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### **Learning More About Incels by Analyzing What They Post on the Internet**

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## **Learning More About Incels by Analyzing What They Post on the Internet**

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### **Abstract**

The current study attempts to learn more about incels by analyzing what they post on the internet to gain a better understanding of why incels believe what they do. By analyzing an incel forum via qualitative analysis and thematic coding, we have created four main themes of incel ideology: Empathy and Community, Importance of Physical Factors, Hatred of Women, and Epistemology. The goal of this research is to better understand incel interactions among each other as well as how incels interpret and interact with the world outside of the incel community.

**Keywords:** Involuntary Celibate, Incel, Qualitative Analysis, Thematic Coding

### **Learning More About Incels by Analyzing What They Post on the Internet**

Incels, a portmanteau for the term involuntary celibates, is a term originally used to describe individuals who sought to be sexually active but were unable due to non-conventional attractiveness, social-emotional barriers, or lack of economic or physical resources (Donnelly et al., 2001). The term has since evolved to describe a contingent of such individuals (almost exclusively men) who endorse violence, terrorism, and anti-feminism as a means of reclaiming their masculinity (Baker, 2016). In recent years, incels have increased in visibility due to an active social media presence, utilizing multiple social websites to connect around the

world and develop their core philosophy and gain followers (Maxwell et al., 2020).

However, incels are not active solely on social media. According to Scaptura and Boyle (2020), multiple mass shootings in the past decade were perpetrated by individuals who expressed incel sentiments or were involved in incel communities online. One such incident was the mass shooting in Isla Vista, California in 2014. Elliot Rodger distributed a written manifesto and YouTube video describing his quest for retribution against women before killing six individuals and wounding more than a dozen others before killing himself. Following the incident, Rodger has become an icon to the incel movement, a hero in what some in the community describe as the coming Incel Rebellion (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020).

As the incel subculture grows, more individuals outside the movement will encounter incels and incel philosophies. This includes human services professionals who may encounter incels as voluntary or involuntary clients. A hallmark of professional counseling is the pursuit of client wellness goals while also respecting client cultural differences (Lee, 2008). Additionally, the codes of ethics for both the National Board for Certified Counselors ([NBCC], 2023) and the American Counseling Association ([ACA], 2014) task counselors with preventing harm to clients and others while also working to reduce social injustice at all levels of society. Counselors then must walk a line of promoting client autonomy while also working to reduce inequity and harm within society. As a result, counselors may encounter individuals who espouse beliefs or values with which the counselor may disagree. In those cases, counselors are directed to bracket their personal values and maintain the professional values that require work toward understanding for and respect toward the client (Kocet & Herlihy, 2014). However, before counselors can ethically bracket their values, they must understand the values of the client; in this case, counselors must understand the subculture of incels so that they might find the balance between respecting client values in pursuit of clinical goals while assessing for possible social or individual harm.

This study investigated the content produced by incels in a public online forum to better understand the experiences and ideology of the population. The research team examined a portion of the content of a popular incel website for themes in order to better understand the incel population. The study research questions were:

1. What are the ideologies espoused by members of this community, and
2. What themes emerge from conversations occurring within this community?

While other researchers have investigated the incel subculture (e.g., Glace et al, 2021; Maxwell et al., 2020), we examined a site that was not used in previous studies. Additionally, we related findings to the standards of professional counseling, an area not explored in the existing literature. Because counselors may encounter clients who are in the incel community and in need of services, considering the incel subculture in comparison to the objectives of counseling may be a critical area of knowledge that improves client and social outcomes.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

A thematic analysis was selected for the current study. Thematic analysis is utilized when researchers seek to understand the experiential and interpretive realities of subjects (Braun & Clarke, 2014). Further, a thematic content analysis provides the opportunity to examine content, themes, and subthemes in written documents (Hays & Singh, 2012). In this study, the data under examination included forum posts from an online website. Engagement in social media and similar social forums presents the opportunity for increased support and connection to others (Eghdam et al., 2018). Forum posts may also more accurately represent the thoughts of incels, as groups that are suspicious of research or who are concerned about legal repercussions are less likely to be forthcoming in direct approaches such as interviews and focus groups (Goldstein, 2014). A content analysis of this forum allowed for data collection and analysis of organic dialogue present among incels.

### **Participants**

Due to the nature of the content, participants were unspecified members of the incels.co forum website. All participants were members of the site but used alternate names or handles. The website

has since become inaccessible. However, at the time of the data capture, there were approximately 4,000 members.

### **Data collection**

Upon approval from the institutional review board, the researchers downloaded posts from the incels.co website. The volume of existing posted content in the group made it unfeasible to analyze all entries on the forum. To obtain a representative sample of the data available from the group, the posts marked Must Read were selected for analysis. These posts represented the most upvoted or most commented posts across the forum.

### **Data**

The content analysis procedures for this study were developed from existing procedures on content analysis in media studies (Davies & Mosdell, 2006) and clinical social sciences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vonk et al., 2007). Units of analysis included all forum posts marked as *Must Read Content* within the group. A post describes original comments entered by a participant onto the forum page of the incels.co website. 110 posts were used in the analysis.

### **Coding and Data Analysis**

Coding and data analysis were completed by all authors. The Braun and Clarke (2006) data analysis method was used. First, each researcher read through the data to become familiar with the content as a whole unit. Next, each researcher began independently coding the posts for units of meaning. Guidance on units was kept intentionally vague to allow each researcher to determine how to chunk the data. Once all posts were coded, the researchers met to review codes and determine initial themes. This was followed by a review of the data and confirmation of themes. Any instance where a unit could not be attributed to a theme code was reviewed by all researchers to determine if a new code was

needed to better capture the essence of the data. Themes were then discussed and operationalized by the researchers. Vonk et al. (2007) indicates a 70% threshold is sufficient for interrater reliability which was met during the analysis. Due to the anonymity of the data, member checking was not possible.

### **Researcher Bias and Trustworthiness**

The researchers possess differing identities and are at different stages in their academic careers. Two researchers were new to the research process, and one had limited experience with qualitative research. All researchers recognized that they possessed identities or beliefs that were in opposition to the initial concept of incels and the subsequent emergent themes. Researcher worldview, bias, and values can impact the outcomes of qualitative data (Hays & Singh, 2012). As suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the following steps were taken to increase trustworthiness of the current study: (a) consultation, (b) self-reflection throughout each phase of the data collection and analysis, and (c) data triangulation. Data was triangulated through review of themes with a third party, an academic with content knowledge related to human services.

### **Themes**

#### **Empathy and Community**

Within and throughout the incel forum posts from which our data was collected, various themes emerged; one of which was that of empathy and community. It was found that the individuals on this site have developed a sense of comradery with one another, involving the sharing of common views, values, and experiences. Furthermore, the dialogue within this community promotes a significant amount of negative dialect that can lead to the spreading of feelings of hopelessness and resignation to life as

an incel. An example of this is expressed by one commenter as follows:

What I'm saying is that as incels, by definition, we're nature's failures and unwanted children. As such, we're in the perfect position to critically weigh the value of the natural process we've been more or less excluded from. After all, have you ever wondered why there has to be people like us, losers, why people have to suffer and die to continue a cycle of reproduction and need fulfillment? Ever wondered why people literally create problems for the purpose of mitigating their own pain, just to have somebody else go about resolving them in the same manner (or fail and suffer more for it)? The reality is that biological life and its propagation, it's not only pointless, but unfathomably harmful. As long as this process continues, more and more people will be created, who go onto live miserable lives solely due to their genetics, to say nothing of all the other sources of unnecessary harm which existence forces upon its captives.

Commenters often believe that their lives are pointless and view themselves as one of the least (some would argue the very least) important populations in the social hierarchy of society. Because of this, they view existence in and of itself as futile for the incel population.

On the other hand, there are several commenters who think that they have embraced their identity as an incel, including all the ramifications that go along with that identification. One commenter discusses his personal acceptance of inceldom on the forum saying,

I've started to realize that I'm not suffering as much as many of the incels on this site because I had the best "default mindset" for

someone who would grow to be incel. I only want sex, I don't want to feel desired, or admired, etc., I abandoned my ego years ago, I just want to enjoy the physical feeling that comes when you ejaculate into a woman's body, and for that there's escorts...Change your standards, not for women, but for life, latching onto normie standards when you clearly aren't one is illogical, the moment you focus on what you can enjoy in this life rather than what you can't enjoy, you'll stop wasting time and feel a lot better.

In instances such as this one, some incels have come to find ways in which they can lead a life that is satisfactory and fulfilling to them while still understanding and acknowledging the limitations that go along with such an identity. These individuals then share their thoughts and experiences with their fellow incels to help others to better accept their own identities as incels.

The theme of empathy and community is also present throughout the incel forum in the aspect of advice giving and receiving. One instance in which this is evidenced involves a commenter posting his experience of discovering that he was not the biological father of the children he had been raising. The commenter posted, "Found out at least 4 of my 5 kids are not mine. Wife refuses to confess her infidelity. Unsure of how to do what's best for my children and marriage." Fellow incels responded to the post on the thread providing the commenter with their advice, opinions, commentary, and empathy regarding his situation. Further along in the thread, the original commenter noted that he was grateful for all of the input and advice regarding his situation that was provided to him through the forum.

Additionally, the theme of empathy and community was exemplified throughout the forum through the detailing of various success stories of individuals who have found a way to

leave incel-dom. One such example was regarding an individual who once identified as and was viewed by his peers as an incel, but who has since become involved in sexual relationships and has had offspring. A commenter discusses this particular incel's story of success saying, "He is gonna be a father to a 3rd child from yet another foid. Truly a success story and a life and hope fuel for incels." This example is meant to act as a source of hope and inspiration for other incels by providing them with proof that it is possible for a person who previously identified as an incel to come to have sexual interactions and to procreate, instilling hope that there is a possibility of leaving incel-dom.

### **Importance of Physical Factors**

Another prominent theme that was found to be present throughout the posts on the incel forum was that of the importance of physical factors. When referencing physical factors, commenters discussed physical attributes such as race, ethnicity, facial structure, height, weight, tone of voice, penis size, etc. Within this conversation, commenters also frequently mentioned how possessing certain physical attributes then negates the importance of having an agreeable personality. One commenter shares his views regarding this saying, "It is as I have always thought: personality means shit. I have been rejected by women all my life despite of being a good person. I have been also rejected by my extended family because of my looks. I have always been an outcast." This logic is upheld by many incels on the forum, and it is noted on numerous occasions throughout the posts that being a good or kind man does not hold as much value or importance as the way a man looks.

Another commenter shared similar viewpoints regarding the extreme importance of physical features in the ability to have an active sex life. This commenter shared that "Chad has 3 critical qualities that every man must possess in order to

have a normal sex life. They are: - Youth - Looks - A neurotypical personality." Both youthfulness and looks are physical features that are considered by the incel community to be necessary in order to reach the status of being a man who is desirable to women (aka: a Chad).

Additionally, commenters on the forum discuss how it is difficult for any other characteristic of a man to make up for that of one's physical features. A commenter exemplifies this idea by stating:

So, the only way money can compensate for being physically unattractive is if you are in the top 0.5%, and this is just enough to bring you back to equal to an average white guy. It still isn't enough to make you actually attractive, and you need to find a way to make sure girls know about the money for it to even matter in the first place. So again, we can see the hierarchy is Race > Height > Face > Money.

This commenter provides a hierarchy of importance involving what qualities/possessions lead to men being consistently sexually active. The first three levels of the hierarchy correlate to physical features, and, as is mentioned in the quote, it is viewed to be quite rare that another quality can outweigh one of the physical attributes, which, in turn, reiterates the emphasis placed on an incel's appearance. Incels on the forum also discuss limitations and restrictions that they face in society as a result of some of their physical features. Specifically, a commenter noted that:

Shorter men don't have more issues with their sperm compared to tall men, but the recipients of the sperm almost always request taller donors, so the sperm banks and fertility clinic comply with their wishes. Many facilities require that their sperm donors be between



5'10" and 6'2", although others maintain that you must be at least 5'7" to qualify.

Incels often share that they face issues regarding their height in their day-to-day lives. Height has become such a prominent topic among the incel community that a name has been developed for those incels who are of a shorter height than the average male, referred to as a manlet ("Manlet," 2024).

Moreover, there is a significant number of conversations surrounding how incels can conform to become increasingly similar to the males that women seem to be attracted to; one of these ways is through cosmetic surgery to alter a person's facial structure. A commenter attempted to reach out to his fellow incels expressing, "Don't let normies tell you that your appearance is not the source of your depression, that facial surgery won't help you at all, and it should not be covered. There are many studies online that prove that facial surgery can significantly improve your life." This commenter's thoughts suggest that there is a considerable amount of emotional pain that many incels endure due to their facial appearance. Because of this, this commenter (along with others on the forum) are suggesting that surgically altering one's face may be the solution to help alleviate some of the mental suffering that many incels seem to be facing. The option of plastic surgery is one that appears to help provide a bit of hope amongst the incel community, although some incels do feel that even the process of undergoing facial surgery would be futile in helping them to achieve a life outside of incel-dom.

### **Hatred of Women**

Another prominent theme found throughout the posts on the incel forum was that of hatred of women. There are a few different ways in which the theme of hatred of women presents itself and they are: anti-feminism, hypocritical women, and

modern women by design. These subthemes reflect the pervasive incel belief that current social structures privilege women to the detriment of men. The result of this belief is a recurring resentment and critique of the behavior of modern women.

One incel illustrates the idea of antifeminism by saying "It wouldn't matter if the Lord came down from heaven and directly told people that men are discriminated against in almost every socioeconomic position so as to hire more women. People would still believe that women have it worse and they need help but that they also don't need help because they are strong and independent!" This incel makes a mockery of the strength and independence of women and almost insinuates that feminism has led women to think that they are more than what they are and that they can do more than what they actually can. Another incel illustrates this by saying:

I hope people get the point here, the purpose of these laws and social norms were to ensure a code of conduct amongst men, so that we would as a collective agree to allow each other to pursue and court women in a safe and organized manner, unimpeded by other men in an 'unfair' manner, we all had a fair chance. There was a 'social contract' at play here. In these modern times the social contract is no longer functioning, expecting men not to regress and go back to the days of rape and violence when the contract is no longer being enforced and/or adhered to, is what is truly outrageous, and not the acts themselves.

In this case, the reason that the "social contract" is no longer at play is because of feminism and the threat of rape in response shows how angry the commenters like this and many others feel about the power that feminism has given to women.

One incel illustrates the idea of hypocritical women by saying “Even though prostitution is illegal in many Western countries, prostitutes who complain about rape or abusive clients are allowed to file police reports because there no longer is a stigma on female promiscuity.” Another commenter replies sarcastically “b-but prostitutes are victims!” These incels, and many others, are upset that women have so much power and can do what they please with their bodies. Additionally, in cases of rape or abuse, women should tolerate or accept the situation and should not be able to file reports about it.

One incel illustrates the frustrations of modern women by design by saying:

You see that slut on Instagram, a lot of you moralfags on this site would say that she is being immoral, but you would be wrong. She doesn't kill, she doesn't steal, she doesn't <insert 'bad' thing here>. That's her morals, as far as she's concerned 'the times have changed' and she can be a slut and 'it isn't hurting anyone'. She is completely moral for the era she exists in.

Incels have a difficult time dealing with the fact that women can be who they want to be and can do whatever they want to without the approval or permission of men and as this becomes more prominent, incels find themselves having less control and they internalize this as womanhood being against them.

All of these, through the language used throughout the forum by incels, can be understood and taken as a hatred of women. There were many more instances and variations of such verbiage and ideas throughout the forum, so these examples are not exclusive, and many more examples exist.

## Epistemology

The last prominent theme found throughout the posts on the incel forum was that of epistemology. Throughout the forum, incels draw many of their conclusions using scientific data/studies and their own interpretations of legitimacy. Many of the incels utilized scientific data when discussing the social requirement of an appeal to physical factors. One incel says “As you can see, 65-70% of white women and a big chunk of women your own race writes you off from the get-go if you are not white.” Accompanying this post are images of graphs regarding preference of height and race. Another incel says “In one study ... female brains were shown to INNATELY process words differently from men.” This incel utilized many more sources to back this claim. In these instances, incels highlight data that maintain their beliefs.

Another instance of scientific data/studies occur from their own experiments. It was common throughout the forum for the incels to create fake Tinder profiles from the perspective of two genders: male and female. The experiments involving the fake profile being a male would be constituted of two separate accounts being made; One being the ideal male based on the scientific data and the other male being one that is lacking the support of the scientific data. One incel requested support for their experiment by saying “Need pictures of an 8/10 Arab that can't be reversed search, and pictures of a 5/10 white that can't be reversed search. ... Also give me the same descriptions for both. They need to have the same status and height.” In this instance, the incel is testing the theory that if you do not meet white attractiveness standards, you will not be able to find a suitable partner.

Another way these Tinder experiments are presented are from the perspective of a woman. One incel created a fake Tinder account with the



intent of seeing how many people would be interested in what they referred to as a landwhale, a person considered unattractive due to their large size. The incel says “Holy fucking shit. I have no fucking words. I literally am disgusted. I can’t believe it. I just set up an account for Tinder and used this pic. I got 10+ likes in the bar literally after finishing the bio.” While this version of the Tinder experiment is intentionally disrespectful to women, it is illustrative of the type of applied experiments that incels would use in this forum to prove their belief of men’s sexual disadvantage compared to a variety of women.

Much of the standards for defining legitimate evidence stem purely from personal experience. Many of the incels will interpret a single negative or a few across a limited number of posters and from those, draw a generalized conclusion. One incel says:

JFL if you think personality matters. Chad can treat women like trash as soon as he meets them and that won’t change her first impression of him. There are guys out there who spend hours on witty openers trying to be clever and still don’t get a text back, meanwhile chad does the exact opposite and insults them and not only gets a reply but her number and then bangs her. Personality never mattered, it was the face all along.

In this example, this incel has tried to utilize personality with no success and from this trial-and-error process, it is concluded that the method of utilizing personality will not work. This also concludes that to progress a relationship with women, do the opposite. An incel could read the previous quote and from it take that if a woman will not respond to witty opener, then send an insult instead.

Another example of the legitimacy within incel belief is unverified thought processes. One incel says:

The males of nearly every species employ the use of force (rape) in order to pass on their genes because what the female thinks of them (validation) is irrelevant to them, their primary goal is to reproduce. ... If validation is inherent to human nature, then men of the past should also have chased after validation, seeing as though nature is throughout the time-space continuum. But this is not the case.

Incels will post similar thought process about different larger ideas. Within this quote, the incel acknowledges an idea (validation) and then debunks it existing by explaining how it had not existed or been desired previously and so it cannot be of existence or be desired now. While flawed, this is a common process found within the forum for incels to make sense of a situation and have it expanded to encompass inceldom.

### **Implications**

The four themes we outlined have major implications for mental health professionals (MHP’s), more specifically counselors. Throughout the incel community, there is a very blatant lack of trust of mental health professionals and counselors due to their perceived inability to relate and fully understand the struggles faced by the incel community. Due to this distrust, incels are unwilling to receive help for how to better interact with the society that they feel has wronged them and will continue to wrong them until their issues are resolved. To succeed at better helping incels with their personal, social, and mental health needs, counselors not only need to address the incel community with compassion, but they also need to have a thorough understanding of how to specifically

interact with incels to address the problems that they face.

As detailed in the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (Ratts et al., 2016), understanding client worldview is critical to developing productive counseling relationships. With more incidents involving incels occurring globally, counselors need to understand the incel ideology and worldview to begin to explore avenues for change. For example, counselors familiar with incel language and beliefs can identify when students in schools are becoming involved in incel spaces and provide early intervention. Counselors who understand the ideology can also target social justice advocacy efforts in specific domains, including improving gender and sexuality education, promoting social skills development, and promoting positive online community. Lastly, counselors who have incels as clients will need to take steps to position themselves empathically as they work to understand how their clients exist within the ideology. While counselors may not agree with the incel worldview and may work at times to challenge unhelpful narratives with incel clients, they need to be familiar with the themes in order to begin unseating any harmful beliefs.

### **Limitations**

The results of this research while as in-depth as possible of the forum that we used, had some limitations. One major limitation was that we only included and analyzed data from one incel forum and many more do exist. Another major limitation is that the data analyzed was taken at face value and so some instances could have been false, but this is the risk taken when looking at an online forum. We also acknowledge the study captures a limited sample of what is likely a diverse and varied community that will warrant further investigation.

### **Future Research**

As other researchers (Maxwell, 2020; Sparks et al. 2022) in the area have noted, more studies focused on compassionately understanding the incel community are needed. This is especially true in professional counseling where the literature remains limited. Additionally, outcome research focused on improving interpersonal effectiveness and other outcomes for incels is needed. However, this will require increased efforts to engage the community and invite them to counseling. A very clear direction of research in the future is creating a tool to help bridge the gap between counselors and incels so that incels will have more support. More specifically, a tool that assesses counselor attitudes towards Incel beliefs could prove to be beneficial in beginning to try to attract more incels to the idea of being counseled.

### **Conclusion**

Our thematic analysis of key posts in this incel community forum produced four main themes that encompass their interaction. All the data used for this research were pulled from a unique source, incels.co. Since platforms like incels.co are frequently shut down or their past posts removed (Hauser, 2017), this research captures a unique slice of incelism that may have been lost. This research expands the knowledge base regarding incels and is beneficial particularly to inform mental health professionals for improved treatment outcomes when working with individuals who identify as incels or stakeholders who are involved with incels.

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