Incel Bonding: Masculinity and Storytelling in Online Misogynist Spaces

Gunnar Eastman
INCEL BONDING: MASCULINITY AND STORYTELLING IN ONLINE MISOGYNIST SPACES

by

Gunnar Eastman

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Advisory Committee:
Dr. Michael Haedicke, Associate Professor in Sociology, Advisor
Dr. Jordan LaBouff, Associate Professor in Psychology
Dr. Brian Pitman, Associate Professor in Sociology
Dr. Judith Rosenbaum, Chair of Communication and Journalism
ABSTRACT

The incel subculture, short for “involuntary celibate,” is one that exists mostly online, but boasts a relatively large number of dedicated members. The goal of this research is to determine how the incel subculture shares their ideology and develops a sense of group identity. The study reviewed 76 threads of posts across two incel forum websites, and was able to conduct three interviews of members from one of those sites. That content was analyzed iteratively for cohesive themes. Several themes emerged, chief among them was the activity of storytelling, which appeared to be done in three different major ways, with varying effects depending on method of telling the story and theme. Methods of telling stories included: Repetition, in which users share similar personal stories; Co-creation, in which users are provided a fragment of a story and twisting it to fit cultural narratives; and Elaboration, where one user makes a claim about outgroups which other users expand upon. Themes of these stories often revolved around performances of gender, hopelessness, despair, and misogyny. Boundary work was also a prevalent activity on incel forums, taking the forms of veteran users policing newer users to ensure they are actually involuntarily celibate, distancing the subculture from the mainstream culture, and members of one forum critiquing other forums.
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INTRODUCTION

The incel subculture, short for “involuntary celibate,” is an online community of individuals who cannot find romantic or sexual partners. The term was originally coined by a woman known as Alana, who started the online forum known as Alana’s Involuntary Celibacy Project in 1997, which was reportedly a “friendly, …supportive place” (Taylor 2018). Since then, it has become overshadowed by men seeking to blame women for their own lack of a partner, sometimes seeking violent retribution in the form of mass shootings. The most infamous of such shootings is the one conducted in Isla Vista in 2014 by Elliot Rodger, who killed six and injured fourteen before ending his life (L.A. Times 2014). Rodger quickly became an idol for the incel community, who now use his initials to refer broadly to such acts of violence.

Incels as a group can be described both as a community and as a subculture. The Collins Dictionary of Sociology defines the term subculture as “any system of beliefs, values and norms which is shared and actively participated in by an appreciable minority of people within a particular culture” and community as “any set of social relationships operating within certain boundaries, locations or territories” (Jary 2019). While incels exist in many cultures, there is a consistent system of beliefs, values, and norms between them, which are discussed and operate within certain digital locations.

The purpose of this research is to determine how the incel subculture shares their ideology and develops a sense of group identity despite the limitation of being mostly online. This study builds upon previous research in the incel subculture, as this is far from the first time it has been investigated, as well as research in storytelling in social movements. It employs a multifaceted method, analyzing posts from 76 forum threads
across two incel forum websites, and conducting three interviews of incel forum members.

Statement of Positionality

Given the controversial nature of the subject matter, I find it important to disclose personal characteristics that might have impacted my standing in relation to the incel community and thus the outcome of this research. At the time of writing, I identify as heterosexual, cisgender, male, and shy, and as such, similar to many of those who find themselves in the subculture (ADL 2020). Furthermore, I have also experienced the struggle of trying to find a romantic partner, and so when I initially began this research, I approached the incel community with what could be considered a level of empathy for their plight. That said, in no way do I condone any violence towards or bigotry against any person or group of people for any reason. I have been aware of my positionality, and importantly, my level of sympathy for men who are unable to find a romantic partner, from the start of my research, and worked hard to ensure that this did not color or bias my research in any way. Some of the actions I took to avoid this included: Regular meetings with my advisors, meetings with my committee, and reflection upon the positions shared by those in the incel subculture on misogyny, homophobia, racism, etc. as compared to the positions I hold on those topics. As a result, I believe I was able to research the subculture in as objective a way as possible.

However, I also want to note that the research has certainly benefited from my being a young man, as I was able to secure three interviews, and had I been a woman I doubt even that many of the members of the incel subculture would be willing to discuss it with me. Here I will note the lack of a woman’s perspective in the analysis of the
research, which will make it a different experience than it would have been had a woman been doing this research. As a man, I am not part of the demographic normally being targeted or villainized by the subculture, leading me to feel innately less threatened by them. While members of the subculture did find and post pictures of me, as well as two of my social media accounts, the comments left in response to those pictures were relatively tame. As a result, I found the posting of my accounts intimidating, but did not feel threatened enough to end the study, and recognize that my gender identity and expression likely made the process of acquiring interviews easier. To my knowledge, my identity had no effect on the information acquired from those interviews.
LITERATURE REVIEW

The Black Pill: Shared Ideas of the Incel Subculture

This is far from the first research to be done into the incel subculture, as several initial forays have sought to outline their ideology and identify the demographics of the subculture. Lindsay defines inceldom as a state in which people (predominantly socially alienated men) are unable to find women willing to be in a romantic relationship with them (Lindsay, 2022). According to the Anti-Defamation League, it is speculated that there might be as many as 100,000 members of the subculture (ADL, 2020). A poll conducted by the Anti-Defamation League showed that among respondents, 82% were between the ages of 18 and 30, with another 8% younger than 17. Of the poll respondents, 43% were from Europe, with 38% from North America, and the remaining respondents scattered across Africa, Asia, Oceana, and Central and South America. Only 55% of the respondents identified as white, and of the 667 total respondents to the 2020 poll, only 665 identified as male.

As noticed during the first few moments of the research for this study, members of incel groups make liberal use of slang. For example, some denote their ideology as the black pill, in reference to the scene from the Matrix where Neo, the protagonist, must choose between taking a blue pill to fall back into his old life or a red pill to be awakened to the true nature of his world. Lindsay argues, based on having read content written by incels across two forums, that some incels extend the metaphor to include a black pill, which “makes one aware of the unchanging nature of reality,” believing not only in a rigid hierarchy of romantic and sexual success between “low-value men” and “alpha males” but also that one cannot change their status in such a hierarchy, inherently
doomed to one’s fate (Lindsay 2021: 32). The other two pills also make appearance in slang, where people who are “bluepilled” do not believe in the existence of the sexual marketplace, “redpilled” individuals are those that do, but consider it possible to improve one’s sexual market value, and “blackpilled” individuals are those who believe in the sexual marketplace and that it is not possible to change one’s value. They elaborate upon this idea in a plethora of more detailed concepts that work together to enable this fatalistic outlook.

The first major concept constructed by the “black pill” is that of sexual market value and the sexual marketplace. Lindsay explains that the idea of the sexual marketplace is that women seek romantic partners bio-deterministically, that is, that they seek partners the same way wild animals would, attempting to mate with evolutionary advantage in mind (Lindsay, 2022). It is believed that each individual has a sum of traits, normally including income and physical attractiveness, that can be used to determine how valuable one would be as a mate. One’s sexual market value, by extension, is the value that one has in such a marketplace. According to a separate research article by O’Malley, members of incel groups often interpret their lack of a mate as an indication that they are physically unattractive, referring to themselves with demeaning terms such as “ugly, degenerate, manlet,” etc. (O’Malley, 2022) While they appear to be consistent in finding themselves unattractive, they are not always consistent in their reasoning for why women do not choose them.

While some incels prescribe the idea that women are simply choosing the most attractive mate, others believe them to be more malicious. In a similar vein of believing behavior to be genetically hardwired, some incels have claimed that women have a
natural propensity for manipulation and tendency for cruelty (O’Malley, 2022). Lindsay points out the dissonance between considering women to be both unaware animals and master manipulators. Other incels blame feminism specifically for their lack of success in the sexual marketplace (Lindsay, 2022). Lindsay indicates that these beliefs are designed not to have a coherent opinion on women, but to dehumanize them, greatly assisting in the process of making threats of, and carrying out, mass violence (Lindsay, 2022). While not all people affiliated with the community hold these beliefs with the same intensity, it appears that some do stand by them strongly enough to commit violence. Clearly much research has been done into the ideology, though some has also been done into its effects.

**Characteristics of those Affiliated**

Some research has been done into common experiences among incels, with interesting results. This research suggests that incels tend to suffer from loneliness, but also that this loneliness can lead to depression and despair, in such a way that can prevent their seeking out the very relationships that would end their involuntary celibacy (Donnelly et al, 2001). These conditions, in combination with the ideology, lead to a cycle of rejection and bitterness in the instances in which they do seek out relationships, further intensifying their belief in their incel status (December et al, 2020).

Dominant themes in the current literature on the subculture include the ideology and its intersections with masculinity and misogyny. Multiple studies cite acceptance and status threat as important themes, as well as how such threats affect the behavior and beliefs of the subculture’s members (Bruson, 2021; December, 2020; Lindsay, 2022). Acceptance threat is the fear that one might not actually belong to their group, and status
threat is the fear that their group is being undermined (Scaptura, 2019). Brunson suggests that incels suffer from acceptance threat, holding the idea that part of what makes a man masculine is sexual success with women, and that it is their lack thereof that makes them less of a man. Brunson describes that such examples outline incels putting in the work to perform masculinity “correctly” but are not getting from it the sexual success they had anticipated. For example, one incel is quoted as saying “I cut my long hippie hair that I loved and took me over 3 years to grow. I’ve been going to the gym for 4 months and I’m actually starting to get jacked. Hasn’t helped me with women at all.” (Brunson 2021:8)

Brunson argues that the idea of “correct” masculinity comes largely from media, where male characters in TV shows and movies, in addition to magazines marketed toward men, help to define what it means to be a man. This dissonance between one’s perceived gender performance and their perception of the ideal member of that gender leads to stress about not living up to one’s gender role, which is correlated with other, more dangerous consequences.

Other research has attempted to determine how this acceptance threat correlates with traits perceived to be held by those in the incel subculture, as well as how it correlates with fantasies about violence and rape, topics that are not infrequently discussed on incel forums. One survey in particular supports the points made by Brunson, showing a correlation in young adult men between stress surrounding one’s gender role and both fantasies of rape and traits and feelings associated with incels, such as insecurity, resentment, and feelings of unattractiveness and defeat (Scaptura, 2019).

Scaptura’s survey collected a list of traits used by journalists to describe incels and incel groups, as well as terms that members of incel groups used to describe
themselves. These were then organized into two groups, the first containing “defeated” and various synonyms, the second containing “hateful” and various synonyms, for a total of 20 terms. A survey was sent out online to men aged 18-30 asking them to rate how closely they identified with each of the 20 terms, then to complete the Masculine Gender Role Stress Scale developed by Eisler and Skidmore to determine how much they suffered from acceptance threat and status threat (Eisler & Skidmore, 1987). Finally, respondents were asked to rate how often they fantasized about destroying their enemies with powerful weapons, and about committing rape, two questions that were adapted from the Aggressive Fantasies measure (Rosenfield et al, 1982). The survey concluded that men who suffered more greatly from gender role stress were also more likely to identify with the “defeated” and “hateful” traits ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$; and $\beta = .29$, $p < .001$, respectively), and that suffering from acceptance threat led to respondents being one and a half times as likely to fantasize about the use of powerful weapons and committing of rape (odds ratio [OR] = 1.43, $p < .01$ and OR = 1.48, $p < .01$, respectively) (Scaptura, 2019). Scaptura believes the nature of this correlation is that men who do not succeed interpersonally with women are more likely to develop the “defeated” traits. Those defeated traits can lead to acceptance and status threat, which many respond to with hatred and fantasies of domination (Dahl et al, 2015).

This study diverges from current literature by focusing not on the ideology itself, or the status and acceptance threats faced by members of the community, but on the ways in which they interact with each other and cultivate that community. This study also takes account of the fact that not all who are involved with the incel community hold all of its
beliefs with equal weight, as while some believe in the ideology strongly enough to commit violence on its behalf, others do not.

Conceptual Research

**Bonding Activities**

In this thesis, I use the term “bonding activities” to refer to activities performed by individuals within a community to build a sense of belonging with that community. Studying bonding activities helps us understand what the members of a subculture or movement do and why they do it. These activities will also help us identify the community, as different groups bond using different methods, and a group who bonds via ritual tattoos, acts of violence, and massive raging house parties will be fundamentally different from a group who bonds over discussing tea. Specifically, a group who bonds over peaceful content will likely be less likely to commit violence than one that bonds over vitriol and disdain for marginalized groups.

Bonding Activities are not unique to the incel subculture, as Simi and Futrell described many examples of activities that they witnessed in their ethnographic research of the American white power movement for the book American Swastika. Some examples include house parties, specialized, private concerts, as well as tattoos with unique meanings, both received by and drawn by members of the movement. Simi and Futrell describe the large physical presence the white power movement has, affording them many physical spaces in which to gather and perform these bonding activities, which members of the movement agree is important. They quote one member as saying “When you live in a world like we do, you have to find places where you don’t feel you have to hold back on being racist; where other people act and feel the same way you do”
(Simi and Futrell 2015:99). While the incel subculture does not show signs of having such physical locations, Simi and Futrell do cite the internet both as a place for organizing in-person events, but also as an alternative space for bonding activities and onboarding. One particular type of bonding activity they noticed was telling enlightenment stories: stories which “tend to highlight a personal trauma as the trigger to someone’s racial awakening” (Simi and Futrell 2015:188). Others include what Simi and Futrell call declarations of faith and the fostering of virtual connections that keep members of the movement invested, despite their physical distance, the latter of which is certainly key to understanding the nature of the mostly online incel subculture.

While Simi and Futrell provide an overview of numerous different bonding activities, many of them require being in the same physical location. Such events are difficult, if not impossible, for the incel subculture to arrange, given their lower numbers, and being spread across the world. As such, the remainder of this study will focus on boundary work and storytelling, two bonding activities that are capable of being performed in online environments.

**Boundary Work**

Boundary work is a bonding activity that can be defined as the attempt to define who is and who is not part of a particular group or community (Boero & Pascoe 2012). Boero and Pasco studied the nature of boundary work in the pro-anorexia community, where they found that exorbitant amounts of effort were being spent by members ensuring that other members were, in fact, anorexic, and not simply pretending. Methods such as providing false advice bait new users into making mistakes that would suggest they are outsiders. In the case of the pro-anorexia community, these outsiders are known
as “wanna-rexics,” those who wish for a thin body without actually being anorexic (Boero & Pascoe 2012).

As they also work with a mostly online community, Boero and Pascoe emphasize the importance of treating the pro-anorexia community not as a virtual community, but as a real community whose interactions happen in a virtual space. They explain that this community sustains itself on its specific rituals and its unique slang (Day, 2007; Riley et al., 2009). These rituals take place individually, such as their eating practices, though ensuring that others are committed to and actually practicing the rituals is a group activity.

Similar behavior has been sighted among incel groups, as this study has found examples in which incels will refer to one another as “fakecels,” disagreeing on what defines someone as an incel. This leads to various subclassifications of incels, such as “khhv”, which stands for “kissless, hugless, handholdless, virgins,” referring to those who have yet to even hold the hand of a woman in a romantic context, who criticize and appear shocked when they find other users who have had such experiences, even if it has been decades since they’ve occurred.

**Storytelling**

Simi and Futrell note that high among the list of bonding activities is storytelling. In the white power movement, this often takes the form of what they refer to as injustice tales, stories that describe injustices done to them by those they are prejudiced against, to justify their racism, or fortifying tales, which describe instances in which literal or metaphorical blows have been dealt to people of color, boosting morale by instilling the idea that their conflict is going well for them. However, Simi and Futrell are not the only
ones to discuss storytelling in a sociological context. Francesca Polletta has written at length on the subject, and describes in great detail the nature of storytelling, as well as how social movements can write and tell effective stories.

Polletta works to make the distinction between a narrative and a story, explaining that a narrative is a series of events described to make a point (Polletta 2011). Stories, however, omit irrelevant details, are structured more according to plot than to the actual sequence of events, and project a specific vision of the future (Polletta 2011:111).

Her later work outlines a number of rules that stories should follow in order to develop an effective narrative frame with which to direct a community. First, there should be a clear “us vs. them” narrative: some clear group that the speaker and audience are in, and some second clear group that is unjustly oppressing the first (Gamson 1992; Stoecker 1995). This trait makes storytelling a very beneficial tool in boundary work, serving to define that boundary between “us” and “them”. Second, the story being told should be “empirically credible,” or consistent with what the audience knows and believes to be true (Benford and Snow 2000). She also explains that stories are useful in the construction of frames: “sets of beliefs that assign meaning to and interpret relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherent and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists” (Poletta 2016:2).

Stories told by incels do tend to have such a framing: using terms such as “Chad”, “Stacy”, and “normie” to denote outsiders to the group, using them as characters in their stories, contrasting them against the prototypical incel (December 2020). This study also
finds many examples of the fortifying tales and injustice tales as described by Simi and Futrell (Simi and Futrell 2015:112).

Hegemonic Masculinity

This analysis of the incel subculture would be incomplete without discussing the topic of hegemonic masculinity, a term first coined by Connell, who defines it as “the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations” (Connell 2005:76). Connell explains gender as an act that is done, rather than a fact that is constant. Thus, as men act differently and are different from one another, there are similarly many different masculinities, with societal and cultural influence determining what the prototypical man looks like for any particular culture and point in time.

Connell explains also that while each man performs masculinity his own way, gender is inherently relational, that is, one cannot properly define what is masculine without also defining what is not masculine (Connell 2005). This fact is highly relevant to the incel community, as through the concept of Chad, not only do they name the hegemonic masculine character, they also describe and compare themselves to him (December 2020).

Ultimately, while bonding activities occur within the community, to strengthen the sense of identity, when discussing gender relations, femininity, and masculinity, they must draw upon sources from outside the community from which to construct their ideas about such topics.
METHODS

This study makes use of two methods for data collection: reviewing posts written by users on incel forums, and interviews with users of incel forums. The former method was chosen for its prevalence in existing incel research, being used by December, Lindsay, and O’Malley in their forays into understanding the subculture (O’Malley 2022, Lindsay 2022, December 2020). Interviews were chosen as a method of data collection for their lack of prevalence in prior research, as no research of the incel subculture specifically that I was able to find had conducted interviews.

Post Review

Two incel forum websites were used in the data collection process: blackpill.world, which hosts 1,377 users¹, and www.incels.is, which hosts 20,480 users¹. Each site allows its users to write and publish posts, which can either be standalone, starting a new “thread,” or in response to an already existing post, in which case the new post will appear in the same thread as the post it is responding to. Each site sorts the threads its users post into a general category, which contains all threads, and a “Best Of” category, which contains a list of threads curated by the site’s moderators. On both sites, posts were collected for this study from each category.

The goal of data collection was to collect as many posts as possible from threads whose most recent post was made between November 1st, 2022 and February 1st, 2023. This goal was far more achievable within the Best Of categories, as few threads were added to those categories within that time frame compared to the number of threads that

¹ User counts are as of 4/1/2023.
appeared in the general category. Collection from the general category required the additional caveat that only those threads that seemed to be of specific interest to the research were selected. For example, threads with only one post were not selected, as no actual conversation was occurring. Threads whose first post contained only a link to external content were kept to a minimum, and many threads were not collected because they appeared to be similar to those I had already collected. In total, 76 threads were collected. While that number represents a small fraction of total threads available across the two sites, I believed it an acceptable number as data became repetitive.

Interviews

Both blackpill.world and incels.is have a strict process in which new users must be approved by the site’s moderators before they can publish posts. Unfortunately, I was only able to conduct interviews with the users of blackpill.world, as the moderators of incels.is rejected my request for an account. I was able to conduct three interviews: one over Zoom, and two using blackpill.world’s private message feature. This allowed for some diversity while still allowing for depth in the data being collected. Interview participants were recruited via convenience sampling. I created a thread on the blackpill.world forum, in which I asked whether any users would be willing to be recruited, and participants were chosen from among those who responded positively.

The interview process used was described to and approved of by the University of Maine’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). In compliance with the IRB’s guidance, participants were provided many details before each interview began, so that they may provide informed consent. In the initial call for participation, forum users were provided my name, my affiliation with the University, and the fact that they needed to be 18 or
older to participate. After showing interest, participants were informed that there would be no direct benefit for participation, that I would ask for their consent before recording any video of the Zoom interview, and that all recordings or notes I take would be deleted by June 15th, 2023. Participants were also informed that they were able to end the interview at any time, that no identifying information would be collected, and that their usernames would not be cited in this thesis, except for one user who explicitly asked to be cited by username. It had also been decided that in the event that an interview participant described plans or ideations of committing violence, that information would be kept confidential. Luckily, no such plans were disclosed during the interview process.

While some reacted to the call for interviews with positive interest, that was far from the only reaction. Some were curious about who would be interviewing them, searched the internet for information on me, and posted what they found, though this was limited to my public LinkedIn and Tiktok accounts, as well as a University of Maine blog post containing a list of students who were awarded grants by the Center for Undergraduate Research, a list which I was on. While unsettling, this experience was not entirely unexpected, and I was sure to make use of a VPN (virtual private network) while posting, conducting interviews, and gathering data to ensure that none who felt inclined to determine my IP address would have an easy time of it.

Questions were asked verbally during the Zoom interview, and I recorded notes summarizing the participant’s response. During the private message interviews, I sent one message that contained the full list of questions, and participants sent a series of messages answering them. In one case, I sent a second message with additional follow up
questions, and the participant sent additional messages answering those follow up questions. The questions asked during the interviews are listed below:

1. “How did you become involved with the incel subculture?”
2. “How would you describe the ideal male?”
3. “Are there ways in which you line up with the ideal male? If so, which ways?”
4. “Are there ways in which you think you don’t line up with the ideal male? If so, which ways?”
5. “In what ways do you think you would have to change, either through effort or through magic, to be more attractive to potential romantic partners?”
6. “How do you think the ideal man would perceive incels?”
7. “Do you hide the fact that you use these forums from other people?”
8. “Are there other incels that you’re friends with in physical spaces, as opposed to online spaces? Do you meet anywhere in particular when talking about the blackpill?”
9. “How would you pitch the blackpill to people who are interested, but haven’t fully taken it yet?”
10. “Do you act differently online than you do in person? In which ways?”

The broad reaction to the call for interviews was to levy insults about my appearance and motive, so I am doubtful of what rapport I may have been able to build. That said, participants appeared to engage earnestly with the interview questions, usually responding thoroughly to initial questions, and to clarifying follow-up questions in cases where initial answers were vague. When asked about their motive for participation, one participant explained a desire to improve the public image of the community, as the incel subculture receives very little outside attention, and in the rare cases they do, it is negative.

**Data Analysis and Coding**

After the interviews were conducted and all forum posts were collected, they were analyzed for consistent themes, structure, and occurrences. These themes were organized using the website Miro to make a visualization of the theme/subtheme schema. The
analysis of the data used a grounded theory method as described by Charmaz—themes were developed as they emerged in the data, which were then checked against the rest of that data to ensure the themes fit properly (Charmaz 2008:161). This method was chosen due to the research puzzle’s nature as a qualitative one that seeks the development of new theories to understand social phenomena, and the nature of the data as examples of those phenomena, the exact type of problem and dataset that grounded theory is meant to be used with. Charmaz praises the use of grounded theory with these data, explaining that it “can lead researchers in the most useful, often emergent and unanticipated theoretical direction to understand their data” (Charmaz 2008:161). The organization of the data was an iterative process, so once a structure had been developed for the themes, that structure was applied to the data, and was changed as I found that the data did not fit the structure that was previously developed. Charmaz describes the logic of the process as abductive, simultaneously making an effort to organize the data such that a theory can be organized around them, and determining whether existing theory accurately describes the data. The Miro concept map is provided below as Figure 1. Note that not all themes that appear on this map are discussed here, as they were deemed not relevant to the research question.

All of these posts were analyzed by hand. While it would be possible to have the assistance of software in that process, I felt there was not a sufficient number of posts to require software assistance, and that analyzing them myself would provide me with a better understanding of their content.
The iterative nature of the methodology was in many ways helpful for the analysis of the forum posts, but led to the timing of the interviews being unfortunate, as the interviews were conducted at the beginning of the data collection process, before much analysis had been done. That said, notes and excerpts from interviews were analyzed the same as the forum posts, even if the data collected in those interviews was not relevant for the final set of themes.
RESULTS

The results of this study are varied, as not only do we discover what bonding activities incels perform, but also how they perform them, as each has several variations. The first of these bonding activities is boundary work, which encompasses both the drawing of lines to determine who is and isn’t an incel, but also the defending of those lines, and attacking outgroups. The second bonding activity is storytelling, which can be both an individual affair, with one author telling a story to a vast audience, or a collaborative effort, with many authors coming together to write one story.

Boundary Work

Boundary work is both about how a group defends their boundaries and who they defend the boundaries from. Lamont and Molnar explain that in communities without face-to-face contact, such as the incel subculture, the sense of shared identity is often constructed through the use of a shared vocabulary or symbology (Lamont and Molnar, 2002:182). Such a vocabulary is certainly present in the case of the incel subculture, and Table 1 showcases some examples collected from the data. Not only is this unique vocabulary present, it is rich with insults that are often targeted against others which the community wishes to define themselves in opposition to. In the case of this study, three targets were prevalent in the boundary work observed: specific outsiders, the general mainstream culture, and each other.

Mocking Individuals

In the process of promoting the study on the blackpill.world forum in the search for those who would consent to interviews, I found myself the target of these methods, as users of that forum took it upon themselves to search the internet for information about
me. One posted what they found publicly on the forum, which constituted an article posted by the University of Maine about the winners of Center for Undergraduate Research (CUGR) grants, in which my name appeared, my Tiktok account, and a high school prom picture of me, which was the profile picture of my LinkedIn account, after which several members criticized my appearance and suggested that “he might as well start posting here.” Others were suspicious regarding the nature of my research, saying “it’s probably [a] biased thesis against incels written from a liberal POV or a glowie building his dossier,” suggesting that I might be a federal agent sent to infiltrate the group. The term “glowie” refers to the idea that one can identify federal agents infiltrating a group so easily they practically glow. Another claimed I was a “r/IncelTears infiltrator trying to make incels look bad,” referring to the IncelTears subreddit, where many users post about incels in a negative light. In addition to all of this, many threw simple insults, as one told me to “go fuck [myself],” and several called me slurs.

The suggestion that a member of one of these forums is an agent of some policing organization or another appears relatively frequently. Aside from my own experience being accused, one thread on blackpill.club documents the forum taking notice of a member who posted a survey which asks participants about their sexual activity and participation in the forum, to which some members responded by warning others about the survey being a “honeypot” operation, in which such surveys are posted looking for information that would be used to incriminate its respondents, and others responded with insults, suggesting that the user who posted the survey “thinks exposing us will get the twitch thot he donates to [to] love him,” meaning that the user posting the poll did so for the attention of an attractive woman, the phrase “twitch thot” including both an acronym
for “that hoe over there” and Twitch, the live streaming platform. Other users were left wondering whether the user was trolling them, and suggesting that others provide false results to the survey.

Outright asking the community about what they believe on certain topics seems to garner a mixed reaction regardless of who asks. Another poll posted on incels.is asks users whether they fantasize about rape, with mixed results. The third comment suggests that the poll was posted by a federal agent, and while the original poster attempted to deflect the suspicion with antisemitism, other users were not convinced. Others still criticize the poll not for the topic, but for its construction, as the poll makes the respondents visible to those viewing the thread (one can click the answer to see which users gave that answer) and users might not respond truthfully when being watched.

The nature of the insults used on these forums often focus on painting them as members of an outgroup, whether that be accusing others of being members of law enforcement, or of being normal people, referred to as “normies.” The use of ‘normal’ as derogatory stems from the many woes that incels seem to believe plague the average man. It may also be a mere accusation of mediocrity. The other form of insult that sees frequent use is an accusation of some form of moral failing, whether that be vague terms such as “degenerate,” or in more detail such as “evil people who enjoy mindless violence.” The idea of a group insulting their own members is not unique to the incel subculture, as similar in-group policing was seen in pro-anorexia communities, with members of that community accusing each other of being “wannarexic,” simply wanting to be anorexic rather than genuinely suffering from the condition (Boreo and Pascoe, 2012). While the communities have similarities, Borneo and Pascoe also noted that
members of the pro-anorexia community would spread misinformation in order to catch outsiders who did not know the information was false. We do not see this specific behavior in the incel subculture, as being an incel is more about the situation one finds themself in than something that someone does. However, Borneo and Pascoe explain that boundary work is part of how one improves their own status within the group, especially because both groups are relational in nature. By warding off outsiders, whether they be “wannarexics,” “fakecels,” or “normies,” one can project that they are a real member of the group.

Mainstream vs. Incels

Another form of boundary work serves not to paint specific individuals as outside the subculture, but to paint the subculture as outside the mainstream. One such thread begins with a link to a YouTube video by VICE News about the release of the movie “Joker” in 2019 which was infamously associated with the subculture. The video refers to the fears of mass shootings near the time of the movie’s release, even though no such shootings occurred. The post containing this link worried whether such a news spectacle would occur again with the upcoming release of the sequel. Commenters in this thread spread sentiment of feeling as though they were outside the mainstream of society: “Incels are le [sic] boogyman of woke kikeoid soyciety”; “Lonely Men And Ugly Men Terrify Normies.”

Another thread is titled “Vice News Hunting Down Incel Extremists,” also beginning with a link to a VICE News video, this time about the incel subculture specifically. The video mentioned Elliot Rodger’s attack, as well as two others in Toronto and Plymouth, England, explaining that there are people associated with the incel
subculture who go on to commit acts of mass violence. The video then shows Julia Ebner, published author on the subject of extremism, explaining her process for infiltrating these groups. She advocates in favor of such infiltration, describing its ability to provide warning of violent attacks should they be discussed on the forum, as well as the insight that could be gained and put toward deradicalization efforts. Responses to this video on the blackpill.club forum include many users being seemingly confused, offended, and defensive regarding the portrayal of the movement as violent. One user summarized the message of the video as “Not Getting Laid is Illegal.” One was simply confused by the idea of studying the incel subculture as an extremist group, asking “So people who don't fuck is on the same list as people who explode? WTF?” Another asked “IF SOCIETY DONT LIKE INCELS THEN WHY NO ONE HELPS INCELS TO GET LAID AND GET SEX?”

An entire genre of boundary work is the interplay between the broader society either being entirely unaware of or looking down upon the incel subculture, anti-extremist circles studying the subculture for its violence and the members of the subculture not wanting to be known for the violent outliers. While the mainstream is the largest group that members of incel forums distance themselves from, it is far from the only one.

Conflict Between Incel Communities

While a lot of the work regarding those within the incel subculture focused on calling individuals out for being “fakecels,” some discussion on blackpill.club was focused on painting incels.is and their users in a negative light, suggesting that the incel
subculture is a collection of disjointed communities that are, at times, at odds with one another.

As the website incels.is did not approve my request for an account, all interviews were conducted with users of the website blackpill.club, who were not terribly fond of the community on incels.is. One interview participant, who used the site with the username “Prince of Istanbul,” and expressed a deep fondness for animals, recounted instances in which users on another incel forum website harassed him by abusing animals, taking pictures of it, and posting those pictures. Other users in forum posts said similar things: “It’s also filled with… normies who love violence and abuse for [some] sick reason.”

Another interview participant also named a third incel forum where users said “you can’t be incel if you’re tall,” a sentiment that is not uncommon among those who try to gatekeep inceldom, as height is seen as something that would elevate one’s sexual market value. A second forum poster suggested that the community on incels.is is larger, but that as a result, the site is “a trainwreck,” and suffers from an abundance of low effort posts that fail to generate meaningful conversation.

One thread on blackpill.club sought to discuss and highlight the differences between the two sites, and while some differences are purely a matter of ease-of-use, such as one site lagging more than the other, or missing features, as blackpill.club allows users to react to posts with emojis, where incels.is does not, others are much more focused on the content, for better or worse. Some users criticized the amount of gatekeeping present on incels.is:

“brushing your teeth makes you [not an incel] according to most users there.”

“blackpill.club allows 2d female [profile pictures] while incels.is does not.”
While others engaged in such gatekeeping themselves:

“Far less self-hating cucks on here. Also less leftist scum.”

“[blackpill.world] is the only forum worth posting on. Every other forum is cucked.”

“I stopped posting on [incels.is] cuz it’s full of guys with gfs.”

This disunion between different incel communities is an important part of the boundary work that these groups perform, as it showcases that the incel subculture is far from monolithic. Different communities have varying numbers of members and differing rules about what topics are and are not allowed for discussion, even if they believe similar things. Simi and Futrell note similar examples of members of the same white supremacist communities disagreeing, though those seem to not pertain to intergroup conflict, more towards attitudes of how white supremacists should perform their white supremacy, with younger members advocating for more explicitly violent tactics and older members preferring more quiet, subtle methods (Simi and Futrell, 2015).

Otherwise, they discuss white supremacist subgroups acting collaboratively, or at least indifferent toward one another. In the incel subculture, pointing out those differences between subgroups helps strengthen the identity of each specific community, which can assist in the forging of intragroup bonds. This is even more true if the discussion centers the in-group being a superior group, as it allows for the collaborative insulting of outgroups. While many forms of boundary work in the incel subculture involve such insults or accusations, this is not always the case, as there are instances in which users discuss the boundaries of the incel identity under perfectly amicable circumstances.
Civilized Discussion

While insults are prevalent in the boundary work of the subculture, there are exceptions to this, where members of the subculture will have a more civilized discussion regarding the boundaries of their movement and condition. Several threads of this type began with blatant questions about who does and does not count as an incel, with one containing a poll asking whether having a long-distance or online relationship counts as someone not being an incel anymore. The policing and discussion of terminology seems to be another topic for civilized discussion. One term in the incel dictionary is “ascending,” which refers to finally getting into a relationship, thus ascending from inceldom. However, one thread suggests that the use of the term is inaccurate, claiming that women are so vile that being in a relationship would actually be “descending, because you have to put up with [her],” which many commenters agreed with. Bonding in these scenarios comes from the act of collaborating to redraw the boundaries in such a way as to account for edge cases. Those who are insecure of their position within the group benefit from the activity by drawing those boundaries in such a way as to include themselves within them.

Storytelling

While this section is separated into the methods of storytelling and the themes of the stories being told, it is also important to discuss the purpose served by these stories. The purpose of a story within the incel subculture varies, though often falls into one of two categories, either to bond individuals of the group together or to draw a boundary between the audience and a different group. This lines up with Polletta’s discussions of storytelling in social movements and their use in the development of frames. She
describes that impactful stories in these settings have “a clear “we”—those to whom the injustice is done—and an obvious “they” who are responsible for the injustice” (Polletta, 2016). The frame constructed by incel movements undoubtedly achieves this, as they frequently paint themselves as the target of unjust persecution, either by women, the government, or mainstream culture.

Another of Poletta’s descriptions of frames includes that they “should be characterized by narrative fidelity or cultural resonance,” (Polletta, 2016) which I believe the incel frame has done through the use of caricatures and stereotypes, namely that of “Chad,” the name used to refer to the stereotypical attractive, successful male, and “Stacy” the name used to refer to the stereotypical attractive woman. Not only are the ideals of the broader culture a particular incel resides in represented by these characters, the ideals of the incel subculture are revealed by how incels are placed in relation to those stereotypes.

Methods of Storytelling

We are not only concerned with what stories get told in incel communities, but also how those stories get told, and in some cases, how they are constructed. The relationship between audience and storyteller is fundamentally different, and far less personal, compared to the interaction between multiple people writing a story together. As we see both forms of storytelling occur on incel forums, it is relevant to understand them separately. Three main methods were noticed in the threads studied: Repetition, where the thread begins with one member telling a story and others share similar stories, thus making all parties the author of their own story; Co-creation, where one member shares a fragment of a story, and others fill in the details; and Elaboration, where one
member makes a claim about the world, and others either elaborate upon that claim, or attempt to explain it. Each of these methods will be explained via example.

Repetition. One such thread discusses the ways in which members of the incel culture have attempted to commit suicide. It begins with someone sharing the story of how they once tried to kill themself:

“I was 16 when I tried to commit suicide. I was drunk and I snuck out the house. I was trying to reach this overpass but by the time I reached the place the alcohol had dissipated from my body so I pussied out. Fell asleep on the side of the street. I got sent to a psych ward a few hours later. Any other faggots ever tried to rope but failed?”

Others describe similar stories of intending to commit suicide before either backing out or failing. This fosters the bond that each participating member has to the community by revealing increased commonalities between its members. This sharing of experience allows for members of the community to feel safer and more accepted among their peers, knowing that they are not the only ones to go through such suffering. This thread, for example, reveals that those who participated not only share the experience of being unable to find a romantic partner, but also the experience of attempting to commit suicide, both very emotionally charged experiences. These storytelling sessions could be considered to contribute to what Lin et al refer to as “a perception of expressive support,” that is, the feeling that other members of the community are willing to emotionally support the individual (Lin et al 1999). Such a perception is negatively correlated with symptoms of depression, thus highlighting the importance of such storytelling rituals.

Another thread contained members posting narrativized versions of their romantic history, expressing hopelessness due to their lack of romantic history at their age: “By your late 20s into your 30s, any woman that may give you a chance is put off that you're
[unable to afford to move out of your parents house].” Ultimately, the user who began the thread is worried that life has passed him by, saying “What a waste my life has been.” Other users express similar fears, and not only state that their lives have been similar, but elaborate upon the differences, some in specific experiences, others on outlook on their situation, as while the original poster sounded rather distraught, another explained he’s “with [his] cat, in peace, sipping some nice lemonade, planning [his] next trip abroad.”

Both of these threads highlight the repetition method of collaborative storytelling, wherein one user begins the thread by telling a personal story, and members of the audience proceed to tell their own, similar stories. In these cases the stories are of hopelessness, suicidality, and misfortune, though they need not always be so dour.

Co-creation. Other times, members of the subculture do not actually have an entire story at the beginning. They imply many of the details, and discussion stems from writing the story, rather than reacting to or reading it. In one thread, a story is woven using only a screenshot of a few YouTube comments as source material.

The thread in question is titled “Based user Blackpills cucks on love,” which translates to “cool user explains to idiots that love isn’t real.” This thread begins with a screenshot of comments left on a YouTube video, where one YouTube user, Dylan24, leaves a comment that says just “Love isn’t real,” to which others disagree, arguing “oh, it is real, my friend” and asking “who hurt you?” The final comment visible in the screenshot reads “I thought this was a [fitness] channel, not an incel channel.” The thread title suggests that this is an example of Dylan24 introducing others to the incel ideology despite there being no evidence presented that Dylan24 has any affiliation with any incel forum. Any connection between Dylan24 and the incel subculture has been fabricated by
the user who created this thread and one YouTuber commenter who replied to Dylan’s comment.

The comments of this thread are disorganized, but those of substance preach the falsity of love, agreeing with Dylan24 and elaborating on the claim, with one commenting that “Love is only for [the very attractive],” and another claiming that “He'll believe in love till she leaves him for Chad. Then he'll be hating on women again,” referring to one of the commenters who disagreed with Dylan.

Another such thread is titled “Incels has enough and attacks bully,” the first post of which is only a link to a video on Twitter which shows one young white man getting something thrown at his head. He then says “I have had enough of you” and proceeds to get into a fight with a young black man, presumably the one who threw something at his head. A young white woman and a second black man attempt to break up the fight, though the video ends before the situation is resolved.

Something of note here is that nothing in the video suggests that anyone in it is an incel, that attribution was given by the forum users. While some users simply left racist comments on the video, others began attempting to make assumptions about the situation, thus developing a story. Many stereotypes are invoked in these comments, including both Chad, the stereotypical successful man, and Stacy, the stereotypical attractive woman, as well as a less frequent character, Tyrone, the stereotypical black man. One user in particular left this comment: “Of course the cumskin whore rushes to defend tyrone once the incel rises up” implying a sense of solidarity between the commenter and the person being bullied in the video.
Ultimately, the activity of co-creating a story, within the incel subculture, at least, takes the form of injecting details into an external series of events to allow members of the subculture to align characters within those events with characters within their own narratives, such as their referring to the YouTube Commenter as a “based incel.” While such tales could also be told about the enemies of the incel subculture, those tales are often constructed differently.

**Elaboration.** These types of stories are often told about the alleged enemies of the incel subculture. As none of those enemies are active on the forums, incels bond over piecing together the ideas that oppose their own. One such thread begins with “[women] and normies want us to kill ourselves. They want us to die. Don't give in, don't listen to them. Don't let them win. Be a nuisance to society.” While spiteful, the anti-suicide message is relevant, due to the prevalence of such ideation on these sorts of forums. It does also serve to make a claim that those not in the subculture, particularly women, hold such hatred for incels that they would wish them dead. Other users leave comments that elaborate upon this claim, and add additional points to it. While the initial message was simply “they want us to die” others expand upon it, including reasons why: “they want you to kill yourself because they see you as weaker than them.”; “Not only that but women are scared of us”; “They also want to seem like a REAL MAN by punching down at targets they can reasonably go after.”

Another thread in this genre is titled “it’s human to feel anger and lust,” where the original post says “Society not only denies our desires, but labels these feelings as abnormal and evil. I believe they're trying to make us hate ourselves so much that we feel like we deserve to be punished.” Similar to the previous thread, this one begins with a
statement of belief in an active attempt by society at large to worsen the lives of incels. Also similar to the previous thread, another user elaborated upon the sentiment: “A foid can complain online and get money, companionship, attention, all sent to her within minutes. We? We get nothing.”

This form of storytelling is similar to the repetition form, though each contribution is not a full narrative in itself, but merely a claim about the world meant to be supported by the audience’s experience, rather than the author’s explanation. Where the participants in a repetition storytelling session share the role of author and audience in a series of narratives, and all participants bond over sharing those narratives, an elaboration activity sees the participants seemingly as the audience for a story that has already been told: they bond in the shared experiences of their lives without elaborating upon the experiences themselves, but instead upon how those experiences have made them feel, particularly about those outside the community. To properly understand these tales requires already being familiar with the frame in which they are being constructed.

Poletta explains that stories need not necessarily be empirically true if they are at least consistent with dominant narratives and held beliefs, and stories of this type often find themselves to be consistent with the previously held beliefs of incel forum users (Polletta 2011). The stories referenced above are consistent with the subculture’s belief that as those with lower sexual market value, those with greater market value seek to cut them out of society. The congruence of the claim made by the first post in an individual thread with the frame held by the subculture makes the claim amicable to its audience, even if no evidence is provided. These claims can be drastic, and reinforce the “us vs.
them” part of the frame, thus inspiring the audience to remain steadfast and united against their fictional foe.

Themes of Incel Stories

We have now discussed how members of incel forums construct and tell their stories on their forums, but the themes of such stories also affect the ways in which they help their audiences to bond. The topics of these stories vary from aggressive stories of violence towards women to depressive stories about the hopelessness of their struggle, and everything in between. Below are described several different themes of relevant incel stories.

Misogyny. Many stories told on incel forums are those of frustration with the world around them, specifically their celibacy, and the women they believe are responsible for it. Often these stories paint women in all manner of vile ways, either as animals who “can’t help but follow their biology,” people who cheat on their partners, or people who deserve to suffer unspeakably horrible things, with only half of the 184 members who responded to a user-posted poll answering that “the thought of rape in fantasies or in real life never occurred to [them]” in a poll where the other options are pro-rape. The use of the terms “foids” or “holes” to refer to women is rampant. While this study does not make any claims about what proportion of incels do or do not support rape, nor does it claim that the results of that poll are representative of the entire community, it does seem that the community is not unanimous in either direction. That said, the prevalence of answers promoting violence against women does suggest that the

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2It was 92 of 184 responses as of 3/19/23, though the poll is set to remain open until 1/19/24.
community does not punish such sentiments, thus allowing misogynist violence within its zeitgeist.

For a movement centered around men who cannot find sexual partners, a surprising number of its members speak against the idea of women being promiscuous. One thread contained a poll asking whether users would rather use a sex toy or have sex with a woman who was not a virgin. The results were 15-13 in favor of the toy, with users leaving comments such as “[a non-virgin woman] is leftover from Chad. It’s no different from dumpster trash,” or “Would you buy a used fleshlight?” Just as the results of the poll were close, comments were left in favor of both positions, with one user making the accusation that those who would choose the toy over the woman are gay. This sentiment spreads also to women’s online activities, as threads complaining about women finding financial success on OnlyFans see users calling society “degenerate,” referring to it as “the collapse of the west” and “ER-fuel,” ER being the initials of Elliot Rodger, the mass shooter, insinuating that seeing the content of the post instilled a desire to commit a similar attack.

The extensive misogyny begs the question of whether the ideal man, in their eyes, holds similar opinions. Interview participants described the ideal man behaving in accordance with, if not believing in, the social structures described by the black pill ideology such as sexual market value and the demonization of promiscuity. One interview participant, with the username “Prince of Istanbul,” described the behavior of the ideal man, saying “a truly not degenerate man hates the thing called dating… [the] ideal man only marries and has sex [with his wife].” Another said that the ideal man
“would not fuck [incels’] looksmatches and turn them into sluts,” with the term “looksmatch” referring to women that are of a similar sexual market value to the incels.

It’s not impossible that incels held these views before their association with the incel community. One interview participant claims to have watched many YouTube videos from the MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way) and MRA (Men’s Rights Activist) communities, which the Southern Poverty Law Center categorizes as parts of the male supremacy movement (Voice for Men). Given the shared stance on women and misogyny, it is not surprising that the different communities share members, and the stance that the subculture has on women may, in fact, be one of the primary factors bringing in new members.

**Hopelessness.** While many incel threads contain an active anger and hateful vitriol, others contain more passive hopelessness than anything else. Some incel threads feature long rants about how they “will never be happy because… I will never get a hot girlfriend… like Chad.” Such threads are met with mixed reactions, with some users agreeing with the sentiment, others blaming women, and, in rare cases, telling those hopeless users to pick up a hobby. Others go one step further and argue that having hope that one will eventually find romantic success is folly, and that peace and satisfaction will be found by abandoning that hope. Users described posts that suggest abandoning hope of romantic success as “a good read for those who are… beginning to get blackpilled.” This dedication to hopelessness is what delineates between those who are redpilled, of the opinion that there are high and low status men on the sexual marketplace, and those who are blackpilled, of the opinion that one cannot change their status in that marketplace. As
a result of this despair, suicide and suicidal ideation are no stranger to the incel community, as several threads either compile or begin with users’ stories of attempts.

Another showcases a very specific breed of incel hopelessness: the fascination with young love. One user considers himself to have been less romantically successful than his peers starting at the ages of “14-15-16 [where] peers are getting proper kisses,” and other users who find themselves on the forum describe themselves as minors or adult teenagers. The idea of young love is seen as a positive, and particularly depressive users see their inability to find love early in life as a sign that they will continue to be unable to find love later on. What is of note in these cases is that this despair does not drive them toward their goal of finding love, as they believe reaching that goal to be impossible. Instead, they are driven closer to each other as they bond in the shared sense of hopelessness, until the forum becomes little more than an echo chamber of despair.

**Gender Roles**. A dominant theme among incel discussion was gender: how it is performed, how people fail to perform it properly, and how gender role narratives do not match with reality. These topics are discussed openly and clearly with regard to women’s gender roles, as many are quick to claim that we live in the “downfall of the west” due to women’s upward social mobility in the past several decades, though when it comes to men, the topic is far more subtle. Granted, members of these forums do form their insults and grievances in ways such that a stance on gender politics can be discerned.

For example, one thread talks at length about height, making minute distinctions between which men are tall enough, average, or irredeemably short.

Every inch you are below the average makes you exponentially less attractive, so the difference between 5'8 and 5'9 isn't big but between 5'4 and 5'5 it's massive. The shorter you go, the more each inch matters. On the taller side it's the opposite, the taller you are the less each inch matters, there's more difference between 5'11 and 6'0 than between 6'1 and 6'2. Also, in general being short is more of a disadvantage than being tall is an advantage.
I'd say the perfect height for dating and for life in general is 6'2 or 6'3. And if you are below the female average height (5'4 in most 1st world countries), you're fucked. I'm not gonna say it's 100% over because there are men that height with girlfriends, but man it's gonna be x50 times harder compared to avg height. Definitely consider leg lengthening even if proportions are a bit weird, it'll be life changing.

Others set oddly specific, unorthodox beauty standards for themselves, such as seeking out surgery to reverse circumcisions. Still others rebel against men’s role in the gender hierarchy, questioning why the responsibility of the man in stories is to rescue the woman while the role of the woman is to be saved by the man, suggesting that modern social trends were freeing women of their traditional responsibilities, such as tending to the home, while men were not being freed of their traditional roles. Unfortunately, the threads that started out this way devolved into misogyny, and the complaints about the uneven breaking of the roles were in favor of their restoration.

While members of incel forums seem to speak of Chad consistently, the perception of what makes the ideal man varies from person to person. While some would envy Chad’s ability to secure multiple sexual partners, others praise moral character and traditional virtue. One praises the virtue of being faithful to one partner, while another suggests that being kind to animals is part of being the ideal man. Another simply equated Chad with the “Conservative ideal: men should be strong, capable, confident, responsible, not too emotional.”

However, while they are inconsistent in their definitions of the ideal man, they are consistent in distancing themselves from him, though the means by which they differ depend on the means by which the ideal man is defined, with one participant who defined the ideal man in part as “strong” suggesting that he was not strong enough, and another who suggested the ideal man was “confident” admitting they suffer from social anxiety.
This dissonance in the definition of the ideal is related to gender role stress as studied by Scheuerman, who agreed that “[Stacy and Chad] only highlight the inadequacies of those that would wish to live up to them,” and emphasizes that incels experience gender stress from the simultaneous enforcement and rejection of traditional masculine gender roles (Scheuerman 2021). Scheuerman explains that many members of the incel subculture agree with mainstream culture on who the ideal masculine character is, but develop a defeatist attitude in response to their failure to line up with an impossible character.

This idea of the ideal man is discussed at length by Connell, who explains that the archetype of what is referred to as “hegemonic masculinity” varies between cultures and over time, and is ultimately the characterization by which men reinforce their dominance over women (Connell 1993:77). The masculinity performed by incels is, while certainly a perversion of mainstream masculine culture, is nonetheless based upon it. Connell identifies several masculinities, namely hegemonic, complicit, and marginalized, though masculinity as performed by incels does not particularly fit into any of these three, as while they certainly do not benefit from their performances of masculinity enough to fit into the model of the hegemonic character, many may not so far removed from it as to be a marginalized masculinity, but similarly do not quietly benefit from sharing traits with the hegemonic masculine character, as the complicit would. If anything, they loudly protest their difference from it, forming something of an aggrieved masculine character.

Connell explains masculinities that are complicit as “masculinities constructed in ways that realize the patriarchal dividend, without the tensions or risks of being the front line troops of patriarchy.” I will refer to masculinities that are constructed in ways that attempt to mimic the hegemonic without receiving satisfactory dividend as aggrieved.
This is something that incels complain incessantly about, with respect to romantic and sexual success with women, as it is the core of their ideology-- that despite their attempts to raise their own sexual market value, to find a romantic or sexual relationship, it is impossible for them. The solutions they recommend to each other in spite of this are things that would put them closer to the hegemon. They recommend working out, because to work out is to become stronger physically, and the hegemonic male is strong. They believe themselves worthy of female attention because that is what they consider the patriarchal dividend to be, some believing it to be part of what makes men masculine:

Imagine if you woke up and everyone on the planet had an expensive sports car, all you see are people around you driving it, everyone with a sports car gets treated differently than those who don't, they have higher social status, etc. For some reason you can't get one no matter how much you adhere to the advice suggested by sports car owners. Everytime you complain about the biased system that keeps you from getting one, someone tells you - "there are more important things in life than sports cars", they then later proceed to talk with their friends about all the awesome sports cars they drove...

Sex is clearly a vital part of every human's existence, a man doesn't even "become a man" in a sense within society until he has sex, in essence a lot of men have not undergone their "right of passage" to become part of the "tribe" that is modern human civilization.

So as it stands we now have a significant and growing pool of sexually starved men, who due to this are angry, violent, irritable and suicidal, seriously how does society expect this to play out, the most dangerous animal is the one backed into a corner with nothing to lose, when someone doesn't care if they die, worse yet they want to die just so their sad existence can end, there is no reasoning with that person, they are on a "war path", you either kill them, give that person what they want, or you get out of their way as they proceed to claim what they want.

Society expects us not to burn the village down when it won't initiate us into the tribe, that's what's truly outrageous, not the violence of disenfranchised men, but the fact that society actually expects us to just remain docile and accept this reality that has been forced upon us.

The incel ideology builds itself upon some of the tenets explained above: their masculinities are aggrieved because they consider older ideas such as “a man doesn’t become a man… until he has sex” to continue to be relevant about society, they continue to hold themselves to those standards, seeing themselves as performing their gender as
expected, but not receiving what they consider their end of the deal. These aggrieved masculinities are toxic to those who embody them, and it is that aggrievement, that belief of being owed something by society at large, combined with American association of guns and violence with the hegemonic masculine character that leads to the incel propensity for violence.
DISCUSSION

The goal of the research was to determine what methods are used by members of the incel subculture to develop the sense of group identity. This was achieved by reading and analyzing the content posted on incel forums, and by conducting interviews with users of one of those forums. This resulted in a total of 76 analyzed threads, each containing multiple posts, and three interviews, one conducted over Zoom, and two over private messages. The two major findings were the themes of storytelling and boundary work.

Storytelling is used for multiple purposes, depending on how the act of storytelling occurs. In the first case, users post stories regarding suicidality, depression, and the struggle to get a date. This promotes a perception of expressive support, which can be attractive to new members who suffer from similar conditions and may be seeking that support. In the second, one user provides a fragment of a story, usually from an external source, and other users twist that fragment into a story of solidarity, taking one YouTube comment out of context, for example. This fosters the idea that the ideas of the incel subculture are spread far beyond their small forums. In the third, forum users make claims about groups they consider enemies, often women and “normies,” to which others will reinforce or elaborate upon those claims, writing an “us vs. them” conflict to give credence to the narrative frame being constructed, a conflict that prospective incels might resonate strongly with.

Boundary work is similarly important to the subculture, as it allows veteran members to define where the subculture stands in relation to the mainstream and other
ince communities. This attracts those who feel alienated by the mainstream, and allows new members to reify their membership.

To narrativize, the incel subculture bonds over the stories they tell. They create a perception of expressive support by sharing stories of their depression, suicidality, and other sufferings, implying that prospective members will receive such support. They use ambiguous characters such as Chad, who is rarely defined, to tell stories which paint women and society at large as the malefactors of such suffering, twisting incomplete examples to fit that narrative. These stories resonate with new and prospective incels, who, in their failure to live up to the hegemonic ideal of their gender, feel ostracized by society, and feel ostracized by women in their failure to achieve romantic success. Boundary work then allows those members to defend their newfound community against the cultural forces they feel at odds with.

The results of this work, while tied to the incel subculture, are definitely not limited to it in relevance. Stories are told in many different contexts, and it may be of interest to see how the construction of those stories varies between communities and what effects that variation might have. Similarly, the work may be useful in the study of other online communities, as it is the online nature of the incel subculture, rather than its misogyny or extremism, that makes these particular bonding activities so popular. I imagine the study of online communities will only become more relevant as online social platforms become ever more popular.

Limitations and Future Work

Unfortunately, this research was done by one person over the course of one year. Thus, this research is limited in scope in terms of posts collected, time over which they
have been collected, number of users whose posts have been collected, and forums from
which posts have been collected. There is definitely room for a broader picture of the
incel subculture, as the data I collected could not possibly represent a group as large as
100,000, and the two forums collected from have a total user count of almost 22,000
(ADL 2020). Beyond simply reading forum posts, the interview process was far from
ideal, as I only conducted three interviews. The interviews provided a space in which to
ask more direct, personal questions of the forum’s members, the answers to which might
not be found in publicly available forum posts. Only collecting three interviews has left
me with a frustratingly narrow view of the subculture’s explicit feelings on topics such as
the ideal masculine character, and members’ experiences such as how they were made
aware of the subculture.

As for future work, it is of interest to the study to note that the relatively simple
act of telling a story can have vastly different effects depending on how it is done, how
many authors there are, and how much the audience participates. Such nuance in
storytelling may be an interesting topic of research in the contexts of other communities
and movements.


Scheuerman, Jacob (2021) "The Anatomy of Inceldom: An Analysis of Incels Through


APPENDIX A: TABLES OF TERMINOLOGY

Table 1. Explanations of Incel Terms

The following terminology was discovered in posts written by incels, and are not terms I have found in other internet contexts. The terms below may be prevalent in non-incel communities that I simply do not frequent, such as 4chan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foid</td>
<td>Portmanteau of “Female Humanoid,” used to refer to women as less than human.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blackpill (noun or verb)</td>
<td>As a noun, “The Blackpill” is the incel ideology. As a verb, “to blackpill someone” is to introduce them to the incel ideology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumskin</td>
<td>Caucasian / white.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-maxx (suffix)</td>
<td>To make the prefix one’s main goal. For example, “gymmaxxing” would be “spending most of one’s time working out / at the gym”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beta bucks</td>
<td>The latter half of the phrase “Alpha fucks, Beta bucks” which refers to the idea that women prefer sex with “alpha,” attractive men but will use less attractive, “beta” men for financial support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rope (verb)</td>
<td>Commit suicide, in reference to hanging.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LDAR</td>
<td>Acronym for “Lay down and rot,” which means to, as much as possible, refrain from participation in society.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Acronym for “Nice Try”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ER / “go ER”</td>
<td>The initials of Elliot Rodger, a broadly known incel who committed a mass shooting before killing himself. To “go ER” is to commit a similar shooting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JFL</td>
<td>Acronym for Just Fucking Laughing, used similarly to “lol” or “lmao”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KHHHV</td>
<td>Kissless, Hugless, Handholdless Virgin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JBW</td>
<td>“Just be white,” referring to the idea that simply being white is enough to guarantee a date.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-fuel (suffix)</td>
<td>A type of content that will drive the readers toward the prefix. I.e.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Suifuel or Ropefuel drives readers towards suicide, and Lifefuel or Hopefuel drives readers towards hope and continuing to live.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>-(suffix)</th>
<th>While normally the word is “incel,” the “in” can be replaced with any number of things to specify a type of incel. I.e. “Ricecel” is used to refer to asian incels, “femcels” are incel women, etc.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SEA</td>
<td>Southeast Asia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inkwell</td>
<td>Another term for incel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>curry- (prefix)</td>
<td>Indian. I.e. “currycels” are indian incels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mog (verb)</td>
<td>‘to mog someone’ means, I think, ‘to think you are capable of overpowering them and/or to want to.’ context clues are vague and external sources conflict with one another.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>looksmatch</td>
<td>Someone who is of a similar level of attractiveness to another person, usually of the opposite gender. I.e. “your looksmatch” is about as attractive as you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>glowie</td>
<td>Federal agent / law enforcement. Based on the idea that it’s so easy to tell who is and isn’t law enforcement that the law enforcement “glows”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fed</td>
<td>Short for federal agent. Refers to any form of law enforcement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“in GTA / in Minecraft / in Roblox”</td>
<td>Used to provide ‘plausible’ deniability after confessing a desire to commit violence. I.e. “I want to kill lots of people (in Minecraft)”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>soyceity</td>
<td>Soy + Society, implying that society at large / the average person is either physically weak or lacking in moral character.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Explanations of non-Incel internet terminology

The following terminology was discovered in posts written by incels, but is not, to my knowledge, unique to the incel subculture, and can be found in other, perfectly innocent online environments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>gains (noun)</td>
<td>Muscle acquired by going to the gym / working out. I.e. “nice gains” means “nice muscles”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEET</td>
<td>Acronym for “Not in Employment, Education, or Training.” Refers to someone who is unemployed and not in college or trade school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alpha / Beta</td>
<td>Alphas and Betas refer to types of men, where Alphas are the strong, attractive, successful men, and Betas are less so.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based (adjective)</td>
<td>Cool and correct.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuck</td>
<td>Short for cuckold, “a man whose wife has sex with other people.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Acronym for “Neurotypical,” referring to people who are not on the autism spectrum and do not have ADHD, anxiety, depression, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ND</td>
<td>Acronym for “Neurodivergent” referring to people who have some form of mental illness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DMs / PMs</td>
<td>Direct Messages / Private Messages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OP</td>
<td>In the context of forums, “OP” means “original post” or “original poster,” either referring to the post that started the thread or the user that made that post.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simp (verb or noun)</td>
<td>The act of fawning unrequitedly for women, going out of their way to do things for them, such as donating money in the hopes of getting some romantic favor, or someone who does so.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soy</td>
<td>weak, referring to a person. Refers to the idea that those who eat soy / vegan meat alternatives are weaker than those who eat meat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thot</td>
<td>Acronym of “That hoe over there”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troll (verb)</td>
<td>To troll is to taunt or harass.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gatekeep</td>
<td>To insinuate that others are ‘unworthy’ of something, usually participation in a community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shitpost / Shitposting</th>
<th>A shitpost is a post that is usually off-topic or provocative, designed to garner a large reaction for little effort. Used as a verb, ‘to shitpost’ is to post shitposts.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lag</td>
<td>When the computer takes a long time to load things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>imo</td>
<td>“In My Opinion”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kys</td>
<td>“Kill Yourself”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B. IRB APPROVAL

Application #: 2022-11-03
Title: Incels' Masculinity and Extremist Recruitment
PI: Gunnar Eastman
 Approval Period End Date: 11/14/2023

Dear Gunnar,

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB) reviewed the above referenced application in expedited review and approved it on 11/15/2022. We will contact you in November 2023 to check with you if the application should be closed.

Attached is the approved copy of the application. The approved informed consent form must be duplicated and used when enrolling subjects.

Please remember that each subject must be given a copy of the informed consent document. Any unanticipated problems or injury to the subject must be reported to the IRB. Any proposed changes to the research must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation. If you require a modification in the future please visit our website for instructions.

Please contact me if you have any questions. Thank you.

Best regards,
Paula

Paula Portalatin, M. Ed., CPIA, CIP
Assistant Director of Research Compliance
University of Maine | Alumni Hall Room 311
(207) 581-2657
https://umaine.edu/research-compliance/
AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY

Gunnar Jared Eastman was born on June 3, 2001. He was raised in Bangor, Maine and graduated from the Maine School of Science and Mathematics in 2019. He majored in Computer Science and Sociology. At the University of Maine, he worked with the Servant Heart Research Collaborative.

Upon graduation, he plans to earn his master’s degree in Computer Science at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York.