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They didn't think I could be that person online, but I was: a journey in and out of incelldom.

SMITH, D.

2023

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**“They didn’t think I could
be that person online.
But I was”: A journey in
and out of incel-dom**

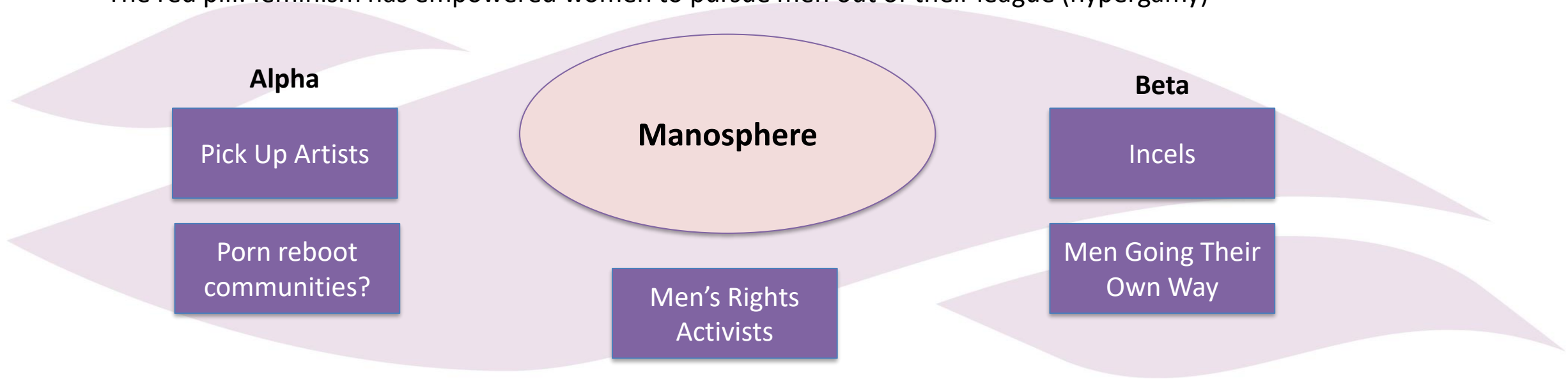
Dr David S. Smith



The manosphere

What it is

- Informal coalition: anti-feminist/pro-hegemonic (Ging, 2019) - biologically deterministic/essentialist
- The red pill: feminism has empowered women to pursue men out of their league (hypergamy)



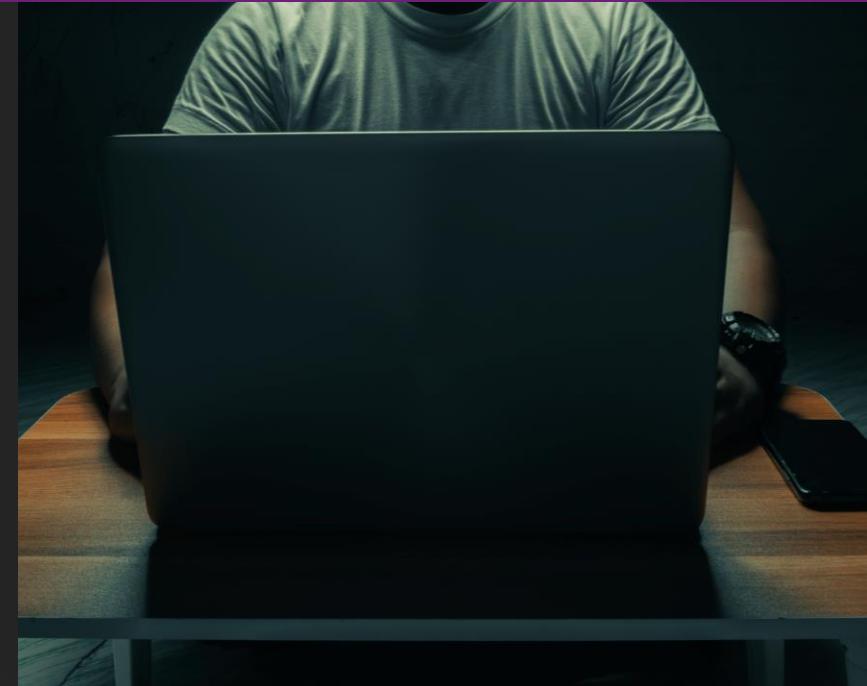
Taxonomies of men

- Natural order: distance from masculine ideal = success in intrasexual competition
- Chads: high social status and cues of evolutionary fitness – 80/20 rule
- Men can “game” system: pedagogy and practice (O’Neil, 2018): PUAs

Incels

Involuntary celibates

- Beta male identity: bond over a perceived social/biological inferiority
- Cannot change physical appearance: dating = insurmountable vs. unfair
- Black pill: incelism = permanent
- Radicalisation: Underdogs in “unjust system” – view affirmed (Bates, 2021)



Who they are

- Racially diverse: 55% white (Blake & Brooks, 2023)
- Mental health: approx. 66% suicidal (Daly & Laskovtsov, 2022)
- Psychological diagnoses: > gen pop (Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2022)
- Economically underprivileged, less higher ed (Costello et al., 2022)
- Subgroups: heightcels, facecels, weightcels, racecels etc. (Hintz & Baker, 2021)



Smith et al., (in revision)

The present study

Research questions:

1. What draws young men to incel communities?
2. Were their emotional needs met by incel communities?
3. Why/how do former incels leave their communities?

Method

- 9 members of digital ex-incel support groups (50-150 mins)
- Asked about life before, what they got out of it, changes since
- Data analysed via reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012)
 - Transcription, reading and familiarization, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining/naming themes, finalising analysis.



Among the first studies to speak with former incels

Smith et al., (in revision)

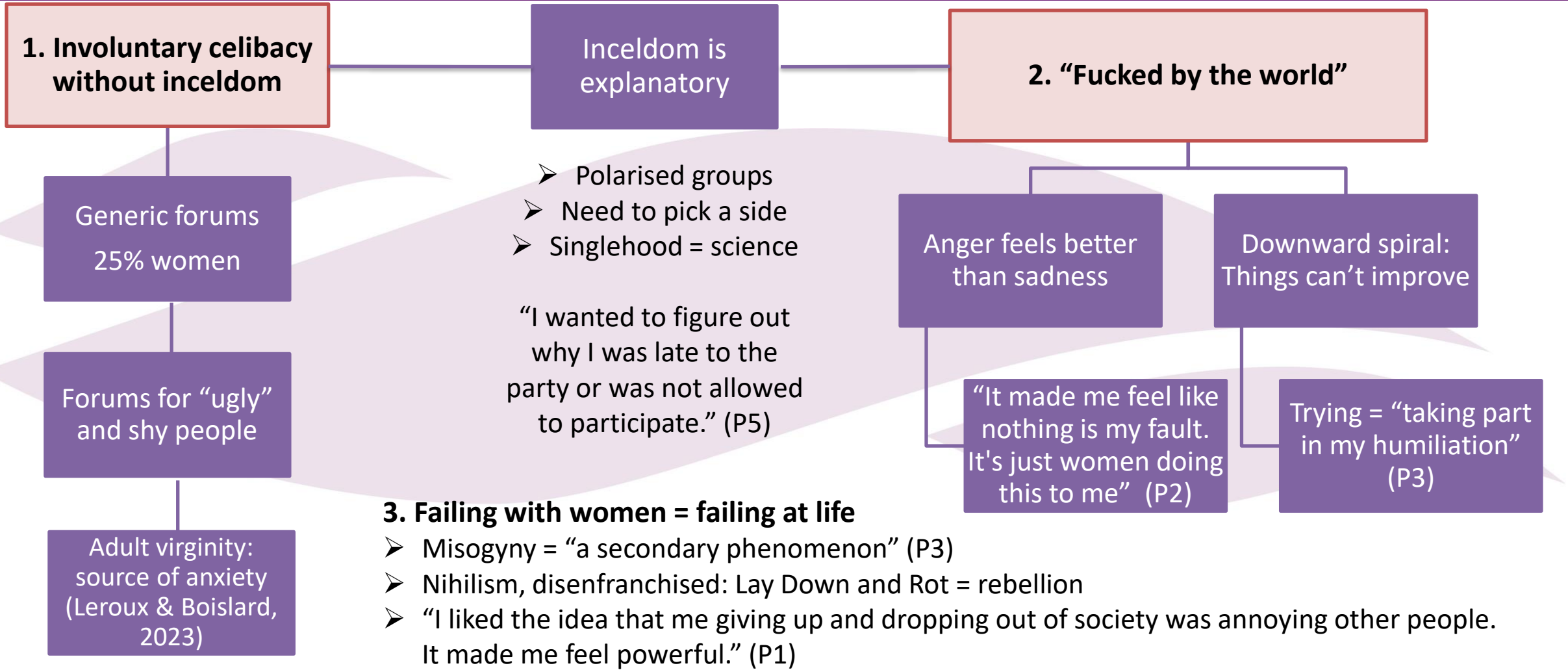
| Participant | Age | Region | Incel from | Incel until | Dominant pill |
|-------------|-----|----------------|------------|-------------|----------------|
| 1 | 23 | United Kingdom | 2016 | 2018 | Black |
| 2 | 21 | Central Europe | 2017 | 2020 | Black |
| 3 | 23 | USA | 2018 | 2020 | Black then red |
| 4 | 28 | Eastern Europe | 2016 | 2018 | Red |
| 5 | 29 | Canada | 2016 | 2019 | Black then red |
| 6 | 28 | USA | 2017 | 2021 | Black |
| 7 | 33 | Canada | 2010 | 2011 | Black |
| 8 | 25 | Italy | 2010 | 2021 | Mixed |
| 9 | 29 | Brazil | 2011 | 2018 | Red |

Predictors:

Mental health issues: anxiety/depression/BPD (all), body dysmorphia (P2, P5, P8)

History of bullying, neglect, and abuse (P7, P9)

Joining



Staying

4. A safe space

A secret life: share socially taboo topics

“I liked being vulnerable; there was less judgment because they in the same position.” (P1)

Intersectional: support for specific issues

Asian men: demasculinized and seen as asexual (P6)

Transactional friendships

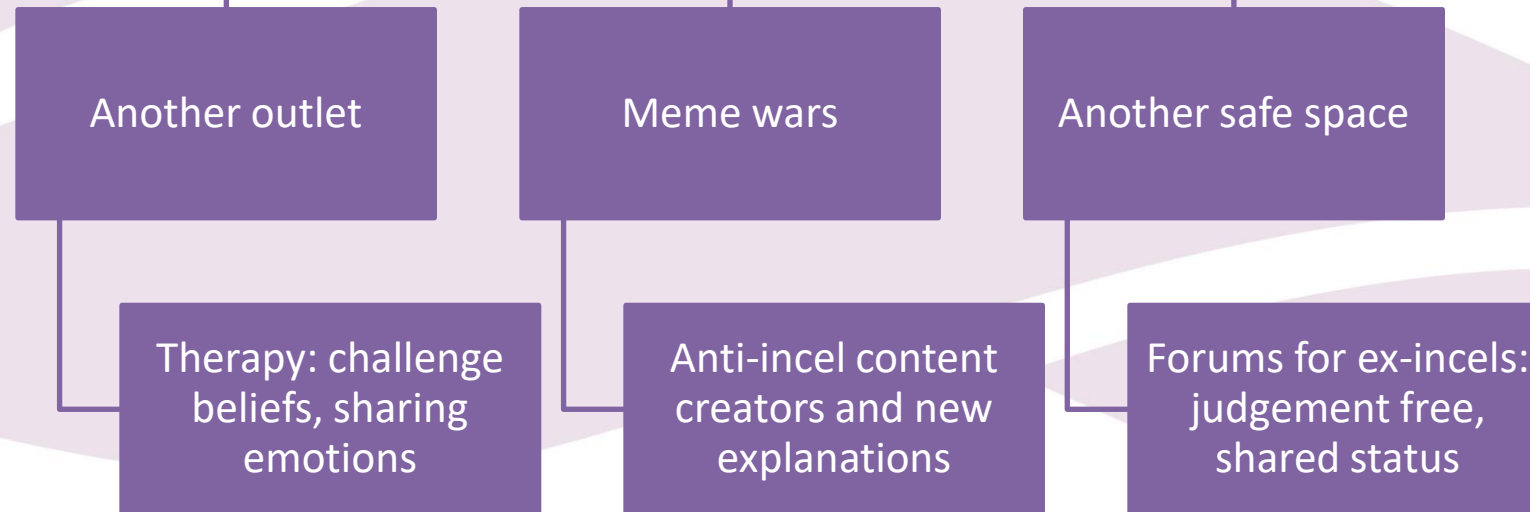
“The alpha of the incels is the guy who spent the most years a virgin.” (P8)

“You could say “I wanna kill myself” and instead of being met with ‘oh no, please don’t do it’ etc., someone would say ‘same’” (P1)

“I couldn’t have expressed my romantic alienation without risking being branded a creep or a misogynist” (P6)

Leaving

5. A process, not an event



6. Ideological residue

Cognitions and biases remain, e.g., triggered by seeing couples – some visit when low
“No matter what I do, I will never be a masculine attractive guy... I am still recovering, and, sometimes, if I have a really bad day, I doubt I’m going to be okay again.” (P2)

Discussion

Conclusions

- Philosophical framework outsources explanation
- Short-term relief/long-term hopelessness: group for emotional support
- Leaving: requires support of a community – alienation a predictor (Maxwell et al., 2020)
- Modern social networking/video sharing helped to radicalise them - but has helped them exit

Implications:

- Education: challenge narratives, online safety
- Therapy: CBT (Maxwell et al., 2020), online/group (Broyd et al., 2022)
- Mental health in men: incel spaces facilitate/normalise talking about it
- Socioeconomic insecurity: predicts anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, especially in men (Álvaro et al., 2019)

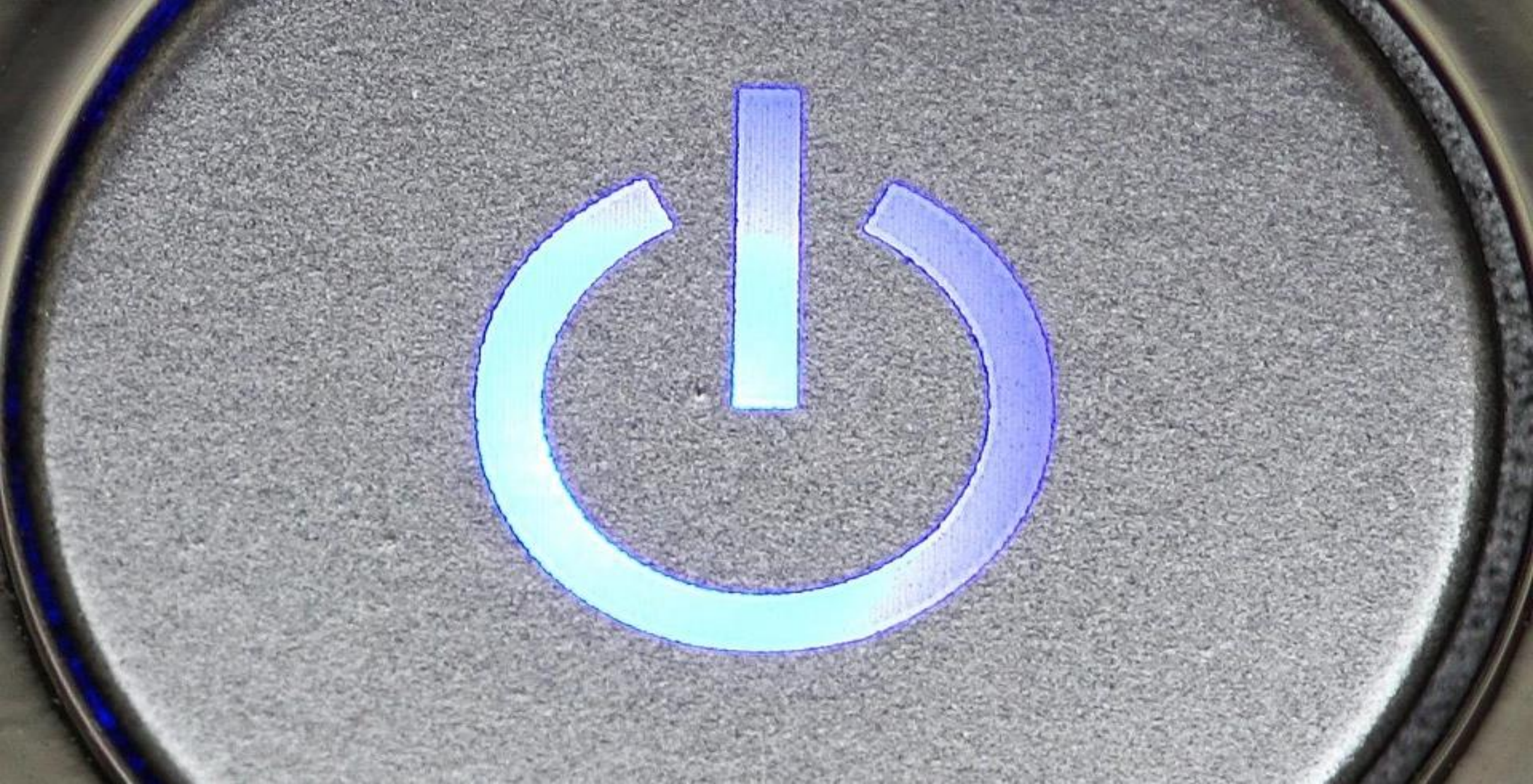
Limitations:

- Sample bias: Participants i) left, ii) joined forum, iii) wanted to talk about it

Acknowledgments

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Any questions?