

The University of Chicago

“Life Wasn’t Supposed to be This Way”:  
Involuntary Celibacy Among Young Men  
Online

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research seeks to explore the ways in which members of a virtual involuntary celibate (incel) community cope with prolonged experiences of failure in pursuing romantic relationships, particularly in relation to their expectations and beliefs about masculine gender performance. Incels define themselves as men who have experienced consistent stigma in the realm of dating due to their gender expression, identity, and performance. As I show, on these visual boards they express a sense that they are incapable of romantic and sexual intimacy due to their inability to embody hegemonic masculine ideals (Ging 2019). Using a multi-method approach consisting of digital ethnography, interviews, and content analysis, I argue that participation in incel forums exasperates users' feelings of gender dysphoria due to community-led pathologizing of their gender performance. I demonstrate that the presence of misogyny in online incel interactions serves the purpose of repudiating their gender infractions as well as temporarily alleviating their stigma as incels. I found that the promise of community solidarity outweighs concerns of experiencing digital self-harm and emotional pain in incel spaces. Criteria for successful gender presentation and performance is moving beyond the boundaries of cisgender and transgender status and into perceptions of physical appearance and gendered behavior.

**KEYWORDS:** masculinity, gender dysphoria, social interaction, stigma

## **INTRODUCTION**

The word 'incel' entered the American lexicon in 2014 in the aftermath of the Isla Vista mass shooting, in which 22-year-old college student Elliot Rodger killed six people and injured twelve others in an effort to avenge his sense of rejection in romantic relationships (Nagourey,

Cielpy, Feurer, and Lovett 2014). In a manifesto Rodger published shortly before what he referred to as his ‘Day of Retribution,’ he outlined every incident throughout his life that he felt pushed him to commit this violent act, including feelings of shame for being mixed race, experiences of romantic rejection from women, and bullying. Throughout the 140-page document, Rodger writes about the impact that prolonged social alienation had caused him since early childhood and how he had reached his breaking point as a college student in Santa Barbara, California. In the years following the Isla Vista massacre, a few incidents of mass violence perpetrated by ‘angry men’ have been linked to similar misogynist sentiments as in the cases of Christopher Harper-Mercer (Gunderson 2015), Alek Minassian (Brockbank 2019), and most recently, Robert Aaron Long (Brumback and Wang 2021), who killed eight people working at massage spas in the Atlanta area, though their connections to the involuntary celibacy community have never been confirmed by media outlets (Gunderson 2015, Brockbank 2019, Brumback and Wang 2021).

Nearly a decade after Isla Vista, Elliot Rodger’s memory lives on in the involuntary celibate community. In forums like Incels.is, users jokingly refer to Rodger as a saint, claiming that he was a martyr for the cause of involuntary celibacy and should be remembered as someone who died for their cause (Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro 2020). Others disavow Rodger’s actions and believe people like Rodger are the reason why incels are being connected to mass shootings the community are not involved in (Gunderson 2015, Brockbank 2019, Brumback and Wang 2021). For the most part, incels find humor in Rodger’s story—they laugh at his low ‘kill death ratio’ as if Isla Vista had been a video game stage and Rodger had been playing the game poorly and make comments about his suspected wealth and good looks for an incel, suggesting that had they been given life circumstances like Rodger’s, they would have avoided incel status.

Involuntary celibacy has been a topic of discussion in online message boards since the 1990s, with users seeking out these spaces in search of moral support, community, and to satisfy emotional needs (Donnelly, Burgess, Anderson, Davis, and Dillard 2001). Incels form community with each other by sharing stigmatizing or traumatic experiences they have had related to their gender presentation, such as being bullied by peers for their physical appearance, or their gender performance, such as experiencing romantic rejection due to a lack of athleticism. Decades later, incel chat rooms and online forums continue to provide interested users with a haven for them to discuss their offline gender infractions, romantic woes, and frustrations with women whom they believe are weaponizing their gender to oppress undesirable men (O'Malley, Holt, and Holt 2020).

Journalists and researchers alike have sought to understand the incel community due to a perceived connection between the involuntary celibate community and violent mass attacks enacted by men in the past decade. To date, most academic and journalistic writings focus on the community's propensity toward violence (Kimmel 2017, Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro 2020, O'Malley, Holt, and Holt 2020, Saptura and Boyle 2020), the implications of misogynistic rhetoric present in incel spaces (Ging 2019, O'Malley et al 2020), or the factors that have led people to identify as involuntary celibate (Donnelly, Burgess, Anderson, Davis, and Dillard 2001). While crucial to our understanding of these communities, this research has overlooked the role that digital environments play in incel community formation and cultural norms—virtual communities that date back to the late 1990s (Donnelly et al 2001). Despite being understudied, digital environments have long served as a haven for deviant online communities, including more violently oriented subcultures like Al Qaeda-affiliated online movements and White supremacist groups (Holt, Freilich, and Chermak 2016).

In this paper, I examine the role of online communities for men who identify themselves as ‘incels.’ Drawing on five months of digital ethnography on incel-exclusive online community spaces, eight interviews, and a content analysis of 1,000 posts from incel forum Incels.is, I explore how participants talk about the impact that their perceived prolonged failure to embody hegemonic masculine ideals has on their lives. Participating in their conversations, I identified key ways that users talked about gender online. Further, I traced how participation in these online communities can create a sense of community and support while also exacerbating feelings of aggrievement among men. I found that involuntary celibate men experience gender dysphoria resulting from their inability to embody masculine gender expectations and these feelings of dysphoria intensify during online interaction as users engage in collaborative pathologizing of each other’s gender performance. During conversation, misogyny is used as a stigma management tool by incels to repudiate their gender infractions and temporarily alleviate their stigma as involuntarily celibate men. Despite the prevalence of emotional pain and risk of digital self-harm in online incel community spaces, incels continue to participate in these spaces in pursuit of community solidarity and a shared sense of understanding. Metrics for successful gender presentation and performance are becoming more rigid and difficult to attain as hegemonic standards of gendered beauty continue to spread in media and the consequences of failing to pass as one’s stated gender identity become more dangerous, including but not limited to self-harm and suicide.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Involuntary celibate-identifying people have existed on the internet since the late 1990s (Donnelly et al 2001), but their communities did not spark interest among researchers until the 2014 Isla Vista shooting, which has informed the way the involuntary celibate community has

been studied over the last decade (Hoffman et al 2020, O'Malley et al 2020). Existing literature on involuntary celibates has overlooked the role digital environments play in incel community formation and cultural norms, the impact prolonged failure to embody hegemonic masculine ideals has on men, and the stigma incel-identified individuals live with because of their perceived substandard gender presentation and performance.

### ***'Doing' Gender on the Internet***

Gender is one of many lenses through which we view the world. It informs our assessment of situations, our presentation of self, and how we interpret the things we see. Until recent years, "doing" gender was a routine accomplishment situated in daily social interaction that was primarily situated offline (West and Zimmerman 1987). Now that the internet has become an essential part of daily life, the ways in which we "do" gender are changing as well. "Doing" gender as a routine accomplishment in digital social interaction allows for interaction ritual partners to play beyond the scope of traditional gender scripts, allowing for gender presentation exploration, identity experimentation, and online gender performance (Rosier and Pearce 2011).

Digital embodiment shifts the boundaries between front stage and backstage (Yeshua-Katz 2015, Goffman 1959), granting people greater control over the image they portray, given that it is an opt-in process via the photographing, editing, and uploading of a person's features on to the internet. This multi-step process allows stigmatized persons whose desired gender presentation may be seen as discreditable to conceal their identities from their offline network to avoid becoming discredited (Goffman 1963). This is the case for transgender people, pro-anorexia bloggers, and online gamers, whose online community memberships and identities carry varying degrees of stigma associated with them. In some circumstances, as in the case of

online gamers, digital gender embodiment can be seen clearly by using masculine or feminine avatar video game characters (Rosier and Pearce 2011, Williams, Consalvo, Caplan, and Yee 2009). In most cases, digital gender embodiment is less explicit but can still be affirming of an internet user's stated gender identity, such as the adornment of social media profiles with images and videos of gender-specific content, as in the case of trans vloggers on YouTube (Jenzen 2017) or trans Tumblr bloggers (Haimson, Dame-Griff, Capello, and Richter 2021). However not all digital gender embodiment is done as a stigma avoidance strategy, as in the case of online dating where both race and gender play a crucial role in digital social interaction (Curington, Lundquist, and Lin 2021).

For transgender individuals, "doing" gender on the internet has allowed for members of the trans community to be able to situate themselves in community spaces while affirming their gender in ways they may not have been able to in the physical world, such as using a name reflective of their stated gender identity or posting DIY approaches toward gender expression (Jenzen 2017). By granting users anonymity as a default, websites like Tumblr allow users to create a space where they feel safe presenting as their new gender (Haimson et al 2021). These accounts are not devoid of user identifiers, but rather are sufficiently detached from the account owner's original network of relatives and peers to avoid being discredited (Haimson et al 2021, Goffman 1963).

By being able to "do" gender on the internet, members of the pro-anorexia community online are able to display their otherwise discrediting gender presentation in community exclusive blogs as well as larger social media platforms like Tumblr (Boero and Pascoe 2012, Yeshua-Katz 2015). Pro-ana gender performance such as weigh-ins, when users post photos of themselves on a scale as proof of their weight loss (Yeshua-Katz and Martins 2012), and body

checks, when users post photos of their bodies highlighting the petiteness of their body relative to surrounding items like boxes or doors (Boero and Pascoe 2012), are performances of femininity among women in pro-ana spaces. Among users who have been authenticated by veteran community members, selfies and other photos of their food intake and body measurements serve as props that further aid the negotiation of their routine accomplishment in digital social interaction as thin women (Goffman 1959, West and Zimmerman 1987, Boero and Pascoe 2012). Pro-ana users' strict policing of who can participate in community spaces as well as their emphasis on physical features as keys to community entry are reminiscent of the ways in which involuntary celibates monitor and control outsider traffic in community spaces and how they form community identity based on perceived unattractiveness.

Video games vary in their capacity for gender expression, with games like Second Life and The Sims granting the user total creative control of the avatar's physical features and the clothing they wear, while others like Minecraft providing limited options in terms of virtual gender embodiment (Rosier and Pearce 2011). "Doing" gender in online video games involves more than avatar selection and customization, it includes use of voice chat, text chat, and who you choose to play with (Williams, Caplan, and Xiong 2007). For cisgender women or children with high-pitched voices, the sound of their voices can influence how others perceive the person playing, especially if users do not know each other in real life (Williams et al 2007). Like gamers, incels are cognizant of the anonymity the internet can provide its users and they value those who go beyond bare minimum engagement like text chat in favor of things like voice chat or in recent years, live streaming of video game or other communally consumable content.

As courtship strategies and social scripts on heterosexual dating practices adapt to dating applications and websites like Tinder, Bumble, and OKCupid, digital gender embodiment



strategies must follow suit. “Doing” gender on dating apps is more difficult than in the previous examples provided, as most dating apps provide users with avenues for gender performance and presentation, but they emphasize succinct communication (Curington et al 2021). These include profile pictures, a character-limited area to write a brief description of yourself, and embedded profiles like Spotify to display music taste or Instagram to further supplement photo supply to provide prospective matches with more information about you which they will use to decide whether they are interested in matching with you (Curington et al 2021). Once a user has moved beyond the matching stage and into the messaging stage, gender performance can prove to be a challenge. In heterosexual romantic correspondence, men are expected to initiate conversations in dating apps, which they are reminded of when reading the bios of women on the apps who request to be messaged first due to shyness (Curington et al 2021). Men are expected to be confident, funny, and original in these initial inquiries, since heterosexual women receive disproportionately high amounts of engagement on dating apps and websites (Curington et al 2021). Dating is not only gendered but also racialized and men of color feel penalized for being non-White, especially Black and Asian men (Lu and Wong 2013, Curington et al 2021). For many heterosexual male users of dating apps, the shifts in romantic social scripts have become increasingly difficult to keep up with, a sentiment shared by incel men that generally have difficulties with speaking to women, therefore being ill-equipped to navigate digital platforms like Tinder, Bumble, and OKCupid.

### ***Gender Infractions***

Social interaction in the digital or physical world is a ritual in which two or more parties negotiate an agreed-upon definition of the situation (Goffman 1959, Yeshua-Katz 2015). The definition of the situation refers to the social meaning one asserts to characterize and interpret a

setting, encounter, or interaction (Goffman 1959). In everyday social interaction, we undergo a process of negotiating the nature of the interaction, the roles we play, and the scripts we are assigned based on such roles. In most circumstances, these factors are not explicitly stated but are rather demonstrated through symbols such as physical presentation, any items one may carry, and verbal or nonverbal cues (Goffman 1959). In the digital world, the process of negotiating the definition of the situation and its respective roles, scripts, and props differs little from what Goffman (1959) has outlined in his work. For instance, in a chat room, you and all other participants would have at least three key characteristics: a profile picture or avatar, a username, and an explicit role denoting your status in the digital space, such as guest, moderator, or administrator, all of which hold varying degrees of power in the front and backstage. Profile pictures, avatars, and usernames serve as places where symbols can be displayed to communicate information you would like prospective interaction partners to know, such as a name or pseudonym, group affiliation, or nationality, many of which can be indicated using emoticons or emojis. Your profile picture can feature a photo with your likeness, it could be a photo of a beloved pet, indicating you are an animal lover, or an image from your favorite video game franchise, letting others know you are a gamer.

As people navigate daily life, they hope to implicitly communicate certain things about themselves to others with whom they may interact with and these things vary depending on social context, such as one's occupation or gender identity (West and Zimmerman 1987). For instance, a person going on a first date with a prospective partner may want to convey romantic intent to their interaction partner and may dress a certain way, carry certain props, or use language they believe will most effectively communicate these things to others. While these actions are not necessary to be seen as a prospective romantic partner by others, they provide interaction partners with new

information with which to assess their own definition of the situation and decide whether to accept or challenge it. Literature on stigmatized identities and social interaction are integral to this work, as they carefully demonstrate the importance of social interaction in negotiating one's identity (Goffman 1959) and managing stigmatized identities (Goffman 1963, Yeshua-Katz 2015).

The emergence of involuntary celibacy as a cultural phenomenon among men is an example of a failure to accomplish a successful performance of one's stated gender identity. West and Zimmerman's (1987) work describes gender as a routine accomplishment in daily social interaction. Gender is a facet of one's identity that is reinforced socially, depicted through the performance of feminine or masculine 'natures' (West and Zimmerman 1987). It is important to note that 'doing' gender is not a reflection of a person's genitalia (West and Zimmerman 1987), as one cannot perform the possession of a penis or vagina. Gender as an action does not require one perform their stated gender identity through the embodiment of gender stereotypes, it simply means that the act of 'doing' gender will be subject to gender assessment (West and Zimmerman 1987).

Successfully asserting one's gender in daily social interaction is not achieved overnight, it is achieved after years of refining one's identity and much of this process includes failures in achieving gender embodiment during adolescence (Pascoe 2011). High school can be a hostile environment for young people to make mistakes in and the consequences youth incur because of these failures can cause emotional distress (Pascoe 2011, Maxwell et al 2020). There is no explicit instruction manual on how to effectively perform one's desired gender identity and thereby successfully negotiate it in everyday social interaction, meaning that gender embodiment is not linear or standardized (Pascoe 2011). For adolescent boys, masculine embodiment entails the repudiation of the specter of failed masculinity, which is done by hurling homophobic insults

at each other or performing gendered objectification of feminine bodies in a competitive manner (Pascoe 2011). By calling into question the validity of another teen's masculinity, they temporarily absolve themselves from gender inquiry and avoid feelings of aggrievement, much like involuntary celibate men do in online daily interaction with one another.

### ***Stigma Management Strategies***

Unlike stigmatized communities of the past, where members congregated in physical meeting spots to establish community with one another (Goffman 1963), stigmatized communities today are primarily situated in the digital world, allowing a wider range of users to access community spaces for solidarity, kinship, and acceptance (Smithson, Sharkey, Hewis, Jones, Emmens, Ford, and Owens 2011). Stigmatized groups have found refuge on the internet since the 1990s (Donnelly et al 2001) and have provided an escape from the reality of living with stigma in a world dominated by normals (Goffman 1963). Increased accessibility brought by the internet has allowed for stigmatized people—from gender and sexual minorities to disabled persons—to form community and create strong ties with each other with an additional bonus of anonymity to protect users from being outed as possessing a stigmatized trait or identity. For those whose stigmatized status cannot be concealed, as in the case of incels, the accessible nature of internet forums allows for them to participate in social interaction without interacting with normals who may subject them to stigma in their daily life. Despite members of the involuntary celibate community believing they are a discredited stigmatized group, their lack of sexual or romantic experience is not visually discernable but rather is something members must disclose to each other in interaction (Donnelly et al 2001, Maxwell et al 2020).

One group whose stigmatized traits are difficult to conceal, therefore discrediting them as potential normals (Goffman 1963), is the pro-anorexia community (Brotsky and Giles 2007,

Riley, Rodham, and Gavin 2009, Boero and Pascoe 2012, Maloney 2013, Yeshua-Katz and Martins 2012, Yeshua-Katz 2015, Ging and Garvey 2018). Researchers have looked at pro-anorexia communities on the internet as examples of embodiment in the digital sphere (Boero and Pascoe 2012, Maloney 2013) and of communities resisting stigma imposed upon them by outsiders (Yeshua-Katz and Martins 2012, Yeshua-Katz 2015). Unlike other stigmatized online communities, pro-anorexia users situate their online communities in private servers or online forums but have also carved space for themselves on larger digital platforms like Instagram and Pinterest (Ging and Garvey 2018), and Tumblr (Yeshua-Katz 2015).

While non-community members can view and engage with pro-anorexia content online, they are not granted community membership unless they are able to embody and demonstrate anorexic beauty standards to other community members through interaction rituals (Boero and Pascoe 2012). Existing research on male rage and its effects on those who experience it (Kalish and Kimmel 2014, Kimmel 2017) directly relate to the incel community due to the prevalence of feelings of anger and frustration in incel spaces resulting from their inability to embody hegemonic masculine ideals. Prolonged experiences of stigma have led some men to seek retribution for their emotional wounds through violence which Kalish and Kimmel (2014) refer to as aggrieved entitlement, a feeling historically privileged groups experience when deprived of things that were once guaranteed to them. Aggrieved entitlement is a gendered emotion which fuses humiliation over emasculation with a desire to enact revenge against those responsible for the humiliation (Kimmel 2017).

In their article on young men committing ‘suicide by mass murder’, Rachel Kalish and Michael Kimmel (2014) discuss the ways in which mass violence can restore the gender infractions of mass shooters, thereby alleviating their feelings of aggrievement and neutralizing their prior

gender infractions by going out with a bang. Kalish and Kimmel (2014) cite the teenagers responsible for the Columbine shooting, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, as an example of aggrieved entitlement in action. According to their journal writings, Klebold and Harris experienced severe bullying and stigma for diverging from gendered expectations of what an adolescent boy should be like and were often accused of homosexuality (Kalish and Kimmel 2014). After years of emotional and physical abuse, Klebold and Harris began plotting their revenge on the community that ostracized them, making sure to include school officials, teachers, and students in their rampage. Responding to those who have antagonized them in such a violent manner was a way for Klebold and Harris to effectively counter and neutralize the gender-based stigma they carried throughout their adolescence (Kalish and Kimmel 2014). The use of violence to enhance social status is not exclusive to mass shooters, as most instances of violence being used as a tool to enhance social status are nonlethal and occur during adolescence (Pascoe 2011).

Racialized masculinities complicate understandings of hegemony, particularly the experiences of Asian men in the United States. Asian men experience compounded grievance—while being a man requires constant negotiation and assertion of masculinity, being Asian brings forth additional burdens of racial stereotypes, many of which are emasculating (Chen 1999, Lu and Wong 2013, Chong and Kim 2021). Cultural stereotypes of Asian men as being effeminate or asexual (Chen 1999, Keo and Noguera 2018) negatively impact their romantic prospects and make it harder for them to successfully perform masculinity compared to their non-Asian counterparts (Lu and Wong 2013). Even the use of violence to neutralize previous gender infractions is not as effective among Asian men, exemplified by Virginia Tech mass shooter Seung-Hui Cho (Kalish and Kimmel 2014). Despite having been responsible for one of the deadliest mass shootings in American history, news coverage of Cho

relied on Asian tropes of nerdiness to describe his life prior to the massacre (Kalish and Kimmel 2014). While White men are the baseline for masculinity, Asian men are below the threshold and therefore at a disadvantage relative to their non-Asian male counterparts (Mayeda and Pasko 2012).

Hegemonic masculinity serves as the blueprint by which many people understand their gender identities and model their gender performance, including the incel community. Men who fail to meet gendered expectations of how ‘a real man’ should look or behave may experience stigma from others due to their gender performance, which may lead to feelings of aggrieved entitlement. It is this state of emasculation and desire to rectify it that has led incels to commit acts of violence, either directed at others as in the case of Isla Vista mass shooter Elliot Rodger and Toronto van attacker Alek Minassian, or as I am finding more often to be the case, directed at the self in the form of digital self-harm and suicide. Ingesting fatalistic ideology like the black pill leaves this community of men wounded and seeking alleviation. The decision of where to direct the violence has much to do with who they blame for their inability to embody hegemonic masculine ideals, and in the case of the incels, I have found that they first blame themselves and less frequently blame external forces. Existing research on involuntary celibate men has focused on ways to ascertain where and when the next mass shooter will pop up in hopes of preventing another tragedy, and I believe that this literature has failed to consider the vast majority of the incel community—men who are on the brink of suicide due to their unwavering despair over what they believe to be an unchangeable stigmatized status.

## **METHODS**

Given the difficulties that come with trying to perform participant observation on a digital community that works hard to keep outsiders away, I am using digital ethnography, in-depth

interviews, and content analysis as methods because the data derived from each approach provides me with a breadth of data on the involuntary celibate community. Approaching this project ethnographically allows me to gather richer data than if I were solely using content analysis as a method and through participant observation, I can generate a contextually informed understanding of incel culture and behavior, which I can then connect to broader themes found in the web scraped forum data. By combining these three types of data, I can compensate for the weaknesses they may have with each other (Small 2011). My multi-method approach deviates from existing research on incels, which has used content analysis of online forums (Ging 2019, Hoffman et al 2020, Maxwell et al 2020), the writings of prolific mass shooters linked to the incel community (Vito, Admire, and Hughes 2017), or survey data (Donnelly et al 2001, Scaptura and Boyle 2019) to study them.

### ***Digital Ethnography***

Since incel community spaces exist exclusively online, my observations were conducted digitally via the private servers of two incel friend groups with over 50 daily active users among both servers. Over the course of my time in the field, my participation in incel servers involved real-time text chat interactions, group voice chat calls, and private in-depth interviews with members. Both servers are hosted by the instant messaging platform, Discord, where users can interact in real-time via text, voice chat, or video chat while doing cooperative tasks like playing video games or watching movies together. Unlike other digital community spaces, Discord allows for real-time interaction and engagement among users, with status indicators to show which users in each server are online and what they are doing at a given moment if they have connected their Discord account to applications like Spotify or their PlayStation network accounts. Server administrators or owners on Discord can customize their space by incorporating various text channels related to specific subjects to compartmentalize conversations in more appropriate



spaces, such as hosting gaming conversations in a #gaming channel. In my digital field sites, text channels like #venting, #nswimages, and #selfimprovement were commonly used by members. Pseudonyms have been assigned to all participants and digital locations mentioned in this study, with the exception of the website Incels.is. I was unable to collect demographic information about all people mentioned in this study with the exception of the men I interviewed. Incels who were in servers where I conducted participant observations and were not interviewed by me did not want to disclose information such as race, ethnicity, or country of residence, so it is not stated when introducing some participants.

The incel server CozyCubbie is a digital space where incels find community and talk about their day-to-day lives without the fear of stigma for holding incel-adjacent opinions or of receiving unwanted advice by community outsiders who misunderstand incel identity and culture. Spaces of this nature have decreased on the internet due to public perceptions of incels as violently misogynistic men (Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro 2020, O'Malley, Holt, and Holt 2020, Scaptura and Boyle 2020) which have spawned trolling campaigns against incel forums and message boards.

The second server I observed is Spiral's Server, dedicated to an incel content creator with over two thousand followers on social media. Spiral is the server administrator, managing a Discord community with over 40 daily active users who identify as incel or have previously identified as such. He is an Indian-Australian cisgender man in his late 20s who has cultivated an online following from his vlog-style videos touching on topics such as loneliness, self-improvement, and daily life as an incel. Most users join this server by clicking on the server invite link below his YouTube videos or by invitations distributed by existing server members, the latter of which was the case for my entry into the server. Since I had no previous relationship with the

server admins or other popular users, it was much harder to integrate and interact with other users, especially given my digital feminine presentation, which made users hostile toward my presence during the first few weeks of my participant observations.

### *On 'Doing' Gender Virtually*

In the early stages of my fieldwork, I would not engage in conversations taking place in these servers because I perceived my status as a woman to be an undesirable thing in these spaces, given the incel community's history of misogynistic sentiment. However, as I began to participate more frequently in conversations, I would learn that I was one of the only women these users were interacting with, both digitally and in real life. With this realization came an awareness of gendered expectations placed upon me by the virtue of being a woman, and in hopes that they would be more receptive to my presence, I would perform gender according to these expectations (Hanson and Richards 2019). This included speaking in a higher vocal register during group voice chat and in interviews, using emojis in chat that were associated with cuteness like hearts, and frequent expressions of excitement like, "yay!" and "omg so exciting!", which are positively associated with women online. I would occasionally note the fact that I'm married in conversations to preemptively deter users from sending me messages of a romantic or sexual nature (Hanson and Richards 2019), which was mostly effective as I only received this form of engagement twice throughout my time in the field.

Conducting participant observations allowed me to better understand the primary concerns incels have, both on an individual level and as a community. Having first-hand access to these conversations in real-time via the internet helped me to better understand users' relationships with one another and the ways in which they use certain language, like slurs, misogynistic comments, or insults. Such linguistic patterns are not unique to incels, but rather are reflective of internet

culture more broadly (Philips 2015, Milburn 2018, Nagle 2017). Most importantly, the ability to ask for clarification and interact with them has been immensely helpful in developing an understanding of how they view gender performance and identity, as well as their experiences with failing to embody masculinity.

### ***Interviews***

I conducted eight interviews with members of both servers. A call for participants was posted in the #general channels of CozyCubbie and Spiral's Server with an interview incentive of \$35 advertised. Respondents reached out to me via private message to schedule an interview and upon completion of their interviews, they would talk about their experiences as an interviewee in the #general channel of their respective servers. I did not ask them to relay this information to their fellow server members, but they chose to do so to provide me and my work some inter-community validity.

I conducted interviews via private voice calls on Discord which lasted approximately 90 minutes. Throughout my interviews, I followed an interview guide I created, asking questions related to online social interaction, entry into and current status within the incel community, and retrospective feelings about the digital spaces they frequent. While interviews were taking place, I was taking notes and transcribing participant responses, as most did not consent to be recorded. These notes and transcripts were then uploaded to a qualitative coding software program, where I coded interview excerpts and notes that touched on social interaction, experiences of stigma, and discussions of the body.

### ***Content Analysis***

I used Python's Beautiful Soup package to scrape posts featured on the popular forum site, Incels.Is, ranging from the website's inception in November 2017 to January 31, 2022 (n =

108,383), that featured at least one of the gender-related key terms I fed to my web scraping program. The list of key terms I created focused on words related to gender identity, gender performance, and emotional distress. From this initial sample, I coded 1,000 posts that featured one or more of my key terms in the title of the forum thread. During data analysis, I coded discussions about users' daily lives as self-described ugly men, their grievances with peers, and their frustrations with society. I also coded conversations about their physical features in relation to gendered expectations of masculinity, beauty maximizing strategies, and pain expressed over being emasculated during social interaction in the physical world.

## **RESULTS**

Examining interactions among members of the involuntary celibate community provides important insights into the ways in which incel-identified men talk about gender. It allows me to understand how participation in online incel communities can simultaneously create a sense of community and support while also exacerbating feelings of aggrievement among men in these spaces. All data showed high levels of emotional distress in incel conversations, especially when discussions were about life offline, physical appearance, and the perceived stigma associated with ugliness. Conversations that were not negatively emotionally charged were those that referred to women in a misogynistic manner, including jokes about their hypersexuality, suggestions that women are less cognitively capable than men, and negative value-judgements on the decisions of women they know personally.

### ***Content Analysis***

I analyzed a total of 1,069 posts and their replies from popular incel forum, Incels.is, whose titles matched a gender-oriented key word. Among the coded conversational data, the three major themes that emerged were incel culture, gender identity, and stigma. Discussions that

touched on incel culture constituted 54 percent of the coded data, which addressed topics including daily life as an incel, misogyny, and the Black Pill—a fatalistic worldview that is popular in incel spaces. The second most represented theme was gender identity, making up 28 percent of coded data, featuring posts that discussed issues of gender dysphoria, failing gender expectations, social scripts, and strategies to enhance masculine appearance. The final theme, stigma, represented 18 percent of coded data, with posts centered around stigmatizing experiences, paranoia that physical features or behavior would lead to stigmatization, and emotional pain related to stigma.

Among data pertaining to incel culture, co-occurring codes included “suicidal thoughts” and “misogyny” which were linked 25 times, “lookism” and “rage”, which were linked 27 times, and “suicidal thoughts” and “blackpill”, which were linked 45 times. These co-occurring codes correlate with interview and ethnographic data on incel culture, as topics of suicidality, fatalism, and rage were consistently present throughout the data. Then, for co-occurring codes in the gender identity cluster included “social scripts” paired with “interactions with women”, which were linked 11 times, “failing gender” and “emotional distress”, which were linked 34 times, and “dysphoria” and “blackpill”, which were linked 9 times. Except for “dysphoria” and “blackpill”, these co-occurring codes were reflective of interview and ethnographic data. Themes of gender dysphoria, paranoia, and emotional distress were heavily featured in this data cluster. Lastly, data in the stigma cluster featured co-occurring codes such as ‘dehumanizing experience’ and ‘lookism’, which were linked 11 times, ‘pain’ and ‘coping strategies’, which were linked 9 times, and ‘alienation’ and ‘blackpill’, which were linked 33 times. These co-occurring codes were reflective of my interview and ethnographic data, as the emerging themes in this cluster were alienation, distress, and alleviation strategies.

## *Digital Ethnography*

My foray into digital ethnography was unexpected. As a cisgender woman, I recognized the difficulties involved in joining incel spaces as an outsider and did not expect to include this method in my study until November 2021 when I was sent a private message on Twitter with a Discord invite to join an incel server owned by a former moderator of a popular incel forum named James. The invite I received was the result of months of correspondence about issues related to the incel community, as well as my own research interests regarding incels, with a veteran of the digital incel space on Twitter. Before accepting the invite, I created an account on Discord with the username “josie” and a profile picture featuring a character from the video game *The Sims* with my likeness with the intent to use this account for fieldwork. James was also responsible for creating one of the leading incel culture databases on the internet, with over 4 million visitors to their website since its inception in 2018.

Active members of CozyCubbie are situated throughout North America, South America, and Western Europe, ranging in age from 18-30 years old. CozyCubbie is home to 15 active users who either currently identify as incel or have identified as such in the past. This server includes former users and moderators from the popular incel forum, Incels.Is, whose departure from the forum was sparked by a perception of the space as fatalistic and violent. Throughout my time in this server, I was assigned the status, “trusted”, which allowed me to interact in the server without needing to prove myself as well-intended to other users in the server.

Users in Spiral’s Server are located throughout North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia, according to server chat logs and interviews I have conducted with members of the server. On average, this server has an average of 40 daily active users whose engagement in the chat varies from typing messages to reacting to existing conversations with Discord emoticons as

a way to signify their presence and their attentiveness toward whatever is happening at a given moment. Users stated racial identities range from White, Asian (with clear distinctions between South Asian and East Asian users), and Black and their ages varied between 18-35 years old.

My interactions with users in Spiral's Server differed greatly from those in CozyCubbie depending on the setting where interactions occurred. In the general chat, where all approved users could see and participate in conversations, my interviewees as well as other users would be more hostile with me, belittling me for being a woman in front of their peers. However, in one-on-one interactions or interactions on different servers, they would be warmer and more receptive to my engagement. They would tell me how much they appreciate my work and interest in the incel community privately but their actions in more public spaces reflected a performance of "toxic masculinity".

### *Interviews*

Interviewees were cisgender men living in Western Europe, North America, and Australia who have identified as incel within the last 10 years and have been active participants in incel spaces in the last year. Half of the respondents reported having held employment at one point in the last year, with two working in data entry, one in livestock handling, and one in the tech industry. Other respondents reported having been a full-time student in the last year or as NEET—meaning they are not in education, employed, or pursuing training. The ages of my participants range from 19 to 27, which is reflective of the broader age range in both servers. Three respondents identified as mixed-race (White mixed with another race), two as Asian, and three as White.

During interviews, six of my participants brought up having experienced traumatic childhoods, including but not limited to prolonged periods of alienation, bullying by peers, and psychiatric interventions such as talk therapy and prescription medication use. All participants

reported dissatisfaction with their physical appearance to varying degrees, but only four out of eight participants disclosed that they were working to improve their physical appearance. When asked about offline interpersonal relationships, five participants reported having no relationships outside of their nuclear family, two reported having at least one close platonic friend, and one reported having a romantic significant other.

## **DISCUSSION**

In incel community spaces, member conversation topics ranged from anime reviews to step-by-step instructions on how to insert a penis into a vaginal canal, just in case an incel needs to know. However, among the discussions I observed and analyzed on Discord and Incels.is, themes of gender dysphoria, community solidarity, and gendered pain emerged. First, I found that while an individual user might experience dysphoria or pain, it was not a solitary activity as fellow incels would join in, engaging in a community-oriented pathologizing of users' gender performance and thereby exacerbating their feelings of gender dysphoria. I then learned that incels also valued the sense of solidarity that community spaces like private Discord servers and forums like Incels.is provided, even when they came with risks of experiencing digital self-harm via the Black Pill or other forms of emotional pain. Lastly, I found that members of the incel community are cognizant of the stigma they carry and therefore strategically use misogyny as a stigma management tool in conversation.

### ***Collaborative Gender Dysphoria***

While most of our conversations on Discord were casual in nature, many users across both field sites shared stories of their attempts and failures at successfully negotiating their stated gender identity in daily offline social interaction (West and Zimmerman 1987). Users would lament the fact that they were men and were therefore subjected to masculine social scripts, such



as being expected to make the first move in romantic interactions with women or stringent physical requirements for desirable masculine presentation. In incel spaces, users compare their physical features with those of male celebrities and express frustration at the reality that features they possess, such as recessed chins, underbites, or a negative canthal tilt are not much different from the facial structures of male celebrities. A common phrase in incel spaces that encompasses their feelings is, “*it’s amazing what a few millimeters of bone can do*”, implying that the difference between a face upheld as beautiful by society and one that is viewed as ugly is not as drastic as initially perceived. This emphasis on undesired physical features and the despair they bring is reminiscent of gender dysphoria as experienced by transgender individuals (Peterson et al 2016, Bradford, Rider, and Spencer 2021).

One evening in March, a new user joined Spiral’s Server—a 26-year-old Asian-Australian man with the username ThatSucks. He begins spamming the server with messages calling everyone in the server a “fakecel”, which means “fake incel” and therefore implying that their difficulties pursuing in romantic and sexual relationships with women are their own fault. ThatSucks follows these messages by asking users to stop tarnishing the name of incels, claiming that the media does that enough. These initial messages in the #general chat were not well received by existing members, as he was trying to troll the server and was suggesting the admin, an Indian-Australian incel YouTuber named Spiral, was a fake incel.

He followed these messages by spamming photos of a naked man with a pear-shaped body—visible from the neck down, slender torso with noticeable breast tissue, and wide hips—stating that he’s a real incel because his body looks like the photo he was spamming in the chat. During a trolling transgression, what trolls desire out of an interaction is a reaction of frustration or rage from the person being trolled, so many users when faced with a troll simply ignore them

(Nagle 2017, Cruz et al 2018), which is how the users in Spiral’s server reacted to ThatSucks’ initial messages. Shortly after this encounter, ThatSucks apologized for his comments, stating that he’s simply upset about his life circumstance as an incel and wants help. From that point onward, his messages mostly related to inquiries about ways to obtain a single digit bodyfat percentage and hormone regimen recommendation in hopes of combatting his high estrogen levels, which he believes are to blame for his fat distribution going primarily to his hips and breast area.

Upon seeing his photos, other users asked if ThatSucks was a transgender man and would then express joy in having finally “mogged” someone after learning that he was cisgender. In the Manosphere, physical appearance is competitive and positional, meaning that no matter how you look, there will always be someone that “mogs you”, or looks better than you, and there will also be people that you mog (Ging 2019). After antagonizing ThatSucks for a while, the other users in Spiral’s Server expressed sympathy toward his circumstance and highlighted physical features in ThatSucks’ photos that were positives, like being White and tall. One user replied to ThatSucks by telling him to be grateful he isn’t a short Indian man, which incels consider to be an insurmountable circumstance to overcome. ThatSucks spoke of his frustrations with his body with two other users:

ThatSucks: yeah but ppl think I’m fucking trans

ThatSucks: people tell me I “pass” and I wanna kill myself

ThatSucks: I have very unfortunate fat deposits for a man

ThatSucks: I can only look decent if I’m extremely lean

JDemon: how big is your dick? no homo.

ThatSucks: 3.7 hard

JDemon: maybe you didn’t develop or something as you should have

Anon223: oh shit

Anon223: alright then I guess TRT...

ThatSucks: Asian, dicklet, gyno...never began lmao

ThatSucks' body issues extend beyond his fat distribution, as he cites his race, the size of his penis, and a self-diagnosis of gynecomastia, which is the enlargement of breast tissue in cisgender males, or “gyno” as incels call it, as reasons why his life never began.

After this exchange, ThatSucks joined a voice call I was in with two other users and asked me if he should just give up on living because of how much he hates his body and before I could respond he said the only reason he looked like this was because he had been taking the medications Prozac and Risperidone, as prescribed by his doctor. He also said that he's had a history of anorexia throughout his life, which affected his testes and their ability to generate testosterone. He said that anorexia was the only way he could regulate his bodyfat distribution and when he would gain weight, it would disproportionately gather around his hips and breast area, making him feel like a woman (Ging and Garvey 2018, Goldbach and Knutson 2021). For incels like ThatTragic who struggled with issues like anorexia or related body issues, incel community spaces provided him with advice on how to achieve the body he wanted—masculine, muscular, and most importantly a body he felt was worth living for.

Discussions of body dysmorphia and dissatisfaction with gender presentation were prominent throughout my field sites. While ThatSucks is the only user with whom I spoke that disclosed having a history of anorexia, my encounters with him were not the first time I noticed the prevalence of these topics. Users on Incels.Is and the Discord servers I observed would often post pictures of themselves into channels like #self-improvement, #looksmxing, or #rate, hoping others would help them enhance their physical appearance (Ging and Garvey 2018). Replies under these photos varied, with other users primarily taking the posts as opportunities for fun at the user's expense (Pascoe 2011). Other times they would be more helpful, suggesting workout routines and medications like finasteride for hair growth or testosterone replacement

therapy (TRT) to help with muscle growth and bodyfat distribution, like in the case of ThatsTragic. ThatsTragic eventually would post a naked photo of himself in the #self-improvement channel with the caption “am I fat?”, and when initial responses said he was not fat, he pushed back until Lukas, the resident Chad, came in to tell him he was disgustingly fat and that he needed to hit the gym.

Much like pictures of “thinspiration” that are popular in pro-anorexia blogs and forums (Yeshua-Katz 2015), incels share photos of men who embody hegemonic masculine ideals, which incels call Chads (Nagle 2015), or men who they believe ascended out of involuntary celibacy to give each other hope that they, too, can ascend out of involuntary celibacy. In Spiral’s server, one such incel-turned-Chad roams the server channels boasting about his muscular physique, sexual prowess, and strict hormone, gym, and diet regimen that he adheres to in order to maintain his newfound beauty. Lukas, a 26-year-old White German stableman has been a member of Spiral’s Server for almost a year and has devoted much of his time there to giving incel users advice on many things, ranging from ways to build muscle at the gym, talking to girls without being scared, and how to approach drug dealers at the gym for steroids and TRT. Incels in the server often express concerns about the use of steroids, to which Lukas replies:

So, I was a little bit ugly. Now for comparison, I cleaned up my looks, I put on 30 kg of muscle, I am right now 230lbs 6’4 and that’s a good frame. I’m physically bigger than most men, I’m taller than most men. I use testosterone and I am a big fan. It made my jaw wider!

Lukas was aware of how much incels in the server catastrophize over their bones and by citing testosterone as a jaw enhancer he knew that it would further entice incels to seek out these drugs, which at least two incel users have disclosed using since this message was posted.

Suggestions of maxxing strategies were popular topics of conversation for incels because they provided them hope of overcoming their feelings of gender dysphoria. These conversations

were more popular on Spiral's Server, which during my time in the field added #gym-fitness and #substances channels to the server so that users could have conversations related to these topics without disrupting larger general chats. In instances where the issue was harder to fix, such as height or facial structure, users would catastrophize and express desires of death because they believed they were too ugly to love. Here, Incels.is user Dingus discusses the importance of one's bones when trying to attract women:

All the things that females first see and are attracted to in males are predetermined by genetics. Almost all of them can't be changed. The ones that can typically require an extreme and expensive intervention. Facial reconstruction surgery may or may not get you the results you want and is extremely expensive for most. Also, don't forget about your skin and if it is naturally oily and prone to acne, bumps, or other unsightly features.

Dingus alludes to a common part of incel rhetoric on male beauty, which is that attraction is predetermined by genetics and that women can distinguish between a man who was born with "good genetics" and a man who has undergone cosmetic surgery or taken TRT to enhance his looks, therefore making all efforts toward improving one's physical appearance futile (Goldbach and Knutson 2021). Incels refer to this as *genetic determinism*. When I have asked how women distinguish an organically handsome man from a self-made one, I am not given a direct answer, but rather am met with accusations of being "just another bitch who only cares about looks".

The concept of genetic determinism in the incel community highlights the paranoia and concern they feel regarding their physical appearance and gender presentation. Some incels believe cosmetic surgery is insufficient in treating ugliness because someone may discover the truth about the origins of their now beautiful features, worrying they will be found out to be a fake beautiful person (Mears 2011). Possessing beauty and being valued for your ability to perform gender like a Chad, or a real man, are believed to be unattainable by incels and those who attempt to ascend out of involuntary celibacy and into living among the normals as a Chad

are doomed to inevitably fail, according to incel community members (Maxwell, Robinson, Williams, and Keaton 2020). Most incels discourage long-time community members from trying to ascend out of incel status, saying it's futile to try to be something you aren't and cite genetic determinism as a reason to not bother leaving the community.

However, one young incel who was encouraged by various users in Spiral's Server to ascend was Ali, a 19-year-old British Pakistani man. Ali discovered involuntary celibacy after being recommended videos about the Red Pill on YouTube during his adolescence (Philips 2015, Nagle 2017, Ging 2019). The videos he watched addressed the concept of lookism, which refers to discrimination based on attractiveness, and as a South Asian teen living in England, he felt these videos accurately described the romantic hardships he faced. In an interview, Lukas described Ali to me as a muscular, handsome young man with great potential to be a Chad, but that his mental issues, likely from prolonged exposure to Red Pill and related content, have affected him. Lukas says:

On our server we have a guy named Ali, he was a Pakistani and had a really masculine face. This really Chad face with a solid beard, he was muscular. But he can't get laid because he always starts talking about some kinky shit with some girls, he is really misogynistic and yes basically can't hold a conversation. That's his problem. He's fucked up mentally.

Among the users in Spiral's server, Ali is held in high regard by most, especially the Chads who claim to see potential in his physical features. Some of Ali's features like his muscles, beard, hairline, and jawline are seen as highly desirable by women, according to other incels in the server.

However, despite the praise Ali received in Spiral's Server, he had spent years consuming content that obsessed over millimeters of bone and the impact it could have on a man's life course outcomes, Ali believed his friends in the server, including Lukas, were lying to

him and that his features were subhuman. Despite having formed strong friendships in incel community spaces, Ali believed his exposure to incels and their damaging pathologizing of physical features like his own were to blame for his emerging mental issues (Goldbach and Knutson 2021). Before leaving Spiral's Server and all incel-related community spaces, he left a departing message in the #general channel:

Ali: IT'S FUCKING OVERR. FUCK THE INTERNET FOR MESSING WITH MY MIND AND MAKING ME OPEN TO TOXIC IDEOLOGIES. NO, I WILL NEVER BE THE SAME AGAIN. I AM DESTINED TO LIFE OF INCELDOM AND LEARNED HELPLESSNESS DUE TO BLACKPILLERS BRAINWASHING ME MAKING ME THINK MY HEIGHT AND FACIAL STRUCTURE WERE INADEQUATE.

In this final message, Ali acknowledges that his belief that his physical features were inadequate was something he learned after consuming incel content on the internet, leaving room for the idea that maybe his peers were right about him being handsome. While no users replied to Ali's final message, they did react with emoticons depicting joy and hands waving goodbye (Adler and Adler 2008). A few days after this message was sent, another user asked about where Ali had been for the last few days, and when I told him he had left the server for good, he said he was happy for Ali and hoped his life would improve now that he was free from the toxicity of the community.

### ***The Emotional Cost of Solidarity***

Pursuing affirmation and acceptance from others in the community is a complex group activity in incel spaces. While incels understand the emotional pain and stigma that comes with living as an involuntary celibate man and maintain a desire to embody hegemonic masculinity in their gender presentation and performance, they also value and respect men whose gender presentation and performance are far below society's expectations, referring to them as "truecels", or true incels. By reframing what they see as aesthetic shortcomings to being

community-specific positive qualities, incels can alleviate the pain that comes with perceiving themselves as ugly.

Men who have been given the title of “truecel” are believed by incels to be ugliness incarnate. They are believed to be so repulsive, both in appearance and in behavior, that no human being would want to interact with them, much less touch them. The label “truecel” is often self-assigned by incels who believe their personal circumstances, such as being short in stature, neurodivergence, or their race, place them in a worse position than other incels. However, it is rare for other incels to validate one’s self-assigned “truecel” status or for an incel to be granted that status and be legitimated in an incel space as “truecel”. Truecel status in incel spaces provides a higher social standing within the community (Goffman 1963), affording them benefits like the legitimacy and validation of their emotional suffering and the ability to police the authenticity of other incels’ lived experiences as ugly and undesirable men.

Failing to possess physical features that reflect gendered beauty standards is a strength in the incel community. Accusations of users in incel spaces being unauthentically incel are frequently suggested and users’ incel status in a digital space must be proven to other users, often via photograph. The practice of body policing in digital spaces is not unique to incels—pro-anorexia online communities are similar in their policing of whether the people in community spaces are authentic or “wannarexics” (Boero and Pascoe 2012), and work accordingly when their security has been breached by outsiders (Yeshua-Katz and Martins 2012, Yeshua-Katz 2015). Stigmatized groups are protective of who is allowed to enter community-exclusive spaces to ensure they are providing members with a rare space where they can temporarily exist without judgement from outsiders who would not understand their community norms (Goffman 1963, Yeshua-Katz 2015).



Performing and embodying ugliness in digital communities is a major component of incel culture. Unlike most online communities (Coleman 2014, Philips 2015, Nagle 2017), involuntary celibates disclose numerous details about their personal life, their physical appearance, and their locality to properly contextualize their status as incel to other community members, often going as far as submitting photographic evidence of their physical features. In this regard, the incel community mirrors the online pro-ana community, as pro-ana forum moderators regularly ask members to submit photo and video evidence of user weigh-ins, body checks, and food reports (Boero and Pascoe 2012). When prospective members fail to meet the standards of an incel moderation team, they are denied entry into the digital space and are called a “fakecel” (Boero and Pascoe 2012). These metrics are not standardized throughout the incel community and vary depending on the diversity of incels in a space. Kenny, an incel in Spiral’s Server, discussed his frustration with the body he’d see when he looked in the mirror:

You see all these billboards of these fit, handsome people when you’re driving. It’s like society subliminally telling you ‘Hey this is how you have to look’. Society is telling me what I need to look like, and I am a failure for not looking like that.

Kenny was a big and tall Italian American man in his 20s who, as he describes it, spends most of his time “rotting” in his room, both mentally and physically, since he has not had the energy or desire to shower over the last eight months. He believed that hygiene was not going to change the fact that he was incel and therefore did not want to make the effort to bathe.

Kenny would frequently interrupt conversations I was having with other users in Spiral’s Server, vying for my attention. I would answer his questions and invite him to join the existing conversation, which he liked. When he interrupted conversations, he would remind us that he was autistic and had trouble making friends with others his age due to a difficulty in navigating social situations, a reminder that would often be followed by a sheepish, “sorry” in voice chat.

Despite his social clumsiness, Kenny was well-liked by other users in the server and enjoyed participating in community discussions. When talking about the impact participating in incel spaces had on him, Kenny said:

You can vent and there are people that share that same emotion or have those same experiences and you could draw upon them and their emotional experiences. You could form like a brotherhood and a community. Safe to say that I did.

Kenny's feelings were reciprocated by most users in the server. Other users felt the need to protect him from himself as well as from the darker side of incel culture, particularly the Black Pill, because they believed he would become suicidal after being exposed to it (Scaptura and Boyle 2020). Users who were new to the space would sometimes see Kenny's messages and respond in a hostile manner to him, calling him "retard" and telling him to "kys" (kill yourself), as is common in incel spaces (Pascoe 2011). Veterans of the space would correct the newcomers' behavior, telling them that Kenny's cool, he's just "really autistic", meaning Kenny is unaware of social context and suggested they be nice to him (Adler and Adler 2008). Kenny's gender performance and behavior would lead to gender infractions in the physical world, causing him emotional distress, but upon venting his frustration in Spiral's Server, he would find comfort in the solidarity he felt with the other incels—his brotherhood (Pascoe 2011).

During my time in the field, I found that users in both servers expressed an overwhelming sense of despair regarding their circumstances as involuntary celibate men. Both on Discord and Incels.is, participants discuss an ideology they refer to as the Black Pill, which is an escalation of the popular Red Pill philosophy that is spread throughout the Manosphere, which refers to a loosely connected network of men's interest groups (Ging 2019). While the Red Pill refers to a realization that feminism has not brought forth equality but rather misandry (O'Malley et al 2020, Scaptura and Boyle 2020) and that men are subjected to implicit and explicit forms of

discrimination (Ging 2019), the Black Pill is more fatalistic in nature. To ingest the Black Pill is to accept the inequities one has become attuned to seeing after taking the Red Pill and cease all efforts toward self-improvement or happiness, instead opting to “lie down and rot”.

Black Pill ideology is controversial in incel spaces due to its propensity toward sparking suicidal thoughts among users, with incel servers like CozyCubbie banning any mention of Black Pill related sentiment to steer users away from its toxicity. James, the server administrator of CozyCubbie, believes the Black Pill causes more harm than good to those who ingest it, and that advocates in favor of exposing more men—especially young adults—to it are hindering their chances of ascending to a better life where they are unaffected by issues that come with involuntary celibacy (Ging 2019). After years of being in online incel forums, James realized he had no desire to live and attributed this feeling to his consistent digital diet of Black Pill ideology. Having previously served as a moderator for Incels.is, he witnessed firsthand the emotional turmoil users experienced after being “blackpilled” (O’Malley et al 2020). The growing negativity and nihilistic sentiment present on Incels.is message boards that was brought on by the Black Pill led James to distance himself from the space, which inspired him to create new incel message boards and Discord servers over the last few years, most of which are no longer active.

Among incels who view the Black Pill more favorably, they believe it is the defining truth in society. All efforts toward being a productive member of society, finding companionship, and experiencing joy are futile because of their status as involuntary celibate men (Ging 2019, O’Malley et al 2020). Black Pillers believe incels possess a combination of undesirable physical characteristics, such as short stature or a recessed chin, and undesirable social characteristics, such as autism or schizophrenia, which make it impossible for them to

attain romantic or sexual intimacy. On Incels.Is, which incels view as a Black Pill friendly space, users vent their frustrations with daily life and commiserate with each other over their ability to see the world for what it is, unlike their Red Pilled counterparts and those outside of the Manosphere, who they call “normies” (Nagle 2017, Ging 2019). Here, Incels.Is user EmptyCumDumpster discussed his feelings about the world after reading a Reddit thread in which someone expressed feelings of self-hatred over being born ugly:

“LIFE IS NOT FUCKING FAIR. THE WEAK SUCCUMB TO THE STRONG, SUBMISSIVE MALES HAVE NO PLACE. THERE IS NO ROMANCE. SHY SUBMISSIVE WOMEN ARE CONQUERED LIKE PEASANT TOWNS UPON THE STEPPE, POWER IS EVERYTHING, THE POWER TO TAKE, THE POWER TO GIVE, THE POWER TO FUCK, THE POWER TO BE CONFIDENT AND HAPPY. IT IS. NOT. FAIR. WE ARE CANNON FODDER, PAWNS, WE ARE THE FALL GUYS OF SOCIETY, I DESPISE IT. I DESPISE THIS FUCKING WORLD.

Other Incels.is users replying to this post were supportive, with one user saying, “submissive males have a special place in my heart”, and another replying, “this is tough shit lads, why can’t I be a man?” (Adler and Adler 2008). Sarcastic or disingenuous comments on Incels.is often feature emoticons, YouTube links, or community language like “JFL”, spelled out as “just fucking LOL”, which the above replies did not include, therefore allowing me to read them with as genuine.

Many Black Pilled incels are aware of the dangers that come with their fatalistic worldview, namely a lingering desire for death and the adverse psychological impacts of prolonged isolation, and some come to regret their exposure to the Black Pill (Ging 2019).

Vincent, an incel member of Spiral’s server, discussed the impact taking the Black Pill had on his outlook on life:

“I just feel more dull. I just feel like now I’m looking at the world through like a dark lens, a lens I’ve never looked at the world before. I look at women differently now, I look at them as hostile creatures. I look at good looking guys as the reason why I am in this position. I’ve just grown a disdain, you know?”

When asked if he regrets learning about the Black Pill, he said he was unsure because at least now he knows the truth about why his life hasn't turned out the way he and his family imagined. Vincent is a White Canadian man in his late 20s who considers himself to be a NEET, meaning he is not currently in education, employed, or training to pursue a career, and spends most of his day playing video games and lurking in incel servers on Discord. He expresses frustration and sadness at the sight of incels tearing each other down on Discord and related incel spaces (Adler and Adler 2008). Throughout his 5-year tenure in the incel community, Vincent has received a myriad of insults, taunts, and death threats from his fellow incels, but says he does not take it personally since he believes they're just lashing out due to also being blackpilled, and therefore he doesn't take their words personally.

Despite the turbulent nature of community engagement in incel spaces, many users view their interactions in these spaces to be generally positive and helpful, including those that revolve around the Black Pill. As for non-blackpilled incels, they can coexist with their blackpilled peers so long as no harm comes to their fellow community members. One of the primary functions of both the Discord servers and Incels is to serve as safe platforms to vent frustrations in without fear of judgement by outsiders, despite knowing members of these respective communities would judge them anyway. However this was welcomed as it was between community members.

A frequent topic of debate in these spaces, and in the involuntary celibate community more broadly, is the plight of Asian men in society being deemed sexually undesirable. While all incels I encountered in my field work shared the belief that Asian men, especially South Asian men, were discriminated against heavily due to their looks and negative stereotypes associated with their race (Chen 1999, Lu and Wong 2013, Curington, Lundquist, and Lin 2021), White

incels would sometimes express frustration with the sympathy Asian incels would get among other community members, but would then say things like, “Asian men are at the bottom of the sexual hierarchy” (Chong and Kim 2021). In an interview with me, Kevin, an Asian-Canadian member of Spiral’s Server spoke on the difficulties of dating as an Asian man with stereotypes being imposed upon him:

From my experiences in dating, I think White privilege is super real. I think you’re gonna have a lot of nonwhites as incel because of women going after Chad. Indian men have the greatest burden in society, they have no positive stereotypes and are heavily discriminated against sexually. The biggest difficulty in dating is fitting Asian stereotypes, we are the most affected.

The stereotypes he was referring to include playing video games, being nerdy, and having had a bowl cut hairstyle at one point in their lives. Kevin told me that girls have made assumptions about his sexual abilities that were oriented in racial stereotypes (Keo and Noguera 2018), dismissing him as a romantic partner due to an assumption about his sexual abilities and the size of his penis. Kevin described himself as a progressive person who does not agree with incels’ positions on women being lesser creatures or on the LGBT community being reflective of a “degenerate society” but does believe men are treated unfairly by society and that lookism is real and has real consequences.

When asked if he had experienced anti-Asian sentiments from other incels in Spiral’s Server, Kevin was unsure of how to respond. He initially said that the incel racial hierarchy inherently puts Asians at the bottom, so he understands why some of his peers hold certain views regarding Asian men’s romantic prospects. After a moment, Kevin remembered that some of the White users in the server regularly use the slur “chink” whenever they are talking about an Asian person, including women they are fetishizing. He recalls Lukas saying something racist, which I found in chat logs from a year ago:

Lukas: bad hair otherwise ok  
Lukas: also, looks Asian  
Lukas: looking Asian is bad  
Lukas: except being a ching chong  
Lukas: being a ching chong gives you small dick energy

Lukas is giving another incel user in the server, who is East Asian, feedback on a photo of themselves that they posted. The person in the picture is looking at the camera and not smiling, they are wearing a red hoodie and have bangs covering much of their face, but the feedback Lukas provides is calling the user ugly for being Asian.

According to incels, there is a racialized sexual hierarchy where if looks were equal, White men would be at the top of the hierarchy, followed by Latinos and Middle Eastern men, then Black men, East Asian men, and South Asian men are at the bottom. This racial hierarchy is commonly referenced in incel digital cultural artifacts, like memes and videos, and in incel conversations. Asian incels believe in this hierarchy as much as other users, including Kevin, who makes it clear that he nor any person of color is inferior to a White person, but he does believe they are less sexually desirable in the eyes of society (Curington et al 2021) and in that regard, the racialized sexual hierarchy incels follow is correct.

### ***Misogyny as a Stigma Management Strategy***

During my first few weeks in the field, I had a difficult time interacting with users in Spiral's Server because I did not know anyone prior to joining the server and therefore did not have anyone to vouch for me in the space. My attempts at participating in the #general chat were met with silence for the first few days until I asked Lukas a question about his ascending strategy, then I began to receive engagement from users in the server. After this point, I was perceived as annoying, bitchy, and as a possible government informant, or "glowie" as they called me during that time (Hanson and Richards 2019). When I introduced myself as a

researcher interested in understanding the incel community, they repeatedly called me stupid for wanting to study them. Their temperament toward me would change over time, but through talking to them I would later learn that many of these insults were only directed at me because I was an easily accessible woman they could direct their frustration toward, even if it wasn't warranted (Nagle 2017). They did not expect me to stay in the server for as long as I did and were primarily concerned with making themselves feel better, so calling me a "bitch" or telling me I am stupid had less to do with me as a person and everything to do with the fact that I inadvertently represented women in that moment (Hanson and Richards 2019).

After conducting my first three interviews, this was no longer an issue for me, but it was something I continued to think about throughout my time in the field. While women did not frequent Spiral's Server, the users would talk about the women in their lives, as well as women they'd see on social media, in the news, or in pornography and insult them in the #general chat, though those women would never know it. An example of this was a post by Jesse, a member of Spiral's Server, who posted a Daily Mail article about a Chinese woman being murdered by her boyfriend into the #memes channel saying:

Old news but worth a read. The foid was 24 years old, betabuxing a 23 year old English guy. The foid's an heir to a multi-million company, one of the largest meat companies in China and the English guy was unemployed. The English guy beat her constantly, telling her she was trash lol. Yet she continued to pay everything for him, including paying for his rent, food, clothes, and also international trips. One day he hit too hard and the foid died due to multiple injuries.

Jesse ends this message with an emoticon that is crying and laughing simultaneously, finding enough humor in the story of this woman's murder to catalogue it in the #memes channel of the server (Scaptura and Boyle 2020). Other users respond to the message with laughing emoticons, reinforcing the humor they have found in this story. By making light of this tragic event and laughing at this woman's expense, Jesse and other incels can temporarily alleviate their feelings



of stigma as incels and the emotional distress that comes with living as an incel by being misogynistic.

Misogynistic posts are not always as thought out as Jesse's. Most misogynistic messages in Spiral's Server were sporadic and were not directed at any given user, but rather typed and sent in as if they were screaming into the digital void. Often in quick, short bursts, these messages would provide the user writing them with cathartic relief, allowing them to calm down from whatever may be causing them stress. Daffy, a user in Spiral's Server does this frequently, spamming the #general chat by saying:

Daffy: FUCK FOIDS I HATE THEM ALL  
Daffy: FOIDS  
Daffy: FUCK ME  
Daffy: OHHHH ITS OVER  
Daffy: GO ROPE RETARDS

Daffy continued spamming similar messages for a few minutes until he eventually calmed down and explained that he was simply feeling upset about still being incel and that the spamming in all-caps helped him feel a lot better (Nagle 2017). I found this especially intriguing since, at least on the server, we couldn't hear or see any yelling, crying, or other cathartic behavior, yet telling hypothetical "foids", which is incel slang for "woman", to hang themselves was able to fulfill that need for Daffy (Philips 2015, Nagle 2017, Saptura and Boyle 2020). He would later tell the server that he had been feeling sad about never having a girlfriend and those thoughts were what triggered his outburst. As a result, this emotional outburst and the directionless misogynistic insults Daffy hurled allowed him to restore his previous gender infraction, which was being reminded of never having had a girlfriend (Pascoe 2011).

Many of the incels I spoke with were in their late 20s and had never experienced romantic or sexual attention from a woman, which was a point of anxiety for them. As they aged

out of their adolescence and into their 20s, they would begin to panic about their inexperience with women (Ging 2019), believed they were at a disadvantage relative to other men, and believed women would not give them attention because their inexperience was easily discernible (Donnelly et al 2001, O'Malley et al 2020). Incels expressed fear of rejection from women in interaction, saying they would not be able to handle the embarrassment and would sooner kill themselves than put themselves in a vulnerable position with a woman they were romantically interested in. Gabriel, a 28-year-old multiracial incel user from CozyCubbie who lives in Brazil, tried explaining why incels are paranoid of being rejected before they even talk to a woman:

In my opinion, explaining incel to females in 2022 is similar to explaining racism to White Americans in the 1950s. It's a concept that is so foreign to them, so distant from their reality, that they lack the minimum understanding to feel empathy. Then you'll hear bullshit excuses and anecdotal arguments to blame the individual when it's actually a large sociocultural phenomenon they can't see.

Unlike his fellow incel community members, Gabriel had experienced a romantic relationship with a woman, but identifies as incel due to the relationship having ended many years ago and believes he is incel now because his physical appearance has declined in recent years (O'Malley et al 2020). He has expressed dissatisfaction with his height, weight, and rapidly receding hairline, and because of those factors he is accepted among the other users in CozyCubbie.

CozyCubbie features a very popular channel among members that allows them to participate in strategic misogyny to repudiate their gender infractions as well as temporarily alleviate their stigma (Goffman 1963), which is called the #rate channel. There, users upload photos of people—celebrities, coworkers, and even current or former crushes—for the sole purpose of dissecting their physical features and assigning them a numerical rating from 1 to 10, with 1 being the least attractive and 10 being the most attractive (Boero and Pascoe 2012). For the first few months I spent in the server, I would not participate in the rating of people posted in

the channel but would spectate and comment on others' scores. One instance of this collective rating activity occurred when Gabriel posted photos of a slender, fair-skinned woman with vivid red hair wearing a matching red bikini, asking for users to rate her. Here, in conversation with a 29-year-old White Canadian user named Andrew, they discuss a rating appropriate for this woman:

Gabriel: it's a difficult one isn't it

Andrew: I don't think she's particularly remarkable, but makes herself look so with the colours

Andrew: She looks like caked up high tier Becky or something like that

Andrew: 6.5/10 and looks like she's trying to LARP as an 8+ is my impression

Andrew: her breasts and hips are barely average it seems, but she's fit and has a pretty good face

Gabriel: yeah her face isn't good imo, and her body is just okay. But somehow she's attractive, there's something in her that makes her remarkable. Red hair helps, but I think there's more to it. Her facial expressions are charming, for instance

Andrew: her face isn't great but it isn't bad, same for her body

Reminiscent of admissions officers considering admitting a candidate like this red-haired woman, Andrew and Gabriel are picking this woman's body apart trying to quantify her physical appearance into a number that has no impact on her life but provides Andrew and Gabriel with an opportunity to be the scrutinizers rather than the scrutinized for a change. Both men believe in the Black Pill and the notion that they are doomed to a life of loneliness due to circumstances out of their control (Ging 2019), so their comforting activity is to rate people in that channel.

Incels often describe themselves as feeling like the world's punching bag—deprived of intimacy and forced to watch others who they believe are undeserving of love be happy while they remain alone. Many incels try to ice their wounds by trolling women on the internet or by fantasizing about them experiencing punishment for having rejected them (Kimmel 2017, Nagle 2017), causing incels what they describe as irreparable emotional harm. Trolling transgressions from incels directed at random women online primarily consist of hurling insults at them, like

“fat” and “whore”, or posting memes that objectify or dehumanize women (Philips 2015, Cruz, Seo, and Rex 2018). Discussions of wishing violent fantasies or punishment upon women who have wronged them are not expressed outside of incel community spaces, as they are not meant to be taken literally or even be directed at a particular person, but rather are a way for them to vent their frustrations at women at large. Lukas speaks to this cultural practice among incels, stating:

Incels, they project this hate on women often in order to overshadow their sense of defeat. If you hate women, it somehow mitigates that feeling. Hating women is a big coping strategy because it gives you anger instead of sadness.

Since anger is a male-coded emotion, incels find it to be more appropriate to express anger outwardly, as opposed to sadness, which they perceive to be an unmasculine emotion.

Expressing sadness would also leave them vulnerable to negative social sanctioning over substandard gender performance (Pascoe 2011). Misogynistic comments serve the purpose of channeling sadness into anger, both to save face as a man and to avoid feeling depressed about their life circumstance as involuntary celibate.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research addresses shortcomings in existing literature by both directly engaging with the involuntary celibate community via interviews and participant observation, as well as analyzing conversational data from a public incel forum. By using a framework that binds literature on digital communities, gender infractions, and stigma management strategies, I found that participation in incel forums exasperates users' feelings of gender dysphoria due to community-oriented pathologizing of their gender performance. The presence of misogyny in social interactions among incels serves the purpose of repudiating their gender infractions as well as momentarily alleviating their stigma. Despite the prevalence of digital self-harm in incel

spaces, the promise of community solidarity outweighs the potential adverse impact of exposure to each other's emotional pain.

Future research should examine the relationship between participation in involuntary celibate forums and mental health. In my field sites as well as on Incels.is, many users described feelings of depression, paranoia, and anxiety and would often self-diagnose themselves with medical conditions ranging from schizophrenia to post orgasmic illness syndrome. Users' desire for the medicalization of their status as involuntary celibate is becoming increasingly prevalent in incel spaces. Future research on involuntary celibate-identifying people may benefit from a longitudinal approach, following a select number of users for several years to see if their status remains the same or if changes ensue with age and with amount of time spent in incel community spaces.

The rigidity of our gender system—its social scripts, increasingly demanding physical and social requirements, and social sanctioning—affect everyone. Patriarchy discriminates against all who fail to embody and uphold hegemonic gender ideals, no matter their stated gender identity or efforts in upholding it, and patriarchy will continue to harm all gendered bodies until it is abolished.

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