How to Become an Incel

Introduction

Discussions around incels – involuntary celibates – have become prevalent across popular social media platforms such as X/Twitter. However, it is not always clear who exactly is behind the incel identity. Are incels just people who can’t find love, or is there more to it? Can anyone fall into inceldom, or are there any special requirements? What keeps incels hooked on online incel forums? And how can incels balance their online and offline life? I argue incels experience an *in-between* identity as they pave their way through the online shit-posting and offline sexual frustration. I focus on the current most popular incel platform: incels.is, an incel forum filled with misogyny, homophobia, and racism, established in 2017.

Splitting Identities

Before discussing the identity of an incel, it is worth examining what the drivers are behind these identities. In our case, incels.is plays a big role.

The key element that determines the success of incels.is is the anonymity of its users. This is because anonymity gives users the power to establish themselves in a certain way online, without having to endure any negative consequences offline. It is important to point out that because incel-forum users are part of communities which are virtual (incels.is) and physical (universities, workplaces, neighbourhoods, etc.), they will similarly have *two* identities – also physical & virtual – and will interpret the term ‘incel’ differently across these two identities.

In their physical communities, involuntary celibates understand that being an ‘incel’ has a pejorative meaning, since lacking sexual experiences infringes on their ability to establish themselves as ‘masculine’. Indeed, young men who are virgin-shamed acquire a lower perceived social status, in accordance with ideas of male dominance.[[1]](#footnote-1) Not being involved in sexual relationships implies a crucial lack in one’s manhood, and a failure to fully transition from child to adult – and subsequently a (self-)denial of desirable masculine identities. Therefore, young men do not want to be associated with lacking sexual experiences offline, or therefore being seen as ‘less masculine’, and attempt to stay clear of publicly self-labelling as ‘incel’.

Lack of Recognition

Because young men don’t want to identify as ‘incel’ offline, speaking of sexual discontent appears to be taboo. This fuels the incel’s frustration, and significantly decreases any received recognition associated with their celibacy. I distinguish two categories in which incels lack recognition in their physical communities: intimate and social.

Regarding the intimate category, incels experience not being involved in sexual or romantic relations while other men are as an injustice. They feel they are owed sex from women, since there exist other men who *do* ‘receive’ sex. This deficiency is felt as an injustice, in the sense of unfairness. Subsequently, they experience a frustration of being denied these ‘female goods’. They therefore desire recognition, or acknowledgement, that they *are* lacking sex and *are* being treated unfairly. However, speaking of this would seem humiliating and would appear to entail a lower social status offline – presuming their predisposition to ideas around men’s dominant position in society and the secondary status of women (or in other words: hegemonic masculinity).

Regarding the social category, because incels cannot boast about having had sexual experiences, they cannot gain higher social status within their physical communities. Moreover, they feel they are unable to relate to their peers, make meaningful relationships through boasting about their sexual relations, or have success in their work-life – again, all of which are assumed through ideas of hegemonic masculinity. Hence, they lack recognition because they cannot climb the social ladder, and their frustration around this remains unacknowledged. For these reasons, incels will seek recognition elsewhere – and this is where incel forums come in.

The Incel Forum

As discussed above, on the one hand, involuntary celibates do not want their social identity to be dominated by their inceldom, yet still desire to be recognised for the ‘suffering’ they must endure. Incel forums therefore provide the most appropriate setting for incels to share their frustration and be recognised as inferior and sex-lacking beings with a common enemy: women.

The anonymity of the forum means incels can be truthful about their lack of sexual experiences, and in this way establish themselves as true involuntary celibates. Since every incel on the forum is in the same boat, sex cannot be used to boost status. Moreover, this entails that fellow incels can appropriately recognise and reciprocate feelings of sexual and social frustration, meaning the incel-forum is also a place to find solace. However, over time incels.is has turned extremely misogynistic, racist, and homophobic, even encouraging fellow members to attack those that are at the root of their inceldom: women and alpha men (who allegedly take all the women).

The forum’s aspect of anonymity means that a member’s identity is not *wholly* that of an involuntary celibate. Online they can proudly discuss their celibacy and show their hatred of women, but when they shut down their computers their inceldom and misogynistic posts remain unknown by their physical community members. Hence, the latter cannot necessarily perceive them as being true involuntary celibates, meaning incels in this way prevent their identity being *fully* branded as ‘incel’. For this reason, incels can both self-assert and self-deny their inceldom through their virtual-incel and physical communities respectively: online they can exercise any desired hatred towards women, while their posts do not have any ramifications in their offline lives.

In this way, incels are constantly *in-between* identities because they experience both a *desire* and *refusal* to self-identify as incel. In their physical communities this *refusal* is most visible in their unwillingness to publicly admit they do not regularly engage in sexual activities. This is done out of a fear of appearing less masculine, since this could further lower their self-perceived social, professional, or sexual status. Their *desire* to self-identify as incel in their physical communities can be seen in their longing for recognition in their sexual and social frustration, and in their secret joining of the online incel forum. Similarly, in their virtual incel communities, their *desire* to self-identify as incel is seen through their engagement with misogynistic, racist, and homophobic posts. Their *refusal* to self-identify as incel, however, is seen in their online anonymity: in their refusal to upload any personal information onto their online profiles, as this would wholly solidify their incel nature. This is because, being non-anonymous, any received incel-related recognition would be directed towards their public image (rather than merely their anonymous, online agency), in this way forcing the incel to *wholly* self-objectify as incel. Such a complete self-identification with the incel-identity would appear undesirable due to its potential, personal risks. After all, frequently engaging with racist, homophobic, and misogynistic content would (hopefully!) appear unappealing to any employer – meaning loss of one’s job would soon follow. Hence, this continuous desire and refusal forces the incel to be in-between two identities: that of the online frustrated incel, and offline ordinary fellow.

Since involuntary celibates feel they are unable to progress on the social ladders of their physical communities, they can substitute their desire for higher social status in *physical* communities with that of *virtual* incel forums. Regular forum posters gain stars, and subsequently increase ranks. Users with a high rank-colour are therefore perceived as having higher trustworthiness and social status compared to e.g., “graycels” – a pejorative reference to users with a post-count below 500, who have a grey rank-colour. Mechanisms such as these create an understanding of acquirable status within virtual incel forums.

Conclusion

Incels find themselves in-between identities while trying to navigate their frustration and anger towards women. Though they cannot express their inceldom offline, they find solace and recognition when expressing it online.

Understanding the mechanisms that underlie the incel’s adoption of identities is key to solving how such damaging mechanisms can be prevented. With increasing terrorist activity linked to incel forums, it therefore evidently remains a very important area of research.

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1. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1060826518758974 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)