Efficacy, Nihilism, and Toxic Masculinity Online: Digital Misogyny in the Incel Subculture

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Abstract

The ever-increasing potential of the internet to widely disseminate information and easily connect large numbers of individuals has fundamentally altered the dynamics of social integration, influence and movements. This is especially true of modern reactionary movements, who have been able to use the anonymity of the internet to spread propaganda and recruit new members with little fear of sanctions. One very clear and poignant example of this is the "Involuntary Celibate" or "Incel" movement—a movement that has emerged over the recent decade that has garnered attention owing to its backlash toward women and connection to several particularly high-profile domestic terrorism cases. This thesis, which builds on several social science literatures, seeks to understand Incels as a reactionary social movement, with particular attention paid to their depiction of women, their framing of grievances, and their strategies for political mobilization. My analyses, which use a combination of web-scraping of Incel online discourse, rich qualitative materials and text analysis, constructs a depiction of participants and their endorsement of violent action. I find that gender and the relative status of women as sexual objects specifically fundamentally underlies followers' core identities and grievances. Moreover, and despite being little explicit advocation of collective political action, there is a significant element of celebration when it comes toward engaging in independent violence toward women. I address these core findings, and then conclude by discussing the untraditional mobilization strategies of Incels—strategies that center mostly on coping with grievances rather than overcoming them, but that nevertheless also find ways to embrace individualized gender violence.

Introduction

The communicative potential of the Internet has given rise to an array of digital subcultures. Subcultures, as defined by Sebald (1975), are characterized by eight dimensions that mark them as separate from the dominant cultural group. They are constructed in response to a shared set of needs or desires that are not recognized or not fulfilled by normative social institutions. To satisfy these needs, subcultures differentiate themselves through the creation of norms, jargon, and patterns of behavior that are distinct from mainstream cultural practices and expectations. These alternative customs are then combined with the use of unique modes of communication and the leadership of charismatic individuals to maintain a collective, in-group identity that is structured around its own particular status hierarchy (Sebald, 1975).

The Internet, with its ability to foster extended, anonymous communication over large distances, between millions of individuals, and across long periods of time along with its relative ubiquity, presents unique opportunities for the formation of online subcultures. Online spaces have emerged as especially important in the formation of contemporary subcultures based in extremely deviant ideologies or behaviors (Adams & Roscigno, 2005; Douglas, Mcgarty, Bliuc, & Lala, 2005; Durkin, Forsyth, & Quinn, 2006; Perry, 2000; Scaptura & Doyle, 2019). For instance, Durkin, Forsyth, & Quinn (2006) found that online communities have formed around providing support and resources for those with shared deviant identities. These digital subcultures then normalize their deviance through interactions with others with similar experiences and perspectives.

Due to the highly stigmatized nature of these ideologies or behaviors, cybercultures would be difficult to maintain without the anonymity and physical distance provided by the Internet (Durkin, Forsyth, & Quinn, 2006). The lack of interruption by normative viewpoints in

such spaces may increase the likelihood that individuals are willing to engage in deviant acts. Studies have found that individuals are more likely participate in normatively negative behavior online—such as hate speech or "trolling"—if they witness others participating in similar actions (Álvarez-Benjumea & Winter, 2018; Cheng, Bernstein, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, & Leskovec, 2017). However, Álvarez-Benjumea & Winter (2018) also found that individuals are less likely to engage in such behaviors if digital spaces mildly censor instances of hateful interactions. Therefore, in unmoderated, deviant cybercommunities, individuals instead experience a reinforcement of their unorthodox ideals.

In this thesis, and building upon literatures surrounding subculture, social movements, and contemporary cyber-forums, I analyze one particularly unique and contemporary online subculture, "Involuntary Incelebates" or Incels. Incels, which center their anger toward women and the fact that they do not have easy sexual access to womens' bodies, have emerged online over the last decade as a particularly popular, deviant subgroup, and with several high visibility cases within which violence was carried out toward women or groups. Understanding how identity is formed within such a group, how grievances are framed, and whether or how political or mobilization efficacy is encouraged, contributes to several important themes within the more general social movements literature while also shedding substantive light on how subcultures operate in cyberspace. My analyses draw on a large and rich body of qualitative data from Incel online discussion forums and use thematic cluster analyses to highlight portrayals of women, core grievances, and sense of collective and individual efficacy. I highlight my key findings in each regard, and conclude by discussing how my findings contribute to broader discussions of culture within the social movements literature and the ways in which new communications technologies and the relative autonomy they afford allow such groups to flourish..

Digital Hate Groups as Social Movements

Many deviant cybercommunities are based around ideologies that express discriminatory attitudes toward a minority group. Hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan have created hundreds of websites dedicated to spreading bigoted propaganda in order to create a digital community of individuals who prescribe to such ideologies (Adams & Roscigno, 2005; Douglas, Mcgarty, Bliuc, & Lala, 2005; Perry, 2000). Online forums are essential for the formation of this collective sense of identity for modern hate groups. Through the sharing of rituals, imagery, and other propaganda online, hate groups are able to better recruit and maintain their membership. This is especially true in countries where non-digital hate-based propaganda is heavily censored or illegal (Perry, 2000). Cultivating a strong sense of group identity increases the ability of hate groups to mobilize their members to achieve their goals (Adams & Roscigno, 2005; Perry, 2000).

Reactionary movements are united by several commonalities. According to the "power devaluation" model outlined by McVeigh (1999) and unlike progressive social movements, conservative social movements are attempts to preserve a group's already-existing power in response to threats to a dominant group's place in cultural or economic hierarchies. Successful mobilization of right-wing activists therefore relies on a reactionary movement's ability to effectively convey to their base various "grievances" regarding their loss of power to minority groups (McVeigh, 1999). Berbrier (2000) and Perry (2000) for instance found that white supremacist communities frame themselves as "victims" of various minority groups in an attempt to garner sympathy for their cause. In fact, white supremacists have claimed that rises in the rate of suicide among whites are the result of perceived assaults on their racial identity (Berbrier, 2000).

Common to such victimization messages are also extreme claims that the cultural or economic success of minorities will lead to the destruction of the white race (Adams & Roscigno, 2005; Berbrier, 2000; Douglas, Mcgarty, Bliuc, & Lala, 2005). The combination of these elements allows white supremacist groups to mobilize through the creation of an internal mythos that argues for the necessity of a reactionary movement for the survival of the in-group. This is in contrast to progressive movements in that, according to resource mobilization theory, left-wing movements arise when an aggrieved group is able to effectively accumulate new resources or political power rather than in response to a spread of "grievances." Within this framework, the relative level of oppression that a minority group faces is assumed to be essentially constant even when there is little organizational activity on behalf of minority interests (Jenkins & Perrow, 1977). In essence, progressive movements emerge based on changes in their opportunity for successful mobilization.

Contemporary digital reactionary subcultures continue to maintain a collective identity by reframing progressive changes (or perceived progressive changes) as attacks on their in-group. Adams and Roscigno (2005) found, for example, that KKK and Neo-Nazi websites meticulously construct a group identity based on a collection of supposed threats to whites, including affirmative action programs, minorities in governmental positions, or through mere exposure to non-white cultural values. These KKK and Neo-Nazis websites feature well-known group symbols (e.g. a burning cross, a swastika) and even links to "white power" music to aid in enculturating members of these online communities (Adams & Roscigno, 2005; Perry, 2000). However, Adams and Roscigno (2005) also illustrate that the purported mobilization strategies of these reactionary groups differ significantly based on how each group frames their grievances. KKK communities appeal to nationalistic pride in United States political institutions while

simultaneously arguing that the government actively creates policies meant to disadvantage white individuals due to minority influence. Therefore, KKK websites advocate for non-violent forms of mobilization through legitimate avenues such as increasing political representation of KKK members or through providing information on how to home school their children (Adams & Roscigno, 2005). This is in contrast to Neo-Nazis, who argue that institutions are beyond reform due to Jewish influence and that a revolutionary break and complete separation from non-whites through potentially violent action is needed (Adams & Roscigno, 2005; Perry, 2000).

Notable in this literature is that there is less explicit online advocations for violence among such subgroups. Members of online hate communities are aware that calls for violence would render them potentially liable for legal action and risk their websites being censored or closed and therefore avoid prescribing violence to others (Douglas, Mcgarty, Bliuc, & Lala, 2005). Online reactionary groups instead tend to call for or elevate hate crimes that do not involve direct physical violence, such as graffitiing a racial slur onto a building (Glaser, Dixit, & Green, 2002). They will also amplify to their members the actions of "lone wolves"—individuals who commit acts of violence to further the goals of reactionary groups. They do so without explicitly planning attacks with other members of online communities in order to obfuscate attempts at legal action against their broader right-wing movement (Adams and Roscigno 2005).

Incels and Violence

As one of the most prominent reactionary subcultures on the Internet, Incels have recently entered scholarly consciousness as a primary example of how digital hate groups can mobilize their members into violent action. Over the past several years, numerous instances of mass violence have been attributed to members of the Incel community. Perhaps the most well-known example of mass violence committed by an Incel—the 2014 Isla Vista attack perpetrated by

Elliot Rodger—was fueled by a deeply misogynistic worldview and psychosexual frustration (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Langman, 2014).

In his writings Rodger lamented his own inability to have sex with women despite his adherence to normative displays of financial success, such as purchasing expensive clothing and cars. Rodger believed that his conspicuous consumption should entitle him to women's attraction. Faced with his failure to attract any women, Rodger proclaimed that women are a fundamentally flawed group that must be eliminated in order to redress what Rodger perceived to be systemic oppression against men like himself (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Langman, 2014). In response to these grievances, Rodger planned and committed a mass attack that left seven individuals dead, including Rodger, with 14 others injured. Rodger was an active member of the "Manosphere"—a blanket-designation given to the collection of digital communities based in toxic masculinity, such as Incels. Individuals belonging to subcultures under the umbrella of the "Manosphere" often express thoughts of violent misogyny and celebrate terrorists such as Elliot Rodger (Blommaert, 2017; Díaz & Valji, 2019).

Incels like Rodger frequently self-identify as "lonely," "inferior," or claim to suffer from significant social impairment to the degree that Incels are unable to find romantic partners or engage in sexual relationships (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Blommaert, 2017; Díaz & Valji, 2019; Langman, 2014; Jaki, et al., 2019). These feelings of social inadequacy are projected as a sense of "masculine victimhood"; Incels believe that their inability to meet the sexual expectations of traditional masculinity is the result of systemic oppression by women, and especially feminists, against "unattractive" men (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Díaz & Valji, 2019; Jaki, et al., 2019; Scaptura & Boyle, 2019).

The ideology of Incels lends itself to violent mobilization. For instance, heterosexual men report higher rates of violent fantasies—including thoughts of perpetrating a mass murder or committing rape—in response to feelings of social exclusion and an inability to meet expectations regarding traditionally masculine gender roles (Scaptura & Boyle, 2019). Murray (2016) found that these violent fantasies are an important step in eventually perpetrating mass murder. Especially in the case of mass violence that targets women, mass murders express feelings of inadequacy which are then projected as grievances against a broader social group (e.g. women). Repeated fantasizing of violence normalizes and justifies the need for violent action in the eyes of the perpetrator (Murray, 2016). So how do Incels portray women generally, and to what extent do their grievances coalesce specifically around gender and sexual access in their online conversations? And, to what degree are their grievances met with attention to, or calls for, collective or individualized actions? These are the questions addressed below and through systematic analyses of their online discourse.

Data

This project analyzes text-based data gathered from arguably the most heavily trafficked Incel forum: "Incels.co." This website is constructed solely for members of the Incel community, with Incels.co reporting to have over 10,000 unique members along with millions of messages archived on over 100,000 threads ("Incels.co - Involuntary Celibate"). Incels.co appears to be one of the most popular and active Incel websites based on both self-reported data ("Incels.co - Involuntary Celibate") and descriptions of Incels.co from other Incel websites ("Main Page"). Though there are many other digital Incel communities, few appear to approach the level of membership and engagement displayed by Incels.co ("Main Page"). Many smaller Incel websites feature specific sects within the greater Incel subculture. For instance, Incels.net—a moderated

Incel forum with only about 100 active users—advertises itself as against violent rhetoric and even features a section of the forum in which women are allowed to comment on threads, unlike at Incels.co ("Incels.co - Involuntary Celibate"; "Involuntary Celibacy"). Collecting data from some of these smaller Incel communities would likely skew this study's analysis toward certain strands of thought within the Incel community.

By focusing on the text threads within Incels.co, I arguably better capture the full range of discourse within the community along with the foundational rhetoric that unifies the Incel subculture under a collective identity. Also, since this study focuses on the ways in which discourse promoting or celebrating violence within reactionary digital subcultures creates real-world violence, it is important to gather data from a source that allows violent discussion to take place. Such communities are increasingly rare as larger forum websites such as Reddit have banned communities that encourage violent behavior. Research regarding Incel forums from as recently as 2019 feature data collected from websites such as "Incels.me" that have been shut down due to these communities' promotion of violence (Jaki, et al., 2019).

Data was collected from 800 posts made on Incels.co between January and March 2020. To have the data more accurately reflect the desired research questions regarding Incels' depiction of women, grievances, and mobilization strategies, each thread was chosen for analysis based on its thematic content. Incels.co features a categorization system for each of their threads, with one to two of 20 overarching "themes" that define their community being applied to each post. I chose eight of these subcategories of Incel post: "TeeHee", "ToxicFemininity", "Blackpill", "RageFuel", "SuicideFuel", "Venting", "Cope", and "LifeFuel". For each subcategory, data was collected from the 100 threads with the most recent interaction by a forum user (i.e. most recently commented upon or posted). In total, 18,735 comments from the 800

posts were collected and analyzed. Data collection was achieved through the use of OctoParse, a web-scraping software that allows users to create algorithms to identify and then extract desired text within websites. After this text data was collected and converted into HTML files, it was then analyzed using the text-analysis software PolyAnalyst. PolyAnalyst uses a specific algorithm to extract data points from text, identify important topics within a dataset, and then model dominant thematic patterns and relationships. In this regard, I use word clouds that highlight predominant themes and draw on qualitative text itself to highlight more clearly how central themes manifest within actual Incel discourse.

The quantitative analysis performed by the web-scraping software was supplemented by a qualitative analysis of Incels.co. Insights regarding the community were derived from the quotations provided by the text analyst software. Each of the three major cultural questions that were explored through the text analysis (depiction of women, framing of grievances, and mobilization strategy) had several hundred significant themes flagged by PolyAnalyst. However, the keyword clouds consist of only the topics with a significance rating >0.2 as defined by PolyAnalyst. Therefore, each of the keyword clouds consists of only the 20-60 most significant themes. Relevant quotations were determined through careful analysis of significant topics relevant to each of the three questions. Quotations were chosen for use based on their clarity, their length, and their representation of the subject matter of the broader topic. To aid in this analysis—along with the 800 threads from which textual data was gathered—several hundred other posts on Incels.co were read to gain a better understanding of the Incel subculture. To further supplement this analysis, the Incels' wiki was used to translate the jargon frequently used by the members of the community.

Results: Cultural Elements and Discourse within the Incel Community

The culture of the Incel community is defined by two primary traits: misogyny arising from an inability to meet the sexual expectations of heteronormative masculinity and the "blackpill," or Incel members' collective nihilism and broad rejection of mainstream social values. Incels focus on illustrating their collective and personal contempt of women through their forum posts, which often outline personal failings or perceived slights by women toward the Incel or another man. As outlined by McVeigh (1999), analyzing this construction of grievances within reactionary movements is key to understanding their pathways of mobilization. If Incels frame their lack of sexual success as the fault of women—whether due to biological or cultural influences—then their proposed solutions would necessarily interrogate how to overcome this external factor. Similarly, if Incels accompany their grievance-framing with violent speech, this may encourage violence as a potential avenue toward amending their situations.

The Incel Depiction of Women

To understand the Incels' cultural framing of women, 200 posts from two major subcategories of Incel threads were analyzed: "TeeHee" and "ToxicFemininity." "TeeHee" is a thread classification meant to signify instances in which Incels viewed women as acting immorally or unintelligently. Such posts often feature Incels mocking women for their behavior, especially in instances in which women conform to the stereotypes held by Incels. "ToxicFemininity" also features threads about women's behavior conforming to Incel-designated stereoypes, but unlike "TeeHee" the posts in "ToxicFemininity" feature examples of women degrading Incels or men

more generally. The name of the subcategory, "ToxicFemininity", is an intentional reference to the sociological term, "toxic masculinity," which refers to the harmful cultural attitudes taught to men surrounding emotional, physical, and sexual expression. Incels believe that women's behavior and attitudes are the source of the patriarchal norms that encourage toxic masculinity.

Figure 1. Keyword Cloud of "Depiction of Women"

Figure 1 displays a keyword cloud of key themes derived through text analysis. Larger terms were more thematically significant while terms that are blue were more frequent and terms that are red were less frequent. As would be expected, the depiction of women on Incel forums is negative and hostile. Incels often even avoid using the phrase "woman." Instead they use the term "foid"—a shortened version of the word "femoid" which is itself a combination of the words "female humanoid organism"—in an attempt to dehumanize women ("Femoid"). "Foid" was the third most common phrase in the threads analyzed, behind only "woman" and "man". "Bitch" was another frequent insult used to negatively describe women. Other phrases such as "whore" or "hole" used sexualization to echo this dehumanization of women:

> *"May all the whores rot and burn in hell. They ask for so much while they aren't shit. Stupid entitled holes"*

"Hole" is another term used by Incels in place of "woman," reducing women to merely sexual receptacles. Sometimes "hole" was used as a reference to women's genitalia, specifically in reference to sexual violence being committed against women. For instance, one comment read:

> *"Hopefully she goes to a country full of those other Asians & gets all her holes forcefully penetrated by ugly men"*

This comment is a rather explicit call for violence; however, it also engages in enough abstract language to avoid concretely asking for violence to occur to this woman. Such sentiments illustrate the normalization and even celebration of violence against women that takes place in Incel forums. Several of the other negative themes in the keyword cloud such as "ugly" or "stupid" were sometimes used by Incels to describe women. However, Incels mostly used these words to describe themselves or their actions rather than to deride women.
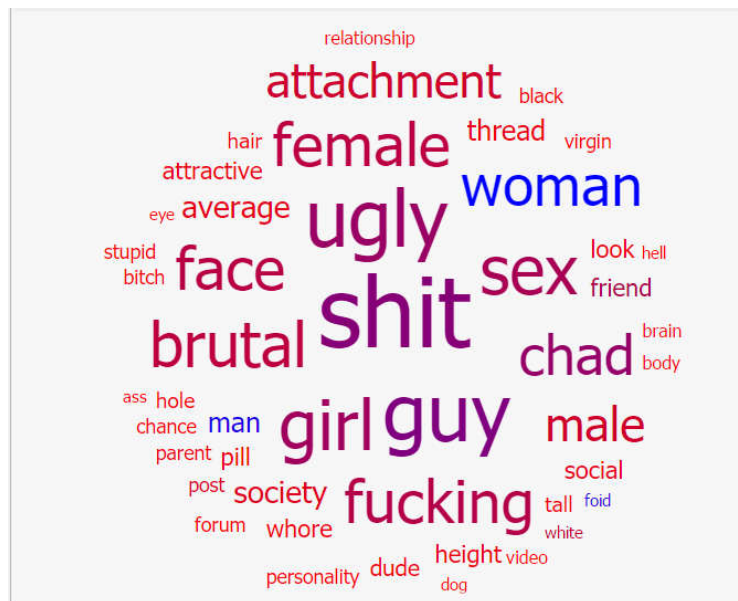
Core Grievances

As a reactionary subculture, Incels depend on a collective understanding of grievances with the social world to unite their members under a shared cultural identity. To achieve this, they rely on several different grievance-framing techniques. These techniques are reflected in four of the subcategories of Incel posts found on Incels.co: "Blackpill", "RageFuel", "SuicideFuel", and "Venting". "Blackpill" alludes to the nihilism that undergirds the Incel worldview and lifestyle.

Posts on "Blackpill" often include threads explaining a particular Incel poster's own feeling of nihilism or includes an anecdote that is meant to inspire a sense of hopelessness in terms of social success to other Incels. Not all Incels identify as "blackpilled" so many of these posts are specifically meant to convert non-blackpilled Incels to nihilism. "RageFuel" is a collection of posts that are specifically meant to inspire rage in the Incel community. Many of

these posts, like "ToxicFemininity," feature perceived instances of "abuse" or mistreatment of

Incels or other men by women. "SuicideFuel" threads are similar to "Blackpill" threads in that

they are meant to create a sense of hopelessness, though these posts feature less of an explicit

push for nihilism. Finally, "Venting" threads contain personal stories of Incels encountering their

perceived oppression in their own lives. This strategy allows Incels to convey to their community

that their personal troubles are in fact part of a broader pattern of social oppression against

"unattractive" men such as themselves.

Figure 2. Keyword Cloud of "Grievances"

Like Figure 1, Figure 2 displays a keyword cloud of text analysis data sorted by thematic

significance (size) and frequency (color). There are two overarching types of grievances

displayed in this keyword cloud: internal and external grievances. Internal grievances are Incels'

accounts of their own self-reported physical and social faults as captured in categories such as

"ugly," "face," "average," and "height." Incels often identify certain traits such as height or bone

structure as causing their lack of sexual success. For example:

> *"If you're below 5'9", have shit facial aesthetics, can't grow decent facial hair, have narrow shoulders, it's over. Just imagine the kind of social breakdown that will occur when all these bluepilled men who've been told by society that if you're a good man, if you work hard, get into a good college, etc. means you will eventually have a good family life. Those pathetic subhumans at my coaching institute who thought that going into a college like IIT (top indian engineering institute) or MIT/Stanford would give them access to pussy, I feel for them. Meanwhile 6'0 jocks didn't even need to try, they caused mayhem, didn't study, didn't give a fuck, yet they went on dates, probably even sexed up some of the good looking girls. And the worst part is, u can't cope by saying they were terrible at studies, a few of them ended up at decent IITs. Parents love to cope by saying jocks don't get good grades. So what do you do when he's 6'2" masculine ubermensch AND scores better than you in every test? That's right, you're fucking SUBhuman"*

Though the Incel worldview relies on misogyny to place the blame for their lack of social and sexual success on women, they highlight their own personal failings and perceived physical shortcomings to explain why women prefer other men over them.

The collective sexual failure of Incels is often explained as a product of biological chance. According to the Incels, women naturally prefer the physical traits of other men and therefore no matter what Incels do or say they are doomed to never live up to masculine sexual ideals. In this way, the personal traits that Incels blame for their lack of sexual success are externalized. To Incels, it is not their behavior or personal attitudes toward women that cause women to shun them romantically, but rather cruel natural processes. This is reflected in the theme of "personality", as one Incel states sarcastically:

> *"Money, help with homework, covering their shifts, etc it takes them effort just to be a "DECENT HUMAN BEING " when they want something from you, if you have nothing to offer, you are trash in their eyes meanwhile, chad only offers violence and smoking weed at home while she pays his rent and is a submissive whore but just improve your personality guys, because looks aren't everything"*

This particular Incel reflects a common nihilistic sentiment in the Incel community: kindness or financial success cannot overcome physical unattractiveness. The above statement also features another widespread external grievance of Incels: the "Chad." "Chad" is an Incel term that is used to categorize attractive men that are sexually successful solely due to their physical traits. According to Incels, "Chads" prove that only physical appearance matters in sexual success because "Chads" often display much of the same toxic behavior of Incels.

Mobilization and Coping

Incels present an interesting case study for understanding the mobilization strategies of reactionary movements. Since nihilism and general antisocial behavior is central to their identity, the movement often rejects the possibility that change will occur. Though some Incels do advocate for potential mobilization strategies, many offer alternatives that involve a collective shift toward acceptance of their position in society while striving toward greater mainstream acceptance of their "plight."

Two subcategories of Incel threads capture this acceptance of poisition: "LifeFuel" and "Coping." "LifeFuel", unlike many of the other Incel forum posts, features threads with Incels celebrating the misfortune of others (particularly women). "Coping" offers a mix of posts mocking women and non-Incel men with threads about different strategies that Incels use to deal with their sexual and social failures. In combination, these subcategories illustrate how a reactionary social movement reframes its goals when collective action is viewed as ineffective or impossible. The aim of the movement is no longer to change society, but rather to shift their own values toward reluctant acceptance of their condition.

Figure 3. Keyword Cloud of "Mobilization"
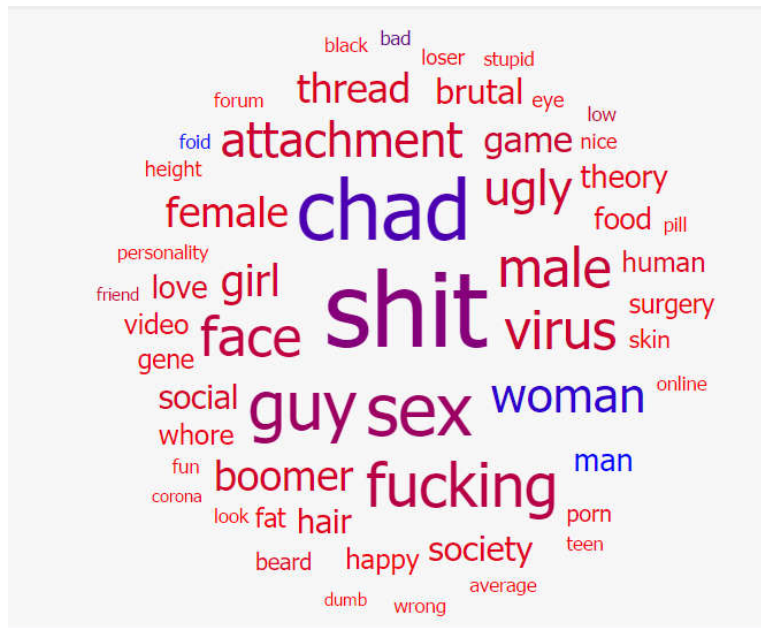
Like Figures 1 and 2, Figure 3 features a keyword cloud of important thematic terms from within the Incel threads. Larger words are more thematically significant and words that are blue appear more frequently in the forums. While most of the major themes referred to instances of Incels mocking women or "Chads," several themes identify potential coping strategies that Incels employ or advise others to adopt. The themes, "food," "game," "porn," and "surgery" link to several comments that demonstrate Incels debating potential short-term ways of managing their problems. For instance, one commenter wrote in reference to their strategy for coping,

> "My only 2 copes for the past 3 years have been food & the internet/surfing. Both of these copes have only hurt me further as I have addictions to both sugar and the internet now and have isolated myself further and further into the oblivion. I think a bucket list would be an incentive of sorts to make life less mundane and push me to try things that I otherwise would have been too comfy to do in my room. Some possible things I would put on would be escortmaxxing, martialartsmaxxing, and drugsmaxxing to name a few things I've wanted to do now for a couple years"

Incels add on the suffix "-maxxing" to refer to coping strategies toward which they devote a significant portion of their time and energy to forget about their inability to have sex with women. For instance, the above comment references, "escortmaxxing" which demonstrates

that some Incels at least vocalize the idea of hiring sex workers to have sex with women. More

long-term solutions to their issues were proposed in the "theory" related threads. However, most

of these threads featured the mocking of potential solutions to their lack of sexual activity rather

than the actual promotion of these ideas.

Beyond these proposed coping strategies, the COVID-19 pandemic has become a

common source of celebration for Incels. As outlined by the themes "virus" and "corona," many

Incels have posted threads lauding the devastation of the virus. According to these posts, the

social isolation that many people now feel due to social distancing measures is similar to the

anomie that they experience due to their identity as an Incel. Other Incels explicitly celebrate the

deaths caused by the virus:

> *"I am loving all the chaos that's being cause by covid19 and it's only going to get worse. Here's my list of reasons why I think covid19 is awesome Some normies, Chads and Staceys are dying Not much else needs to be said about this Some normies, chads and Staceys are getting a lot less sex or maybe even none Unfortunately couples that live together are probably fine and having a lot more sex than ever, however anyone that doesn't have a girlfriend or fwb and usually picks up foids at the bar or anywhere else in public probably won't be able to get laid for a while. He will finally get to experience what we have to. He will finally be sexually starved like we have been our whole lives"*

This comment illustrates one of the primary coping mechanisms of Incels: the sharing of the

suffering of non-Incel individuals. Since most Incels do not believe that they will ever be able to

achieve the normative values presented by masculinity, they instead hope for the mass failure of

others in this regard. The movement would rather have many other individuals share their

psychological pain over their lack of sex rather than attempt to change the conditions of the

social world to allow them to have sex with others.

Discussion

Two major findings emerge from this study. First, misogynistic subcultures rarely explicitly advocate for violence to occur to women. Rather, Incels praise occurrences of violence against women or express a vague hope that some form of adversity will negatively impact a particular woman or group of women. Through this, Incels normalize violence against non-Incels as a desirable event that is to be celebrated by the group even if similar violent acts are not directly *advocated* for by the broader community. This is consistent with findings that demonstrate that reactionary subcultures intentionally avoid publicly prescribing violent mobilization due to potential legal ramifications (Adams & Roscigno, 2005, Douglas, Mcgarty, Bliuc, & Lala, 2005).

The second major finding concerned the unique ways in which the nihilism inherent to much of Incel ideology was reflected in their mobilization strategies. One of the primary assumptions of the Incel movement is that they will be unable to achieve their broader societal goal of the redistribution of sex. Therefore, their mobilization strategies often do not focus on even attempting to organize to change societal values or systems. Instead, Incels engage in collective action through the formation of coping mechanisms that allow them to individually reorient their values and actions away from their failure to succeed through a traditional masculine paradigm.

Unlike many other reactionary social movements, the grievances outlined by the Incel movement are highly personalized. Consequently, the solutions or benefits offered by the group to its members are individualistic. Incels have adopted what is essentially an alter-mobilization strategy; if a social movement accepts that they do not have the political, economic, or cultural capability to achieve their goals then their resources are instead redirected inward toward coping

with their perceived oppression. This re-orientation of the Incel movement toward short-term coping mechanisms over long-term changes has several implications for understanding social movements in a digital context. Though the Internet increases the potential for movements to more easily diffuse information across long distances, it may in fact decrease the potential for these movements to organize due to their anonymity and size. Without the infrastructure and face-to-face interaction of non-digital political groups, Incels appear to have low political efficacy and little organizational strength. However—as evidenced by terror attacks committed by Incels such as Elliot Rodger—there may instead by an enhanced potential for lone-wolf violence. Future studies may attempt to draw a more direct link toward violence committed by reactionary groups and the overall efficacy of digital social movements.

Conclusion

This thesis has analyzed the case of the "Involuntary Celibates" movement to better understand the cultural frameworks of contemporary reactionary movements and their potential for both violent and non-violent mobilization in digital spaces. To achieve this, data was collected from a major web-forum and studied with a quantitative text-analysis software followed by a qualitative review of the text-analysis data. Particular focus was given toward the ways in which Incel posters depict women, common themes constructed within their collective grievance framework, and their methods of mobilization.

The results of this study have illustrated that members of the Incel subculture rarely advocate for violence against women within their forums. However, the celebration of violence against women and non-Incel men is endemic within their community. As suggested by previous studies regarding the relationship between toxic masculinity and aggression, this creates an atmosphere conducive to potential lone-wolf acts of violence. This is further evidenced by

several high-profile terror attacks committed by members of the Ince community, such as Elliot Rodger. However, the nihilistic attitude that permeates the Incel forums and the lack of organizational infrastructure resulting from the digital nature of the Incel movement would suggest that Incels have significantly reduced political efficacy. Instead, their members resort to coping strategies that allow them to deal with the stress caused by their grievances. Despite this lack of potential for causing widespread institutional change, the Incels are representative of a broader trend of digital misogyny, growing anomie, and a cultural backlash toward feminist movements.

Appendix A

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