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"Even though I'm not an incel, I'm still an involuntary celibate": A journey in and out of inceldom

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ABSTRACT

Incels, or involuntary celibates, represent a sub-section of the manosphere: an informal confederacy of digital communities where men construct and strengthen anti-feminist/male hegemonic narratives. Inceldom represents a beta masculine identity, with members placing themselves at the bottom of a natural hierarchy. Bonded by a shared belief in their genetic inferiority and ensuing sexual marginalization, they are depressed and angered by the perceived permanence of their circumstances. In extreme cases, this outlook has been linked to acts of mass murder. The present study investigated how these digital communities attract young men, why they stay, and how they can be supported to leave. Online interviews were conducted with ex-incels to study why they joined incel communities, stayed in them, and later left. Thematic analysis identified six key themes, representing key stages across their journey in and out of inceldom: i) involuntary celibacy before inceldom; ii) "fucked by the world;" iii) failing with women = failing at life; iv) a safe space; vi) online de-radicalization; and vi) residue. Combined, they demonstrate how insular online spaces further isolate and radicalize socially inhibited young men.

KEYWORDS

Black pill; inceldom; manosphere; radicalization; red pill

Introduction

Since its creation, the Internet has been an enabler and mediator of sexual relations (Brickell, 2012). Pornography, information sites, dating applications, and message boards allow people to congregate and electronically explore aspects of their sexual identity that they may not share offline for social or legal reasons. Thus, digital outlets provide a space between fantasy and action, empowering individuals through growth and autonomy or disempowering them through de-validation and stigmatization (Döring et al., 2022; Ross, 2005). As well as facilitating relations between members of marginalized groups, communities use online resources to forge new sexual identities. One example is involuntary celibates (henceforth, incels); young men with

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unmet desires to be in romantic or sexual relationships with women (Lindsay, 2022).

Adult virginity is associated with negative emotions, including sadness and fear (Leroux & Boislard, 2023). Sexuality is among the most symbolically important distinctions between people in Western societies, and unsuccessful men are subordinated according to hegemonic norms, e.g., virgin shaming (Connell, 2000; Fleming & Davis, 2018). The potential embarrassment can inhibit them from expressing/exploring their romantic rejection in person, so online communities provide a safe outlet. Sites where geographically disparate users anonymously share sexual anxieties are not inherently misogynistic. An early example from 1997, Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project, provided a mailing list for users to support each other and overcome barriers such as shyness (Sugiura, 2021). However, current incel discourses have moved the cause of celibacy from the self to feminist modernity, so their groups are overwhelmingly characterized by deep mistrust/dislike of women (Daly & Reed, 2022; Hart & Huber, 2023; Menzie, 2022).

Incels are one of several online identities to have emerged around the red pill philosophy, a worldview stipulating that feminist brainwashing has subverted a natural order in which traditional gendered social roles reflect fundamental sex differences (Ging, 2019; Lindsay, 2022). They argue that women's liberation encourages them to pursue only the most attractive and socially dominant partners, aka Chads, resulting in most men's sexual subordination (Maxwell et al., 2020; Menzie, 2022). Thus, their communities lie at a nexus between empowerment and disempowerment: discourses normalize members divulging their insecurities in a judgment-free zone, though their talking points also reinforce helplessness. In some instances, inceldom has been linked to acts of mass murder, leading to its classification as a domestic terror threat (Barcellona, 2022, DeCook & Kelly, 2022; Hoffman et al., 2020). To mitigate the likelihood of young men becoming radicalized, we must better understand why they join these communities, how social networking exacerbates their grievances, how these sites meet their emotional needs, and how they may be supported to leave.

Inceldom today

Incel forums make up one section of the manosphere: an informal coalition of online communities that support male hegemonic/anti-feminist identities and attitudes (Ging, 2019). Through the metaphor of a sexual marketplace, manosphere taxonomies rank members by sexual conquest, encouraging them to see themselves as entrepreneurs competing for limited opportunities (Han & Yin, 2022). Pickup Artist (PUA) communities, who teach men to overcome the odds through manipulation (O'Neill, 2018), and, arguably, porn-abstinence groups (Smith, 2024), position themselves as prospective winners. In contrast,

incels place themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy, unable to participate in a society that excludes them. Though some try to transcend their disadvantage via surgery or research, most argue society's biological stratification places attractiveness outside the manageable realm of personal behavior (Menzie, 2022). This belief, known as the black pill, represents the last point on many incels' trajectories (Lindsay, 2022).

60,000–100,000 users currently populate incel forums. They are an ethnically diverse community of mostly 18–30-year-old socially inhibited men typically based in economically underprivileged areas (Blake & Brooks, 2023). Their forums have been likened to counter-publics: networks that produce/replicate alternative forms of knowledge in opposition to mainstream culture (Ging, 2019; Lindsay, 2022). Digital terrains allow members to withdraw from the society that has marginalized them and enact symbolic revenge through violent, hateful posts. Repeated visits strengthen their identification through shared experiences, discourses, memes, and vocabulary (Maxwell et al., 2020; Menzie, 2022). Because people challenging these norms are banned/sanctioned, and neither women nor sexually active men can join, their communities become echo chambers of negative thoughts (Halpin, 2022; Sugiura, 2021). Upvote systems also reward/incentivize congruent posts, encouraging the polarized thinking and confirmation bias, which fuel other conspiratorial movements (Van Raemdonck, 2020). As well as vindicating users, these features algorithmically promote popular comments and filter voices of dissent (Lindsay, 2022). Over time, incels are increasingly convinced of their low status and resistant to contrary perspectives.

Developments in social media are not the only advancements in digital technologies that have facilitated the rise of inceldom. Location-based dating apps represent a sociotechnical step toward literalizing the manosphere's sexual marketplace. Users are encouraged to commodify themselves, with the quality and quantity of their matches manifesting their value (Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2022). Incels argue that by expanding women's dating pools, apps make them more selective than if they were limited to men they encounter offline. Moreover, because high-quality men can approach multiple women, their accessibility accentuates the male hierarchy (Preston et al., 2021). There is evidence dating apps contribute to male loneliness since i) they vastly outnumber women on them, and ii) women receive far more messages/matches to instigate conversation (Ponseti et al., 2022). Thus, the red/black pill's explanatory value could appeal to self-conscious men frustrated by their lack of replies. Dating app rejection predicts anxiety and sadness – particularly in people prone to upward social comparison, like incels (Toma, 2022). High users also experience more negative views of themselves and their bodies following rejection (Strübel & Petrie, 2022). Inceldom provides sexually unsuccessful men with a framework to understand these feelings and a receptive place to communicate them through the comfort of an avatar.

As well as reflecting technological advances, inceldom's growth has occurred in tandem with a sustained decline in living standards across Western countries (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019). Like far-right populism, which thrives under economic inequalities (Jay et al., 2019), the black pill might be relatable to young men with few prospects. Geo-location data supports this hypothesis, showing income equality as a regional predictor of Tweets with incel-related terminology (Brooks et al., 2022). Demographic data also suggests those lacking experience with higher education, unemployed, or living with parents are disproportionately likely to be incels (Costello et al., 2022). This may be explained by them also being more likely to be i) high-intensity internet users (Feng et al., 2019) and ii) sexually inactive (Bozick, 2021). The former is consistent with isolation predicting online activity among young adults (Primack et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2021), and the latter could be due to their low self-esteem decreasing their self-confidence (Bale & Archer, 2013), social status influencing women's attraction (Walter et al., 2020) or practical considerations like the cost of going out. Precarious employment and financial insecurity also predict adverse mental health outcomes, including low self-esteem and depression – particularly among men – that can make them vulnerable (Álvaro et al., 2019; Daly & Reed, 2022). Thus, uncertain economic climates reinforce the powerlessness that inceldom responds to.

Incels and radicalization

Maxwell et al. (2020) characterize incel radicalization by online spaces validating/contextualizing repeated offline experiences of rejection, pain, hopelessness, and anger. Incels are encouraged to externalize these, leading to hostility (Regehr, 2022). Through platform algorithms and push notifications, their communities perpetuate themselves through members receiving a steady stream of content reinforcing their beliefs (Ging, 2019; Sparks et al., 2024). Heavy social media use heightens individuals' isolation, especially when outlets promote social comparison/envy (O'Day & Heimberg, 2021), as incel ones do, thereby exaggerating their alienation. Over time, their growing victimhood and perceived distance from society make them reliant on their online communities to satisfy social needs, which they cannot do offline (Lindsay, 2022, Nagle, 2017). These sites are initially empowering, providing opportunities for identification, but the constant reiteration that nothing can change makes members more resigned and depressed (Daly & Reed, 2022; Regehr, 2022). Through the incel framework, their pain gradually becomes hatred and anger (Hoffman et al., 2020).

In some cases, incels' belief in their inherent inferiority prompts them to pursue physically/sexually aggressive behaviors to enact dominance on women they otherwise cannot (DeCook & Kelly, 2022). Masculinity anxiety and

endorsement of incel beliefs predict the likelihood of individuals fantasizing about harming others (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). Insular sub-cultures where these ideas get taught, rationalized, and nurtured are therefore dangerous; thus, The Southern Poverty Law Center (2021) class incels as a hate group. This classification is contentious: though many posts support violence, the wider community overwhelmingly rejects it (Moskalenko et al., 2022), something that may be skewed by members posting provocative statements for attention or humor (Hoffman et al., 2020). Still, several killers have directly cited inceldom as a motivation, highlighting a pipeline between this ideological framework and acts of domestic terror (DeCook & Kelly, 2022).

While some incels pose a threat to the public, they mostly pose a threat to themselves. Up to two-thirds report suicidal ideation (Daly & Reed, 2022), and though those claims may carry social utility since their communities coalesce around it, surveys indicate incels have a higher prevalence of psychological diagnoses than the general population (Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2022). It could be argued that inceldom attracts young men experiencing mental health problems, though it could also be argued that the perceived permanency of their position worsens these. Analysis of suicide posts supports a connection between black pill tenets and authors' decisions to take their lives (Daly & Laskovtsov, 2021). Despite associations with depression, most incels mistrust therapy because i) it cannot stop them from being physically unattractive, and ii) an affluent therapist cannot empathize with the inescapable problem of natural inferiority (Daly & Laskovtsov, 2021). Thus, incel forums seem like the only place they can discuss these anxieties with people who understand them.

Leaving inceldom

Fortunately, young men regularly leave incel forums. Accessibility constraints, such as websites like Reddit banning/quarantining groups, have led to a reduction on some platforms (Copland, 2020). However, changes in former members' circumstances have also prompted them to leave, including transitionary stages like college, widening their social network, realizations about their sexual orientation, or speaking to other ex-incels (Hintz & Baker, 2021; Thorburn, 2023). There is no one-size-fits-all approach to de-radicalization, but the presence of mentors or peers has helped people exit a range of groups (Weeks, 2021; Woloszyn et al., 2020). Likewise, counter-narratives that redirect anger, build hope, and encourage pride in other positive group memberships are effective (Ashour, 2010). These can be facilitated by the platforms that helped radicalize them earlier. Recently, digital outlets designed to help current/ex-incels find a pathway out of the community have emerged: an inverted manosphere, including YouTube channels, blogs, and Reddit pages (Thorburn, 2023). The online setting is practical since social inhibition is among the risk factors associated with inceldom, and groups can traverse

geographic boundaries. These forums fulfill similar needs to the incel boards they replace; community, identification, and validation in an anonymized community that will not judge them. However, users are encouraged to share how inceldom ruined their lives rather than being rewarded for hostility. Finally, these sites offer researchers an opportunity to research/connect with the radicalization and de-radicalization proxcesses with people who have been through it.

The present study

Relatively little research into incel communities has directly recruited men who are or have been incels. This omission is crucial since they may be best placed to comment on factors that could have prevented them from joining, and their insights could educate others who may be drawn to inceldom (Hart & Huber, 2023). It is also helpful to differentiate between the sociocultural factors pushing men toward inceldom and the psychological processes characterizing their engagement. For example, The Southern Poverty Law Center's (2021) interpretation that inceldom protects male supremacy fits the narrative of natural masculinity conflicting with modernity. However, a lot of incels do not see themselves as supreme since they believe women and other men subordinate them. Many men position themselves in relation to unachievable hegemonic archetypes and feel shamed to different degrees (Howson, 2014). Conflating this insecurity with a belief in patriarchal structures downplays how unobtainable ideals also harm them. The present study involves interviews with ex-incels about their experiences with online communities. To our knowledge, it is the first to span the same individuals' journeys from browsing these groups to identifying with the label and later disavowing them. It charts what drew them to incel sites, if/how the tone of these communities changed during their affiliation, what their incel identity meant to them at the time, and their relationship with inceldom now. Through this research, we explore the emotional logic underlying their decisions to enter, stay, and exit and if/how the community met their needs. In doing so, we add to the literature addressing personal factors that contribute to online radicalization and how their communities are preserved.

Method

Ethical approval was sought and granted to conduct in-depth interviews with individuals who had left inceldom or no longer identified with the incel label. A call for participants was posted on various online forums and platforms frequented by ex-incels. It asked explicitly for volunteers who previously identified as an incel but no longer did. For privacy reasons and to protect participant confidentiality, the research team has chosen not to name the

platforms used for recruitment. However, some of these outlets have been explored in detail elsewhere (Thorburn, 2023). We appreciate that the term "ex-incel" is ambiguous since incel philosophy implies membership is for life. However, since not all men who are frustrated about being virgins call themselves incels, we regard them no longer identifying with the label as reflecting a fundamental change in their mindset.

The research team collectively designed a semi-structured interview schedule and topic guide but agreed that it was most suitable for the primary investigator to conduct all interviews and communicate with participants. As the second and third researchers are women, their gender presented a potential barrier for ex-incels who may have been uncomfortable discussing their views with them. Overall, 13 respondents contacted the primary investigator to express interest. Three did not continue communications after receiving the information pack, and one was ineligible due to being under the age of 18. Nine interviews were conducted across two intakes. This final sample is limited, as often happens when recruiting hard-to-reach populations, including fringe identity groups comprising vulnerable people (Abrams, 2010). Still, it fits within the recommended parameters for interview-based research (Braun et al., 2016; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Most high-frequency codes should be observable within nine interviews, allowing for the development of meaningful themes and interpretations without saturation (Guest et al., 2006).

Of these interviews, seven were conducted with participants via Zoom. Participants could choose whether to turn on their video or remain unseen, and all but one opted to keep their camera off for the interview. The remaining two preferred to conduct the interview asynchronously over e-mail. The research team considered the differing formats – synchronous video call vs. asynchronously written interview – but decided that, due to the sensitive content, it was ethically correct to give participants agency to choose the most suitable format. Questions provided in both asynchronous and synchronous interviews were from the same interview topic guide, and thus data gathered across the sample are comparable. Interviews ranged in duration from 50 to 150 minutes and

Table 1. Participant information.

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

Table 2. The left-hand column references Braun and Clarke's six-step approach (2006). The right-hand column shows how the research team engaged with the process and ensured inter-coder reliability and consistency.

1. Familiarization	The project PI completed transcription, and all team members reviewed transcripts to familiarize themselves with the dataset.
2. Generating initial codes	Researchers focused on at least two transcripts and generated initial codes for them.
3. Searching for themes	Each researcher identified themes at a latent level within the transcripts from step 2.
4. Reviewing themes	After reviewing their allocated transcripts, researchers exchanged transcripts to review at least one transcript analyzed by each of the other team members. This process took place asynchronously to allow adequate time to review themes. Suggestions were made if the researcher felt themes were overlooked or underdeveloped.
5. Defining and naming themes	Team members met to discuss the themes identified and to decide on their pertinence and the terminology to represent each.
6. Producing the report	The project PI drafted the report with input and contributions from the other authors. The manuscript underwent several iterations and revisions reflecting comments.

were recorded and then downloaded for transcription by the primary investigator. After transcription, all recordings were deleted. Basic demographic details are provided below (Table 1). Two participants requested we not report their specific country because they did not want to compromise their online identity.

Analysis was completed by a three-person research team following Braun and Clarke (2006) six-step approach to inductive thematic analysis. Each researcher analyzed at least two of the transcripts and, to ensure inter-coder reliability, checked at least one transcript analyzed by each of the other researchers. This approach meant that two researchers analyzed all transcripts. The team then held several meetings to discuss themes. This approach is blended with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach, which is illustrated in Table 2.

Findings and discussion

We identified six core themes reflecting the approximate trajectory of an individual's journey in and out of inceldom. These show how online communities reflected their offline concerns, providing them with a community that affirmed and exacerbated their feelings of sexual/personal marginalization. The first demonstrates the emergence of incel communities from more general sites for single people. The second addresses incels' hopelessness and how the online communities provided a receptive outlet they could express themselves. The third explores their failure with women as part of a wider sense of failing at life and how the socioeconomic context influences the movement's growth and scale. The fourth explores the social dynamics of incel forums. The fifth discusses their decision to leave and the resources that facilitated them. Finally, the sixth theme addresses the extent to which they retain aspects of inceldom. Quotes have been slightly edited for clarity.

Involuntary celibacy before inceldom

> *"[Website name] was male-dominated, but maybe one in four users were women, and it was more supportive and open than any other incel board. . . They just didn't fully capture or validate the anger and frustration I felt."* (P6)

> *"Each community is a different world. I mean, the German community – they're fantastic guys. I have no words – they are very, very, very good people."* (P8)

Most participants first explored their sexual anxieties on websites where single people vented or exchanged dating advice, including the now-defunct IncelSupport. These sites were less hostile than later incel communities and let men and women alike connect over their inability to find romantic/sexual partners and barriers such as shyness. The incel label has existed since the 1990s but did not imply a specific culture or framework until recently (Hoffman et al., 2020). To the extent these original communities used it, they framed involuntary celibacy as unfortunate but rarely permanent. However, groups where frustrated young men congregate to lament their inability to attract women are open to the explanatory value of the red/black pills: "[They] want to figure out why they can't do something that most of the population has seemed to figure out at such a young age." (P5). As such, the incel arguments began to spread, and for some, it was a game-changer: "I thought I had discovered the secret to life" (P9).

A shift toward more extreme content happened as arguments about free speech cultivated increasingly hostile discourses, and the function of the groups changed from peer support and sociality to nihilistically deconstructing the possibility of change (Hoffman et al., 2020). P7 and P8 saw the atmosphere become more pessimistic when the causes of involuntary celibacy moved from the self toward social engineering. These ideas spread as red/black pill incels brigaded other communities – some unrelated to dating, like the image board P9 frequented – to share their anger and prescriptions. The publicity surrounding a high profile shooter's also led to his ideas about human nature entering incel discourses (Sugiura, 2021). P3 recalled reading evermore misanthropic and deterministic incel posts on singles communities as long threads dissected the roles of looks and personality, inviting a debate he felt he should respond to: "It made me want to take a side."

P8 experienced the same pressure after visiting an Italian message board for self-identified ugly people. Initially, it was a generic place to discuss body image with "a lot of personal experience and less focus on theories," though red/black pill narratives eventually permeated the page. Over time, the framework positioning women as sexually privileged led to increasingly resentful male-centric discourses, and he became increasingly interested in the American-dominated boards where scientific rationalizations enabled him to

make sense of his alienation through the lens of evolutionary psychology (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019). The books, articles, and videos he subsequently consumed were those endorsed by the community, reflecting how selective evidence and social approval mechanisms foster ecologies where polarized, conspiratorial thinking spreads (Van Raemdonck, 2020).

"Fucked by the world"

> *"People come for the truth and stay for the lies. When I first joined, I was drawn to them because of my truth (no one had ever been attracted to me), but eventually, my truth became the truth (no one could be attracted to me)."* (P1)

> *"It wasn't my fault. I didn't choose to have all these illnesses. I did not choose to have my brain operate the way it does."* (P7)

All participants experienced long-term mental health problems during late adolescence (Blake & Brooks, 2023; Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2022), including anxiety (most), depression (most), borderline personality disorder (P7), and body dysmorphia, e.g., fixations on stature (P2, P3) or balding (P5). Some also reported adversity through bullying, neglect, and abuse (P7, P9), and all worried about falling behind peers sexually. Virginity as a gateway into manhood and rite of passage is a popular narrative among young men (Leroux & Boislard, 2023), and their inability to lose it marked them as failures. P8 had the youngest entry point, joining Italian forums at age 12, and found it validating to see older people, who were not his comparatively optimistic parents, share his concerns: "I just followed what [they] were saying at the time – it was almost like they were my teachers." P9 had a similar drive to explain his marginalization, although, unlike most incels, he had already had sex before joining. However, he had less than he thought a man should, and his experiences did not give him the validation and intimacy he craved. In most cases, feelings of injustice began a two-stage process, summarized below, that solidified their identification with inceldom.

Stage 1: Anger feels better than sadness

> *"I'm here. I'm a man. I'm pathetic. I will not hide any longer."* (P1)

> *"I remember when my mindset started to shift. . . There's a specific time I was like, 'I can't handle all this self-deprecation anymore. It's too painful to think this way.'"*(P3)

> *"At first, I was curious, more than anything, but when I started to read more of that stuff, I became angry because I felt that a lot of the things were outside of my control and they were things that I couldn't influence or change."* (P4)

There is an ego-defense logic to inceldom (Johanssen, 2021) and all participants found short-term benefits to joining incel forums. They met people they

could connect with, and the red pill's insistence that sexual inequalities stemmed from the natural laws meant they could externalize their sadness in a way that protected them from further pain (Maxwell et al., 2020): "It made me feel like nothing is my fault – it's just women doing this to me" (P2). Replacing their self-loathing with anger moved their locus of control from the self to others, freeing them from personal accountability (Regehr, 2022). The community's diffusion of responsibility helped curb P3's suicidal thoughts, so he deliberately immersed himself in the forum's fury: "Putting responsibility on myself meant I was contributing to my humiliation." His appreciation of these sites as an alternative to the real world, and a place to grow his resentments, echoes the metaphor of incel forums as counter-publics (Lindsay, 2022). Following regular visits, P5 became convinced of a "conspiracy" orchestrated by women who would have sex with alpha males in their twenties and exploit lesser men like him in their thirties. Likewise, P6 recognized that going on the forums to replace despair with anger and hate was not good, but it felt better than before: "It's okay to be aggressive; society deserves it . . . It's what they've been doing to me for 20 years." However, while inceldom's outlook offered solace, the relief soon gave way to something darker.

Stage 2: The downward spiral

> *"When you've been in these incel spaces for a while, you become sort of bitter. That person doesn't make very good friends, right?".* (P2)

> *"It might be confusing how that sense of giving up and feeling completely powerless will lead somebody to be violent. But to me, because I have first-hand experience seeing how that mindset develops, it's not confusing at all."* (P3)

> *"[Incel communities] are about finding what you're insecure about and then blowing it up to proportions that are not realistic."* (P5)

> *"If you keep kicking a dog when it's down, as it's trying to get help, even if you're trying to help but you're doing it in a way where they feel they're being picked on, eventually they're going to bite back."* (P7)

Inceldom does not represent exclusively online radicalization since incels' offline interactions reinforce the systematic inequalities and nihilism they are engaging with on forums (Hoffman et al., 2020; Lindsay, 2022). The insular nature of social media communities allows extreme viewpoints to go unchallenged (Van Raemdonck, 2020), and participants became increasingly convinced that not only would their situations not improve, they *could not* improve. The angrier they became, the harder they found it to create meaningful relationships elsewhere. This loop made them feel more alienated by their offline society: "I was getting people who heard, listened to me, and understood me [which] I did not get in real life . . . Because they were not

unattractive, they didn't care" (P8). The reproduction of incel discourses is, therefore, an interaction between online and offline worlds.

Incel communities encouraged participants to stop playing an unfair game and lash out at those rigging it in a way they could not in their daily lives with extreme language – recalling Ross's (2005) conceptualization of internet communities as a space between fantasy and reality. Online communities offer social disembodiment: the freedom to transcend one's physical environment (Ging, 2019). For example, P3's posts became increasingly violent as the affirmation of the forum fueled his visions of forming militias to overthrow the social order, a dominant persona that contrasted with his offline self, who grudgingly did low-paid service work. Despite limiting his frustrations to forums, he saw continuity between his thoughts and a recent mass shooter he had encountered online. "What defined his [posts] was not just a burning hatred – it seemed like a total sense of powerlessness ... At a certain point, being down on yourself is just unbearable, so you turn it outward."

P2 and P4 compared inceldom to radicalization, though they suggested they were not intentionally manipulated. Rather, they saw it as a self-reinforcing byproduct of people with shared grievances coalescing in curated spaces where alternative discourses are not welcome and misogynistic narratives are rewarded (Halpin, 2022; Lindsay, 2022; Van Raemdonck, 2020). The more participants went online to reproduce their subordination by alpha males and women, the worse they felt about their prospects offline, fostering greater learned helplessness (Maxwell et al., 2020). P5 compared incel communities to groups of low-ranking UFC fighters finding others of a similar level and bonding on how they could not get better rather than training. Users would share their views that were losers, and others would agree, encouraging them to catastrophize further. Inceldom also made them anxious about things they had not worried about before by i) offering numerous reasons to feel insecure and ii) incentivizing members to identify with them.

Despite calling fellow users "family" and "friends," participants saw forums as transactional rather than social. This distinction explains why none have retained contact with people they confided their emotions in: it mattered *what* was being posted rather than who was posting. Though members positioned themselves as "losers," they were also competitors whose social capital came from having the most hopeless situation. "The alpha of the incel forum is the guy who spent the most years a virgin" (P8) because they were the most underprivileged and least accountable. P2 described a typical conversation: "Somebody would say, 'I'm short and poor'... And some other guy would say, 'You think that's is bad? I'm short, poor, and have a small penis.'" Members do not advocate for each other because doing so undermines their defeatist beliefs (Sparks et al., 2024). Instead, they address the substance of each other's posts

by confirming their worthlessness or citing other traits that could deter women, making them feel even worse. "Whatever hurts must be true," P5 said, paraphrasing the vlogger Contrapoints, who explored the incel misery economy. The continued focus on finding reasons to feel bad pushed participants to disconnect from the offline world and accept that nothing they could do would change their lives. This process reflects a wider existential malaise underlying inceldom, addressed in the next theme.

Failing with women = failing at life

> *"I believed that adage of 'work hard, be a good person, and good things will happen to you.' The black pill made me realize that the world is unfair and there are no guarantees for anything in life."* (P1)

> *"It goes far beyond just the dynamics of sexual relationships . . . What we call incel ideology is an extreme manifestation of things that are happening in milder forms in a lot of people."* (P3)

> *"I believed I was unlovable, so who the hell is gonna love me?. . . I won't get a good job, and if I don't get a good job, I won't be able to do things I want to do in life. I'll be lonely and depressed, and what's the point of living?"* (P7)

In addition to sexual grievances, participants explained their anger and self-loathing through a broader crisis in meaning and confidence: "Society pushes you to keep moving forward, they tell you 'Never give up,' so going against that was another part of that rebellion" (P1). Incel communities let men explain disappointment in multiple areas of their life through a victimhood narrative. Bratich and Banet-Weiser (2019) interpret their forums as a response to capitalism's subjectivization of individuals, where young men who have internalized a prototype of what their lives *should* look like connect on a failure to meet it.

Other parts of the manosphere also frame a man's worth as a function of his sociosexual interactions, including PUAs and reboot groups that promote self-mastery to ascend hierarchies and achieve the success/financial power they link to sexual opportunities (O'Neill, 2018; Smith, 2024). Social media provocateur Andrew Tate's meteoric rise also arguably reflects insecure young men looking to an aspirational figure who positions himself as a paragon of masculine achievement in the face of economic uncertainty and structural unfairness (Haslop et al., 2024). Incels invert the idealism of this alpha-beta dichotomy to emphasize their subservience. Even the comparatively optimistic red pill incels positioned themselves beneath their more accomplished mentors: "There are leaders, and there are followers who want to learn something" (P4). Their forums offered an avenue from inceldom, but the two-tiered structure reinforced the natural hierarchy subordinating them.

Participants linked their failure in sexual and socioeconomic markets: "All these bad things happen because I'm an incel. 'Oh boy, I got this bill I had to pay today because I'm an incel, and I can't get a higher-paying job because I'm unattractive'" (P7). To the manosphere, a man's value stems from the universal mechanism of competition, meaning failure in one area indicates failures elsewhere. Yet this did not reflect the work participants put in, undermining the meritocratic foundations of neoliberalism and the red pill connection between sexual labor and partners (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019). P3 expressed his degradation at work through the metaphor of a eunuch, replicating the manosphere's emasculating language to signify low status and subservience (Ging, 2019). Incels integrate job types with the male hierarchy since sexual and romantic desirability among men is associated with physical and social power alike (Menzie, 2022). His disappointment at struggling for relevant/prestigious work following college reflected his betrayal by mainstream narratives surrounding dating: "It was supposed to be easy." Thus, he argued inceldom has evolved to include broadly disaffected and socially weak youths, with misogyny "a secondary phenomenon." If competing for either women or jobs is futile, giving up is an act of defiance: "I liked the idea that giving up and dropping out of society was annoying other people. It made me feel powerful" (P1).

A safe space

> *"The weird kids must form their own collectives because they have been outcast by the dominant collectives . . . You could go there and say 'I wanna kill myself' and instead of being met with people saying, 'Oh no, please don't; people care about you,' etc., someone would say 'same,' and you could bond in that."* (P1)

> *"It felt like joining an underground club . . . It felt like I belonged somewhere, whereas I felt like I didn't fit in normal society with normal people."* (P9)

Incel communities encouraged participants to express feelings they typically did not for fear of vulnerability or judgment: "On these forums, men were very open . . . In real life, I didn't feel it was easy to do that with other men" (P8). This hesitancy to disclose mental health issues offline is common among men whose concerns relate to perceptions of their masculinity as prescriptive norms circulate behavioral scripts conflating emotional displays with weakness (Hanna & Gough, 2018). Forums also permitted them to vent about aspects of the heterosexual male experience that were taboo elsewhere (Menzie, 2022). P6 recalled friends supporting a drug-addicted colleague and knew they would not extend that compassion to him: "I would have been called a creep or a misogynist . . . I couldn't have expressed my romantic alienation

without risking being branded as someone worse." On incel forums, nothing was off-limits, provided it supported the red/black pill. Hammarén and Johansson (2014) conceptualize vertical and horizontal male communities to denote physical/digital spaces that defend and strengthen gendered hierarchies through nurturing male power or that share emotional experiences and intimacy, respectively. Incel fora share aspects of both since members uphold hegemony and explore their exclusion from it (Halpin, 2022). We explore both factors below.

A secret life

> *"I have difficulty opening up, especially about a subject like this . . . That's why I liked being vulnerable on incel spaces; there was less judgment because the people were in the same position."* (P1)

> *"And to me, that was, for the most part, my group of friends: it was just like going to the pub after work, except you could do it several times a day. It was very comforting, very warm."* (P6)

Socially inhibited people can compensate for a lack of openness in their in-person relationships by anonymously confiding in online spaces (O'Day & Heimberg, 2021). All participants worried friends/family would judge them for identifying as incels because of the community's links to violence. P8 said these events and their backlash made him feel worse: "If a member of your political group commits a terrorist attack, you're not happy about it because it makes you lose votes." Using a similar comparison, P5 likened this tendency to the Islamophobic attitudes he was subject to: "It's not like if we see a Muslim person commit a terrorist act, it'd be right to say all Muslims are culpable, right?" The incel label gave them fraternity, but the group's reputation offline amplified their alienation (Daly & Reed, 2022). Thus, like people in other stigmatized communities, incels operate in two spheres; i) a public one, where they suppress their sociosexual anxieties, ii) a secret digital one, where they express things they otherwise withhold (Döring et al., 2022; Ross, 2005). This project marked the first time most had spoken about their affiliation with another person who was not also an incel. Their decision to speak without cameras or interview via e-mail meant they could retain aspects of the digital realms they were used to: "Any time I've discussed this topic has been through my keyboard, so it sounds alien, to hear my own voice say it" (P5). As well as discussing universal aspects of the male experience, online communities enabled more niche sub-communities to connect around more specific grievances.

Hierarchies within hierarchies

> *"The way I've seen the media portray them is things like, 'Oh, they're white supremacists, right.' And that was absolutely baffling to me because the amount of ethnic minorities that I talked to was extremely high."* (P5)

> *"There's a stereotype of incels normies have. That because I'm not white, I'm not right-wing, and I'm not consistently angry, then they don't think I could be a part of that community. . . But I was."* (P6)

P5 and P6 challenged the popular narrative incels support/uphold white supremacy (Kay, 2021). Both identify as people of color, with families from South and Southeast Asia, respectively, and characterized incel forums as inclusive spaces where global coalitions of men could bond in opposition to their common enemy of feminism. Because digital communities are transnational, incels receive an endless supply of content from around the world: P6 recalled browsing in the early morning to see what Asian members had posted. Incels see all non-alpha men as structurally disadvantaged, but some are even more disadvantaged than others (Halpin, 2022). Thus, white male rage explanations downplay the distinct sociosexual pressures members attribute to their race or ethnicity (Hoffman et al., 2020). P6 felt like a "freak among freaks," arguing that in addition to typical pressures facing heterosexual men, Asian men have the additional challenge of being demasculinized (for supporting data, see Balistreri et al., 2015). On dating apps, research suggests that over 90% of non-Asian US women who state racial preferences reject Asian men (Robnett & Feliciano, 2011). Incel forums allowed him to connect with other Asian incels who had these experiences. Specific subgroups raised by participants included "the black manosphere," "MRAsians," "currycels," and "ricecels." Each had dedicated forums or Discords to discuss ways in which they have been discriminated against. This layered analysis can be superficially aligned with feminist intersectionality, though the underlying framework is incompatible. While members would not argue that any group is *superior*, subgroups' inferiority is often qualified by race, making the uncritical reproduction of innate hierarchies a part of inceldom (DeCook & Kelly, 2022). The question of how familiar racist tropes are on incel forums, and their relationship with online sections of the far right, remains an open question (Hart & Huber, 2023).

Online de-radicalization

> *"Gradually, I realized I can't live like that if I want to be happy again . . . If I want to see thirty, I have to leave; otherwise, I'll probably end my own life."* (P2)

> *"The entire red pill philosophy is nonsense: I had to move out, meet new people, have some success with women. But mostly to make new friends."* (P4)

Participants described leaving as a gradual process mediated by online resources discussed below. In addition, some cited formative experiences that prompted them to reevaluate the community and, by extension, their connection to it. P2 struggled to align his incel identity with seeing others troll single mothers' dating profiles: "I realized these women are not too different from me; they are just looking for love and did nothing wrong." P9 was similarly horrified to learn a school shooting was planned over the image board he used: "I began to think that the movement was evil . . . Piercing together those things, it felt like something was wrong with me frequenting the same place." He and P8 benefitted from therapy: another judgment-free environment, but one where their ideas were scrutinized more critically than on incel forums. Participants' decisions to leave were also impacted by their material circumstances. P3 gained confidence through a job he was invested in, alleviating his feelings of failure and resignation. P4 gained social and economic opportunities after moving from a rural to an urban area, making him less reliant on virtual communities. Their accounts combine to show the importance of self-efficacy, emphasizing the importance of socioeconomic status as an indicator of their vulnerability to online radicalization (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Costello et al., 2022). The following subthemes address digital resources that helped them de-transition from being community members.

Meme wars

> *"I browsed r/inceltears as a form of self-harm, reading the bad things people would say about incels and projecting it onto myself . . . Seeing some of that and them 'debunking' incel points may have pushed me away."* (P1)

Since incel communities operate digitally, it is unsurprising that participants cited other forums and content creators as instrumental in their leaving. These included the aforementioned Contrapoints, conservative commentator/self-help guru Jordan Peterson, and porn-reboot communities. Though the latter two share aspects of the incel worldview, including prescriptive gender norms and a natural sexual economy (Johanssen, 2021; Nesbitt-Larking, 2022; Smith, 2024), they represent a step toward self-improvement and sovereignty. For similar reasons, some said red pill websites represented a welcome alternative to the black pill's extremity. They also credited purple pill boards (where people who are red/black pilled debate those who are not) for challenging their ideas without stigmatizing them. Though they promote the tribalism that marks people's descent into insular communities, communities that debate inceldom's merits are more accessible than fora where it is ridiculed (Thorburn, 2023). Likewise, anti-incel forums that adopted a constructivist lens: "Those communities have similarities to incels in their logical arguments, and recognizing those helped me realize the issues incels have are born of

society, not individuals, which helped alleviate the blame off of myself" (P1). Exposure to these ideas can change incels' perspective without condemning them personally.

P7 sees the Internet as a vehicle for transformational dialogs and has spent years on incel forums, vlogs, and podcasts countering black pill narratives: "[Going back] was like a trip down memory lane of suffering." As a married father, he finds exemplifying how incels can change their lives effective for talking current members around, paralleling the importance of role models/mentors in facilitating de-radicalization (Weeks, 2021). Prior research shows many ex-incels were deradicalized when confronted with contradictions or flaws in their logic of inceldom (Thorburn, 2023). However, the insular nature of their communities means it can be challenging for individual ex-incels to reach current incels on their home territory without being dismissed as never being "truecel." Hence dedicated spaces where former incels help others leave are promising.

Another safe space

> *"I find [recruitment site] useful because, unlike the other forums, you can debate the radical incel points – while on the others, they just assume that you have already left the community. So, it's a very good place to challenge those ideas."* (P8)

Outlets for ex-incels and current incels trying to leave helped participants in three key ways: i) connecting them with others they related to, countering the loneliness that made them vulnerable to inceldom, ii) offering alternative narratives surrounding consent/relationships, iii) supplying non-judgmental arenas to discuss aspects of their past they would not offline. The stigmatization of incel identities offline meant that when leaving, most did not want to tell others they had been affiliated: "I feel I may say something that cannot be unsaid and makes someone change their entire perception of me" (P1). Ex-incel communities are not substitutes for therapy, though they have a similarly supportive role without the differences in status inherent to client-therapist relationships (Broyd et al., 2023).

Because of the risk of people falling back into incel mindsets, forums' tolerance for restating red/black pill arguments varies. P8 prefers those that permit exploring them because "members do not just assume incels are hateful, but recognize they have ideas [that] need addressing." Yet P3 cautions that ex-incel communities' focus on individual practices neglects the need for socioeconomic change, and these spaces must push for both micro and macro change: "I'm not saying those are not issues, but I think men use incel forums as an emotional outlet ... The powerlessness is crucial." Arguably, a structural framework that situates incels as victims of

modern capitalism represents further deference of responsibility since, like the red pill, it renders them unaccountable. Still, it is essential to acknowledge that these mindsets do not develop in a vacuum. Without a change in their prospects, former incels may regress into the same fatalism. We address this challenge of staying out of incel thought patterns below.

Residue

> ""*I'm not sure I've even fully 'left' yet, to be honest. It's a mindset as much as a community . . . I still believe some aspects of the black pill. The black pill is a good lie, and all good lies are based in the truth.*" (P1)

> *"No matter what I do, I will never be the like a stereotypical masculine, attractive guy . . . I am still to this day recovering, and sometimes, when I have a really bad day, I doubt I'm going to be okay again.*" (P2)

While participants have left inceldom, they are not necessarily outside its influence. It may seem intuitive that they would be more emotionally content after exiting such a defeatist community. However, in some ways, they were worse off since the absence of a scientific explanation for their circumstances meant they internalized the anger inceldom helped them externalize. In some ways, personal responsibility is positive, though it begets the self-loathing that prompted them to look to the red/black pill for answers (Hoffman et al., 2020). Participants have avoided their old forums, except for P7, for the reasons mentioned above, and P5, who has passively browsed: "Occasionally, on my darkest days, I would just look it up – I have no idea why." Still, some of the same psychological processes and biases remain.

P8 now identifies as purple pilled: "The black pill says some things right, the red pill says some things right . . . All groups have something." He is still distressed when more attractive people deny aspects of the red/black pill that they could not experience. Similarly, P9 still argues men should be stoic: "Men discussing emotional matters or showing too much weakness can be detrimental to a relationship . . . It is what it is, and it's useless trying to change it." However, he now sees culture and biology as joint arbiters of gender differences. P6 does not feel connected with inceldom but retains depressive symptoms and seeing happy couples still "brings a damper on [his] day." Similarly, P3 remains nihilistic and preoccupied with inequalities, though this is now on a societal level: "I developed a mindset that sticks with me today . . . Even if I improve my situation and become one of the winners, there's still tons of losers." He channels this helplessness into supporting causes he values rather than lashing out at himself or others, a far cry from the militias he fantasized about before.

General discussion and conclusions

We have charted nine ex-incels journeys through inceldom. When first vulnerable to radicalization, they fitted the incel profiles detailed elsewhere: socially inhibited young men concerned about their sexual success and social status (Blake & Brooks, 2023; Costello et al., 2022; Daly & Reed, 2022). The red pills explanatory power, and the novelty of openly discussing their sexual marginalization drew them toward incel forums. By explaining aspects of their offline lives through an unfair natural order, the red/black pills' diffusion of responsibility encouraged them to be angry where they were previously sad. It offered a digital fantasy world where they could say whatever they wanted and be affirmed vs. rejected (Lindsay, 2022) This shift in their locus of control gave way to a self-fulfilling cycle that made them increasingly hostile, hopeless, and reliant on the community for their social needs (Maxwell et al., 2020). However, while modern social networking helped to radicalize participants, forums, content creators, and alternative communities have also helped to rehabilitate them. Digital resources, including therapeutic interventions, visible role models, specialized forums, or video essays, might prove invaluable for reaching often socially inhibited people. Online group-based therapy may also help them overcome their mistrust of the industry by having others present whom they see as sharing their low status (Broyd et al., 2023).

Since more depressive and anxious symptoms are among the risk factors associated with incel radicalization, we must continue normalizing discussions about mental health in young men (Moskalenko et al., 2022; Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2022). Cultures of openness might help current incels leave and make others less likely to become red/black pilled to begin with (Hoffman et al., 2020). Addressing inequalities in youth employment or access to education is also essential since socioeconomic pressures contribute to nihilism, resignation, powerlessness, and the tendency to escape into online communities (Brooks et al., 2022; Costello et al., 2022). If researchers can point to trends in who is most vulnerable to radicalization, inceldom represents a sociological problem as well as a personal one.

It is also important that we do not reflexively dismiss or belittle incel concerns with modern dating since status, education, and economic success are among the factors influencing women's interest in men (Walter et al., 2020). In digitized and male-dominated markets, these qualities may carry greater salience for filtering candidates than offline, where they can build a personalized rapport. Less attractive and educated men are both more likely to be incels and less likely to get responses on dating applications (Brooks et al., 2022; Egebark et al., 2021). In addition, racial stereotyping contributes to whether men are seen as sexual prospects by themselves and others (Robnett & Feliciano, 2011). Although their framing differs, incels' explanations recall mainstream discourses surrounding halo effects. Acknowledging nonrandom

patterns in dating/sexual success does not endorse their discourses and may counter their alluring claims of secret information (Brooks et al., 2022). Promoting prosocial attitudes is fundamental, but individual-level responses that deny the significance of physical and structural factors may prompt young people to find answers elsewhere. The culture surrounding modern dating technologies, the importance young people place on them, and other relevant topics such as consent, misogyny, groupthink, and online safety need to be addressed through education and counter-narratives.

On a related point, for researchers, there is an ethical tension between exploring and excusing incel narratives. Yet highlighting its psychological, socioeconomic, and cultural drivers does not reduce individuals' or groups' moral responsibility for violent behavior/discourses. The manosphere relies on men's grievances, so an approach that stigmatizes individuals as much as their ideology could exacerbate them. We consider it critical that a social phenomenon, even one associated with horrific outcomes, is understood in its own terms. Particularly when preventative or de-radicalization strategies are in their infancy. Inceldom's answers are concerning, yet as Johanssen (2021) points out, the questions incels ask are very human: Am I attractive? Why am I alone? What can I do with my life? We must address their alienation constructively to help them leave for the good of themselves and others they may harm.

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