## UNITED BY RAGE, SELF-LOATHING, AND MALE SUPREMACY: THE RISE OF THE INCEL COMMUNITY

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Abstract:

Since the 1990s, the internet has fundamentally transformed social relations by giving rise to cyber-communities, which have brought new kinds of polymorphous, highly personalized, and lifestyle-oriented social groups (CBC News, 2018). They have also given rise to new political movements, including extremist internet groups, that can be severely detrimental to the sustainable wellbeing of society (Delanty, 2018, p. 200). Over the past decade, a fringe internet group known as the involuntary celibates (Incels) have developed mainstream infamy for their extreme misogynistic rhetoric and reactionary anti-feminist language, which has manifested into several terrorist attacks (ContraPoints, 2018). It can be argued that Incels have developed an online community centred on the desire for society to revert to absolute patriarchy that dehumanizes women as mere sexual commodities and vehemently oppose the idea of women's empowerment and sexual liberation (Tolentino, 2018). This paper will analyze the social dynamics and methods of communication within this fringe echo-chamber to better determine if the values of hate, self-loathing and misogyny can facilitate deliberation and in turn constitute the Incels as a legitimate community.

*Keywords:* community, Incel, misogyny, violence, hate, and manosphere

## Introduction and Background

Following Delanty's post-traditional interpretation of Jurgen Habermas's ideation of community, a community is an entity that is linguistically created through deliberation and sustained by social action (Delanty 2018, p. 135). As noted by Ryfe (2007), deliberation is regarded as a cultural practice that facilitates the exchange of ideas, knowledge, beliefs, and opinions. It is also a procedural mechanism that serves a political purpose by asserting an individual's roles, values, and actions in the dynamics of the group. Under this notion, online communities would be considered a manifestation of an echo-chamber that can be intrinsically individualistic and fragmenting. However, it can be argued that because of the lack of deliberation from excluded groups within such forums, these online groups are instead regurgitating ideas within their boundaries.

Since the 1990s, the Internet has brought about a fundamental transformation in social relations through advancements in communication, which have revolutionized our theoretical understandings of a community and everyday experiences (Delanty 2018, p. 200). Cyber-communities have brought about new kinds of social groups, which are "polymorphous," highly personalized, and lifestyle oriented (Delanty 2018, p. 200). They have also given rise to new political movements, including extremist internet groups, that can have significant influence over the sustainable wellbeing of society (Delanty 2018, p. 200).

Over the past decade, a fringe internet group known as the involuntary celibates (Incels)

have developed mainstream infamy for their extreme misogynistic rhetoric and reactionary anti-feminist language, which has manifested into several terrorist attacks (Olheiser, 2018). On April 23, 2018, Alek Minassian was charged with murdering ten people, mostly women, and injuring sixteen others through a van attack in downtown Toronto, Canada. Before the attack, he applauded the Incel movement. He declared an "Incel Rebellion" to punish women for denying Incels sex, which was regarded in the forums he partook in as a human right (Olheiser, 2018).

In the same Facebook post, Minassian pledged allegiance to Elliot Rodger, a 22-year old, self-identified Incel who killed six people and wounded fourteen others in the college town of Isla Vista. Rodger is lionized within online forums of Incels, in which Minassian actively engaged (Branson-Potts & Winton, 2016). The deification of Rodger was not only due to the violence of his act but also the 137-page manifesto that excoriated women for "unfairly" rejecting him and giving their affection, love and sex to other men while he remained a virgin. Rodger's manifesto and YouTube videos became a staple hold of the Incel movement, serving as a guide for many Incels who want to partake in acts of violence (Branson-Potts & Winton, 2016 ). The motives of sexual frustration and hatred for women further inspired Scott Paul Bierele to murder six women at a yoga studio in Tallahassee, Florida, in November 2018 as well as several other attacks in which perpetrators were linked to engaging in Incel forums (Zaveri, Jacobs & Mervosh, 2018).

A product of the anti-feminist Men's Rights Movement (MRM), Incels operate within a broader online conglomerate of fringe anti-feminist sub-groups known as the Manosphere (Lily 2016, p. 50). Although Incels express a common sentiment of disdain towards feminism, they are distinctly unique due to their language, beliefs, and ideology compared to other groups in the Manosphere (Jane 2017, p. 662). Incels have developed a cohesive environment of social engagement centred on a shared desire for society to operate under absolute patriarchy that dehumanizes women as mere sexual commodities and quashes the empowerment of women and sexual liberation (Tolentino 2018).

It is essential to determine what elements within the online platforms where Incels gather provide members with a sense of nostalgia and comfort that Zygmunt Bauman refers to as the foundation of community (Bauman, 2001). This paper refers to core theoretical notions of community noted by Zygmunt Bauman and Jurgen Habermas's as the basis of whether or not interactions among Incels within and outside their online forums constitute the subgroup as a legitimate community. Analyzing the social dynamics and methods of communication within this fringe eco-chamber clarifies whether values of hate, self-loathing and misogyny can facilitate deliberation, emotional connectedness, and nostalgia which in turn will constitute the Incels as a sociologically legitimate community.

**History of the Incel Community**

In 1997, a woman in Toronto known as "Alana" created a website that sought to operate as a support network for anybody of any gender who was lonely, never had sex or who had not been in a relationship in a long time for whatever reason (Taylor, 2018). She coined the term 'involuntary celibates' to refer to the members of this online support group. However, after dissociating herself from the network, the forum began to shift towards becoming a virtual area of hate and frustration

among mostly heterosexual men within the manosphere (Taylor, 2018).

According to Ging (2017), the manosphere is a product of the men's liberation movement of the 1970s, which emerged as a form of resistance against second-wave feminism. Historically, Incels identified as men who were disillusioned by the seduction methods of pick up artists whom they felt had failed them in developing sexual relationships with women (SPLC, 2018). As a result, Incels began to coalesce within anonymous social media platforms such as 4Chan, Reddit, 8Chan, Gab, Incel.me as well as other platforms to express their frustrations through unfettered misogyny, racism, and violence rhetoric (Fifth Estate, 2019; Beauchamp, 2018; Massanari 2015, p. 333).

The adoption of violent and extreme misogynistic rhetoric within Incel forums appealed to male members as a socially acceptable outlet for venting their anger and hate without backlash (Marwick & Caplan, 2018). Many Incels consider such platforms as safe-spaces for members to find kinship, camaraderie, obtain emotional support and develop a sense of belonging through a shared sense of victimhood even through the promotion of violence against women (Kimmel 2013, p. 115; Hill, 2019; Ging, 2018). This coincides with the notions of community highlighted by Bauman (2001), those of preserving and promoting a sense of comfort among its members.

According to Lily (2016, p. 50) Incels claim that the purpose of such forums is not rooted in sexist ideology but is rather an effort by men fighting against their alleged emasculation and sexual repression at the hands of feminists (Lily, 2016, p. 50). However, The Southern Poverty Law Center has labelled Incels as a male supremacy group that spews a hateful ideology advocating for the subjugation of women (SPLC, 2018). The Incels' ascent to mainstream social discourse is due, in part, to the acts of violence perpetrated by Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian, whom Incels glorify for avenging the perceived injustices of an oppressive feminist society (Ging, 2017, p. 3). The consensus among Incel chatrooms is that feminists, social justice warriors, and alpha males are to blame for their inability to have sexual relationships (Ging, 2017, p. 3). Overall, Incels subscribe to a notion of masculinity that is defined by a tally of "sexual conquests" and referring to women as "emotionally cruel," "sexually deviant subhumans" (Grinnell College, n.d.) who are inferior to men intellectually and genetically and must, therefore, be controlled.

**Social Boundaries of the Incels**

It is important to note the difference between those who are involuntarily celibate and those who are part of the Incel community. According to a linguistic analysis study, it was determined that the demographic characteristics of self-identified members of one Incel forum were predominantly adolescent males, heterosexual, often less educated and described as lonely, socially anxious, and depressed (Jaki et al., 2018, p. 13). They were also noted as using language that exhibited low-self esteem, self-pity and hopelessness due to perceived physical or mental shortcomings and a lack of professional success as a result of unemployment (Jaki et al., 2018, p. 13). No boundary or filtering mechanism can prevent anyone who may not identify as an Incel to engage in the chat rooms, message boards or forums since most platforms provide their users with a veil of anonymity (Massanari, 2017, p. 334). This anonymity allows anyone who may not abide by the values of the group or share the ideologies of Incels or other manosphere groups to infiltrate the

websites, view their activities, and partake in their discussions (Massanari, 2017, p. 335). However, in the eyes of Incels, there are boundaries as to who can identify as a member of the group, despite being unable to filter out anyone whom they consider as unwelcome to their forums unless forum administrators remove them. These boundaries are established through language, and rhetoric exchanged between members within the message boards.

The expression of terminologies such as "roastie[1]", "femoid[2]", or "holes[3]" is correctly used not only as derogatory expressions against women but also as a rhetorical force that strengthens the interconnectedness of an ingroup and ostracizes those who are deemed unwelcome (Marwick & Caplan, 2018). The overall vernacular of Incels serves as an active strategy of excluding individuals who do not fit the ideals of Incel forums and work to orient Incels against women, feminists, as well as self-identified female Incels or "Femcels". One of the most actively repudiated members of Incel forums are Femcels as well as Incels from the LGBTQ community, commonly referred to as "Gaycels" who are actively met with great hostility, shut out, and blocked from Incel forums. This expulsion campaign is suspected to be due to commonly shared notions within the forums that the struggle of women and LGBTQ people in terms of interpersonal and sexual relationships are illegitimate compared to those experienced by heterosexual male Incels (Chester, 2018; Coles, 2018).

The members of the predominantly male Incel community believe that unless a woman is "severely deformed," (Jennings, 2018) she can have sex whenever she wants. They also argue that the main reason women and gay men consider themselves to be involuntarily celibate is not involuntary at all but rather centred on having "too high of standards" (Jennings, 2018) that eliminate the prospect of finding a realistic male partner. In the case of an anonymous "Femcel," the individual made a post on a popular forum where she refuted claims that her celibacy was voluntary or based on high standards but instead genuinely insisted that she is unattractive. The response to the thread was met with a severe backlash by other Incels, filled with posters calling the woman a liar, a troll, a "vapid whore," "lonely and unloved," and "pig woman" (Jennings, 2018). The participant who disclosed herself as a woman was subsequently banned from the forum.

Eliminating the participation of women in such forums is emphasized as a necessary mechanism of preserving the politically incorrect online culture of Incel forums, where members can say whatever they like without having to support their position or provide evidence (Massanari, 2017, p. 335). Ideology, through language, plays a significant role in shaping the boundaries of the Incel forums. Members actively use terminologies that describe women as "evil subhuman beings" and refer to them in dehumanizing terms such as "femoids," "FHOs (Female Humanoid Organism)" or "holes." A unique component of the Incel subculture is the group's language, terminologies

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[1] A derogatory term to describe the disfiguration a woman's genitalia after engaging in intercourse

[2] A dehumanizing term to describe women as humanoid creatures

[3] Female

(Conti, 2018)

and neologisms that differentiate Incels from other groups in the Manosphere (Conti, 2018; Jane 2017, p. 661). Incels' ways of communicating are aimed at being demeaning, discriminatory, violent, racist, and misogynistic (Conti, 2018).

Social membership is therefore determined by individual members contributing to forums using Incel specific terminologies that aim to be offensive to other Incels or outside members of the group (Jaki et al., 2018, p. 4-9). Following conceptions of community highlighted by Habermas, members of Incel forums can engage in discourse over controversial political issues, openly establish a consensus while acknowledging and accepting that reasonable disagreements may exist. However, such an idea of a community may more easily be conceived in theory rather than in practice (Stanford, 2017)

Due to this extreme anti-woman rhetoric, many female Incels are dissuaded from engaging in such forums (Jennings, 2018). Although this may compromise the ability of Incel forum to be qualified as a legitimate community under Habermas's notions of deliberation, there is no indication that because specific demographics are actively excluded that deliberation does not exist (Stanford, 2017). On the contrary, there are several factions within the Incel forums who, despite a consensus against the rights of women and other groups, remain openly at-odds to the notions of violent extremism, politics, and policy as highlighted by VICE News (2018).

**Social Manifestations**

The Incel ideology is preoccupied with a manosphere concept known as the Red Pill Subreddit. It is a theory which originates from The Matrix Trilogy where the hero must choose between swallowing a blue pill, that will allow him to remain in a pleasant illusory world, or a red pill,

which will open his eyes to the reality in which he is enslaved (Van Valkenburg, 2018). The concept of "red-pilling" is a common theme among many subgroups in the manosphere and has served as a rhetorical tool to systematically challenge liberal progressive ideas or any external perspectives contrary to the beliefs of the in-group (Aikin, 2018). According to Ging (2017), the emergence of the philosophy uniting concept among manosphere groups is believed to have originated from a subreddit thread in reddit.com known as "The Red Pill" (r/TRP).

The hallmark red-pill thinking is its contention of society being subjected to a grand illusion and that the messages expressed by the online forum serve as an enlightening source guiding member in discovering a new corrected reality (Aikin, 2018). The Incels consider themselves to be "red-pillers," claiming to realize that Western society is sexist against men. They claim that most people whom they refer to as "normies" have instead taken the blue pill, which has subjected them to remain ignorant of what they claim to be an oppressive feminist system (Grinnell College, n.d.).

This perceived notion of an unjust feminist conspiracy against men has resulted in many Incels amplifying sentiments of self-hate, self-loathing, and anger towards women as well as themselves ("Inside 'Incel' Ideology," 2018). It has also manifested into a political theory among Incels known as "Sexual Marxism." Proponents of this theory believe that their Incel status is due to a rigged system of sexual and economic injustice where there is an unequal allocation of sex to the top 20% of men who are alpha males (Beauchamp, 2018). One of the fundamental rules within the r/TRP that legitimizes membership within the community is not only the active use of terms but

the sharing of theoretical concepts regarding human nature and Western society that in turn facilitates a deliberation of ideas, policies and beliefs regarding the perceived struggle among Incels (Van Valkenburg, 2018). Within the forums, Incels debate and discuss policy ideas from legalizing prostitution to potentially more extreme propositions such as the equal distribution of sex, state-mandated girlfriends, and the legalizing rape, incest and in some cases pedophilia (Jakie et al., 2018, p. 20-22; Cook & Campbell, 2018).

Through such mechanisms, Incels have established in-group identity through collective self-loathing, companionship, and commiseration of their perceived social isolation to help address their emotional needs. Out-group identity is formed by depicting women, normies, and LGBTQ individuals as reprehensible Jaki et al. (2018). Incitement and justification of violence against women and minorities are some of the most common characteristics of Incel forums such as Incel.me, which enhances negative out-group depictions (Jaki et al., 2018).

It was noted by Jaki et al. (2018) that the in-group vs. out-group dynamic is further propagated through the persecution of individuals who post comments or threads that do not align with common ideas expressed in the forums. The creation of such a virtual echo-chamber has not only made individuals susceptible to violent radicalization but has also categorized members of the out-groups as a source of all of their despair and view them as a threatening group. Hence, it is common that much of the speech expressed within the forums incites violence targeting certain people because of their gender, sexual orientation, as well as their ethnic, religious, or racial background Jaki et al. (2018).

Within the r/TRP, the community is structured around social and biological theories in which new members are required to both familiarize, understand as well as engage with other members in accordance with the rules of the forum through virtual interactions (Van Valkenburg, 2018). For Incels, a sense of community is developed through a profanity-heavy form of communication by making posts regarding their sexual frustrations, commenting on other members' posts, and collectively commiserating over their loneliness (Romano, 2018). Members share memes, comments, and videos as well as pornography that are overtly racist, misogynistic, abusive, violent, and encourage other members to commit suicide (Hill, 2018). This method of engagement among Incels demonstrates how online communities can emerge through language and how group-specific terminology determines the boundaries of the community (Jaki et al., 2018, p. 25).

However, the most disturbing social manifestations of the Incel movement have been the acts of terror committed by self-proclaimed Incels (McDonell-Parry, 2018). Many of the individuals initially share social media posts, messages, or, in some instances, an elaborate manifesto encrypted with Incel specific language proclaiming vengeance against the system that has left them sexless (Blommaert, 2017, p. 10). Acts of violence and declarations of mass violence have become a significant concern among the public due to the potentiality of Incels becoming a breeding ground for so-called lone-wolf terrorist activities such as those enacted by Alek Minassian and Scott Paul Bierele (Shechter, 2018).

**Solidarity Through Hate and Self-Loathing**

The sense of solidarity among Incels is rooted in their self-deprecating perceptions of

physical appearance and a shared sense of inferiority (Hill, 2018). They collectively obsess over their facial features, height, weight, wrist size, neck size, penis size and several other physical attributes that they claim to serve as the reasons why they are unwanted by women (Janki, 2018, p. 10; Hill, 2018). Incels perpetuate a shared identity centred on the belief that they cannot have sex or affection from women because they fail to fit a stereotypical ideal of masculinity (Hobbes, 2018). Incels exemplify their ideal animus through a cis-gendered male archetype known as "Chads." According to Incel forums, Chads are men who are considered athletic, physically fit, and easily capable of developing hundreds of sexual relationships with attractive women whom Incels refer to as "Stacy's" (Jennings, 2018). Solidarity through misogyny and violence is also displayed by members "joking" about how they would like to rape and murder Stacy's, as well as plot mass shootings (VICE News, 2018).

The second point of solidarity among Incels are their stated suicidal tendencies. Referred to as "black-pilling," many Incels claim that the only way to escape this unjust system of sexual repression and inceldom is suicide (Romano, 2018). Many Incels have found a sense of belonging within forums that allow them to share expressions of suicidal thoughts as well as detailed declarations of committing suicide with others who may also be suicidal. The aggressive and cruel engagement of Incels with each other has escalated a sense of fatalistic nihilism among the members to such an extent they feel comfortable in openly discussing how and when they want to commit suicide (Romano, 2018).

**Sociological Assessment**

Max Weber emphasized that communities are centred upon a balance of communal and aggregative relationships. He also noted that without the communal elements of emotional ties or traditional links, a community is unable to exist, regardless of the number of face-to-face interactions experienced or locations shared with other members (Weber, 1962, p. 92). There is arguably a sense of communalization among Incels as they have developed a kinship with one another through shared feelings of inferiority, anxiety, depression, anger, hatred, and disillusionment. Weber noted that communal relationships could be coercive; however, for many Incels the forums serve as an emotional support group for individuals who are experiencing personal issues. Arguably, it should be noted that the rhetoric of hatred, bigotry, mockery, and vicious antagonization perpetuated by forums towards the enemies of Incels has shown little evidence in enhancing the psychological wellbeing of their members.

Following Zygmunt Bauman's sociological interpretation of public spheres, the sense of community among Incels is also rooted in the imagination of a world based on nostalgia and security (Bauman, 2001, p. 3). A component of the communal nature of Incels is their vigorous belief that they are 'low status' men and have found a sense of solidarity through this shared belief (Delanty, 2018, p. 138). Within the forums, there is an expression of a "paradise lost" (Bauman, 2001, p. 3) mentality where Incels express a desire for society to return to a time where women were subordinate to men that will then allow them to obtain sex from women whenever they please. This concept emphasizes the notion that a community is dependent on an illusion where individual members construct their perspectives to defend against invading forces, which, in the case of Incels, is feminism (Delanty, 2018, p. 138).

## Conclusion

The rise of Incels exhibits how communities are built upon shared emotional experiences independent of shared physical spaces and locality. Delanty (2018, p. 201) notes that networks that facilitate such communications do not necessarily constitute communities directly. They do, however, allow for de-spatialized communities to emerge from consistent communications between individuals who share communal solidarity.

Although Incels exhibit characteristics of an echo-chamber, their forums do facilitate deliberation with regards to who can be categorized as an Incel, how Incels should grieve their celibacy and whether violent rhetoric is necessary to enhance their status. For Incels, community is centred on a voluntary association of their shared beliefs, values, and active communication through the common vernacular of their respective forums. It is a concept that is rooted in kinship and emotional experiences without the expectation of direct compensation (Tonnies, 1974, p. 8).

According to Craig Calhoun, the internet is producing communities whose participants share similarities of thought rather than enhancing diversity (Delanty, 2018, p. 214). Computer-mediated communication has bolstered the rise of communities where members share a collective identity across geography, such as Incels (Delanty, 2018, p. 218). It is essential that researchers further investigate why self-described Incels gravitate towards online spaces and how they develop a sense of community within forums that may be emotionally maladaptive for young males who vulnerable in engaging in such groups. Investigating the Incel world is critical in understanding communities as entities that operate under a virtual format and can allow us to consider the possibility of deliberation existing within an echo-chamber. It will also allow us to understand better the radicalization trajectories of vulnerable youth towards engaging in violent extremism.

## Future Research

There is little literature, or empirical data is exploring the social dynamics of not only the Incel community but the manosphere as a whole. Without an adequate understanding of the trajectories and socio-behavioural patterns among those who engage in the manosphere, it will be challenging to implement social and legal policies to reduce violent radicalization, suicides and psychological trauma among both members and those who are victimized by hateful rhetoric. In a study conducted by Jaki et al. (2018), an interdisciplinary group of investigators in the fields of computer science, psychology and sociology sought to explore the group dynamics of incel forums through natural language processing (NLP).

Unfortunately, this study was conducted using a single forum as its source of data, which limits its generalizability. Future research should focus on developing systematic reviews as well as various discourse analysis of online forums within the manosphere, including the Incel subgroups using NLP. Through such research strategies, future investigations will better analyze the dynamics of how manosphere communities like the Incles operate, obtain new members, construct a sense of commonality potentially prevent future acts of violence and perpetuation of radicalization and online psychological trauma in society.

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