphic language that they use to describe violence against women. While suicide is often still framed as the only “solution” to incelism, many insist that women are deserving of violence based on their use of power to subjugate groups of men. Edgein says that, “ROPE IS NOT THE SOLUTION! THERE IS ALWAYS RAPE!,” implying that forcibly taking sexuality is one way to cope with incelism. Others frame violence against women as a form of retribution, rather than a solution to incelism. For incels, the logic follows that women are systemically denying them access to sexuality, and therefore deserve to be punished for depriving them of something that they should naturally have access to. In response to a description of a woman who has had sex with many men, a-virgin-nigger says, “that cunt deserves flaying its skin over and over and applying salt as you flay the skin, as thin as possible. then cauterize the wound and apply pain killers and adrenaline as needed to extend the torture as long as possible... until it eventually dies from a mixture of starvation and extreme pain.” This graphic imagery is clearly not an attempt to free anyone from incelism. Instead, it demonstrates anger towards women, and attempts to reassert power over women through the use of violence. A conversation between WarriorSkull and hirayama\_ronin offers one explanation for incels’ use of violence against women:

WarriorSkull: Personally, I think the blackest of all the pills is when you finally accept how much women respond to violence. They are literally wired to cum in under 2 minutes when being violently raped. They’re vacuous personalities are an adaptation to conform to what ever violent man force them to be their mate.

hirayama\_ronin: One of the reasons violence works is because it raises the stakes. Why do women play games to make their man jealous? Jealousy is a negative emotion, but it signals the man is invested in the woman. Women want to see men fighting over her

because it proves she has value. It means so much more than to stand around Mr. Nice Guy who says I love you but won't lift a finger. Violence is also emotionally charged. Like a car crash, you remember and feel violent events. Boring Mr. Nice Guy never does anything that gives Stacey the tingles, or reminds her how important she is. Every day is meh.

In these quotes, violence is not used to establish power over women. Instead, these men insist that women want to experience violence to experience pleasure or relief from boredom. While this explanation initially seems to counter a simple narrative held by many incels (that women control the sexual market, and deserve to be punished for intentionally excluding them), it does work to justify violence against women performed on this site. If women are using their power in the sexual marketplace to attract violence, then descriptions of rape and acts of gender-based violence by incels are justified. This continues to contribute to the perception that women have power over incels (and other men) in society; in this “asking for it” argument, incels see themselves as fulfilling the desires that women already have. Therefore, not only can violence be used to retaliate against women for their role in denying sexuality to incels, but it is also perceived by incels as something that women want.

Addressing the blame that incels place on society as a whole for their misery, some incels call for mass violence to be committed to those who prosper in the sexual economy. For example, iKillCucks articulates this point quite clearly when it posts “FEMSHIT AND CUCK GENOCIDE NOW.”<sup>5</sup> iKillCucks utilizes violent rhetoric aimed more generally at society to further patrol the borders of the site. For example, he proclaims, “i welcome anyone that supports the genocide of femshits and cucks. It

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<sup>5</sup> In this quote, “femshit” refers to women who identify as feminists, and may be extended to encompass all women more generally. “Cuck” refers to men who do not believe blackpill ideologies; instead, this man seeks the approval and affection from women. Incels believe that this is at the sacrifice of his dignity and self-worth. Many incels also use the word “cuck” to describe a specific situation, in which a man is in a relationship with or married to a woman. This man knows that the woman he is in a relationship with is intimate with other men, yet remains in the relationship.

doesn't matter if they are incels or not they are fellow soldiERs [sic]." Violence here becomes compulsory to adequately perform as an incel in this online space. Interestingly, this quote also demonstrates some dissonance within the community. While many are adamant that only incels should be allowed on the site, iKillCucks insists that anyone who believes in blackpill ideologies and relies on violence to enact masculine performance should be allowed to participate in discussion on this site. Despite this disagreement, there is a strongly held belief among incels.is members that general and widespread violence is acceptable, and even encouraged, as a response to their perceived societal disenfranchisement.

## CONCLUSION

I began my analysis by looking at the understandings of sexuality and the imagination of a sexual market online. Incels are quick to assign nearly everyone a place in the sexual market, and judge a person's worth based on that value. Further, incels insist that they are at the bottom of their contrived sexual hierarchy with very little opportunity for mobility. There are many ways in which this belief is troubling. First, it continues to associate sexual bravado with masculinity, and further associates appropriate masculine performance with affirming subjecthood and personhood (Pascoe 2007). While this space claims to offer refuge for men who do not fit the mold prescribed by hegemonic masculinity, it instead reinforces the idea that sexual bravado should be associated with self-worth for men. Second, incel ideas about sexual marketplaces reinforce neoliberal thoughts surrounding the commodification of daily life (Van Valkenburgh 2018). As a result, sexuality for incels is less about pleasure and more about achieving status. This allows incels to seek status through means other than sex within their insular community, while continuing to position themselves at the bottom of society in general. Third, ideas surrounding how women should behave in the sexual market contradict their experiences, causing incels to frame women as spiteful of and vengeful towards them. Incels conclude that women do not behave as they "should" in the marketplace (as a commodity to be exchanged, rather than an active sexual agent) and believe that women are intentionally denying them access to sexual capital.

Next, I explained how incelhood functions as a gendered identity and how the borders of the identity are patrolled on the site. Collective identity and group cohesion rely on internalized beliefs and shared experiences which distinguish members of the

group from non-members (Cerulo 1997; Lamont and Molnár 2002). For incels, common sexual experiences (or, rather, lack thereof) and acceptance of the incel ideologies distinguish them from the general population. From this starting point, the group establishes symbolic and social boundaries (Lamont and Molnár 2002). There are qualities that can exclude someone from membership to the incel identity and qualities that make people more easily claim it; incels patrol the borders of the site in accordance with these qualities. As such, individuals may be comfortable on the site if they “fit in,” but are often met with opposition if they do not. Critical to incel ideology is the recognition of unequally distributed power among different “men” identities. Chads (and Tyrones, the black equivalent) are given the most power in this hierarchy, while others occupy lower positions. Incels believe that they are given very little power in society, but this, too, is precarious because they also often mock the foolishness of “cucks,” or those men who are not attractive enough to maintain stable relationships with women but do not fully realize their social position. As such, these men establish power in claiming membership to the incel identity for these men.

In the final section of my analysis, I explored how men on incels.is interact with dominant masculine scripts to develop a new way of performing masculinity. Incel’s gendered performance rests on ideas of aggrieved entitlement and victimhood, and focuses on violence as a way to reassert masculinity. In light of not being able to achieve the sexual bravado that they perceive as imperative to masculine identities, these men feel a sense of aggrieved entitlement— they are unable to access sexuality in a society that shifts further towards equality in general, and offers women more sexual agency in specific (Kimmel 2013). Instead of viewing this shift as a move towards a more equitable

society, incels believe that they are victimized and unable to access an essential part of being a man—sexuality. As such, they adopt the perspective of victimhood and assign blame to genetics, women, and the organization of society in general. Incels then resort to violence in an effort to reestablish masculinity. An interesting paradox is presented in this section: incels overtly reject standards of masculinity that emphasize sexual achievement, while still covertly working to reproduce hierarchies in accordance with hegemonic masculinity. They simultaneously claim a victim status as a critical part of the incel identity, while also working to reject that status through violent masculine performance.

Although I present a rich analysis of conversations on this forum, I also note that there are several limitations to this study. First, this study pulls data from only one discussion forums where incels interact. I use a substantive data set from one website, but there may be variation in conversations when compared with other sites. Given that I only focused on one site containing discussions between incels, this study is also not generalizable to all Men's Rights Activists (although some of my findings may be helpful in understanding other groups). Second, I did not create an account on incels.is, nor did I attempt to converse or otherwise contact any men who post on the site. As a result, it is possible that I misunderstood what was being communicated in these discussions. Further, there is a significant amount of jargon that is characteristic only to this space. I used context clues and searched the web when attempting to decode this jargon, but there remains the possibility that I misunderstood the meaning of certain words and phrases. Third, I note that the social identities held by these men, ultimately, remained concealed. As a result, I use the posts on the website as my unit of analysis, rather than the incels

and their discussions. I do note, however, that there are assumptions made surrounding the identities of men posting on this site that could have limited my analysis.

In light of these limitations, this study provides ample paths for future research. First, it would be interesting to design a study with different methodology. A netnographic study, where a researcher creates an account on incels.is and participates in conversations, would provide important insight that was outside the scope of this project. Additionally, finding a way to contact men who post on this site and arrange interviews could result in a rich qualitative data set. Second, there currently exists little research detailing the similarities and differences of various groups that occupy the manosphere. Future research that compares different groups occupying the manosphere and analyzes discourses without sacrificing depth of analysis would offer an important contribution to understanding current antifeminist movements. Third, it would be interesting to compare the experiences of incels with other groups of men who hold marginalized masculinities. Although the emphasis of this research is analyzing the discourses among incels online, this framework can be applied to groups outside of the manosphere to illuminate similar patterns.

Through this study, I explore a case study to illuminate one way in which men who are unable to successfully perform masculinity still work to reproduce gender hierarchies. While still acknowledging incels' egregiousness, I present an analysis here that explores the logic of inceldom and situates it within broader sociological understandings of masculinity. In the future, these findings can be utilized to address the social and cultural forces that have led some men to believe in radicalized ideologies, such as those propagated on incels.is. Further, incels present an interesting case because

their existence as a group is only possible due to recent technological advances. On one hand, incels would not be able to congregate and develop the discourses explained here without the technology that allows men to find the manosphere. On the other hand, men often point to technological advancement as one cause of widening sexual wealth disparities. Thus, not only does this study illuminate ways in which marginalized men make sense of gendered and sexual identities, but it also demonstrates how these identities have shifted in tandem with broader social modernization efforts.



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix I. Images of The Site Used in This Study

These images are included to offer a deeper understanding of how this site is organized. This site is accessible to the general public by navigating in a web browser to incels.co. These images were captured on April 13, 2020. Importantly, the site has altered since the data for this project was collected between February and August, 2019. Most importantly, the site's address has changed from incels.is to incels.co. Despite these changes, these images offer a visual understanding of the structuring of this site that is limited by descriptions alone.

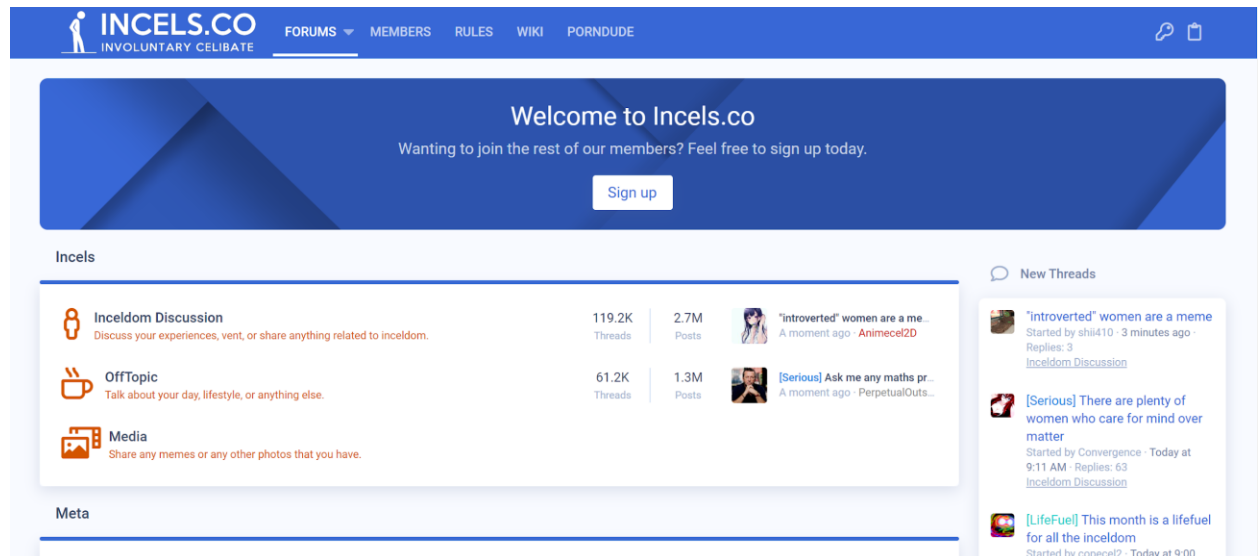


Image 1. The landing page of incels.co. All comments used in this analysis were taken from threads under the “Inceldom Discussion” tab.

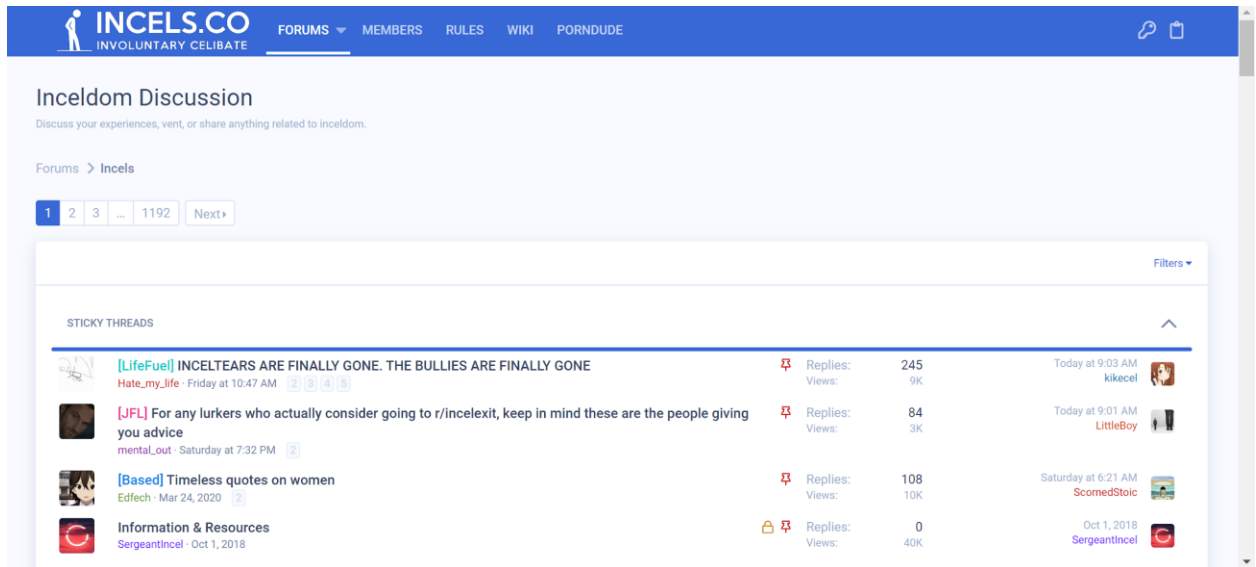


Image 2. The landing page for the “Inceldom Discussion” tab.

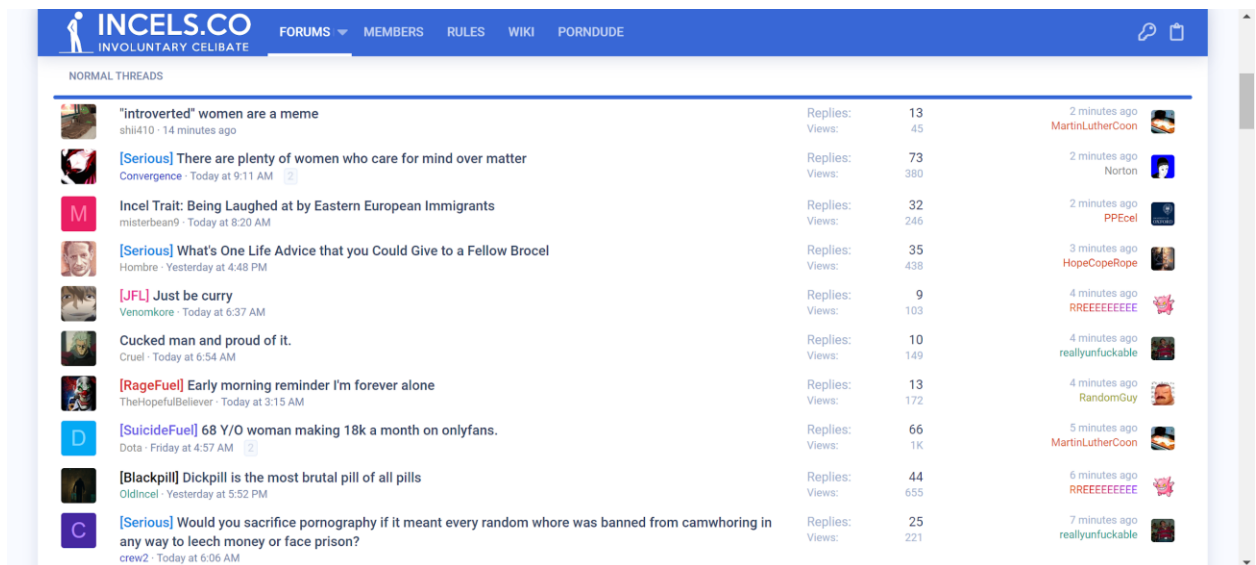





Image 3. Organization of threads within the “Inceldom Discussion” tab. Threads are organized from most recent activity to least recent activity by default.


**INCELS.CO**  
 INVOLUNTARY CELIBATE


FORUMS ▾ MEMBERS RULES WIKI PORNDUDE

### [RageFuel] Early morning reminder I'm forever alone

TheHopefulBeliever · Today at 3:15 AM

Forums > Incels > Inceldom Discussion



**TheHopefulBeliever**  
Recruit


Joined: Mar 30, 2020  
Posts: 72  
Online: 17h 36m

Today at 3:15 AM

#1

It's 4 am and I've been sitting here watching YouTube videos of incels for the last hour. Every one I watch causes unbearable pain as it serves as a reminder of what my future holds for me. According to one of the videos, when a man hits 20 and has never had a girlfriend and is a virgin, his chances of ever finding a wife or even have a girlfriend become extremely low. Well, I'm almost there while meeting both criteria. I don't see it changing either. My entire life no girl has ever liked me (yet they like to lie to and use me) and it kills me everyday. It honestly feels like I can't even breathe, like there are walls closing in around me. Life truly is miserable being ugly and pathetic, and it makes it far worse knowing it never even began.

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**Words2\_live\_bye**  
What a Shame ...


Joined: Nov 2, 2018  
Posts: 8,129  
Online: 34d 14h 18m

Today at 3:15 AM

#2

same man same

---



**ItsOver4cel**  
You're either a WinnER or a big LosER

Joined: Sep 30, 2019  
Posts: 14,201  
Online: 44d 17h 36m


Today at 3:18 AM

#3

Words2\_live\_bye said: ☹

same man same

---



Today at 3:19 AM

#4

Words2\_live\_bye said: ☹

Image 4. Organization of comments within each thread. When a user clicks on a thread, they are navigated to a page where all comments within that thread are viewable. Pages like these contain the comments that served as the unit of analysis in this study. However, there is a significant other amount of information available on these pages that is not included in this study, including screen names, short biographies, avatar images, date and time stamps for each post, and more.



Appendix II. Restructured Thematic Codes	
Code	Example Quote
<b>Sexual Hierarchies</b>	
Sexual Market (and the place of incel)	“But I do believe we're experience a sexual wealth disparity that is analogous to the actual wealth disparity that was extant in both France and Russia before their respective revolutions.” <i>37YearOldVirgin</i>
The Place of Women	“Whores should be used but not respected. She exploits her SMV [Sexual Market Value] in order to leave an easy life.” <i>existentialhack</i>
Race, Ethnicity, and the Geopolitics of Sexuality	“All curry girls in the west want a white guy but yes it still would be pretty easy for an arab guy to get a paki girl as most pakis see themselves as inferior to Arabs.” <i>Krispinwah</i>
Possibilities for Mobility	“Just go to therapy and stop being this loli creepy guy and you would escape inceldom easily” <i>Jewsel</i>
<b>Identity Construction</b>	
Importance of Physical Difference	“Height is mega cope. It's all about face.” <i>RREEEEEEEEE</i>
Importance of Marginalized Identities	<p>“I'm mentally fucked AND unattractive to foids. You're much better off if you're mentally healthy.</p> <p>Even if I had no social anxiety and could talk to foids, I would probably still be incel.” <i>CopingGymcel</i></p> <p>“Tellem has a 7/10 face but looks black and so gets nothing on Tinder.” <i>Bronzehawkattack</i></p>
Reinforcement of Foundational Beliefs	“Any sub8 male is a truecel in the 2010's+, since women all truly go for Chads and rarely give a chance to a sub8 male in looks, or even worse, a repulsive manlet like ER [Elliot Rodger] himself.” <i>Blackpill101</i>
Proof of Difference	“People said London was so multi-cultural that any black man could get laid there. A user did a Tinder experiment with @PrinceOfCope in London, who is a 8/10 looking blackcel, and he got nothing.” <i>Bronzehawkattack</i>
Border Patrolling	“What the fuck am I reading? This is absolute bullshit. I have no female friends whatsoever. One stupid asshole on here even said he SLEPT AT A FEMOID'S HOUSE.

	I FUCKING HATE THESE IDIOTS.” <i>anincelforlifelol</i>
<b>Reasserting Masculinity</b>	
Violence: Others	“I don’t even want pussy anymore, I just want a nuclear holocaust which kills very Stacy, roastie, femoid, WK [White Knight], cuck, and SJW [Social Justice Warrior] on Earth.” <i>MayorOfKekville</i>
Violence: Self	“im genetic trash and i should hire a hitman on myself.” <i>whogivesafucc</i>
Entitlement	“I TURNED FUCKING 18 AND IM HERE FUCKING ROTTING THIS IS MOTHERFUCKING BULLSHIT” <i>CroMagnonBoy</i>
Victimhood	“Femoids have ruined our lives. Modern feminism will destroy society eventually.” <i>thetruecelibate</i>

<b>Appendix III. Screen Names of Incels Quoted in Results</b>		
<i><b>“The Literal Bottom of Society”</b></i>	<i><b>“It’s Not About Virginity”</b></i>	<i><b>“He’s Entitled to Compensation”</b></i>
Arrogantcel	UBERCEL	SupremeG
37YearOldVirgin	Bronzehawkattack	CroMagnonBoy
Lubricare	Dekim	Weirdcel
Blackpill101	Yoyo	FuckingDed
Dispair	Harvey_Weinstein_Here	Total Imbecile
StoicNihillist	Robtical	Kointo
Raper	MayorOfKekville	Suicel
13k	leeringlurker	TheRealChincel
TheGoodGuy	CopeWithTheRope	Lubricare
FeminismsCancer	superrighteous	VLÖ
Yoyo	BridgeJumper	Mainländer
Hunchback	CopingGymcel	Evildoer
Sgtpinkie	spicycurry	Zod
Alone75	blackletcel	ToxicAlcoholSyndrome
Existentialhack	Cynistic	Grotesque
Lthelthe	MaxZM98	Edgein
JewsCreatedFeminism	TheGoodGuy	a-virgin-nigger
Spicycurry	FACEandLMS	WarriorSkull
Incel Scum	St. Yams	hirayama_ronin
Cali_Incel	Jewsel	iKillCucks
OrangeFez2311	BlkPillPres	
Lesbianwalrus		