

Alone Together: Exploring Community on an Incel Forum

**by
Vanja Zdjelar**

B.A. (Hons., Criminology), Simon Fraser University, 2016

B.A. (Political Science and Communication), Simon Fraser University, 2016

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Declaration of Committee

Name: Vanja Zdjelar

Degree: Master of Arts

Thesis title: Alone Together: Exploring Community on an Incel Forum

Committee: **Chair: Bryan Kinney**
Associate Professor, Criminology

Garth Davies
Supervisor
Associate Professor, Criminology

Sheri Fabian
Committee Member
University Lecturer, Criminology

David Hofmann
Examiner
Associate Professor, Sociology
University of New Brunswick

Abstract

Incels, or *involuntary celibates*, are men who are angry and frustrated at their inability to find sexual or intimate partners. This anger has repeatedly resulted in violence against women. Because incels are a relatively new phenomenon, there are many gaps in our knowledge, including how, and to what extent, incel forums function as online communities. The current study begins to fill this lacuna by qualitatively analyzing the incels.co forum to understand how community is created through online discourse. Both inductive and deductive thematic analyses were conducted on 17 threads (3400 posts). The results confirm that the incels.co forum functions as a community. Four themes in relation to community were found: *The incel brotherhood*; *We can disagree, but you're wrong*; *We are all coping here*; and *Will the real incel come forward*. The four themes elucidate that incels most often exchange informational and emotional support.

Keywords: incel; involuntary celibates; misogynist extremism; virtual community; community; support

To my Baka and Djed, for teaching us all how to love and how to survive.

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Chapter 1.

Introduction

Involuntary celibates, or incels, are generally men who are unable to find a sexual and intimate partner. This inability to find a partner and their perceived lack of desirability result in anger directed toward women as well as men who they believe are more successful. This anger has repeatedly resulted in violence against both men and women, although men are not usually the focus of the violence, most notably by Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian. Rodger, killed six people in Isla Vista, California in 2014 (Pengelly, 2017) in what he called the “Day of Retribution.” He has since been deemed to be an “incel hero” or “incel Saint” by some incels (Witt, 2020), and is the most well known individual to have committed violence in the name of the incel ideology. In his lengthy manifesto, Rodger states that the violence is revenge against those who rejected him.

My orchestration of the Day of Retribution is my attempt to do everything, in my power, to destroy everything I cannot have. All of those beautiful girls I’ve desired so much in my life, but can never have because they despise and loathe me, I will destroy. All of those popular people who live hedonistic lives of pleasure, I will destroy, because they never accepted me as one of them. I will kill them all and make them suffer, just as they have made me suffer. It is only fair. (Rodger, 2014, p. 137)

Rodgers took his own life before police were able to apprehend him.

There have also been a number of cases of incel violence in Canada. The first instance, although occurring prior to the emergence of “incels,” is a misogynistically motivated attack on women at École Polytechnique committed by Marc Lépine (Hoffman, Ware, & Shapiro, 2020). A more recent attack was committed by Alek Minassian who drove a van into pedestrians in Toronto’s downtown core (Yang & Champion-Smith, 2018). Prior to the attack, he posted on Facebook saying, “The incel Rebellion has already begun!” (Yang & Champion-Smith, 2018). Minassian was arrested by police officers and subjected to a lengthy interrogation in which he shared much of his ideological orientation, including his support for Elliot Rodger (Humphreys, 2019).

As of November 2020, the most recent incident of incel violence involved a male youth who attacked women at a massage parlour in Toronto in February 2020. This attack left one dead and two injured (Nasser, 2020). The youth, 17 years old, who has remained unnamed by authorities due to his age, was initially charged with first degree murder, but in May 2020, prosecutors laid terrorism related charges against the youth (Nasser, 2020). This incident is the first known instance of incel ideology being treated as terrorism by a state government. Notably, this incident is the first time the Canadian authorities have laid terrorism charges for non-Islamist extremist attacks.

Although Canada is the first government to label incel violence as terrorism, a number of researchers have argued for just that. For example, Hoffman et al. (2020) draw similarities between incels and other terrorist groups and phenomena such as the so-called Islamic State or ISIS and, more generally, lone-wolf terrorism. Similarly, Zimmerman, Ryan, and Duriesmith (2018) argue that incels are misogynistic right-wing terrorists. Others argue that incels should be considered a terrorist group and security concern in order for governments to efficiently and effectively respond to this threat (Tomkinson, Harper, & Attwell, 2020).

This seemingly new phenomenon appears to exist exclusively in online spaces, except for physical violence committed by some incels. Communities initially congregated on Reddit, then, after being banned on that platform, on independent forums, such as incels.co, incels.net, and looksmxing.me. These spaces arguably act as communities where those identifying as incel can interact with other like-minded individuals. Yet little is known about those spaces. To date, there are only a handful of studies focused on understanding incel forums (See Heritage & Koller, 2020; Jaki et al., 2019; Maxwell, Robinson, Williams, & Keaton, 2020; O'Malley, Holt, & Holt, 2020; Regehr, 2020). Their findings provide a thorough overview of the content discussed in incel forums including elements of incel ideology but fail to provide any further in-depth knowledge of how these groups interact online. More specifically, these studies have not addressed important questions about how, and to what extent, incel forums function as online communities. Yet research by Regehr (2020) found that individuals tend to congregate online to find community and escape loneliness.

The current study begins to fill this gap by exploring how incels build community. In order to fully understand incels, it is important to expand beyond surface level

discussions and descriptions of what incels believe in and instead focus on understanding how individuals interact in the space to create what are presumably meaningful connections. In doing so, we can begin considering how to respond to these groups and these individuals.

The current study has two research questions:

1. How is community constructed through discourse on the incels.co forum?
2. How is support, a key element of community, exchanged between members?

To answer these questions, deductive and inductive qualitative approaches were used to conduct a thematic analysis of one incel forum, incels.co. This forum is one of the most active incel forums, and thus is worthy of exploration. The first 200 posts of 17 threads (a total of 3400 posts), purposively chosen from the top 50 most popular threads on the forum at the time of data collection, were analyzed.

The thesis is organized as follows. Chapter two begins with a description of who incels are and the existing research on this group and is followed by a discussion of how community is defined. The elements of community as found in the literature are identified. Following this section, the exchange of support, a key element of community, is explored in more detail. The chapter ends with a discussion on existing research on virtual terrorism communities. Chapter three provides an overview of the methods used in this study; the process of coding and analyzing the data using thematic analysis is discussed. I pay particular attention to the role of reflexivity in qualitative research.

Chapter four includes the results and discussion begins with a general overview of the forum and how it is structured. The rest of the chapter is split into two sections: inductive results and deductive results. The inductive themes include: “the incel brotherhood,” “we can disagree, but you’re wrong,” “we are all coping here,” “the use of language as community building,” and “will the real incel come forward.” Following inductive results, deductive results are reported, which show how support is exchanged on the forum. This section also includes a discussion of the lack of social support that was evident in the data and ends with a comprehensive discussion of the results. Chapter five concludes the thesis with a discussion of the implications of the results on

our understanding of incels and our response to incels, as well as a discussion of future research.

Chapter 2.

Literature Review

Existing literature on incels and their existence in online spaces is limited. While it is accepted that incels are misogynist extremists and hold hostile views towards women, how incels are categorized within the existing extremist landscape is contested. In addition, from the extant literature, little is known about incels including how they engage with one another in online spaces and whether these spaces function as communities.

2.1. Who are Incels

The term “incel” is short for *involuntary celibate* and is used to describe those who are not sexually active but desire to be. Their celibacy is not of their own choosing, but rather, is a result of rejection. Although any individual can identify as involuntarily celibate, incels are generally men who are frustrated with their “unjust” celibacy. These male incels define the term as follows:

Incel is a sociological term that is short for involuntary celibacy, defined in academia as a common life circumstance. Inceldom is recognized as a medical disability in some countries and by the World Health Organization. The condition of being incel is a certain kind of nonsexuality.

Contrary to perceptions in the media, incel is neither a political movement nor a community/subculture, but a descriptive academic term for a gender-neutral life circumstance. Therefore, incels do not share a belief system, especially not those who do not self-identify as incels. ("Incel," 2020)

Taken from the Incels.Wiki¹, a wiki specific to incel ideology and topics created by and for incels, this definition holds that that being an incel is a status rather than an ideology,

¹ I defer to definitions within Incels.Wiki throughout this thesis. With little research about incels to draw on, the wiki acts as a primary document, one which serves as a knowledge bank for all incels. At times information from a secondary wiki, known as IncelWiki.com, is also included. This second wiki is the result of a feud between Incels.Wiki creators, in which the creators parted ways and created separate platforms. Emphasis is given to Incels.Wiki because it is linked to the incels.co forum. It is important to note however, that having been created by incels, definitions and explanations of inceldom will be biased and likely paint the group and ideology in a positive or sympathetic way.

or a cohesive group movement, subculture or community. A sociological study by Donnelly, Burgess, Anderson, Davis, and Dillard (2001), which explored involuntary celibacy over the life course, informs their position. In this study, involuntary celibacy was characterized by a six-month period of sexual inactivity, despite an individual's efforts to engage in sexual activity. The study highlighted that involuntary celibacy could occur at any life stage, and although individuals had differences in their experiences of being involuntarily celibate, they generally reported feeling frustrated about their inability to engage in sexual activity (Donnelly et al., 2001). Incels, have been known to rely on this study as proof that being an incel is a valid sociological condition.²

The existing literature focusing on incels as an extremist group describes them as men who desire a female sexual partner but are unable to find one (Hoffman et al., 2020; Zimmerman et al., 2018).³ Women are supposedly only attracted to stereotypically attractive men, referred to by incels as "Chads"⁴ (Zimmerman et al., 2018). They reason desirable women, so-called "Stacys,"⁵ find incels unattractive and undesirable (O'Malley et al., 2020). They believe less attractive women, or average women (sometimes referred to as "Beckys") ("Becky," 2020), may settle for "normies" (i.e. average looking men), or "Brads," those deemed less attractive than Chads but more attractive than normies ("Brad," 2020), but never incels. This hierarchy of physical attractiveness (based on what incels refer to as the decile scale, see Table 2.1 & Figure 2.1; "Decile",

² Within the two incel wikis, at times the entries include references to existing scientific research to support their points. Unfortunately, their interpretations of these works are not necessarily complete or accurate.

³ This definition comes from the Incels.Wiki entry "Brad" however, other entries discussing elements of the hierarchy suggest that a "high-tier normie" is called a Brad. At times, it is difficult to narrow down one single definition for terms used by incels, likely due to the collaborative nature of knowledge production among incels, particularly in a wiki space. These discrepancies may also be because incels are a heterogeneous group, with heterogeneous views.

⁴ While Chad is the most commonly used name for attractive men, incels have created a number of variations specific to various racial and ethnic identities. Some examples include: Tyrone, an attractive Black male; Chadpreet, an attractive Indian man; Chadriguez (alternatively Rico or Carlos), for an attractive Latino man and Gaston, for attractive French men. For a full list see: <https://incels.wiki/w/Chad>

⁵ Interestingly, no documented variations of the term Stacy Incels.Wiki, or incelwiki.com were found. This lack of variation may be a result of Stacy being depicted as a blonde white woman; whiteness appears to be a key characteristic of a desirable woman. This finding is not surprising, as it reflects overarching and stereotypical western beauty standards.

2020) and thus desirability is the basis upon which incels make sense of their perceived rejection by “all” women.

Interestingly, this hierarchy appears to be mostly applied to men (i.e., identifying Chads, and themselves as points on the scale), whereas women are presented more uniformly as evil, cruel and manipulative (Heritage & Koller, 2020; O’Malley et al., 2020). This conceptualization of women as the enemy, and the comparisons incels make between men, manifests as anger targeted at women in general for not choosing them, and non-incel men for successfully finding intimate partners. In their view, women control the sexual market and dating pool (Hoffman et al., 2020; O’Malley et al., 2020).

Table 2.1 The Decile System as described by Incels.Wiki

| Decile | Males | | | Females | | |
|--------|--------------------------|--------------|---------------|-----------------------------|--------------|-------------------|
| 10th | Gigachads | | | Gigastacies | | |
| 9th | Chads | | | Stacies | | |
| 8th | Chadlites | | | Stacylites | | |
| 7th | High-tier normies | | | High-tier normies | | |
| 6th | Brad meme | Male normies | Failed normie | Female normies/Beckies | | |
| 5th | Tanner meme | | | Female normies/Beckies | | |
| 4th | Low-tier normies | | | Low-tier normies | | |
| 3rd | incelish | Semicel | Failed normie | Femcelish | Femcel-lites | High-tier femcels |
| 2nd | Malecels (male inceldom) | | | Femcels (female inceldom) | | |
| 1st | Truecels (Omega male) | | | True-femcels (Omega female) | | |

Taken from: <https://incels.wiki/w/Decile>

Attractiveness Scale

The standardized approach to measuring looks.

Male

| | | |
|-----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 10 | Considered attractive by 99% of females. Square face with masculine features and hunter eyes. |  |
| 9 | Nearly a 10, but jaw isn't quite as chiseled, eyes aren't as sharp, etc... |  |
| 8 | Objectively good-looking, but looks suffer from 3 or more mild flaws. Girls call you "cute" or "handsome." |  |
| 7 | Well-above average, but women will rate you as being average. 7's suffer from at least one more major physical flaw, like this nose on the right. |  |
| 6 | "He's alright, I guess." Barely has attractive features. Not likely to be incel, but finds much more trouble dating than 7's. |  |
| 5 | Neither attractive, nor unattractive. These males will encounter significant trouble when looking for a spouse. |  |
| 4 | Only a few 4's succeed in matching with 1's or 2's. Some are called "soyboys" because they put up with cheating to get laid. |  |
| 3 | People will bully you because of your looks. Lowest possible ranking male to still have a chance to pay a prostitute to lose their virginity. |  |
| 2 | Possesses several serious flaws in facial structure. "Eww, look at that creep. I bet he's a serial killer." |  |
| 1 | Actually preferable to being a 2 or 3 because someone might pity-fuck/date you. The majority of women consider 1-3's to be subhuman. |  |

Female

| | | |
|-----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 10 | Perfectly conventionally attractive. It is impossible to fail at life. If you become homeless, a modeling scout will scoop you up in under a day. |  |
| 9 | You're still on easy-street here, but it will take you longer to get scouted than a 10. Anyone considers you to be beautiful and sexy. |  |
| 8 | You're very attractive. You will constantly be bombarded by thirsty men. Men will spend their entire life's savings to keep you in a relationship with them. |  |
| 7 | Your sexual rejection rate is 4%. Unless you are a prude, you will have at least 20 sexual partners before marrying. |  |
| 6 | People call you "pretty" and "cute." You can use your charm and above-average looks to cheese your way through a career. |  |
| 5 | Perfectly average. You are not ugly, but you aren't beautiful. You will be pursued by male 5's but will reject them in favor of a chance with an 8 or 9. |  |
| 4 | 4's are at just the right level to get with any level 5, 6, or 7 male. As a result, 4's can have dozens of sexual partners. These women ride the proverbial "cock carousel" and settle with male 5's. |  |
| 3 | The lowest you will date is a 4. You may even get with a 6. Either way, you're not ugly enough to have a limited amount of potential partners. |  |
| 2 | Marries a desperate "4" or "5" male. Has had 2-8 sexual partners before the age of 30. |  |
| 1 | Like a male 1's, you are conventionally hideous. Much like male 1's, male 6's will pity-date you. Male 4's will go for you because they have lost hope. |  |

Figure 2.1 The Visual Decile System with Descriptions as Described by Incels.Wiki

Taken From: <https://incels.wiki/w/Decile>

Scholars have stated that incels view their status as stable and unchanging (Hoffman et al., 2020). This logic is supposedly based on the fact that incels believe women, assumed to be only interested in attractive “Chads,” have excluded incels from the dating pool (Hoffman et al., 2020). This belief is a key element of the incel ideology: women are to blame for an incel’s inability to find a partner because they will always choose a more physically attractive male. As a result, incels believe that they will not be able to find a partner in the future and are said to have adopted the blackpill⁶ (Hoffman et al., 2020; Zimmerman et al., 2018). The blackpill, and the entire incel conceptualization of pills, is a nod to the blockbuster film *The Matrix* and its references to the blue or red pill, one keeping Neo plugged into the matrix, and the other unplugging him and awakening him to the real world⁷. While these incels are arguably the most angry and perhaps most likely to engage in violence, according to the Incels.Wiki, not all individuals identifying as incel subscribe to the blackpill philosophy (“Inceldom FAQ,” 2020). Hoffman et al. (2020) state that being an incel includes the acceptance of the blackpill, yet some incel spaces are considered be purplepill-ed, such as r/incelswithouthate, Incelsitan – Facebook Group, and youarenotalone.co formerly incelsistan.net (“List of incel forums,” 2020).

While the blackpill is considered a nihilistic perspective (Hoffman et al., 2020), there are other pills such as the redpill, purplepill, whitepill, and even a pinkpill. Incels.Wiki includes defines each pill as follows:

Redpill: Confronting the true pretense of an aspect of a particular thing, especially in regards to the mechanics of socialisation, in the incel contexts.

Blackpill: A fatalistic/depressed version of red pill.

Bluepill: The preference of believing in a comforting or convenient lie, especially when it concerns a person’s world view, with emphasis on the

⁶ Throughout both the literature and online discourse, there are variations in how blackpill is spelt, with variants including blackpill, black pill, and black-pill. I have chosen to use the one word variant as it is the one used within the Inecls.Wiki.

⁷ The Matrix is a 1999 blockbuster movie that depicts people unknowingly living in a world created by a computer program called the matrix. Neo, the main character, is approached by individuals who have unplugged from the matrix and are living in the dystopian and decaying real world controlled by computers. Neo is then given the choice to either take a blue pill or a red pill. The blue pill would keep Neo in the false reality of the matrix, while the red pill would unplug him and place him in the dark and dystopian actual reality of the film’s world. The concept of redpilling is often used by members of the alt-right to refer to their awakening to the “truths” of the world. (Tobias, 2019)

pretense or opinion that goes contrary to the research suggesting physical attraction is utmost in social or sexual situations.

Purplepill The stance of being neutral or on the fence with regards to gender relations; i.e. not on the manosphere side, nor on the feminist side.

Whitepill: The acceptance phase of the blackpill and therefore seeking to assimilate that knowledge to improve your life, or become a volcel per <https://incels.wiki/w/Whitepill>. The term has also been used by some to refer to the negation of the black pill i.e another form of the bluepill.

Pinkpill: The femcel version of the blackpill. A femcel's brand of philosophy. ("Incel forums term glossary," 2020)

Within this framework, Bluepill-ed individuals are those who are living in denial of so-called reality. Redpill-ed individuals are aware of the "truth," that dating is unfairly stacked against some individuals, while blackpill-ed individuals go further and accept nothing that can be done about this perceived injustice. The white pill poses an interesting additional pill; it describes those who have accepted the red pill but may still be attempting to improve their circumstances. Interestingly, other pills, such as the purplepill and pinkpill, hint at some being undecided about whether dating is skewed in favour of one group or another and to femcels or *female* involuntarily *celibates*. While femcels do exist, they are generally not accepted by male incels, particularly those who have accepted the blackpill. Although these pills are specific perspectives or philosophies, individuals may transition through pills. For example, an individual may move from accepting the blue pill to accepting the red pill and/or the blackpill. A purple pill may reflect someone who is neither blue pill no red pill but exists somewhere on the spectrum ("Purplepill," 2020). Pill jargon provides a collective terminology for quick identification of various perceptions on dating and rejection and thus the incel experience.

It is necessary to emphasize that while there are commonalities among incels, they are not a homogenous group. This heterogeneity is reflected in the various pills individuals can subscribe to within incelism, but also in their overall make up. While both men and women can theoretically identify as incels, the term has been attributed only to Incel males so far. Moreover, these men are also diverse and can be from a number of ethnic and racial backgrounds (Hoffman et al., 2020; Jaki et al., 2019); in fact, Rodger was half white and half Chinese (Rodger, 2014). The heterogeneous makeup of incels was most recently confirmed in a survey of members of incels.co conducted in

March 2020, in which approximately half of the respondents were white. Similarly, incels come from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds ("Survey results - March 2020: Incels.Co - involuntary celibate," 2020). For example, in terms of education, half completed high school, approximately 36.8 percent had completed college, and 12 percent completed graduate school. When asked about which social class they belong to, 59.3 percent self-identified as middle class, 34.3 percent identified as lower class, with the rest (6.4 percent) identifying as upper class. The forum is also diverse when it comes to age, with approximately 50 percent being between the ages of 18-25, 18 percent being 26-30 and 8.7 percent being between 31-40 with the rest being over 40 ("Survey results - March 2020: Incels.Co - involuntary celibate," 2020).

Incels exist in several spaces, including Reddit, standalone web forums, Facebook and Discord. According to Incels.Wiki, a number of active subreddits exist, including ones that cater to women (e.g. r/ForeverAloneWomen, r/trufemcels) and people who identify as transgender incels (i.e. r/trancels) ("List of incel forums," 2020). Notable subreddits include r/ForeverAlone, and r/incelsWithoutHateOutside. In addition to Reddit communities, several forums exist on separate platforms, including incels.co, incels.net, and looksmax.me (supposedly geared toward self-improvement) ("List of incel forums," 2020). There is also one well-known Facebook group, Incelistan, and at least one known Discord server (a chat app that allows for both text and audio/video calls) associated with incels.co.

Within these spaces, incel communities have consistently faced shutdowns and, as a result, have routinely moved to different platforms and spaces. For instance, incels were forced to leave Reddit for other platforms. Among the most noteworthy Reddit space was r/truecels, originally a known incel space until it was placed in "quarantine," which restricted access to the community to its members at the time, and later banned by Reddit for content that violated Reddit rules ("r/incels," 2020). Following this quarantine, incels congregated on r/incels, likely the most well-known incel subreddit. This "Reddit community" amassed approximately 40,000 members before being shut down by Reddit in November 2017 (Hauser, 2017). Following the shutdown, a number of alternative forums were created, most notably incels.co, formerly incels.is and incels.me. One last subreddit which deserves mention is r/braincels. At one time, the most popular subreddit was r/braincels, active during 2018-2019; much like other forums it was quarantined by Reddit and banned in the fall of 2019 ("r/Braincels," 2020).

Although it seems that incels are a relatively new phenomenon, incels existed online prior to the inception of r/trucel. The term incel was first used by a woman named Alanna, who created Alanna's Involuntary Celibacy Project, a website and mail list in late 1997 (Taylor, 2018). Using this platform to post about involuntary celibacy and her research on the topic, she created a supportive network for lonely individuals who were socially awkward and had trouble dating. This space then became a forum that included both men and women of a variety of sexual orientations (Taylor, 2018). She is quoted saying: "There was probably a bit of anger and some men were a bit clueless about how women are unique, individual humans, but in general it was a supportive place" (Taylor, 2018). Alanna stopped participating in this incel community by 2000; however, the term incel survived, and was taken over by the incels we know today.

There is evidence that violence motivated by misogyny and reminiscent of incel ideology existed prior to Elliot Rodger. Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian are key examples of attackers with a clear incel motivation, but Hofmann et al. (2020) identify a number of others. First, the authors claim that there are those who had mixed motivations, but in which incel ideology played some role. These individuals referenced being socially isolated prior to their attack and expressed support for incel ideology or Elliot Rodger, such as Nikolas Cruz, who killed 17 people in the Parkland School Shooting in February 2018. Hoffman et al. (2020) reference other individuals who self-identified as involuntarily celibates, although not incel, including Sheldon Bentley, who murdered a man in Edmonton in July 2016. Lastly, they also identify misogyny as a factor in historical acts of violence, which they call "Ex postfacto inceldom." For example, although not an incel in name, Marc Lépine, who murdered 14 women at Ecole Polytechnique de Montreal in 1989, shows evidence of the same misogynist extremist ideology (Hoffman et al., 2020). These ex postfacto inceldom cases share similarities in that individuals often experienced rejection by both women and society (Hoffman et al., 2020).

2.2. Existing Research on Incels

Existing empirical research on incels is limited. There are a number of theoretical pieces (see Hoffman et al., 2020; Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Ging 2019; Zimmerman et al., 2018) and a handful of articles specific to understanding individual attackers (see Baele, Brace, & Coan, 2019; Williams & Arntfield, 2020). Research on incels in more

mainstream social media spaces is also limited. One study showed that the number of incels has been rapidly growing on YouTube, and that YouTube acts as a platform that allows the ideology to be shared with a larger audience (Papadamou et al., 2020). The presence of incel-related YouTube videos is not only rapidly escalating, but the probability that someone will come across an incel-related YouTube video was found to be “non-negligible” (Papadamou et al., 2020). They estimated a “20.9% chance of a user who starts by watching non incel-related videos to be recommended incel-related ones within 5 recommendations” (Papadamou et al., 2020, p. 10). Therefore, incel ideology is quite accessible to a sizeable proportion of the public. Relatedly, and perhaps more disturbingly, researchers who focused on understanding the level of incel sentiment in the general population found aspects of what the researchers deemed “incel traits” present in a general population of men (Scaptura & Boyle, 2019).

As of November 2020, only a handful of published studies have empirically explored incel activity in online forums (Heritage & Koller, 2020; Jaki et al., 2019; Maxwell et al., 2020; O’Malley et al., 2020; Regehr, 2020). These studies consistently found misogynistic language (Heritage & Koller, 2020; Jaki et al., 2019) that often described women as evil and harmful (Heritage & Koller, 2020; Maxwell et al., 2020; O’Malley et al., 2020). In addition, O’Malley et al. (2020) found that women were often described as “less evolved” as well as childish and manipulative (p. 13). Within the forums, incel members often discussed so-called “Chads,” and believed that being more like a so-called Chad would be better, but also simultaneously expressed anger at them (Maxwell et al., 2020). Chad is thus both an ideal and an enemy as incels are reported to believe that their inability to find a partner was a direct result of their physical appearance (Maxwell et al., 2020; O’Malley et al., 2020; Regehr, 2020); they view themselves as the bottom of a hierarchy of men based on appearance (Heritage & Koller, 2020).

More specifically, Maxwell et al. (2020) analyzed r/braincells, prior to it being banned from Reddit, and found that a common discussion was what women are and what they want; women were said to want “chads” with money to ‘take care of them,’ yet they were also hypersexualized individuals who want to have “sex with anyone” (Maxwell et al., 2020, p. 7). In addition, incels perceived women to treat them differently from how they would treat Chads, suggesting that women hold a double standard. The findings also showed that incels wanted to find a female partner, but that they also

reported certain standards, saying that women they perceived to be unattractive (examples provided including women they perceived as fat and or ugly) were not worthy of dating (Maxwell et al., 2020). Yet, although they did not appear to want to date just any women, incels believed that women could not be involuntarily celibate themselves; instead, women voluntarily chose not to date certain men (Maxwell et al., 2020). This paradox positions all single women as responsible for being single, and yet these same women were deemed to be undesirable by incels.

Incels have also both been described and have described themselves as isolated individuals who have been rejected, bullied, and are generally misunderstood by society (Maxwell et al., 2020; Regehr, 2020). They believed they are excluded from society because of their looks (Regehr, 2020) and argue that “normies” could never understand the incel experience (Maxwell et al., 2020). As a result, incels come together in an effort to escape loneliness and find community (Regehr, 2020). Within the forum, they are exposed to blackpill ideology, which the forum reinforces because it acts as an echo chamber of radical thoughts (Regehr, 2020). Because the blackpill is a nihilistic perspective, it is not surprising that Maxwell et al. (2020) found that many incels believed being an incel was permanent, suggesting that those who manage to leave incelhood were never “real” incels to begin with. Similarly, in Regehr’s (2020) study, participants reported that forums often encouraged engagement with members and the ideology, while discouraging incels from leaving the forum ; interaction with individuals outside the incel community was opposed.

One of the first studies on incel forums was conducted by Jaki et al. (2019). Researchers conducted a textual analysis of incels.me, now incels.co, which used an automatic modeling technique to estimate the demographic composition of forum members (Jaki et al., 2019). Their findings indicated that users on incels.me were under 25, who experience isolation and social anxiety or inhibition, and were categorized as “negative” individuals suffering as a result of being an incel. This research is consistent with Regehr’s (2020) more recent work that found that some incels experienced mental health problems and low self-esteem. Likely as a result of their low self-esteem, incels engaged in self-pity and shared feelings of hopelessness (Jaki et al., 2019). Notably, there was “no definitive evidence that incels.me users are predominantly white, contrary to what is often reported about incels” (Jaki et al., 2019, p. 18). Jaki and colleagues (2019) characterized their incels in their sample as having a “lack of stable personality

as a long term result of physical and mental flaws” and success in one’s life (multiple incels seem to be unemployed)” (p. 20). Unsurprisingly, misogyny and antifeminism were rampant within the forum; however, misogynist or hateful language, although frequent, was posted by only 10% of the users in the sample (Jaki, et al. 2019), suggesting that not all members on the forum are hateful to the same degree, once again highlighting the heterogeneity of the group. Furthermore, not all forum users hated women. Instead, responses to a poll created by forum users that asks if members hate all women show that individuals are about evenly split in their responses; “about 55% [...] answer positively, while about 45% [...] answer negatively” (Jaki et al., 2019, p. 13). One member was quoted saying, “I don’t hate all women. And I believe that most brothers on the Forum also don’t hate them all. We hate the situation we are in” (Jaki et al., 2019, p. 13). Jaki and his colleagues were also able to identify that threats of violence, although present in the forum in approximately 24% of their sample, represented a small amount of the overall number of threads and posts on the forum. It is unclear from this work, and the lack of additional data and literature, how large of a violent threat incels pose.

Incels have the potential to be dangerous, as is apparent from past incel related or incel inspired attacks; however, the extent to which incels as a whole are dangerous is not fully understood. Research by O’Malley et al. (2020) shows that on forums, violence is legitimized. They report that members “made comments encouraging and justifying violence against women” (O’Malley, et al., 2020. p.7). Further, references to going “ER” (i.e. Elliot Rodger) and prior school shooters being heroes (O’Malley et al., 2020), and the martyrization of these individuals (Hoffman et al., 2020; Regehr, 2020), suggest that violence is at best not frowned upon and at worst encouraged. O’Malley et al. (2020) reported that some members wanted to ‘get revenge’; they quote one poster who says:

I really want to kill this whore. I would punch her in her face over and over again and force her to say this phrase over and over again: “Teehee you are not entitled to this, but I am entitled to anything, now rot.” I will make her rot in hell for sure. I will turn her life into a living hell. (p. 18)

This type of language and the references to women being deserving are similar to those of other attackers, such as Elliot Rodger. Regehr (2020) argues that these types of messages normalize the ideologies, and through increased engagement in the forums,

these “ideologies are solidified by the Internet’s echo chamber effect” (p. 15). This normalization results in indoctrination, which promotes violence, which is then shared on the forum, praised, and contributes to further radicalization (Regehr, 2020). Finally, given that Hoffman et al. (2020) draws parallels between incels and other terrorist groups, suggesting that the potential for future violence is non-negligible.

2.3. Are Incels Terrorists

In light of incels being a seemingly new phenomenon, there has yet to be consensus or detail on who incels are and how best to characterize them. Instead, researchers, law enforcement, and government officials have drawn their own conclusions based upon what little published work exists. Early work situated incels within a larger “manosphere” or network of misogynist men’s rights activists, pick up artists, and other red pill men (Ging, 2019; A. Marwick & Lewis, 2017; A. E. Marwick & Caplan, 2018). Men who have accepted the red pill believe they have uncovered a reality that others have not, a reality in which society generally and women specifically are biased against them (Ging, 2019; Hoffman et al., 2020; O’Malley et al., 2020). This network has a collective understanding that feminism is problematic and that men must be freed from its constraints. While some in this incel space take on a more antagonistic view, fighting for the liberation of men (e.g. men’s rights activists), incels take on a language of “victimhood and aggrieved entitlement” (Kimmel, 2015 as cited in Ging, 2019, p. 3). This victimhood is evident in other work that showed that incels view themselves as oppressed (O’Malley et al., 2020) and engaged in self-pity (Jaki et al., 2019). In addition to connecting incels to the manosphere, Ging (2019) argues that incels encompass the “geek and gamer elements of the men’s rights community” (p.13), although no evidence is provided to substantiate this statement. While it is true that many incels may play video games, that gamers are stereotypically thought to be isolated loners, and that there is some overlap between terms incels use and terms gamers use, the assumption that incels are made up of geeks and gamers does not appear to be grounded in any concrete evidence.

While some researchers have argued that incels should be considered terrorists (Hoffman et al., 2020; Tomkinson et al., 2020; Zimmerman et al., 2018), others have argued that incels cannot fit within our current conceptualization of terrorism (Williams & Arntfield, 2020). For example, Williams and Arntfield (2020) suggest that incels are like

other sexual murderers. They conclude that in instances of incel violence, the violent actor is experiencing sex negativity “where they believe that as White males, they are entitled to the sexual and romantic relationships that they desire” (Williams & Arntfield, 2020, p. 40). They highlight that this violence is akin to that of other sexual murderers but that incels do not engage in rape prior to murder, which would normally be present in incidents of sexual murder. Williams and Arntfield (2020) stand alone in their argument, as terrorism scholars draw similarities between incels and terrorists.

On the surface, incels can be considered terrorists given the standard state definitions of terrorism. Within the American context, incel violence can be considered terrorism under the US State Department definition of terrorism (Zimmerman et al., 2018). The U.S. State Department defines terrorism as “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents,” and incels meet this definition (Zimmerman et al., 2018, p. 2). In Canada, prosecutors for the Canadian government recently charged an individual with terrorism related charges, furthering the understanding that violence committed by incels is terrorism. In addition to state definitions of terrorism, Hoffman and his colleagues (2020) provide a compelling argument that incels are terrorists by comparing incel violence to other terrorist groups.

Hoffman et al. (2020) state that, although not inherently political like traditional terrorist groups, incels do have a similar drive – large-scale societal change. In their work, they compare incels to other terrorists, including the so-called Islamic State or ISIS, and find several similarities. First, much like other terrorist groups, incels both exist and recruit online (Hoffman et al., 2020). Second, they argue that incels are learning from other terrorist groups about how to use violence. For example, Alek Minassian drove a box van into pedestrians on a busy Toronto street, which is similar to attacks committed by individuals in the name of ISIS. In addition, much like ISIS and other Jihadist extremists, incels glorify violence and the attackers, such as Minassian and Rodger who have both have been deemed martyrs and heroes (Hoffman et al., 2020). Most attackers have also died by suicide during or following their violent attacks – with some dying by suicide as a result of interactions with police. Lastly, both ISIS and right-wing extremist groups, also focus on recruiting and radicalizing vulnerable people based on their insecurities (Hoffman et al., 2020).

Although researchers have made connections between incels and radical right-wing extremist ideology, these connections are dubious. Hoffman et al. (2020) point to examples from Elliot Rodger who espoused racist sentiment in his manifesto. Similarly, they point to racism found in online interactions and the use of terms such as ricecels for Asian incels and currycels for Indian incels used in the forum (among others). They also state that incels have been known to share antisemitic views (Hoffman et al., 2020). However, the arguments presented by Hoffman et al. (2020) are predominantly based on cases involving extremist violence, which represents only a small fraction of incels. Their analysis does not necessarily extend to incels generally; it is uncertain to what degree non-violent incels may hold right-wing extremist views. Likewise, Zimmerman et al. (2018) suggest that incels are connected to white supremacy and right-wing extremism. They claim that incels holds a “violent and political ideology based on a new wave of misogyny and white supremacy” (Zimmerman, et. al., 2018 p. 1) and seek to reverse the advancement of feminism which they feel persecuted by. Unfortunately, Zimmerman and her colleagues (2018) also provide no evidence to substantiate their claim and although they acknowledge that not all incels are white supremacists, they highlight that shared among both incels and white supremacists is a similar view on gender. Recent work by Mudde (2019), however, makes a distinction between general sexism and hostile sexism. While right-wing extremists, in general, are known to have traditional views on women’s roles (e.g. as caregivers), incels and some right-wing extremists, including the alt-right specifically, show additional hostility towards women (Mudde, 2019). Indeed, both the alt-right and incels have hostile views on women’s rights (Hoffman et al., 2020; Mudde, 2019), while older virtual communities such as Stormfront include discussions against feminism (De Koster & Houtman, 2008).

For each of these arguments connecting incels to right-wing extremism, little evidence is provided to substantiate these statements. In fact, these claims stand contrary to Jaki and colleagues’ findings, which showed that while the presence of language reflective of right-wing extremism existed in the incels.me forum, its occurrence was not a consistent pattern (Jaki et al., 2019). Given these findings, it remains unclear to what extent right-wing extremism plays a role in incel ideology. While those who commit violence have shown right-wing extremist sentiment, it may be that this is characteristic of only those who commit violence rather than incels in general. In

addition, the degree to which some incels may simply be racists rather than committed right-wing extremists is also unknown.

Although it is understandable that there has yet to be a consensus on how to characterize them, incels themselves argue that they are neither a “group, ideology, subculture, organization, community or movement” (“Inceldom FAQ,” 2020). They maintain that they believe that being involuntary celibate is a life condition; “an analogy many incels often find elucidating would be comparing the state of lifelong inceldom to other common adverse life circumstances, such as poverty” (“Main Page,” 2020). This analogy is troublesome given that poverty is not necessarily a permanent status. Yet there are those who adopt the blackpill ideology and believe that people cannot “leave inceldom.” Perhaps accepting the blackpill is actually characteristic of internalizing the status as a core component of their identity. Conceptualizing inceldom as a “status” is thus of questionable utility.

2.4. Community

Incels congregate in online spaces, yet little is known about what occurs in these spaces. Recent work by Regehr (2020) highlights that incels experience rejection (both from women and society in general) and are simply looking for community. In her study she quotes an individual who states that “a lot of it’s also like community, they don’t have enough community and they’re missing that community” (Regehr, 2020, p. 7). This same individual goes on to say

Incels would be missing community, especially the forever alone, they call them *forever alone* ls that don’t have any friends either, or social circles, like I was. They would have no community. So they’re seeking a community. So they would find a community with other incels and they would . . . they would gravitate towards that, and like a moth to the flame they would be drawn to that. (Regehr, 2020, p. 15)

For some incels, these forums act as a support system, a place where they can be themselves, share experiences and find support. To date, no studies specifically address whether incels build community and, more specifically, whether incels.co functions as a community space; this study addresses part of that gap.

A community is a group of individuals unified by some commonality, whether it be a shared interest, shared location, or shared belief system. While traditionally community

was bound to location (Coyle, 1941; Queen, 1922), Benedict Anderson's (1983) work on nationalism expanded the definition and created what he called "imagined communities." In these imagined communities individuals may never meet, but have a commonality or a common tie to one another and are thus understand themselves to be a community (Anderson, 1983). In his view, "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact [...] are imagined" (Anderson, 1983, p. 18). Community then is less about being bound by a physical space, and instead more about feelings of connectedness. Virtual communities are imagined communities. While one may never meet members of said "community" or group, one can still feel as though they are a part of it based on their shared commonality.

Definitions of virtual community echo Anderson's conceptualization. Although virtual communities are bound by virtual spaces, these communities exist in the minds of their members. Therefore, although individuals do not physically meet, they engage in consistent communication with other people. An often-cited definition of virtual community comes from Howard Rheingold, who states that:

Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace. (Rheingold, 1994, p. 5)

Similarly, Amitai Etzioni defines community, more generally, as having two elements.

communities are social entities that have two elements. One, a web of affect-laden relationships among a group of individuals, relationships that often crisscross and reinforce one another [...] The other, a measure of commitment to a set of shared values, norms, and meanings, and a shared history and identity—in short, to a particular culture. (Etzioni, 1996, p. 127)

In a later work, he extends this definition to virtual communities as well as offline communities (Etzioni, 2003). In both definitions, the key to a virtual community is sufficient human feeling and affect-laden relationships – or emotional and meaningful connection. In each case, virtual communities are about interactions with others in an effort to build relationships.

While some have argued that community cannot be created online, others believe that if we reconceptualize community in the ways of Anderson, Etzioni and Rheingold, virtual community is not only possible but a natural transition from earlier

forms. Fernback (1999) similarly stresses that community has a symbolic form. She argues that since reality is socially constructed, and given that Anderson characterizes community as imagined, “if we log on, form relationships in cyberspace, and believe we have found community, it is real for us” (p. 213). Therefore, a real community is defined by individuals, regardless of the space in which it occurs. As Fernback (1999) asserts, “there is a there there” (p. 218).

Fernback (2007) has since asserted that the word community is meaningless, is applied to any grouping of people and is used as a marketing or political tool. As a result, she argues that studies of online spaces should not be focused on whether the space has elements of community and instead should focus on the level of commitment individuals have to the “community” they are engaged with as she found that traditional elements of community may not be present online (Fernback, 2007). Instead, commitment to the group is a key and desired element of community both online and offline. She claims that “if scholars continue to paint internet studies with the broad brush of community, they dilute the potential of the research to understand how online communities are constituted, how they operate, how they are integrated into offline social life, or what they provide” (Fernback, 2007, p. 6). Although Fernback (2007) argues that community should be studied through people not content, doing so is not always feasible, as is the case in the current study. The data available do not lend itself for empirical evaluation in the way Fernback proposes. Further, access to deviant subgroups such as incels is limited, leaving few options for empirical validation as of yet. Consequently, the current study focuses on understanding community within incels.co through the elements of community, as elements of community can be found in discourse between members.

2.4.1. Sense of community

One way to understand community is to understand sense of community. Originally proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986), sense of community is composed of four elements: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. First, membership refers to boundaries that delineate who are members of the community and who are not. Within this element, McMillan and Chavis (1986) include five attributes “boundaries, emotional safety, a sense of belonging and identification, personal investment, and a common symbol system” (p.11). The use of a

common symbol system such as language to help establish and fortify who is a group member and who is not. McMillan and Chavis (1986) argue by maintaining membership boundaries group, members allow for feelings of safety and trust. These feelings result in the exchange of vulnerable information; he refers to this as “emotional safety and security”. This safety and security provide protection from non-members. A second element of community is influence, which refers to the ability for individuals to have an impact or “influence” the community and for this community to affected the individual. McMillan and Chavis (1986) refer to the element as “a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members” (p. 9). Members must believe that they can affect the community and its activities, but the group must also be able to affect individual members. A group's ability to affect or change members allows for the creation of a united identity.

The third component, integration and the fulfilment of needs, or reinforcement, comes from a number of places, although McMillan and Chavis (1986) stress that membership within the group with shared values is key. They state that:

When people who share values come together, they find that they have similar needs, priorities, and goals, thus fostering the belief that in joining together they might be better able to satisfy these needs and obtain the reinforcement they seek. (McMillan and Chavis, 1986, p. 13)

Having shared values and thus shared needs means that the community has the ability to respond to those needs. The last element, a shared emotional connection, includes a shared history. Members of the group will identify with a shared history and can see that shared history continuing through regular interaction. McMillan and Chavis (1986) argue that “strong communities are those that offer members positive ways to interact, important events to share and ways to resolve them positively, opportunities to honor members, opportunities to invest in the community, and opportunities to experience a spiritual bond among members” (p. 14). An established sense of community is a result of these four dimensions and their elements coming together.

A newer, more specific model for sense of virtual community has been proposed by Blanchard and Markus (2004), Blanchard and Markus (2004) hold that virtual communities are different than their non-virtual counterparts, and thus that community is experienced differently. Their model includes recognition of members, exchange of

support, attachment obligation, identification of self and of others, and relationships with specific members. First, recognition of members refers to the ability of members to recognize and remember usernames. Next, identification refers to members being able to remember who other members are, their beliefs and experiences. Identification also refers to members' needs to individuate from the group. Unlike McMillan and Chavis (1986) who argue for cohesion within the group, Blanchard and Markus (2004) posit that in virtual community members must create a unique personal identity. They reason that members create unique identities in order to be distinct from the community, which tends to be based on anonymity (Blanchard & Markus, 2004). A sense of virtual community is also created through relationships with individual members as well as attachment obligation. Attachment obligation refers to obligation felt by individual members to post and engage in the community. The final element is the exchange of support, including both informational and emotional support. Blanchard and Markus (2004) state that "exchanging informational and emotional support is the impetus for community formation. But members must trust the support they receive, and trust requires belief in the support-givers identities" (p. 76). In their work, the elements of community, recognizing and knowing members as well as creating a unique identity within the group, coupled with an obligation or commitment to post, work together to create trust and ultimately a sense of community. Therefore, although there may be evidence of community building behaviours and components, without feelings of trust there is not necessarily a sense of community.

While both sense of community and sense of virtual community are ways to understand feelings of belonging to a group, one set of researchers assessed the presence of these element using a qualitative content analysis rather than direct conversation with individual. Lizzo and Liechty (2020) conducted a netnography (an internet ethnography) to determine whether a sense of community exists in an online running club community. They used McMillan and Chavis's (1986) four dimensions of sense of community to code the community's posts and found evidence of the four elements within their sample (Lizzo & Liechty, 2020). In their study, community was seen in the use of a common language and shared symbols, they had a shared history and consistent posting patterns, they exchanged support and thus show an emotional connection. They also exercised influence as a group, by asking members to participate in making group decisions (Lizzo & Liechty, 2020).

While determining sense of community may be accomplished through talking with community members, conceptualizing sense of community as elements of community building visible in discourse allows researchers to explore forum or community content for the presence of these elements. Community may be felt by individuals, but evidence of community building behaviours should be present in interactions within the community and thus would be identifiable by an outsider. As such, although the current study cannot definitively say that individuals experience a sense of community on incels.co, elements of community may be present.

2.4.2. Support

A key component of community, and particularly *sense* of community, is the exchange of support between members. While Blanchard and Markus (2004) mention only informational and emotional support, studies focused on understanding what types of social support and how social support is exchanged in virtual spaces consistently use conceptualizations of social support offered by Cutrona and Russell (1990) and Cutrona and Suhr (1992). Cutrona and Russell (1990) conceptualize social support as having five dimensions: emotional support, network support, esteem support, tangible support, and informational support. Cutrona and Suhr (1992) provide further details on each type of support.

Information [al support] includes advice (“I think you should tell your supervisor”); factual input (“If you don’t treat the infection quickly, it will get worse”); and feedback on actions (“You shouldn’t have told her so bluntly”). Tangible aid includes offers to provide needed goods (e.g. money, food books) and services (e.g. baby-sitting, transportation, housework). [...] Emotional support includes expressions of caring (“I love you”), concern (“Are you feeling better?”), empathy (“You must have been really hurt by his coldness”), and sympathy (“I’m so sorry you’re upset”). Network support entails a sense of belonging among people with similar interests and concerns (“We’d like you to join our support group”). [...] esteem support refers to expressions of regard for one’s skills and abilities (“I know you’ll do a good job”) and intrinsic value (“Losing your job doesn’t mean you’re worthless”). (p. 155)

These definitions are in line with Cutrona and Russell’s (1990) conceptualization but provide additional examples which aid understanding what encompasses each type of support.

Studies focusing on understanding the types of support given and received by individuals in online spaces reveal that not all types of support are used equally. Consistently, members of online communities share informational and emotional support most often (Braithwaite, Waldron, & Finn, 1999; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Eichhorn, 2008; Evans, Donelle, & Hume-Loveland, 2012; Haverfield, Leustek, & Timko, 2018; Rains, Peterson, & Wright, 2015). Less likely are esteem and network support, while the least offered was tangible support. It is unsurprising that tangible support would be least likely to be offered. Given that individuals engaging in virtual spaces may not be in close physical contact, providing services is likely not possible. Providing resources may also be difficult given the potential distance between people. The likelihood of providing money to an individual in need may also be mediated by the closeness, or lack thereof, of that particular relationship.

2.5. Existing deviant communities online

Many groups have been known to meet and create communities online. This includes a variety of health support communities. For example, communities have been developed by those who are suffering from diabetes (Litchman, Rothwell, & Edelman, 2018), those who are suffering from postpartum depression (Evans et al., 2012). In these communities' individuals can meet and exchange information for how to best manage the disease and emotional support to help individuals cope with the psychological problems. Deviant online communities also exist, including eating disorder support communities. In these communities, individuals are looking for support in their eating disorder, but not necessarily support in overcoming the disorder itself (Eichhorn, 2008). For example, in one pro-anorexia (or pro-anna) community, members met and shared tips on maintaining their weight or weight loss, continuing their behaviour (Brotsky & Giles, 2007). Similarly, Eichhorn (2008) also found that individuals shared informational support more often than other types of support as identified by Cutrona and colleagues. In these groups, members encouraged each other to continue to engage in harmful behaviours and to adopt more extreme behaviours (Boero & Pascoe, 2012; Brotsky & Giles, 2007). Membership within the community included providing evidence that they are serious in their commitment to anorexia (Boero & Pascoe, 2012).

More elicited groups, also create virtual communities. For example, individuals engaging in zoophilia have been known to congregate online. Within these communities,

individuals find a space to engage with like-minded individuals while simultaneously avoiding reactions from outsiders (Maratea, 2011). Maratea (2011) found that within the online zoophilia community, members engaged in neutralizations to justify or legitimize their deviant activity. The study showed that individuals use traditional neutralization techniques proposed by Sykes and Matza (1957), but also identified additional themes. The themes included the use of: “denial of injury, justification by comparison, claims of benefit, and condemning of condemners,” as well as “appeals to enlightenment, neutralization by comparison, and claims of cultural diffusion” (Maratea, 2011 p. 927). By joining the group, individuals are able to mitigate their experiences of hostility from outsiders.

Although there have been a number of studies about terrorist groups’ use of the internet (see Conway, 2016; 2017), only a handful explore terrorist groups in virtual spaces as communities. Most notably, Bowman-Grieve’s (2009) work characterizes Stormfront, a prominent right-wing extremist forum, as a community. Through a qualitative analysis of forum posts, Bowman-Grieve (2009) showed that members engaging in the forum do so in a conversational, respectful way that allows members to share their perceived grievances and experiences. Respect was maintained by both posters and moderators who are able to enforce rules as well as through peer monitoring. In doing so, members were able to engage with each other, exchange emotional responses and support, as well as information and knowledge about the ideology. One key characteristic of knowledge sharing in this group included the transfer of knowledge from older members to newer members; Bowman-Grieve (2009) draws parallels between this and (2003) work, suggesting that this transfer of knowledge from older to younger members encourages the formation of a community of practice. Members of Stormfront also regularly debated the ideology (Bowman-Grieve, 2009). Their conversations demonstrate that right-wing extremism is both a part of their online world, but also their offline world, as such members are able to discuss the role of right-wing extremist ideology in all parts of their lives (Bowman-Grieve, 2009). Individuals were also encouraged to act on and incorporate ideology into their daily lives; members encouraged each other to “awaken” the public to the “truth” as they see it and provided information on how best to do so. Through engagement, it was evident that members created relationships and that members do know details about each other, their lives, and their beliefs. This study ultimately shows that Stormfront is a community.

Similarly, De Koster and Houtman (2008) explored whether members of Stormfront experienced a sense of virtual community. Through semi-structured interviews and a qualitative analysis of forum posts, the authors found that some members felt a sense of community from engaging with others on Stormfront. They use Blanchard and Markus (2004) sense of community behaviours, as well as virtual community as defined by Etzioni, and sense of community as described by McMillan and Chavis, to show that Stormfront has both elements of a community and that members experience a sense of community online. More specifically, members who experienced offline stigmatization and rejection because of their ideology were more likely to experience feeling a sense of community than members who did not (De Koster & Houtman, 2008). Stormfront was said to have distinct rules and norms as well as a shared history and identity, a key component of community. In addition, members of the forum included emotional exchanges that, together with other aspects, created a sense of belonging (De Koster & Houtman, 2008).

Unfortunately, little is known about how incels create community and whether there are elements of community behaviours present online. The current study attempts to fill this gap, and relies on research on community by Blanchard and Markus (2004) and McMillan and Chavis (1986), as well as research on social support by Cutrona and Russell (1990) and Cutrona and Suhr (1992), to understand whether there are elements of community present in the incels.co forum as well as how support is exchanged. The following chapter explains the methods undertaken in this study.

Chapter 3.

Methods

The current study focuses on understanding how community is created in the incels.co forum. The incels.co forum was chosen because it is the most popular incel space ("incels.co," 2020). This forum was created as a result of r/incels being banned on Reddit in November 2017 ("incels.co," 2020). The following sections include detailed information about the forum, the sample, the data collection, and data analysis procedure. Also included is a discussion of the ethical considerations of online forum research, as there are concerns about researcher obligations. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the current study.

3.1. The Forum

The incels.co forum⁸, formerly incels.me and incels.is, is considered a blackpill incel forum ("Incels.co," 2020). The blackpill⁹ refers to individuals who have accepted the premise that they will never be able to find an intimate relationship with a woman due to their personal characteristics as unchangeable fact ("Pill jargon," 2020). Although some of these personal characteristics are more permanent than others (e.g., facial structure), someone who has accepted the blackpill believes that although some characteristics can

⁸ From here on referred to as "the forum"

⁹ Blackpill as defined by the incelwiki.

Definition 1: "The black pill is the idea that looks are by far the most important element in attracting a mate in 2019. It has more political undertones than other pills however, mainly because it's proponents tend to be traditional conservatives who favor "enforcing monogamy" by "reversing the sexual revolution." Not all incels subscribe to the blackpill or even any pill at all. Alternatively, the blackpill means accepting that ugly men should just stop trying to date due to societal or evolutionary female selective pressures being too powerful (defeatism)." From: https://incels.wiki/w/inceldom_FAQ#What_is_the_black_pill.3F

Definition 2: "A pessimistic, nihilistic or defeatist version of the Red Pill, where one accepts the fate nature has bestowed upon them, and resigns themselves to the fact that the world is naturally unfair and will always remain so. These people will generally accept, much like redpillers, that looks means everything, and other materialistic facets of the redpiller's truth, however will remain apathetic. Although this defeatism isn't illogical, to the contrary, a lot of these people realise the irrational situation of improving themselves would be. Blackpillers are usually very disgustingly ugly and realise all hope was lost before they were even born." From: https://incels.wiki/w/Pill_jargon

be changed or improved upon, doing so will not change their ability to find an intimate partner. This perspective reflects a defeatist attitude, in that individuals who accept the blackpill theory have given up on attempting to find an intimate partner altogether. According to many who subscribe to the blackpill theory, “all hope was lost before they were even born” (“Pill Jargon,” 2020). The forum is publicly available, meaning anyone can view posts; however, contributing posts is limited to forum members only.

Visually, the front page of the forum includes a series of quick links that are included at the top of the page, including access to forum rules, the incel Wiki, the blog, a page dedicated to listing the membership of incels.co, and PornDude (see Figure 3.1). The Rules section outlines the boundaries of membership and behaviour. The Wiki is an external website that holds the bulk of information on the incel ideology. It employs a traditional wiki structure where individuals can contribute articles or changes to existing articles; this knowledge is moderated by administrators (“Editing rules, account creation, and other info,” 2020; “Incel wiki: About,” 2020). The blog, a recent endeavour by a moderator on incels.co, includes longer posts that allow for further clarification and elaboration on specific points of contention or countering of critiques from those outside the ideology. Also prominent on the forum is a Welcome to incels.co statement, which includes the language “Do you want to join our community?” with a link to sign up.

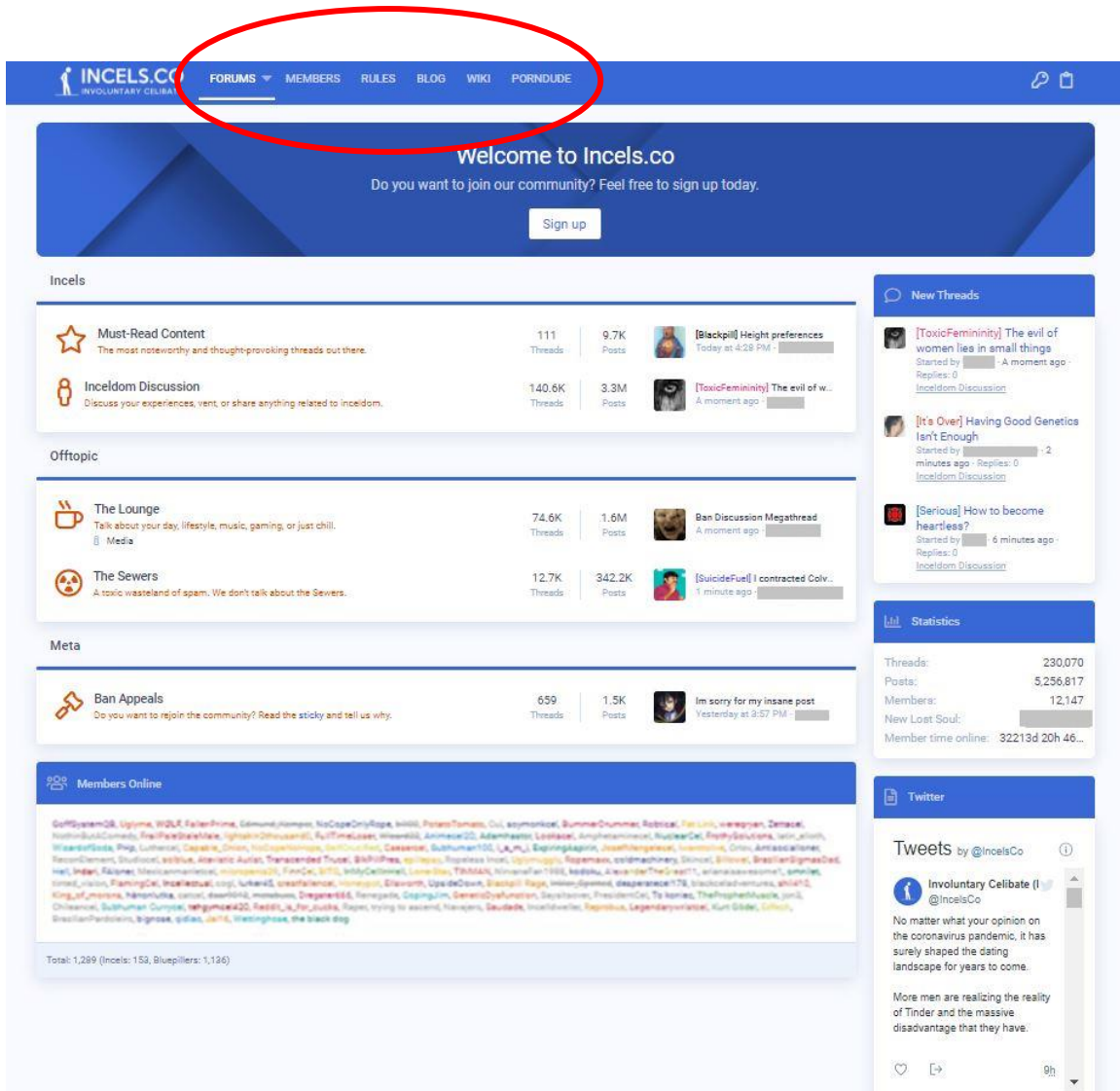


Figure 3.1 Incel Home Page - September 24th, 2020

As of September 24th, 2020, forum threads have been organized into three main sections: threads relating to being an incel, Offtopic [sic] threads, and Meta threads ("Rules and FAQ ", 2020; see Appendix A). The threads under the section "incel" are further subcategorized. First is must-read content, which includes old threads deemed to be important. They refer to this space as "the most noteworthy and thought-provoking threads out there." Inceldom Discussion also sits within the incels category; this is where threads considered to have taken effort to create are located ("Rules and FAQ ", 2020). Here they can share experiences, vent, or discuss inceldom. The second section, Offtopic, includes the lounge, where low effort posts sit, including those about lifestyle, music, or commentary on daily life. Offtopic also includes what they call the sewers

where there are no limits – all content is considered acceptable except blatant spamming ("Rules and FAQ ", 2020). Each thread can be “tagged” with keywords, such as [Blackpill] or [Life Fuel]. These act as a way to classify or sort threads by larger themes. Lastly, the Meta section is a place where individuals can discuss ban appeals; that is, it allows users to provide an argument, often through another member, for rejoining the community following a ban instituted by a moderator.

At the very bottom of the page is a list of members online at any one time. Members’ usernames are written in different colours that allow for easy differentiation of engagement based on the number of posts the user has made. On the right-hand side, a list of new threads allows users to quickly engage in new discussions. The forum also includes details about the number of threads, posts, total members, new members, and the amount of time members have spent online. Lastly, there is a link to the incels.co twitter account.

3.2. Data Collection

Individual posts from the incels.co forum were collected using the Terrorism and Extremism Network Extractor (Bouchard, Joffres, & Frank, 2014), which extracts individual text posts and their associated metadata. This metadata includes information about which thread the post was a part of, when it was posted, and by whom it was posted. While the Crawler is able to capture text, it is not able to capture images, meaning the analysis is limited to the written content. The data includes all posts available in the forum at the date of data collection.

From the full dataset, the threads were sorted by number of posts, and the top 50 “most responded to” threads were selected, comprising a total of 41,548 posts. The first post for each thread was read and reviewed for content and relevance to the concept of community; a list of all the threads can be found in Table 3.2. From these 50, a subsection was purposively chosen and qualitatively coded. Mass posting threads such as the music recommendation thread, the movie night threads, and others of a similar nature were excluded from in-depth qualitative coding. If the initial post included an external link or image, the thread was also excluded. Lastly, one thread was excluded because of the nature of the request made in the first post. The individual asked for

photos of a white and Arab man in order to conduct a Tinder experiment. This thread was removed because the Crawler does not collect images.

The threads included in this study are those in which the original poster either shared an explicit ideological position, an experience, or a request for assistance. These threads were chosen in order to limit the volume of content available on the forum, and to focus the research on threads that showcase the tie between incel ideology and community, as opposed to focusing on threads that showcase the general creation of community in online spaces. The final sample included 17 threads. The first 200 posts of each thread were coded, resulting in a total of 3400 posts. Lastly, in addition to the subsample of quotes, the forum’s structure and relevant posts about rules and membership were also included in the analysis, as they contributed to the understanding of community.

Table 3.1 Top 50 Threads

| Rank | Topic | Number of total Posts in Thread |
|-------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| 1* | “Mega thread” for “the community” to discuss bans | 8812 |
| 2 | Music Cope – Sharing music recommendations | 3885 |
| 3* | No way that 1 in 1000 girls won’t like me | 2546 |
| 4 | “Megathread” for Soccer World Cup 2018 | 1121 |
| 5 | incels interested in learning Portuguese | 696 |
| 6 | Sharing Porn Videos | 685 |
| 7 | Sharing Gore Materials | 652 |
| 8* | Catfishing a woman on Tinder – Convinces to come to another country | 556 |
| 9 | Response to Christchurch Shooting | 554 |
| 10 | Exposing a Fakecel using photographs to prove they cannot be incel | 501 |
| 11* | Introductions | 499 |
| 12* | White Nationalism Debate – “Ethnic responds” | 462 |
| 13 | Movie Streaming Club – Watch movies together | 448 |
| 14 | Movie Streaming Club 2 – Watch movies together | 430 |
| 15 | Creating a Clique called the “No Fap Faction” | 426 |
| 16* | Successful Matches in Thailand | 396 |
| 17 | Movie Streaming Club 3 – Watch movies together | 381 |
| 18 | Response to Florida Valentine’s Day School Shooting | 368 |
| 19 | Discussing becoming famous on rival opposition group incel Tears (r/inceltears) | 359 |

| Rank | Topic | Number of total Posts in Thread |
|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| 20 | Anime Recommendation Thread | 351 |
| 21 | Favourite poster is a Fakecel | 343 |
| 22 | Discussing attractiveness of a man | 322 |
| 23 | Rate the avatar above you – Chain post | 311 |
| 24* | Kicked out Looking for Advice | 305 |
| 25* | Suicidal ideation Post 1 | 305 |
| 26 | Gore material – Sharing a violent video | 302 |
| 27* | Women should not have rights | 300 |
| 28 | Streaming Anime Movies – Watch together | 293 |
| 29 | Exposing a staff member as attractive Chad | 286 |
| 30* | Gymcelling is a waste of time | 277 |
| 31* | Suicide Final Post | 264 |
| 32* | Response to Survey | 257 |
| 33 | Changes IP address to see if he could find matches in Thailand | 254 |
| 34* | The Alt-Right and incels should work together | 250 |
| 35* | This Forum is Cope | 248 |
| 36 | Link to suicide Livestream | 245 |
| 37 | Response to Parkland | 242 |
| 38 | Share what you think about the person above you – chain post | 241 |
| 39 | Verifying whether someone is an incel | 238 |
| 40 | Comments about a member who has found success | 237 |
| 41* | One-year Anniversary | 235 |
| 42 | Recommendation to read Robin Baker's Sperm Wars | 234 |
| 43 | Chain Thread – Reply 1000 times | 232 |
| 44* | Do not fall for the race baiting | 231 |
| 45 | Who is your Favourite user? | 291 |
| 46 | Revenge | 229 |
| 47 | Book recommendations | 228 |
| 48* | Whites have a better life and better chances at being incel | 227 |
| 49 | Asking for pictures of men to run experiment about race | 225 |
| 50 | Amazon Gift Card Giveaway | 225 |

* Denotes threads included in the final sample.

3.3. Data Analysis

The current study has two main research questions:

1. How is community constructed through discourse on the incels.co forum?
2. How is support, a key element of community, exchanged between members?

To answer these questions, a thematic analysis was conducted, using both inductive and deductive approaches. Thematic analysis is an approach researchers use to “search across a dataset [...] to find repeated patterns of meaning” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86), or themes. It is a flexible method, allowing for both inductive and deductive approaches to coding, and for the researcher to focus on not only describing but also interpreting the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017). More specifically, I employed a reflexive thematic analysis which “fully embraces qualitative research values and the subjective skills the researcher brings to the process” (Braun & Clarke, 2020, p. 6). Objectivity is thus not the goal of this, or other, qualitative research. Instead, I utilized reflexive practices, including a research journal where I recorded analytic and reflective memos, to maintain transparency of the research process. In the research journal, I made notes on what I saw in the data, as well as the process of coding and reaching themes. Reflexive research practices are key to maintaining transparency (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Tracy, 2010) and thus increasing the trustworthiness and credibility of the research – an essential component of quality qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003; Tracy, 2010). It is important to remember that qualitative research is not judged on the basis of validity and reliability but rather, trustworthiness, credibility, and transferability (Golafshani, 2003; Hoepfl, 1997; Tracy, 2010). Similarly, the goal of qualitative research is not generalizability rather transferability (Hoepfl, 1997; Tracy, 2010).

The current study follows the guidelines put forth by Braun and Clarke (2006) on how to conduct a thematic analysis. They state that a thematic analysis begins with familiarizing oneself with the data, creating codes, searching for themes, checking or reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. The following section details this procedure, and more specifically the coding process for both the inductive and deductive analyses.

3.3.1. Inductive Analysis

To answer the first research question, a qualitative content analysis was conducted, using an inductive approach to generate codes. To begin the process, I familiarized myself with the data by identifying the top 50 threads and determining the overall subject matter (a full list of the top 50 threads is found in Table 3.1). The data were then imported into NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software that allows researchers to easily code and categorize large volumes of data without the cumbersome approach of traditional pen and paper coding methods. Once imported into NVivo, the data were read, and initial codes were created based on patterns identified in the data. This initial coding process was focused on coding within, rather than across, threads.

A second round of coding was then completed wherein initial codes were refined and combined where appropriate. Codes that could be grouped into larger categories were grouped under larger parent codes with original codes acting as child codes. Following refinement, codes were compared across threads for commonalities. The original coding structure focusing on within-thread analysis was separated to preserve the original coding structure. Codes were then copied and combined to reflect patterns across threads. During this process, the coded content was verified; each thread was opened and reviewed to make sure each code accurately represented the coded section. Lastly, the codes, originally descriptive, were changed to analytical codes create themes.

Themes are a result of analyzing codes for meaning and interpretation. Themes are reflective of codes and thus the data, but are also a reflection of the researcher's knowledge, understanding, and theoretical approach (Braun & Clarke, 2020). While qualitative research contains an element of subjectivity, as previously mentioned, I engaged in reflexivity practices and documented how codes and themes were created in a journal to increase transparency about the data analysis process. This journal included both analytic and reflective memos. In addition, by also conducting multiple rounds of coding and verification, I engaged in practices known to increase rigour and thus the trustworthiness of the findings (Tracy, 2010). While the results are specific to this forum, and thus are limited in their capacity to generalize to all forums or extremist groups, the

results are still valuable as the findings may be transferable to other situations (Golafshani, 2003; Hoepfl, 1997; Tracy, 2010).

3.3.2. Deductive Analysis

Following inductive coding, the data were coded using a deductive approach for a clearer understanding of how exactly support was exchanged. This process included an exploration of how individuals solicited support in the initial post of a thread and what types of support they received. The work of North (1997), Cutrona and Russell (1990), and Cutrona and Suhr (1992) were used to create deductive codes. Informed by North's (1997) work, five codes reflecting ways to ask for help in an online support group were used: self-deprecating comments; shared experiences, either asking whether others have a similar experience or sharing their experiences; requests for information; statements of personal success; and statements of extreme behaviour, such as suicide. To categorize the type of support given, the works by Cutrona and Russell (1990) and Cutrona and Suhr (1992) were used. They categorized support as either emotional, providing comfort; network, belonging to a group or shared experience; esteem support, attempts to boost competence or self-esteem, informational support, which includes advice or guidance to possible solutions, and tangible support; which is practical and instrumental support (e.g., sending financial support).

First, posts requesting support were identified and the initial post was coded using North's (1997) codes. The threads were then coded to identify the type of support being shared. Posts exemplifying two types of support were coded to both support types present. This process comprised the first round of coding. The second round of coding included a verification of the already coded material to ensure the coded material reflected the operationalized definitions. During this coding process, it became clear that there were instances where the responders simply were not providing support, or the type of "support" was a push towards what could be characterized as giving up and becoming helpless. As a result, a round of coding for "non-supportive" comments was also conducted.

3.4. Ethics

This research is exempt from needing Research Ethics Board approval as the content of the forum is publicly available. Specifically, the research complies with the exemption detailed in Article 2.2 of the *TCPS2* (2018) which states that data that is “in the public domain and the individuals to whom the information refers have no reasonable expectation of privacy” is exempt from traditional ethics approval involving people (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2018, p. 15). Moderators at incels.co suggest their awareness of the fact that they are not acting in a private space by stating that members should protect themselves by not sharing personal details. Additionally, members regularly mention the existence of “lurkers” or those who visit the forum but do not post or are not members.

There are additional considerations related to conducting internet research and maintaining individual members’ anonymity. Anonymity is already central to the forum, in that individuals select usernames and user avatars (or profile pictures) to hide their true identity. However, it is possible that members may have used the same username in other places, where they may not be exercising the same amount of caution they are on the incels.co forum. In an effort to maintain the anonymity of members, member usernames are not included in this write up, as suggested by Sugiura, Wiles, and Pope (2016).¹⁰

3.5. Limitations

There are a number of limitations of the current study. First, the current study focuses on a select subset of threads within incels.co. While small samples are characteristic of qualitative research (Hesse-Biber, 2016), it is a common criticism. As a result, it is necessary to acknowledge that including a larger number of comments and threads may result in different or additional findings; however, expanding the size of the sample would limit the depth of analysis due to a broader focus. Similarly, the study includes only one forum; other incel forums may have created community differently or

¹⁰ The author is aware that this does not fully protect the individual as direct quotes are presented in the research that could be traced back to the original poster. While this act is largely symbolic, it does allow for an additional, albeit small, layer of anonymity.

may not have created community at all, and thus different themes may be produced. As a result, the findings of this study are not generalizable to all incels or all incel forums. However, it is important to note that generalizability is not the goal of qualitative research. Instead, a goal of qualitative research is transferability (Hoepfl, 1997), the idea that findings in one context can be extended to another. In this case, there is evidence that the findings of this study are supported by the existing literature on virtual communities in general and other extremist groups more specifically. Thus, while we cannot be certain that the findings can be replicated in or generalized to other forums, the findings are trustworthy.

Second, the study provides a limited understanding of community in the incels.co forum. While studying community by analyzing existing text allows us to make statements on whether elements of community exist within the forum, there is no way to address whether members of the forum themselves experience a sense of community. Given that community is something that is experienced, one would need to talk to its members to truly understand community in this forum. As such, this study can only provide information about whether elements of community exist within the forum and whether incels behaviours online lend themselves to community. Conducting interviews with incels.co members was not possible in the current study due to time constraints and access limitations.

Although the current study has some limitations, there is still value in it. First, and perhaps most importantly, the current study adds to the scant research on incels more generally and on incel communities more specifically. In addition, the volume of posts included and the variety of threads included provides a sizeable sample, particularly in qualitative research where samples are generally smaller than in quantitative research (Hesse-Biber, 2016). Using a qualitative method, the study provides a rich and in-depth analysis of incels.co. This study's findings create a valuable foundation for further research. The results are presented in the following chapter.

Chapter 4.

Results and Discussion

In this chapter, the analysis shows that incels.co has elements of community. The chapter starts with a more general discussion of the top 50 threads and the elements of community that exist there. The results of the inductive analysis include the following themes: “the incel brotherhood,” “we can disagree, but you’re wrong,” “we are all coping here,” and “will the real incel come forward” follows. The chapter ends with a discussion of deductive results, exploring whether support was given, and which types of support were present in the forum.

4.1. The Top 50 Threads and what they tell us about Community

There were some threads within the dataset that spoke to community but were not necessarily valuable to explore qualitatively. In the top 50 threads, several threads were devoted to sharing music, movies, books, and porn. These threads are akin to physical spaces in a community where people exchange their interests. For example, the thread dedicated to books acts much like a library, where individuals may come together to share books. Similarly, places to share music are much like traditional record stores where customers may discuss music and share recommendations with each other. Community building also happens outside of the forum, through regularly scheduled virtual movie nights. These movie nights allow members to come together and stream movies with one another, engaging in similar behaviour to people going to a physical movie theatre. A number of threads also discussed current events, anything from the FIFA World Soccer Championship to the Christchurch mass shooting. It is noteworthy that within the top 50 threads, the majority of posts are not related to the incel ideology specifically. Instead, the posts showcase everyday experiences. Consequently, while being involuntarily celibate brings individuals together on the forum, the forum provides more than a space to discuss the ideology or their experiences; it provides a virtual world. Of course, ideological discussions do occur within the forum, but they are not the *only* topics discussed.

4.2. Observations of Forum Rules and Boundaries

4.2.1. Following the rules

The forum includes a number of rules that guide membership access and behaviour on the forum. For example, explicit rules outline who is allowed to be a member:

Incel (Allowed): Person who desires, but is unable, to be in a romantic relationship.

Honorary Member (Conditional): Person who is not currently incel, but agrees to respect the views portrayed on the forum. The user should be indistinguishable from other incel members, and mentioning they aren't incel is an instant ban.

Female (Not Allowed): Banned on sight, no exceptions. This is a male-only forum. ("Rules and FAQ ", 2020)

As a part of maintaining these boundaries, to become a member of the forum, and thus be allowed to post in the forum, individuals must fill out a membership request form. This form requires members to disclose whether they are male or female, as well as “explain their situation” in detail. The forum moderators reserve the right to deny any membership requests from women and those without sufficient detail about their “situation.” Thus, moderators are able to tightly control who is able to contribute and interact with the rest of the community and keep community members safe from attacks by those who do not agree with the ideology.

Within the rules, a number of behaviours are not allowed (see Appendix A for full list). For example, bragging is not allowed on the forum – meaning that sharing one’s success is generally not viewed favourably. Further, “heavy bragging” on other incel forums such as looksmax could be used to ban a member on incels.co. Also disallowed is LARPing, or Live Action Role Playing (i.e., pretending to be an incel when one is not); “there’s a difference between withholding your experiences and pretending they never happened” ("Rules and FAQ ", 2020).

Other banned behaviours include bullying and persecution, although what constitutes these behaviours is not clearly defined. The line between bullying and what is deemed disrespectful is further blurred by the presence of disrespectful and

confrontational exchanges by members detailed in the subsequent sections. The list of unacceptable behaviours also includes trolling and baiting, although the terms are once again not clearly defined. Given the lack of clear definitions, it is possible (in fact quite likely) that what may be considered disrespectful by an outsider is not necessarily seen as disrespectful by forum members. The establishment of specific group norms reflects what forum members, and specifically the moderators, are willing to tolerate.

The establishment of rules is a normal and necessary aspect of community formation. Similarly to incels.co, Stormfront also included a number of rules governing their forum (Bowman-Grieve, 2009). More generally, McMillan and Chavis (1986) included membership and rules around membership as a contributing factor for the traditional sense of community. The establishment of rules and boundaries are essential as they are the basic building blocks of group formation and delineation.

Bans Bans Bans!

Moderators can institute bans for two reasons: following a breaking of the “rules”; or at the request of a member wishing to remove their own posting privileges. These bans can be temporary or permanent (i.e. a permaban) in nature ("Rules on ban appeals," 2020see Appendix B). Individuals requesting a ban for themselves can do so for a variety of reasons; however, they are only able to request to be reinstated twice per year. If a member was banned not of their own volition, they are able to request to be unbanned only once ("Rules on ban appeals," 2020). Bans appear to only affect the individual's ability to post to the forum; their ability to log into their account and continue existing private messages remain intact. Banned members thus ask others to lobby for their return or message the moderator directly. However, users often want more information or clarity about why certain members were banned. As a result, members have created a thread to discuss bans; this thread is the thread with the most posts in the dataset.

This megathread [sic]¹¹ is for the community to discuss bans in general: Bans issued. Banned users. Ban appeal threads and responses. General discussion of the topic. Note that unless a user is very prominent and creates big news with his ban, you should PM users

¹¹ Here and in future examples taken from the data, the original spelling, grammar, and obscure language choices are kept as is. While the error is identified with [sic] here, in future excerpts it is not, as the number of [sic] designations necessary would impede readability.

yourself to find out why they were banned, as reasons are personal. Spamming, trolling or making bogus requests here might get you banned from the thread.

Within the thread, members ask for clarity around why some members were banned and whether specific members were still active on the forum, showing that posting members of incel.co are aware and acknowledge other members. This thread is a clear example that individuals recognize each other by their usernames because they directly ask about users. The recognition of member names/usernames is one of the elements of community outlined by Blanchard and Markus (2004).

It is not surprising that members can recognize other members. First, all members' usernames are displayed under the members' tab, and a list of active members is located on the bottom of the landing page. Because these lists are so prominent, it makes it easy to remember and recall users who are consistently active in the forum. In addition, because of the colour coding system that incels.co uses, it is easy to distinguish new members from older members, allowing for an additional layer membership recall. These older, more engaged members are also more likely to be aware of other forum users simply because they frequently post threads and responses to threads.

Blanchard and Markus (2004) also discuss the identification of others, or the more in-depth understanding of other individuals and their identities, including how they present themselves online. While it is impossible to tell how deeply members know each other without speaking to them, evidence suggests that members are aware of other people's posts or types of posts. For example, some members easily remembered a poster who argued for white nationalism, as well as an individual who believed in the positive benefits of going to the gym.

The existence of private direct personal messaging within the forum points to the potential existence of in-depth personal ties to individual members. By allowing direct messaging, individuals are able to forge one-on-one relationships with other members. Given that these messages are considered private, they may include more personal details and more in-depth discussions than on the public portion of the forum. The extent to which individuals engage with other members using this feature is difficult to gauge; however, there are several references to direct communication between members within the forum. Engaging in direct, one-on-one, messaging with other members would, of

course, increase both one's surface level recognition and deeper knowledge of forum members.

4.2.2. Individuating from the group

Another way to individuate is to create an identity within the group that is characterized by specific roles or ideological points. This deeper conceptualization of "individuation" is likely closer to Blanchard and Markus (2004) initial conceptualization, which viewed individuation as distinction from the shared group identity. They state that "established members" are more likely to create a unique identity in order to differentiate from the group, while those who are less established work to conform to the group identity. Arguably, this individuation is evident in posts by individuals who stand against the majority views, which is detailed in the inductively created theme "We can disagree, but you're wrong." However, the extent to which individuals do actively create unique identities, and the degree to which they perceive this as something that matters cannot be investigated accurately without speaking to individual members directly. From an outsider and researcher point of view, the way individuals are willing to take a stance on contentious issues, even when met with opposition, suggests that not all members conform to the majority viewpoints.

4.3. Inductive Results

The inductive results yielded four main themes. The first theme focuses on members' of incels.co references to "the incel brotherhood," suggesting that some incels share a strong familial-type bond. The second theme describes the nature of debates within the community: "we can disagree on things, but you're wrong." Often members of the forum disagreed on points of conversation and in their disagreement responded to each other in disrespectful ways. Related to the second theme, but standing distinctly on its own, is theme three, "we are all coping here." Within the forum, members often used the term cope both to describe various coping mechanisms and to hurl at other members when they believed the member was being delusional. The last theme covered in this section is "will the real incels please come forward," which describes the importance of defining membership within the forum.

4.3.1. The incel brotherhood

There are few references to incel.co members calling the forum a community. Only a handful exist in this sample, including one made by forum moderators celebrating the one-year anniversary of the new forum location:

One year anniversary of incels.is! It's been exactly 365 days since /r/incels was unfairly banned by reddit and this platform you are now in was created. A big thank you to all users who make up the community and to all mods who help keep the peace around.

Although the individual first calls the forum a “platform,” they make a point to mention that a community is made up of its members. Virtual spaces, like this forum, act as a meeting place, but the creation of community rests with the individuals. Explicit statements about community suggest that members may feel a sense of community and a sense of belonging.

In another example of explicit statements about community, a poster claims his membership to this community by distinguishing himself as an older and thus wiser member. Here the poster is responding to someone who is arguing with another member about what the original poster should do. The older member sates:

I've been active in the incel community a lot longer than you, boy. I'm just not convinced what OP [original poster] is doing is going to bring him any happiness, and he's being egged on by immoral degenerate morons like yourself here to do something he doesn't really want to do.

Explicit references to seniority and what appear to be wisdom, as is the case in this example, are rare within the current sample. This finding may simply be a result of the types of posts that were most popular, and it cannot be said for certain that this does not occur in the incels.co forum. Other research suggests that this can occur; Bowman-Grieve (2009) found that older members pass knowledge to younger members in her analysis of the Stormfront virtual community.

Lastly, in the following example, the individual mentions that they wanted to join this community because they felt the pain of losing r/incels space:

I am an incel with a 2/10 face, been bullied all my life. I found /r/incels 6 months ago but never got around to signing up and participating with the community. Now I feel the pain because it is gone, want to start being a part of the community

This post, found in the introductions thread, shows that for some, the forum may provide a sense of community. While this individual never posted in r/incels, the loss of the space still left an impact on the individual, suggesting that even those who ‘lurk’ (i.e. read the forum but do not participate) experience the space in a meaningful way. Research has shown that although lurkers may never post to a community they are visiting, they can develop feelings of community (Nonnecke & Preece, 1999).

Although explicit references to community are limited, the forum now includes an invitation to “Join the community” on their landing page (See Figure 2.1, Chapter 2). No such invitation was present under the previous domains incels.is and incels.me and appears to have only come into effect in May of 2020.¹² This shift suggests that perhaps now, as the forum has grown and its members have had the opportunity to interact with one another for a prolonged period of time, members themselves believe or feel as though they have formed a community. Unfortunately, without speaking with them, it is impossible to say for certain that they are indeed experiencing a sense of community.

Though the word community is not used often, there are a number of references to an incel brotherhood by calling fellow member brothers. Examples of this brotherhood were most prominent in response to a member who was counting down the days until he ended his life by way of suicide. On his last day he posted a final message explicitly stating the forum was not to blame for his death and signing off with “Goodbye brothers”:

I first want to thank everyone who personally took some time to message me when they did not have to. There are some really kind people on this forum and it’s a shame we had to meet in this manner. In another life I dreamed we all met at a party, or a great job, had happy lives and families. But the true nature of this thread is something of the other. This will be my final post on incels.is. [...] I’d like to say to my fellow incel brothers do not give up hope, maybe someday you will be free of these chains and no longer held down by inceldom. I will die a kissless virgin – but let’s not think I never tried. I have tried everything – tinder, bumble, bars, clubs, meetups, co-workers. I can’t even count or remember the amount of times I was rejected. It has to be in the thousands at this point. I COULD NOT EVEN GET A SINGLE DATE. This was soul crushing to me. Why could I not even land a single

¹² The date of this addition was verified by using the WayBack Machine’s archival information related to the incels.co website and its previous domains. While the WayBack Machine includes several captures of the website per month, it does not do so on a daily basis and as a result it is not possible to pinpoint exactly when this shift happened. However, the first time this language is captured by the WayBack Machine is on May 26th, 2020. See <https://web.archive.org/web/20200526135752/https://incels.co/>

date with any women? Where my standards to high? Was it something I said? No no no no, it was my face. I lost the genetic lottery and this was my destiny. All I ever wanted was to be loved by someone as much as I loved them, this is the only thing I have ever wanted but I know this will never happen.... My proof is I'm 25 years old and I live in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I'm not going to post a picture of my gun or face or anything like that. Check local news sites about a young man's suicide and that will be me. I'm not a troll, nor an imposter just a subhuman who lost before I even knew there was a game. When this post is 1hr old I will be gone. Goodbye Brothers¹³

In addition to the original posters sign off, the individual explicitly reiterates the validity of their membership within the group by stating that they are "not a troll" (i.e. not someone who is there to incite responses or attention) and "not an imposter." This message prompted members to respond with some variation of "rest in peace brother":

We will always remember you, brother.

We will join you soon brother.

You made some excellent posts and I truly admire your dedication. I would have taken down some the people that mock and torture us every day with me, but that goes to show how most of us really are just hopeless people just looking for an inkling of affection. See on you on the other side, brother.

Rest in piece ... brother. I hope you are reading this wherever you are. You have truly touched me and others on here. I am crying for the second time because of you, I truly hope you are in a better place where ever you are. Bless you brother.

These posts indicate that individuals have been affected by the loss of a "brother." In other instances, individuals expressed this loss explicitly, saying that they and the forum would miss this individual. Similarly, De Koster and Houtman's (2008) found that a loss of a member in Stormfront (although not as a result of suicide) resulted in emotional responses from those that remained.

¹³ Following the first 200 posts in response to this individual, it was uncovered that this poster never actually killed himself and was found requesting a new username. This resulted in backlash from individuals who then accused the individual of wanting attention and lying.

Another example of the brotherhood language comes from a thread in which the user is newly homeless and is requesting advice from the other members. Members responded by expressing their concern and suggesting tips for their brother:

Holy shit brother, this is discerning to read. I hope you make it through the night. How long will you be homeless for? Do you need money?

Been there brother, I used couchsurfing (low inhib required but you will be desperate) and through the people that hosted me I got a shit job in mcdonalds with weekly income. After two weeks I was able to rent a room in a shared flat. Ate the food at mcdonalds, easy to steal some fried and nuggets. Good luck man, you will live alright, just let the survival instincts kick in.

That's horrible, i wish you best of luck, brother. Having a shelter is actually good, only your thread make me come into realisation.

In each example, brotherhood suggests a stronger bond than just community, one that reflects the intensity of their shared experience. This language of brotherhood is not unique to incels and is evident in other contexts. For example, research has shown that brotherhood is a key component of ISIS's recruitment narrative (Mahood & Rane, 2017). Similarly, research on gangs has shown that the gang can act as a surrogate family (Regan, 1996; Ruble & Turner, 2000), with members referring to their fellow gang mates as brothers. Additional research on biker clubs discusses brotherhood as a key element which "provides belonging, security and assurance of assistance in vulnerable situations" (Grundvall, 2018, p. 218). Grundvall (2018) concluded that brotherhood is a result of shared experiences and continued engagement with the group.

Because Incels are generally isolated individuals who spend large amounts of time online, the strong bond between members in a given forum being perceived as brotherhood demonstrates a sharp contrast. Their shared experiences unite them because they are perceived as deeply distressful. Forums, like incels.co allow for these individual experiences to be validated and may foster a sense of belonging to a group among like-minded members, belonging which these individuals do not receive in person. By referring to each other as brothers, they signify the intensity of their shared experience.

4.3.2. We can disagree, but you're Wrong

Similarly, to Bowman-Grieve's (2009) findings from the Stormfront forum, individuals used the incels.co space to engage in discussions and debates about ideology with one another. In this sample, debates focused on specific aspects of being an incel or the relevance of race within the incel community. It is not uncommon for incels to disagree, especially when it comes to the role of race and right-wing extremism in inceldom.

An example of such a debate comes from a discussion about whether women should have rights, and whether giving women rights "dooms" a society:

Any race or society that gives women rights have doomed themselves to be invaded and have a death spiraling birth rate

In response, a member argues that taking away women's rights would not change the incel situation.

This whole taking rights away idea however is not only a fantasy, but it comes from a place of hard coping. Do you honestly believe that even if their rights could be taken away, that people would actually support that idea? do you think that once stripped of their rights they'll come crawling to us? The answer is no, they'll continue living the same way they've always been: normies, Chalites, and Chads get all the action while we are left to rope, cope, or go ER¹⁴

Following this comment, two members begin to exchange pointed responses at each other's posts.

We have to blackpill the normies and beat the shit out the cucks for the cucked laws to change. Sub6 men will refuse to contribute to society and will not pay taxes if they don't meet our demands. *"do you think that once stripped of their rights they'll come crawling to us? The answer is no, they'll continue living the same way they've always been: normies, Chalites, and Chads get all the action while we are left to rope, cope, or go ER"* → Major galactic cope. Even today in south east asia men who are considered ugly incels in the west can get laid there just fine. The reason is because foids in poor countries have less privileges and rights, which is good for sub6 men.

¹⁴ This refers to going Elliot Rodger (i.e. committing violence).

"We have to blackpill the normies and beat the shit out the cucks¹⁵ for the cucked laws to change. Sub6 men will refuse to contribute to society and will not pay taxes if they don't meet our demands." → I'll use your own words to refute this: "Major galactic cope."

Your using western standards to judge these said males, you have no idea how dating, relationships, and marriage is handled in other countries much less how SMV [sexual market value]¹⁶ is calculated over there

Taking away foid's rights and privileges in the west will also increase sub6 men's smv like in south east asia. We have to get rid of the cucked laws, stop taxing sub6 men, and remove censorship everywhere then men will have the upper hand again in dating, especially with new inventions coming soon like sexbots, male birth control, and possibly artificial wombs. All these things will make sub6 men's smv skyrocket, which is why most foids and feminists are against them.

The posters continue to argue with each other about whose position is strongest for approximately half of the 200 coded posts. They respond to the post of the previous person, often quoting a portion of that person's original post and providing a rebuttal. Individuals are actively engaging with each other, responding to both the original post and additional posts. The structure is thus conversational in nature, corroborating Bowman-Grieve's (2009) findings.

One example of controversial topics within the group is the role of right-wing extremism. This topic was discussed in three threads in this sample. In one example, a member makes the argument that incel and the alt-right should join forces in order to 'defeat the normies.' The individual says:

Despite the main belief here, the vast majority of the Alt right (those who back white ethno nationalism and neo-nazism), is pretty blackpilled

¹⁵ Cuck, is a swear word, used to describe something emasculating or someone who has been emasculated. It is generally used as an insult. The term has connections to the alt-right where "cuckservative" is used to "describe Republicans who are perceived to be emasculated or "selling out" (Roy, 2016).

¹⁶ SMV refers to the sexual market value of an individual. SMV is a number which encompasses the individuals desirability out of 10, but factors in "all the things that make someone attractive" ("SMV," 2019). This includes desirable factors such as money, status, instead of just focusing on looks.

on females and female behavior in general. The only reason as to why members of its community are not revealing that is to not repel females from accepting white nationalism. This fact has been discussed on Alt right websites and Alt right subreddits themselves. The vast majority believe that female voting rights should be essentially removed, but are not promoting this idea in order not to lose 50% of the population. A myth commonly stated is that the Alt right are basically orbiters for white women. Wrong, again. Just have a look at the Daily Stormer for example and you'll see that Alt righters there heavily criticize the actions of white women. The only reason as to why they support preserving the white female race is to essentially preserve the white male race, and they believe that once the Alt right revolution takes place, white males will pass patriarchal laws that will indirectly prevent females from having multiple partners and being whores to Chads. The Alt right is NEVER for sexual liberation and is dissatisfied with female and Chad degeneracy in the West right now. We incels should take them as potential allies, not enemies. But... but... they're racist and would not accept ethnicels. This is somewhat true, but the Alt right believes that every race is essentially entitled to its own existence as a group, hence the term race nationalism. Ethnicels, outside the West, would not be opposed because of skin color. Also, no ethnostate could be realistically achieved in the Western world, and the remaining ethnics will not be heavily discriminated because of skin color. Current demographic trends are approved by leftists whom we incels hate. Now onto the topic of race mixing. I honestly believe that ethnicels in general would benefit if anti-miscegenation laws are passed in all nations and cultures, because of the foreign female demand for White men, essentially. I see no problem with opposing race mixing. Just imagine what an alliance would look like. The Alt right and incels together could easily defeat the lying Jewish media (we both generally hate the tribe) and leftist degeneracy in general by influencing norms.

Although tangential to understanding community within the incels.co forum, it is worth noting this post implies that some incels may be part of other much larger communities of right-wing extremists. This connection is not surprising; much like the poster says, both incels and the alt-right generally have ultra-conservative and hostile views on women's rights (Mudde, 2019). Similarly, in an older study by De Koster and Houtman (2008), one of the common principles discussed within Stormfront is the opposition to feminism. These connections to right-wing extremism suggest that incels may be a part of a much larger community.

However, although some of the members responded in agreement, including one person of colour who said, "even though I'm an ethnik, I'd consider it," others vehemently opposed the proposed coalition:

No Alt-righters hate us

Race is irrelevant. You're either an incel or an enemy.

Nazis would kill subhumans on sight with no problems. I won't let my incel brothers with inferior genes be crushed by their supposed liberators.

These posts are to-the-point and clearly stand in opposition to the original idea. Others included more thorough responses, providing the original poster with a complete argument against the coalition:

Decent idea in the abstract, but absolutely impracticable given the inevitable contingencies. I admire the position the Alt-Right occupies with respect to normscum and media mandarins, but there are entrenched incompatibilities on our side and theirs. Whatever any of theirs might actually think of white women, they invariably hate incels more. Despite a good number of them being socially nonviable wasteoids (even if most seem to at least have a low-profile job and experience with one or two cunts), they pretty clearly have a higher opinion of themselves. I've seen a lot of them embrace the term 'chad', in fact, and associate it seriously with a model of masculinity, power, and skill. If one of these dreamers happens to lift weights, you can be sure he'll call himself a chad, too. Some even outright agitate against incels and reaffirm the gynocracy's degenerate propaganda that, in the inestimable wisdom of woman, nature's greatest philistine, we deserve our loss. Again, I support the quixotic battles they fight against almost every single element of society; there's no doubt that a lot have integrity, even if it's wasted on stupid shit.

Similarly, another poster says,

Another element to consider is that they fail to cohere even among themselves. They kept a tenuous alliance leading up to Trump's election and promptly fell apart into internecine sniping afterwards. None of these absurdly powerless factions want to face the fact that, as soft and foppish as it is, the soymachine could crush them in its gaping, excited maw. That kind of fragmentation is the last thing you'd want to introduce into the White/Black/Hispanic/Asian/Dravidian/Uralo-Baltoid... incel coalition, the division of which upon these lines would be absolutely untenable. We've got too few resources as it is; forging a weak understanding with /pol/iticians wouldn't be worth hearing even fuckin' more about race every day on the board. We do need a broad-based union of rejects, but we shouldn't be making crippling compromises to get it

In these examples, we see that both the quality and thus length of responses can differ. But in either instance, it is apparent that not all members of incels.co think alike; certain ideas are not necessarily always supported by the group. It is particularly interesting,

although not surprising that far-right ideology is not necessarily accepted. Many ideas about what incels deem as attractive in women and men are based in the stereotypical standards of white beauty. This description, in addition to the shared views on women, could lead individuals to believe that incels are simply another type of right-wing extremist group. However, given that incels are of a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds, opposition to right-wing extremist ideology is to be expected. The same debate about the role of right-wing extremism occurs in another example in which an “ethnic” responds to those who believe in white nationalism.

Yet, although right-wing extremism is contentions within the forum, discussions about the role of race occur, including debates about which race is more likely to be successful in finding a partner. Arguably, the existence of these debates could be considered racist in and of itself; however, they may be a reflection of racism and racist stereotypes within society rather than right-wing extremism. There are those who believe in “just being white” – meaning, if one is white with light hair and blue eyes, they are considered more attractive and thus be viewed as more desirable by women. Conversely, others believe that black men may be more successful, relying on the stereotypes about black men’s penis size.

As previously mentioned, these debates are not always respectful, and members can come off as confrontational. For example, in the above-mentioned thread on joining forces with the alt-right, it was not uncommon to find posts similar to these:

` Nah go fuck yourself lol [laugh out loud]

Fuck that. incels is apolitical.

In other threads, posters throw more pointed personal attacks, accusing individuals of being volcels, or voluntarily celibate, and thus not “real” incels, or simply stupid.

You're a fucking volcel and a Degenerate no better than femoids if you would race mix instead of fucking obedient African women who would confirm to obedience and patriarchal values. Literally. Legal prostitution won't fix incelldom. Escortcels [an incel who purchases sex from a sex worker] exist for a fucking reason. Incelldom isn't about sex, but validation. Also if anti-degeneracy laws and anti-miscegenation were passed, it would be clear that the situation would get better for incels. Just look at how the West functioned back then, or how current

Islamic states function. Ugly men with multiple wives were/are not a coincidence.

Lol retard thinks women will literally become docile and obedient again simply by separating the races XD. Idiot they'll still be degenerate, it'll just be intra-racial degeneracy instead of inter-racial degeneracy. blackcels will still lose to tyrone, ricecels will still lose to changs, currycels will still lose to chadpreet, you are an idiot, separating doesn't solve our problems as incels, women will still be degenerate and fuck men out of their league leaving the rest of us sex starved. incelldom is about sex you fucking retard, the term literally is INVOLUNTARY CELIBACY (CELIBACY AS IN ABSTAINING FROM SEX). Its not Inlon (Involuntary Lonliness). Go peddle your BS race propaganda somewhere else, here's the door

It is evident that incels are willing to be aggressive towards other members with whom they disagree. While in Bowman-Grieve's (2009) study individuals were able respectfully engage in discussions and explore the different points of contention within their right-wing ideology, incels are not afraid to be disrespectful towards one another. Similar to Stormfront, rules and moderators on incels.co exist; however, it appears that a different set of norms may govern incels.co that allows for higher levels of hostility, at least hostility as perceived by an outsider.

Lastly, the willingness of some members to stand against others, and in some cases against the majority of responders, support the concept of individuation from the group proposed by Blanchard and Markus (2004). Perhaps the most notable example is in the exchange between a member who believes women should not have rights and another member who believes this is flawed thinking. While generally incels would be expected to agree with the original poster that women's rights should be curtailed or taken away completely (and there were those that did), one member stood against such thinking. He identifies as an incel but distinguished himself from group thinking.

4.3.3. We're all coping here

The concept of 'coping' or 'copes' consistently emerged as both a topic of discussion and was used as a way of insulting members. As mentioned previously, coping can refer to activities that help an individual manage or distract them from the distress they feel as a result of being an incel. However, it can also be used to call out or expose beliefs and thoughts that are deemed to be delusional. This call out appears to

serve two purposes: 1) to push someone to accept the more nihilistic blackpill perspective; or 2) to uncover fake incels, referred to as *fakecels*.

One example of coping comes from a post in which the original poster claims that *gymcels* (incels who go to the gym) are just coping. He argues that working out will not help an incel attract women.

Gymelling is a meme invented by normies to rob incels of their time and money.vGymcelling 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. Who runs and operates gyms? Normies. Who often has disposable time and money? incels. Normies are lying to you by telling you the gym works so they can steal your time and money. They will use your money to buy alcohol and drugs and continue to fuel degeneracy. They want to steal your time so you're too tired or busy to mount a coherent intellectual resistance with other incels against this scam. Gyms are scam. Gymcelling is a scam. Don't do it. Don't play their game

EDIT: lmao at all of the gymcels telling me I'm wrong but not realising their gymcelling has failed to attract a single girl which actually proves my point

Some of those who respond agree with the initial post citing that there is no history of an incel "ascending," or being successful, in finding a sexual partner or romantic partner.

One poster goes on to say that "Eating chocolate is more fun than gymcelling. And both will get you the same amount of pussy." However, others countered saying:

I gymcel at home with minimum equipment... my father did so with no equipment back in the day (rocky style). Your logic is stupid.

BTFO OP [Back the fuck off original poster] Lifting is the best activitiy I could ever have started in my life, it made my life soo much better, and yes girls like it aswell without lifting I would still be hopeless but you can waste your time posting on incels.is

Gymceling helps you look more robust if you are a framecel

The mental health benefits are insane and it can help certain people. It won't.work for the 5'2 2/10 bald indian janitor (No shit)

In these posts, although there are some who experience mental health benefits from going to the gym, this is not always considered important. Of paramount importance is their ability to find an intimate partner relationship; this is the only thing that will improve an incels life, and all else is “coping.”

In another example, participants argue that focusing on race as an explanation for their incel status is a cope. The original poster argues that incels should join forces with the alt-right and is met with people who disagree.

I agree that most alt-righters are ugly men in denial, but I don't think we should ally with them. It's up to them to stop coping and join us.

Sorry man I'm not a mental midget, the alt right is mostly filled with incels, but their white. I don't want to cope by thinking that by gassing the kikes we can save the world and everything will be normal, that's an illogical fallacy. Low IQ post.

Another member refers to ethnic nationalism as a “gigacope:”

I dont get this type either. Any sort of ethnic nationalism is gigacope for incels. It will not benefit them in any way as they fill always find themselves on the bottom rungs of society. They believe ethnics are stealing their women when in reality its the other way round (white normies won't have issues dating any race of woman). It's a coping mechanism to give them something to identify with to give a sense of faux superiority to the ""violent low iq darkies""

Another person states that the thread is a giant cope and that the original poster is a “race obsessed moron:”

I just realized this entire thread is one giant cope for a race obsessed moron JFL, anything short of participating in the holy grail war (Fate/ anime series) and making a wish isn't going to magically be able to force the entirety of earth to go along with your BS plans. You are coping hardcore if you think anything you said is possible, you'd have to literally nuke the planet and kill off most of the population and start from scratch to create the world you imagine. Women don't need to be defeated, they need to lose their leverage and be rendered obsolete, then there's no reason to even care if they desire you or validate your existence idiot, that's the point. You don't need to care about women at all when you can just pay for sex. Anyways I'm done, good luck with your pipe dream cope, its never gonna happen though, but you lack the common sense to come to that realization. If this is what high IQ thought is I think I'd prefer common sense over that any day lol

In these cases, although the responders provide thoughtful responses to the original poster, they also accuse the person of coping and thus being wrong or misled. The term coping serves to expose those who believe that being white explains why they are unable to find a woman, and to insult someone who disagrees. Sometimes, these insults are pointed and lack additional context, other times the insult is accompanied by a thought-out rationale.

Finally, and perhaps the most important example of this coping phenomenon, is in reference to the forum. In the following thread the original poster argues that “the forum is cope” but laments that there is nothing that can be done about that:

if u fuck around with poor people u will always be poor ursel, if u see how rich people operate daily u will more likely get that habit as well. same here, the more u hang out here and whine and bitch about incelldom, the more fucked u get. but what can we do when we were cursed to never get laid, right?

While the original poster makes the observation that the forum is essentially the ultimate cope, others are quick to argue that the “real” cope is continuing to trying to find a partner and not succeeding.

Cope is going out expecting things to change when they never will...

Others accused the original poster of coping, saying that thinking the forum is a cope is the actual or real cope:

Mega cope. You are here for a reason. I became smarter thanks to this forum. I never had sex even before coming here.

Once again, coping is a term thrown at those with whom someone disagrees. While leaving the forum and engaging with people in person would likely increase their chances of finding a partner simply because they would be around women, this is considered a waste of time.

The term coping generally refers to activities that distract individuals from their situation; therefore, coping could be viewed positively as something that can help an incel escape their distress and could include participating in the forum, playing video games, and other distracting activities. However, for incels, the term cope is also often used negatively, as “a response to people who say things that indicate that they're out of touch with reality” (“Decile,” 2020). In this way, a cope is also a delusion about the

permanence of and/or the reason for their incel status. The Incels.Wiki entry for cope, provides examples such as:

"Yeah I'm balding, but I'm not past my prime, I read that men peak at 40."

"The reason that girls reject me has nothing to do with my short height. Once my career is established girls will line up for me."

"I'm not getting any matches on Tinder. There must be some kind of bug, I hope they can fix it in the next update."

"There is nothing wrong with being a virgin, it's not like I'm missing out on much anyway, sex isn't all it's cracked up to be."

"I could have sex whenever I wanted to, I'm just not interested in having a bunch of soulless, loveless casual sex."

"If you just work on your personality and keep a positive attitude, you will find a nice girl eventually." ("Cope," 2020)

Many of these examples could be interpreted as optimistic views on dating and the ability to find an intimate partner. It is also something incels believe normies would say and have said to them. While coping could be considered a positive activity, in that we want to increase a person's ability to cope with negative situations and feelings, in this case, any attempt to "cope" is negative in and of itself. If this sort of helplessness is internalized by members, the forum then appears to act as a barrier to desistance.

While it is possible to interpret calling out "copes" as concerned members trying to help those they deem "delusional" from experiencing additional pain, doing so also acts as a barrier to leaving the forum. When an individual is attempting to be proactive and try to find a partner, the term is used by some in what appears to be an effort to discourage this pursuit. Leaving the forum and finding success may reinforce feelings of failure for those that remain. Depending on the relationships the individual leaving the forum has with other members, the loss of a friend, or brother, may also be difficult. Although leaving the forum because one has found a partner is referred to as "ascension," the loss of a member could be perhaps selfishly viewed as "unfair" perhaps as a result of jealousy. How one views the loss depends on the perception members have of the permanency of being an incel. If being incel is considered unchangeable, a member who ascends can be disavowed and viewed as never being a "true" incel at all.

4.3.4. Will the real incels please come forward

One prominent theme in the data are references to “real” versus “fake” incels. Within the forum, individuals appear to be concerned with who is a “truecel” versus those who are *fakecels* *vol*-[untary]-cels and *locationcels*. A truecel is someone who is a “Kiss-less and touch-less virgin –] has never had any sort of physical interaction with a member of the opposite sex because of his repulsive ugly appearance. another word is *permacel* [sic] (“Incel forums term glossary,” 2020). Truecels exist on a spectrum with truecels at one extreme, incels (those who are involuntarily celibate but may have had a physical interaction with the opposite sex) in the middle, and *nearcels* on the other extreme. *Nearcels* are those who are “romantically unsuccessful, but not adequately enough to qualify as an incel or truecel; a portmanteau of “nearly” and “incel”” (“Incel forums term glossary,” 2020). This inceldom spectrum reflects how “deeply one is immersed with the inceldom condition” (“Incel forums term glossary,” 2020). Outside of this spectrum are *volcels*, *locationcels*, and *fakecels*. *Volcels*, or *voluntary-cels*, are those who are believed to be incel but whose incel status could change if the individual were to make certain changes. Similarly, *locationcels* are only incels as a result of the city they live in; if they were to move to a different country, they would be successful. *Locationcels* are often considered *volcels* because they are expected to move to have sex. *Fakecels*, are those who are faking their incel status.

Without speaking to incels, it is difficult to understand why someone may be a *fakecel* or whether *fakecels* truly exist. The term “*fakecel*” may simply be an insult directed at another member – if one is fake, then they may not be seen as worthy of being in the group. Attempting to expose someone as a *fakecel* may be a way to maintain boundaries within the group as individuals may only want “real” incels on the forum or may only trust these “real” incels. Alternatively, if there truly are individuals who are pretending to be incels, then it is important to maintain boundaries by excluding those individuals, and to check the authenticity of its members. Checking for authenticity is a phenomenon seen in other communities include the pro-anorexia community (Boero & Pascoe, 2012). Why someone would want to fake being an incel is unclear. Perhaps it is because they may be lonely (although not involuntarily celibate) and may be looking for community online and have found a place where they are accepted, or perhaps the forum is a source of entertainment.

One example of being a locationcel comes from a post in which a member travels to Thailand and proceeds to share his success of finding sexual partners. In these examples, not moving to another continent is seen as a choice by some; thus, locationcels are voluntarily incels.

Ehhhhh fuck off actually,even if I would have a chance to score some low tier asian women I don't feel like travelling to another continent just to try and get some pussy,I would like for people of my race to not find me repulsive.

ahaha another volcel spotted meanwhile ethnics are INcels cuz theyre unwanted everywhere

1. I can't go to Asia for the next couple of years. 2. Then I'd just return to Germany and rot again. What is seperating a sex trip from fucking actual hookers? 3. Being white is not a superpower. Being attractive is

1. so u are a locationcel not incel 2. it would give u huge life fuel and u can plan to live there to escape inceldom or bring a girl t gernany 3. oxymoron being white is the ultimate beauty standart in asia

Because they are seen as being able to leave inceldom, their self-identification as an incel is not necessarily seen as legitimate. In these examples, the stereotypes around race and whether whites can even be incels are also questioned. The belief being that white men are generally more desirable than other men are, especially to Asian women.

In another example of this phenomenon, individuals react to a survey of members in the forum. The results showed that 33% of people who responded had female friends; this information was not well received:

FUCKING BEG YOU, 33% in this FORUM HAVE FEMALE FRIENDS???!!!!!!! BEEING NT + UGLY IS ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE. UGLY HUMAN BEEINGS SHOULDNT HAVE ANY FRIENDS

If you have any friends or social life youre a fakecel/volcel.

Friends = normie True incels have no friends. [Click to expand...](#)
incels are celibates, you had sex with 10 girls, 2 of them being teenagers.

For some, friendship itself does not align with their understanding, and perhaps their experience of being an incel. Others disagreed, saying:

Come on bro this is retarded. In high school I had female friends yeah, but that was nearly 5 years ago. Being deformed doesn't mean you have to be socially retarded as well. None of them were ever attracted to me.

How the fuck are you a fakecel for having friends? I have 4-5 friends from my highschool i still hangout with when i'm on break from uni. I have ZERO friends at uni and ZERO female friends. Being ugly dosent stop you from having friends. Even the elephant man and the scaly skinned fishboy had friends.

Lastly, in response to the same thread, a member states, “tfw [the feeling when] there’s only like 10 truecels left.” These exchanges show that although there is a common understanding that being an incel is being involuntarily celibate and that being an incel is a life status, the incel identity is actually more complicated than the term denotes. Even more important is that within incels.co there does not appear to be clear boundaries about the characteristics of an incel. How the incel identity is created and what the specific characteristics of incels are is something that needs to be explored further in future research.

Who should be allowed to become a member of incels.co?

Although there are some clear boundaries about who is not allowed to become a member of the forum – females, gay people, and those anti-incel – there are some questions about existing members and whether they should have been allowed to join in the first place. Some in the forum believe that those who are considered “bluepilled” should not be allowed on the forum. Bluepilled individuals are those who chose to stay within the “matrix,” living in ignorance of the realities of the “cruel world.” Although most incels would likely not consider themselves bluepilled, according to the Incels.Wiki they can be (“Inceldom FAQ,” 2020).

Incels who are considered to be bluepilled may still believe that their status as an incel is not permanent and thus believe there are changes that can be made to improve one’s chances of finding a relationship or sexual partner. While many on the forum may consider themselves blackpilled, or nihilistic, others are still working on improving their

chances, whether by attempting to approach a 1000 women, as one member claims, or through other activities such as going to the gym.

In addition to bluepilled incels, there is some debate over how old a member should be before they can join the forum. While some believe that incelism is truly permanent and does not change over the life course, others disagree. There are those who believe that youth need to try everything they can before coming to the forum. They point to the fact that completing puberty can have significant impacts on one's physical appearance and thus one's odds at finding a mate. While this discussion occurs in several threads, it is most striking in response to the Anniversary and survey results. The membership survey results show that 7.7% of the 547 respondents were 14-17, and an additional 31.3% were 18-21. Members responded to this saying:

Tbh large part of the userbase don't have to be here. Almost 50% are under 21 they should all leave and try to ascend.

If you're young you should fuck off and go get your shit together. I'm not saying this directly to you [user], but in general to any youngfags here.

too many kids here in comparison to old incels reddit days.

...Youngcels are not automatically fakecels. Every incel was young at some point in their life.

Although some members do not believe that youth should be in the forum, the discussion does not occur frequently in this sample, and it appears that nothing has been done to limit access to the forum for youths. Indeed, a more recent forum survey from March 2020, reports that approximately 8% of 667 members who responded are under 17. Another 36% are 18-21.

The fact that youth are frequenting this forum (and likely others) raises concerns. While for these youth rejection by their female peers can be distressing, this rejection could arguably be considered a normal part of adolescence. In fact, research on sexual activity has shown a decrease in rates of sexual activity among teenagers over time (Abma & Martinez, 2017; Rotermann, 2008; J. M. Twenge & Park, 2019; J. M. Twenge, Sherman, & Wells, 2015; Jean M. Twenge, Sherman, & Wells, 2017), suggesting a shift

in the experiences of youth. Still there appears to be no shift in what is considered a normal, albeit new, reality in society. The resulting dissonance may cause distress, and the forum could be a space where members feel accepted. If instead of a forum like incels.co there were adequate support services and access to positive peers, youth may be able to be kept away from the echo chamber that is incels.co and away from an extremist ideology.

4.4. Deductive Results

While the inductive results showed that support is exchanged between members across various posts, the deductive analysis focused on understanding the types of social support shared between members. Within the sample, six threads were identified as overt examples of the exchange of support on the forum. The threads included:

1. The sharing of the decision to approach 1000 women
2. Sharing experience of successfully catfishing on Tinder
3. Sharing experience of successful sexual encounters in Thailand
4. Asking for advice after being kicked out of their home by parents
5. A member sharing their suicidal ideation, and
6. The same member sharing their final suicide note.

The ways in which individuals asked for support aligned with existing research. Previous research on eating disorders found that individuals posted to forums by either sharing their experiences, sharing extreme behaviour, or asking directly for help (North, (1997)). Much like North's (1997) study, members of incels.co relied on sharing experiences, both positive and negative, most often (in four out of six threads). In the current sample, asking explicitly for advice occurred once. Lastly, the sharing of "extreme behaviour," in this case suicidal ideation, occurred in two posts but were written by the same author.

4.4.1. We are here to help

When responding to the above-mentioned threads, members most often provided informational support, followed closely by emotional support. Less often, individuals provided esteem support. Tangible support was only offered a handful of times, and network support, defined as the sharing of additional networks, was not present within these threads. These findings are consistent with existing research showing that informational and emotional support were most frequently shared in virtual support communities (Coulson, Buchanan, & Aubeeluck, 2007; Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Eichhorn, 2008; Evans et al., 2012).

Informational support included the sharing of individual experiences and advice based on them, as well as general advice (e.g., I think you should do x). For example, in response to a member becoming homeless, individuals shared their own experiences of being homeless:

What state are you in? Depending on your age and by spinning a story you could get welfare. This could be a blessing in disguise, one step to stop becoming incel is leaving your parents house. I was close to complete homelessness in the winter when it was like -25 Celsius, honestly the cold is hands down the worst thing about being homeless. If you're in a place with a warm climate like California it won't be so bad. But if you're in a cold ass place you can day after just 1 day of being homeless. If you're in a warm place I'd suggest just getting a gym membership so you can shower there and clean yourself up and the rest of the day you can chill at the gym or try to find some work or something or do legal scamming to get by. Advertise a job offering that says you are a fund raising company then get your employees to collect money from people saying they are raising money for charity then just keep the money for yourself and pay a percentage to the charity. It's technically legal since other companies do this to and it's easy cause you get other people to collect the money and you just take it yourself.

Been there brother, I used couchsurfing (low inhib[ition] required but you will be desperate) and through the people that hosted me I got a shit job in mcdonalds with weekly income. After two weeks I was able to rent a room in a shared flat. Ate the food at mcdonalds, easy to steal some fried and nuggets. Good luck man, you will live alright, just let the survival instincts kick in.

By sharing similar experiences, individuals were showing both empathy and sharing informational support. They are both bonding over a shared reality.

In other instances, informational support was given based on what an individual thought someone should do.

Your first course of action will be to find a homeless shelter, be careful those places run like prison don't let anyone punk you. You'll next want to save up for a van where you can remove the back seats and place a mattress and juggle a day job and a night job while using your gym membership for showers.

At this point you should just start robbing people, you've got nothing to lose. I would mostly focus on pensioners and the weak.

you're gonna make it brah. go to church get accomodation then get a job and work your way up until you can provide for yourself. then disown your parents when this is all over.

Find a salvation army I think they take you in if you volunteer.

You should be able to feed yourself via dumpster diving and food kitchens. Aside from that, you need to find a way to maintain hygiene and get a job.

In this example, members also provided information (although not necessarily factual) by arguing that the original posters parents cannot simply kick their child out of the homes, arguing that it is illegal to do so without sufficient notice:

They cannot kick you like that. Not in USA. Go to police and tell them that your parents kicked you out without eviction notice. You have about 30 days, in which you will look for job and learn how to drive.

Within this thread on being homeless, was also the best example of tangible support, which was not found often within the forum. One member says

Holy shit brother, this is discerning to read. I hope you make it through the night. How long will you be homeless for? Do you need money?

Although not providing tangible support themselves, a handful of other members argue that tangible support should be something incels provide their brothers.

bro, where you at? If you're serious, maybe some of us can help you

What State are you in? A Richcel [a wealthy incel] should house you for a bit.

I agree. We should have some solidarity between incels. Even sleeping on the floor at someone's house is a better option than woods.

I wish I was a richcel, I'd have a Beach House in Santa Barbra and invite everyone on here over and then hire a bunch of escorts for an incel orgy. Would be epic.

While tangible support is not being exchanged, there is some inclination towards attempting to provide this type of support.

In another exchange of support, members respond to an individual who catfished¹⁷ a woman over a dating app; this woman planned a trip to visit him in another country. Initially, individuals responded with what was characterized as esteem support:

This is fucking epic lmao!

This is a YUGE moment in incel history.

OP is a GOD

she got owned lmao , good job mate

Omfg lmao WHAT A BEAST

In these responses, the individual is praised for his actions, sometimes called a God. Individuals seemed to believe the member did a good job.

In this case, the original poster's initial amazement at his ability to deceive a woman quickly turned to guilt. In response, members provided informational support by sharing their opinions on what he should do.

Ghost her if she sees your subhuman visage irl she will not even recognize you, or just puke. Lol over chad chasing whore will fly over a

¹⁷ Catfishing refers to pretending to be someone other than yourself on dating apps.

thousand miles to get chad cock and semen. Fuck this world, fuck this life, burn it all.

If you ghost her it could fuck her up for a long time, developing massive self esteem and trust issues. Call me whatever the you want but I feel bad for her. If it was me I'd just own up, tell her it was an experiment and if you can afford to atleast pay for her ticket back. Everyone already knows women will do anything for attractive men and treat unattractive guys like us as creeps. Making her travel to another country doesn't make this any more factual.

Every word of this is more cucked than the last. This girl here is average looking and would never acknowledge you exist simply because you are ugly and you will still wk her.honestly go be a faggot on cucktears

Show her your real face then report back with how nice she is.

Evident within these examples is that incels responded by denying the existence of a victim. By sharing advice in the form of this neutralization technique (Sykes & Matza, 1957), the individuals justify the behaviour because in their eyes, women in general and this woman in particular, deserve to be treated poorly. Essentially, these members are justifying the actions similar to the way members of a zoophilia community justified their deviant and illegal activity (Maratea, 2011). Using a neutralization technique such as this is another example of informational support as individuals are sharing their opinions and advice.

Emotional support was most prominent in response to the member sharing his suicidal ideation and his eventual suicide note.

Don't do it [...], you are an important poster here.

Post a mug in your final post, what do you even have to lose. Enjoy your last day, brother. You will be missed, if not by the awful world that torments and mocks us, then by your compatriots and camerades here, with whom we struggle in solidarity.

He's a good poster. It would be sad if he kills himself

I still wish youd reconsider, you made some great posts on this forum and we would have still had your back. But I understand that your life

is yours alone and so is the decision to end it. I really hope there is a better life after this one and I wish you all luck in finding it

A number of people responded to his post with attempts to either dissuade him from suicide or to share their love for him and his posts. Following his final post members shared sentiments that he would be missed and to rest in peace.

4.4.2. You're wasting your time; I'm not here to support you

Although some members are supportive of their incel brothers, others are not. In one thread, a member attempting to approach 1000 women, believing that "there is no way in hell that not 1 girl in 1000" will not like him, although committed to this activity, is met with resistance. A handful of posters called this behaviour a cope:

Giga cope. See you in jail.

Cope until you come back to rope.¹⁸

In these examples, members responded by saying that this individual is just "coping" and that they will ultimately be disappointed and rejected. Others were more explicit in their lack of support, saying:

If you think that is gonna work, you're delusional. Cold-approaching girls in public just creeps them the fuck out.

You made a mistake. I assume you meant 1,000,000 cold approaches, not 1,000.

stop embarrassing yourself

Have fun groveling at the feet of a thousand women.

Further attempts to discourage include members sharing their experiences in approaching women. In these cases, individuals claim that they have approached thousands of women but were still unsuccessful:

¹⁸ This phrase appears to be well-known within the community, highlighting that a person copes until they lose hope and thus back to being suicidal from: https://incels.wiki/w/Cope_or_rope

I'm a high school dropout with an IQ of 70, but I will apply at every Ivy League College in the country. Someone has to accept me, right guys? Take it from a guy who has actually done 1000+ cold approaches with pretty much zero success: Approaching women is NOT a numbers game. That's one of the biggest, most persistent PUA myths. All women, nomatter what they look like only want chad to approach them. If you get rejected by 10 women in a row the next 990 approaches won't be any different.

I already approached somewhere around 4500 in my life. Zero success with anything I had atleast some physical attraction to

These experiences and failures of approaching women can be interpreted as attempts to dissuade and discourage the individual from attempting to find a partner. These attempts to dissuade the original poster from trying serve to encourage the original poster to accept the "reality" of being an incel, and thus the permanence of the incel status. As previously mentioned, by discouraging members from engaging in positive activities and by encouraging members to take the blackpill, individuals face a barrier to leaving the forum.

4.5. Putting it all Together: Understanding the Incels.co Community

The results of the current study substantiate the claim that incels.co is a virtual community. Indeed, some members refer to the incel brotherhood. Community is also seen through the way they interact with one another, engaging in debates, providing support to one another and creating boundaries around who can and cannot be an incel. Section 4.5.1 contextualizes and make sense of these findings within existing literature on community. The current study also yielded an additional finding about incels generally. Most importantly, the findings show that a key point of contention within incel communities is the role of right-wing extremist sentiment within their misogynist ideology. The implications of that finding are explored in section 4.5.2.

4.5.1. On community

First, although members rarely referred to incels.co as a community, individuals respond to other members as brothers, suggesting that the bonds these members feel to one another may be stronger than that of community, as brotherhood reflects a familial

bond. This bond is not unexpected, as there are other groups such as ISIS that rely on creating a brotherhood. Indeed, the actual forum itself includes an invitation to join the community on the front page. On the surface, this invitation implies members of incels.co view incels.co as a community.

When compared with the work by terrorism researchers on virtual communities, a number of similarities exist. Much like in Bowman-Grieve's (2009) study of Stormfront, individuals engage in conversations, taking turns to speak, asking, and answering questions in turn. Incel.co members also engaged in debates, although they were not necessarily as respectful as those on Stormfront. This deviation from Bowman-Grieve's (2009) findings highlight that incel group norms are different from those of Stormfront. Both platforms, however, include rules and norms enforced by moderators (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; De Koster & Houtman, 2008). They were also able to recognize usernames and members, as was the case with members of Stormfront (Bowman-Grieve, 2009). Emotion was easily found throughout the incels.co forum, a key finding within the Stormfront forum (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; De Koster & Houtman, 2008); however, within incels.co emotive responses and emotional exchanges of support for other members were most apparent in response to a member's decision to die by suicide.

More generally, the findings are in line with both Rheingold's (1994) definition of virtual community and Etzioni's (1996; 2003) definition of community. Within incels.co there is a sustained discussion over time, suggesting regular interactions, which Rheingold (1994) states are necessary to establish a virtual community. Emotion, which is a key element of community (Etzioni, 1996, 2003; Rheingold, 1994), was also present within incels.co. There was evidence of emotion in specific exchange of emotional support, but also within general discussion where individuals shared reactions to other posters. Arguably the use of profanities to confront members suggests that individuals are at least somewhat passionate or acting with emotion in these responses.

Members of incels.co have also very clearly created a community based on a shared history and shared norms (Etzioni, 1996; 2003). At the most fundamental level, all incels share an experience of rejection by women. Evidence of this rejection is evident in a number of places, including the introduction thread, in which incels often referred to themselves as kissless or kissless and hugless virgins. Some further

identified as “kissless hugless handholdless virgins” or KHHV, referring to a shared reality. This shared experience is also apparent in other threads including in response to a member who stated he wanted to approach 1000 women in order to find someone who would not reject him. Some members responded by saying that they have done the same but had not had success. And although there is a shared history or experience, this shared history is not entirely homogenous. For example, members of different races share that they have had different experiences and understandings of being an incel.

Shared norms are also shown in a number of ways. First, there are clear definitions of who can and cannot be a member as well as what constitutes allowed or permissible behaviours. Perhaps most notably, individuals on incels.co often confronted other members on their opinions or perceived delusions. Similarly, within the forum it is normal and thus accepted that members will not always agree and may experience pushback on their posts. These interactions are often confrontational from an outsider’s perspective, and yet this is considered acceptable.

In addition to norms, Etzioni (1993; 2003) defines a community as having a unique culture. This unique culture is arguably most evident in forum members use and creation of a common language. The ability to redefine a word, such as “coping,” reflects the incel community’s ability to create a unique vernacular. While coping is one example of how language is used by incels, there are other examples of words created or coopted by them. For example, among incels, certain monikers are used to describe members. The term incel has been adapted with various prefixes, effectively create subcategories. These subcategories include but are not limited to ricecel, ethniccel, and currycel, all used to describe non-white incels often by referencing racial stereotypes. These prefixes can also include references to mental health, vocation, and leisure activities: mentalcel is used to describe incels with a mental health condition, gymcels is used to describe someone who goes to the gym, and stemcel is used to describe an incel working in the STEM sciences. Using language in this way allows incels to quickly differentiate themselves from the group, adding more detail and nuance to their identity while also referencing the common incel experience.

Other examples of language creation are key terms in the incel ideology. These include the use of words like Chads, Stacys, and normies, used to describe attractive men, attractive women, and average looking people, respectively. Similarly, females (in

general) are sometimes described as froids or femoids. These are used as derogatory terms. Use of this language allows members to easily define the bounds of membership – the in-group from the out-group. It also allows members to exchange ideological beliefs quickly, reinforcing the ideology and common beliefs or feelings towards the out-group. But perhaps most importantly, it creates a unique language that contributes to the incels.co “culture.”

Their created language is both a way to define their ideology but also a way to create community among incels. McMillan and Chavis (1986) hold that a common set of symbols, including language, is a defining component of membership and sense of community. By using a common symbol system, and in this case, a common language, group identity is established (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In addition to this, language is essential to the creation of community and allows for members to easily identify in-group versus out-group identity. It is also not unreasonable to expect that a common language allows members to feel as though they are “part of a group,” thus contributing to in-group/out-group distinctions.

Not evident in the current sample, but apparent in Bowman-Grieve’s (2009) work, is the distinction between older and wiser members from newer members. Bowman-Grieve (2009) concluded that because of the exchange of information and resources on Stormfront, as well as the way knowledge is transferred from older members to newer members, Stormfront could “arguably represent a community of practice, where members have actively sought out this virtual space to use effectively to interact in a meaningful community driven way” (p. 1005). Communities of practice are informal learning communities, where learning occurs through interactions between masters and apprentices (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The theory suggests that learning occurs through seemingly non-instructive everyday interactions between those who know, masters, and their apprentices, rather than in a formal learning setting. Since its conceptualization, the theory has changed significantly, shifting from a master-apprentice model, to a model of social learning and identity creation, to a managerial approach to community building (Li et al., 2009). In the most current iteration of their work, Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) describe communities as “groups of people who share concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (p. 1). Although groups may have a shared interest and regular interaction, they need to be creating “a shared repertoire of resources[...] ways of addressing reoccurring problems”

created by practitioners (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 2) to be a community of practice. Communities of practice are essentially task oriented (Herring, 2008). Yet it is unclear what task or problem members of Stormfront were taking on. While arguably coming together and sharing resources, experiences, thoughts and opinions on ideology, in addition to actively encouraging members to take particular actions in the name of ideology could be considered a “task,” it does not necessarily translate to tackling a particular problem. Bowman-Grieve (2009) state that

“Communities of practice are informal social learning environments where members share their experiences and opinions, their ideologies and outlooks; over time such communities develop their own set of norms and have the potential to contribute to the creation of very real values.” (p. 1005)

However, this would be the case with any community and does not reflect communities of practice task-oriented nature. Indeed, Bowman-Grieve (2009) does not clearly address what exactly constitutes practice within this “community of practice.”

There was no clear evidence that knowledge is passed down from older to newer members or master to apprentices within the current sample. In addition, although incels are a group with a common interest, or at least a shared experience that does regularly engage in conversation and are thus a community, there is no evidence that they are working on solving any particular problem. In other words, they are not task-oriented. If a key characteristic of being an incel is the acceptance of the blackpill, as suggested by Hoffman et al. (2020) and Zimmerman et al. (2018), then members of these communities are supposedly accepting the fact that they are unable to find a partner rather than working to find solutions to this “problem.” While not all forums are considered to be blackpilled, incels.co is, and as such it does not seem appropriate to characterize it as a community of practice.

This is not to say that learning is not occurring in the forum – it is. It is also reasonable to believe that there are discussions about what should be done to change the incel situation. But, if we accept the premise that incels are lonely and looking for like-minded people, it may be more beneficial to view incel spaces as communities of support. This conceptualization is perhaps more in line with how incels characterize inceldom – a life status, and one that is distressing. This characterization would also be reflective of the current sample, where members exchanged support, and discussions of ideology occurred but were not necessarily most prominent. Future studies should

consider using a larger sample in order to ascertain the extent to which these conversations are happening and whether there is any evidence suggesting incels create communities of practice.

Elements of Community and Support

In addition to the more general definitions of community and virtual community, incels.co also contains elements of community as defined by traditional sense of community and sense of virtual community measures. Incels.co contains a number of tradition measures of sense of community by McMillan and Chavis (1986). First, with respect to membership, there are clear boundaries on who can become a member, and these boundaries are reinforced through membership requests as they can simply deny requests from those that are not welcome. This ability to control membership may help maintain safety and security as there is no immediate danger of opposition or attacks from non-incels. Safety is also partly a result of the anonymous nature of the forum. The forum encourages users to create usernames and include avatar pictures, while maintaining that members need to exercise caution about what they share on the internet. Because members can choose their usernames they are able to remain anonymous which allows for increased safety (De Koster & Houtman, 2008).

We can see that there are also a number of individuals who have shown a personal investment in the forum by the number of posts they contribute. There are members, although not all members, who consistently engage with others on the forum. This engagement is also characterized by a common symbol system, or a common language, not necessarily understood by the public. These findings again lend support to McMillan and Chavis (1986) conceptualization of membership, including both common symbol systems and personal investment.

Although it is unclear how much influence the group has over individuals and how much influence members have over the group, there is evidence of some level of conformity and cohesion. McMillan and Chavis (1986) argue that influence over the group and the influence of the group on individual members results in cohesiveness. Cohesiveness in general is present on incels.co although there is a small, albeit substantial, number of individuals not afraid to disagree. These division, however, do not discount the fact that there are common shared beliefs and experiences of being an incel. These instances of disagreement and confrontation may be a reflection of a desire

to create more cohesion. Exposing someone as a fake or coping, is one way to protect the membership and what it means to be an incel. Further research is needed on understanding the degree to which the group is able to influence a member and the degree to which a person can change the group.

With respect to information and the fulfillment of needs, McMillan and Chavis (1986) argue that shared values result in similar needs. Given that incels share a common experience of rejection and isolation they likely also share a similar need for connection and acceptance. We know from previous work by O'Malley et al. (2020) that the desire for connection is one reason for joining incel forums. The forum may be a place where individuals may be able to find a sense of belonging and where their needs for interaction can be met. Indeed, we can see support being exchanged on the forum. Similarly, members of incels.co have a shared history that they identify with and thus a shared emotional connection.

When looking at the more specific sense of virtual community proposed by Blanchard and Markus (2004), incels.co appears to show elements of virtual community. First, there is evidence that individuals recognize member usernames, for example, by directly asking about members, in addition to recalling members more intimately, by remembering their beliefs. There is also some evidence that members do remember specific details about individual members and have relationships with specific members. In a number of places there are references to speaking to individuals using private direct messages. In terms of creating a unique identity distinct from the group, individuation is most evident in examples where members take stances opposing a commonly held belief. However, without speaking to members and without making individual members the unit of analysis, it is difficult to tell the extent to which individuals are choosing actively to individuate.

A key element identified by Blanchard and Markus (2004) in community is the exchange of support. Support was easily identifiable and was exchanged within the forum. In fact, using work by Cutrona and Russell (1990) and Cutrona and Suhr (1992), it was possible to identify that informational support and emotional support were the most common types of support shared. Although it is not clear whether the individuals' needs for support were met, the community is able to and willing to respond to their needs by providing support.

The last element of community Blanchard and Markus (2004) propose is attachment obligation. They argue that in a virtual community, individuals should feel an obligation to participate in the community. Given the dataset, it is not possible to comment on this element; Without speaking to individuals, it is impossible to know if they feel a sense of obligation to participate or how strong that obligation may be. Evidence within the forum suggests that members amass hundreds, sometimes thousands of posts on the forum, arguably suggest that they feel some obligation to or at the very least feel drawn to engage. Future research should focus on speaking with incels as

4.5.2. On incels more generally

The current study also corroborates existing research on incels. Most importantly, the current study is similar to Jaki and colleagues (2019) in finding that while members may discuss right-wing extremism, right-wing extremism is not the norm in this sample. This finding is unsurprising as many members of incels.co are non-white. However, these findings stand in contrast to existing theoretical work that has positioned incels as a part of right-wing extremism (Hoffman et al., 2020; Zimmerman et al., 2018). These results suggest that our understanding of what incels are and their ideological beliefs are perhaps not as clear as they should be.

Indeed, the findings of the current study indicate that incels are not a homogenous group. Their willingness to debate one another and stand in opposition to one another is an important component of their interactions and arguably their identity. These debates also help draw distinctions between who incels are or are not. For example, in debates around who should be allowed to become a member of incels.co has implications for both boundary setting and membership within the forum. For some, having friends disqualified individuals from being incels. Others believed that white men cannot be incels and are instead just locationcels. For some, being an incel was a permanent status that did not change over the life course. As a result, they believed youth could be incels and should be allowed don the forum, while others believed that identifying as an incel is a last resort. Our current understanding of incels as simply angry (often white) men is too simplistic. How the incel identity is created and what the specific characteristics of incels are, is something that needs to be explored further in future research.

The structure of incels.co and the various spaces to share music, recommend books, and watch movies also suggests that not only is incels.co a community, it is actually a world within a world. This virtual world allows members to completely escape from their daily lives, yet stay connected to the outside world, albeit through the lens of incelism. The lens protects its members, at least somewhat, from having to engage with non-incels. However, the protection is not necessarily complete, as posts are accessible to those without a membership and as a result posts can be linked to other spaces such as r/incelstears who regularly respond, poke holes, and make fun of incels.

Chapter 5.

Conclusion

The current study shows that incels.co does function as a community. Through a thematic analysis of 17 of the top 50 threads on incels.co the results show that incels.co does contain elements of community as defined by both general definitions of community and more specific conceptualizations of sense of community and sense of virtual community. Four themes were found: The incel brotherhood; We can disagree, but you're wrong; We are all coping here; and Will the real incel come forward. The research also shows that within the incels.co community, individual members both share experiences, ask for support, and receive emotional and informational support in response. Support was broadly a reflection of two themes: We are here to help; and you are wasting your time, I'm not here to help you. The current study also highlights the heterogeneity within the incels.co forum that needs to be further explored in subsequent research.

The forum community emerged following the closure of r/incels and shows incels.co members' resilience and need for interaction. Knowing this, it is obvious that policy responses to incels cannot simply be focused on removing these domains. Censorship of this group will likely lead to displacement rather than disbandment. Closing accessible forums may push incels into the dark web, making it more difficult to monitor and anticipate escalations in violent rhetoric and future violence. It would instead be beneficial to closely monitor these groups and limit the accessibility of these communities to the general population while not banning them outright.

The results of the current study also confirm that incels are not a monolithic entity. The incels.co membership is heterogeneous as is reflected in the debates and conversations they have. Treating incels as one homogenous group by relying on stereotypes and tropes does not allow for an adequate nor effective response to the risk incels pose. For example, while research has previously suggested incels are a part of right-wing extremism, the current work and work by Jaki et al., (2019), provide counterevidence to this claim. Thus, more research is needed to understand the characteristics of incels beyond their basic beliefs.

In addition to understanding incels themselves, we must understand how incels react online to be able to understand how to respond. If, as was the case in the current study, incels join forums to find community and support (Regehr, 2020), then policies should be created that target incels prior to finding these online spaces. The need for support is further reinforced by the prevalence of mental health concerns among incels (Jaki et al., 2019; Regehr, 2020), which are likely exacerbated by the echo chamber that incel forums are. Therefore, responses to incels should be grounded in real-world services and real-world connections. Importantly although incels.co and other incels forums can radicalize individuals, there is nothing wrong with individuals looking for a community in which they can lament their dating woes and find support. It is when that discussion shifts to hatred and calls for violence that this community is problematic.

Incels feel rejected by society, in addition to their desired mates, and as such any approach hoping to be successful should be focused on accepting these individuals while slowly countering the narrative. Fostering non-judgemental authentic relationships between incels and those they view as their oppressors (e.g. normies) will be necessary to create change.

The current study, although adding to the scant research on incels, does have some limitations. First, the study relies on a small sample and although qualitative research focuses on in-depth exploration of small samples, it is possible that the inclusion of additional threads may result in different findings. Future work should include additional forums and a larger number of threads. Second, while the current study focuses on understanding community through member discourse, future studies would benefit from directly interviewing or surveying incels on how they perceive and experience incel forums. Although the results of the current study show support for community being present within the incels.co forum, individuals' perceptions of whether the space is a community, and their feelings of community may vary. As Anderson (1983) states, community is imagined; thus more research is needed.

Future studies must also explore how incels create identity and what being an incel truly means. For example, can they have friends? Can white men be incels? Is incelism permanent or does it change over the life course? These are all topics that have been contested within the forum. Existing research has not been able to narrow down key components of being an incel, such as whether incels are a right-wing

extremist group or not. The current study suggests that right-wing extremism, while discussed on the forum, is not accepted by all members. One notion they consistently accept is misogyny; incels are thus best described as *misogynist extremists*, a new form of extremism worthy of scholarly attention.

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Appendix A

Rules and FAQ

Taken from: <https://incels.co/threads/rules-terminology-and-faq.799/>

Nov 9, 2017

Rules and Terminology

Welcome to incels.co. This is a forum for involuntary celibates, people who have trouble finding a significant other. If you wish to know more about incels in detail please scroll down to the FAQ.

Note that this forum has no rule against impolite or typically-deemed offensive language. As long as decorum is maintained, users are allowed to express themselves in ways that would be censored elsewhere. If this bothers you, don't browse the site. Read the rules below for an in-depth explanation of what is allowed.

Users

- **incel (Allowed):** Person who desires, but is unable, to be in a romantic relationship.
- **Honorary Member (Conditional):** Person who is not currently incel, but agrees to respect the views portrayed on the forum. The user should be indistinguishable from other incel members, and mentioning they aren't incel is an instant ban.
- **Female (Not Allowed):** Banned on sight, no exceptions. This is a male-only forum.

Rules

- **Bragging:** No discussing/requesting personal romantic or sexual experiences, even if they happened long ago. Discussion of paid sex (e.g., escorts) is allowed as an exception as long as it doesn't devolve into bragging. No humble-bragging, this includes subtly praising one's own features ("I'm incel even though I'm muscular and 6'2"). Use Looksmax.me to discuss romance. Heavy bragging outside of incels.co may carry a warning/ban if it is brought to our attention. No LARPing; there's a difference between withholding your experiences and pretending that they never happened.
- **Users:** No persecution, bullying, sharing accounts, or posting on behalf of banned users. You can only have one account.
- **Behavior:** No trolling, baiting, white-knighting, mass PMing, mass tagging users, posting misinformation, platitudes, or arbitrary necroposting (i.e., don't post in inactive threads - older than ~1 month - unless you have a good reason to. Plain agreement, mere quoting, and meaningless one-liners don't qualify as a good reason).
- **Content:** No low effort, spam, advertisement, all-caps, or selfies.

- NSFW Content: Pornography and violent content needs a [NSFW] tag if it's a thread, spoiler tags if it's a post. No NSFW avatars or signatures.
- Disallowed:
 - Asking for ratings (use looksmax.me).
 - Trans and gay content of any kind.
 - Worship of both males and females (i.e., praising them, putting them on a pedestal, posting pictures to admire them, etc). This also applies to avatars and signatures.
 - Cherry-picking (e.g., posting unattractive men with girlfriends).
 - Requesting a ban (PM a mod to do so instead. Read the [rules on bans](#)).
 - Discussion of illegal activities. If in doubt, assume it's rule breaking.

Subforum Guidelines

- Must-Read Content: Posting in old threads is allowed, some may be old but all are relevant to this day.
- incelom Discussion: No spam. No low effort.
- The Lounge: No spam. Some low effort allowed.
- The Sewers: Everything allowed, except blatant spam (e.g., mass posting "aaaa" everywhere, mass tagging people, etc).

Mods warn and delete content on a case by case basis, so please don't try to circumvent the rules.

Please read our [privacy policy](#) for more information on data and content. By using this site you agree to all our policies and rules.

MORE IMPORTANT INFORMATION

-What are incels? What is the blackpill?

All information can be accessed from [this thread](#).

-I have an inquiry or proposal, or want to advertise on the site, where can I reach you?

Email [omitted]

-Does you have a Twitter?

Yes: [@incelsCo](#) and [Member Twitter Redacted]

-How do I change the site's theme?

There is a button on the bottom left of the page to change themes.

There are many, including Dark themes easier on the eyes.

-When can I send private messages/vote on polls?

If you're active you'll be given permission automatically, be patient. It's a spam prevention measure.

-How do I add an image to my signature?

Go to imgur.com and upload the image. Click on the down arrow once its uploaded -> Get share links, and copy the BBCode (forums) link. Paste that in your signature.

-How do ranks and stars work?

You earn one star per 100 posts, up to 5 stars.

Once you get 500 posts your rank and color changes, and you reset to one star again.

Notice that for each rank you need to have been registered one extra week on the site, this is so spamming to skip ranks isn't possible.

You can see all ranks in the Members section's sidebar.

-I have more than X posts, why hasn't my user color changed?

If you have the post count + registered time required, simply be patient; the 'upgrade' process runs every hour.

-How do I change the tag under my username/my alert preferences?

From your preferences panel.

-What is Fast Banana?

Change your theme from the bottom left corner of the page to Fast Banana, you'll see.

-Can I block a user that is annoying/I don't like?

Yes. Click on their username, followed by the button "Ignore".

-Can I edit/delete my posts and threads?

Posts: You have a 15 minute window to edit/delete them.

Threads: You have a 15 minute window to edit them. You can't delete them, as otherwise good discussions are sometimes lost.

You can always ask a mod to remove content if you really need it gone (we don't mass

delete however, it's a task we do manually), but the time given should be more than enough to erase should you make any mistake.

-How do I get alerts from a thread?

At the top right of every thread there's a button that says "Watch".

If you want to Watch a particular thread without having to post, simply click the button.

By changing your alert preferences, you can automatically Watch threads after you post in a thread, or after you create a thread.

-Can I change my username?

No.

-Can I delete my account?

No. We do not delete accounts nor mass-delete content. You can change your privacy preferences to make your profile "invisible" to others. You can also PM a mod to get a voluntary ban.

-What happens if I am banned?

Your posting privileges will be taken away, and you won't be able to start PM conversations. Sometimes existing PMs will be deleted.

If you feel your ban was unfair you can post an appeal in the "Ban Appeal" section. Read the sticky there first.

-How can I stay safe online?

The same way you do anywhere else: Don't post personal information (e.g., name, address, phone, email, pictures, etc), unless you are comfortable exposing that information to the whole internet. If you want to go a step further, you can post with a proxy or a VPN (we don't allow either during registration to avoid spam, but afterwards you are allowed).

-How do warnings work?

Warnings you get are active in your profile for exactly 1 month by default. Active warnings will add up, and if they total 60% or more you will get a temporary ban (up to 4 days). At 100%, you'll be permanently banned.

-Why was X user warned/banned?

Warnings are personal, we do not publicly announce reasons.

You are free to PM the user in question to ask, though know that it will not be an official statement.

-What is a low effort reply?

Low effort replies are generally unrelated to a thread or posted for memetic value.

Examples: emote reply to thread, many men, go ER, and many other variations. The response might as well not have been posted.

-Are antisemitism, racism, and the like prohibited?

They all have a very high chance of breaking the existing rules against persecution, bullying, trolling and personal attacks, after all, members of the forum belong to many races and cultures. Severity and frequency raise the likelihood of mod action. We allow you to express yourself in a very broad way, but don't be an asshole.

Appendix B

Rules on Ban Appeals

Taken from: <https://incels.co/threads/rules-on-ban-appeals.15066/>

Jan 17, 2018

All users have:

Two assured unbans per year for requested bans. They reset to two at the start of the year (Jan 1st), regardless of whether you use them or not. They do not stack.

- One unban chance for non-requested bans. The unban might or might not be accepted, depending on your appeal and the offense that permabanned you. If you use this chance and then get permabanned again, you might or might not be allowed to appeal again; ask a mod.
- One extraordinary unban chance, to be used at least six months after an appeal of yours is denied. If your offense was severe (e.g., heavy trolling), you might not be given this chance. It never replenishes, you only get one.

Ban appeals are only for permanent bans, NOT temporary bans.

If you are temporarily banned you can respond to the warning PM that triggered it to discuss it with a mod.

To appeal a permaban:

Mention the mod who banned you.

1. Explain why you feel your ban was unfair. Notice there's a difference between a justification and a complain.

Take into account:

There is no set time on how long it will take to answer your appeal, but usually it is less than 24hs.

- This is not a place to rant. If you do so your appeal will be automatically rejected.
- Don't post in other people's appeals.