Coded Words and Ironic Incel Register on Forum-Based Social Media Sites

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Abstract

The involuntary celibate community, also known as "incels," are an online group of men who are not able to have relationships (mainly sexual) with others. They mainly coalesce on online forums such as Reddit and 4chan to discuss their problems regarding a lack of sexual relationships. Oftentimes, posters use hate speech in an ironic fashion in order to create a unique register to discern "truecels" from "fakecel" or "normies." Most of the ideology has to do with sex, and the hatred they feel for those who can have sex or those who don't understand them. They use many different coded terms to speak to each other online, such as "Chad" and "Stacy." The incel register includes terms that are misogynistic and oftentimes violent, and the content created can have dangerous off-line effects. In addition, many members of the community often use irony and sarcasm in order to establish in-group bonding and exclusion of others, increasing social isolation. Linguistic style is also important, as those who do not post in the proper way are deemed not part of the group. The correct use of the in-group register in conjunction with irony and sarcasm may create group cohesion and identity, with a loss of self identity in the process.

Coded Words and Ironic Incel Jargon on Forum-Based Social Media Sites

The secret language of involuntarily celibate men is one we all ought to be aware of. As increasingly niche communities crop up on increasingly niche websites, it becomes important to be able to understand how certain groups communicate, especially those that are potentially dangerous. There may be a manner in which a set lexicon, irony, internet communication, and the involuntarily celibate community all intersect. In addition, many niche internet communities enjoy the veneer of freedom that "ironic" online communication may provide for some individual users, particularly those who participate in "incel" forums. Incels (a portmanteau of "involuntarily" and "celibate") employ a certain register when chatting online. Group identity and a sense of community are extremely important to all people, especially to those who feel left out of society or unable to form real connections with others. A community allows for a push and pull of singular and group identity as each member weighs their values against the values of the group. It can be easy to be influenced by a group one feels strongly about, wants to be a part of, or is deeply embroiled in.

The incel register relies on encoded messages, especially relating to the 1948 Shannon-Weaver model of communication that involves a sender, encoder, channel, decoder, receiver, and feedback. The messages are encoded and decoded to mean certain things, however, other messages are shrouded in irony in an attempt to protect some sort of emotional vulnerability while discussing the topics (among others) of virginity and male rage. In addition, I intend to explore the pull of group identity as it relates to the usage of certain coded, ironic, or singular words that pertain directly to the incel community. Despite much separate research on the actual messages used on incel forums, group identity, and ironic language over electronic

communication, there is not an established link between all three. The focus of this paper is to

draw a connection between the coded incel register and the amount of group identity that those

involved feel, which can sometimes be translated to violent acts against women. First, I will

address the definition of incels and the insidious nature of the community, and explain their

frighteningly misogynistic and oftentimes violent ideology. Next, I will cover the register and

certain popular words that are used time and time again within the community, and then group

identity while using words or phrases that relate to a certain register. Lastly, I will propose a

hypothesis that explores the role of an in-group register in the creation of feelings of group

identity.

Rationale

Involuntary Celibate Community

Involuntary celibates, more colloquially known as incels, have been gaining notoriety in

recent years. The term was originally coined in 1993, defined as "anybody of any gender who

was lonely, had never had sex or who hadn't had a relationship in a long time" (Taylor, 2018, as

cited in Tranchese & Suguira, 2021). Now, it has evolved as a term only for men who are not

able to have sex with women for many factors. These factors make up a large part of the incel

ideology, employing a "woe-is-me" approach to their involuntary celibacy. The deeper one looks

into communication between group members, the more far-flung the reasons for celibacy

become, including race, wealth, social adeptness, face shape, etc.

Nearly all incel ideology has to do with sex, or lack thereof. They mainly are concerned

with "the sexual market," and how to attain sex or complain about how they don't have any

(O'Malley, R. L., Holt, K., & Holt, T. J., 2020). The perceived female dominance of this sexual

market is a large source of anger for these men, accentuating the belief that the only human goal

is to obtain a sexual partner and reproduce (O'Malley, R. L., Holt, K., & Holt, T. J., 2020). This

can be seen in the numerous allusions to Eliot Rodger, a man who murdered seven people in the

name of inceldom in 2014. He wrote a manifesto outlining his connection to the incel community

and his reasons for the slaying of six people and injury of 14, as well as his own suicide (Lindsay

2022). This event garnered much media attention and was perhaps the first introduction of incels

into the public sphere. Online incels often state that they are "going ER," for Eliot Rodger, when

they are speaking of their frustration and anger about their lack of sexual connections (O'Malley,

R. L., Holt, K., & Holt, T. J., 2020). Perpetrators of multiple acts of violence in the United States

and Canade have cited incel ideology, misogyny, virginity, and/or hatred as motivations for their

attacks (Tranchese & Suguira, 2021).

They are also heavily concerned with their own ugliness and self-hatred—they are

obsessed with superficiality, looks, and status (O'Malley, R. L., Holt, K., & Holt, T. J., 2020). In

addition, they believe that women are naturally evil—lying, cheating, and manipulating men in

order to have men do whatever they want. Contradictorily, they simultaneously assume that

women are stupid and less evolved than men, as they only care about sex, money, and status

(O'Malley, R. L., Holt, K., & Holt, T. J., 2020). They also believe in "male oppression," as

feminism and modern society has alienated men today, and they are deeply trapped within and

simultaneously excluded by the norms of society (O'Malley, R. L., Holt, K., & Holt, T. J., 2020).

Historically, the "men's rights movement" began in the 1970s as a way to bring about

progressive gender equality. They acknowledged that the patriarchy harmed men as well as

women through oppressive gender roles and other issues, such as draft requirements, 'emotional

stoicism,' and social pressures (Lindsay, 2022). Members intended to work with the feminist movement to destroy issues of patriarchy that relate to all people. Despite this positive start, the movement began to break down and turn on the feminist movement instead of working with it, with some sects eventually degrading into an anti-feminist group (Lindsay, 2022).

The movement has turned to an online presence with the arrival of forum-based social media, as it is a place for users to speak their mind anonymously, and engage with users from all over the world. The geographic disconnect has no effect on the connection by interest, as users can join and post on boards that are strictly reserved for certain topics. In addition, online lives are mostly private, as users can search and post without fear of social repercussion. It has been found that "young males between the ages of 18-29 are more likely to use forum-based social media, such as Reddit, where incel discussions are most often reported (Duggan & Smith, 2013, as cited in O'Malley, R. L., Holt, K., & Holt, T. J., 2020). Incels had found a home on Reddit due to its forum-based structure, but have also moved to 4chan due to the less restrictive moderating and free speech covenants.

As is somewhat typical with online movements, the incel community has grown increasingly fringe, espousing ethno-nationalist and misogynistic views. As one can hide behind a screen, there are many things said online that would not be said to those someone would connect with in real life (Freilich, Chermak, et al., 2015; Hamm & Spaaij, 2017; Holt et al., 2019; Weimann, 2011, as cited in O'Malley, R. L., Holt, K., & Holt, T. J., 2020). In addition, the community is able to grow so large due to the online aspect of it, as community members are not limited by geography (Hamm & Spaaij, 2017; Weimann, 2011, as cited in O'Malley, R. L., Holt, K., & Holt, T. J., 2020).

To build upon the foundational definition of many aspects of the involuntary celibate community, the next section will explain the register used by members of the community on popular websites such as Reddit and 4chan.

Incel Register on Forum-Based Social Media Sites

There are four main groups of people who are cited often in incel communication, and each have a different purpose in reinforcing belief systems. While there are many terms for many different aspects (many of which sexually explicit), they are not as relevant to the purpose of this paper.

Importantly, "Chads" are high-status, good-looking, sexually active, "alpha" men who have sex with all the women, leaving none for the incels. Chad is attractive, has a high social status, is wealthy, and large in stature (Maxwell, Robinson, Williams, & Keaton, 2020). Chads are often put down by incels because they feel that the Chads can get away with anything due to their appearance, as well as that they cannot sustain a relationship (Maxwell, Robinson, Williams, & Keaton, 2020).

The Stacy trope is used to represent most women. In conjunction with this, some incels describe themselves as "manlets"—small, unattractive men with few prospects. "Stacies" are the women who have sex with the Chads—they are attractive and superficial, caring only about wealth and sexual relations (Incel Wiki, 2019, as cited in Tranchese & Suguira, 2021). Stacy is conceited and only wants to talk about herself, and is hyper sexual, as well. Incels often rate these women on a scale of one to ten based on superficial attractiveness (Maxwell, Robinson, Williams, & Keaton, 2020). Another word for women is "femoids." In addition, they frequently use the more degrading term "female" in order to push the narrative of women being less than

men, and use "women" to categorize them into a uniform group, instead of seeing the differences

between them (Tranchese & Suguira, 2021).

Lastly, "normies" are those who do not belong to the group of Chad, Stacy, or incel

(Tranchese & Suguira, 2021). Incels believe that normies will never understand what it is like to

be an incel due to their status of extreme social outcast, because of their appearance, experience

with bullying, and social ineptitude (Maxwell, Robinson, Williams, & Keaton, 2020). As a result,

many incels are socially isolated offline and do not or cannot relate to others who do not belong

to the community. They explain that this isolation stems from an inability to form human

connection (Maxwell, Robinson, Williams, & Keaton, 2020). This drives them to form some

kind of connection on sites such as Reddit and 4chan, where they can at least speak to people

who relate to them in some manner.

The next section will explicate the issues with studying irony and sarcasm on forum-

based websites in order to explain the established terms in the incel register.

Irony and Sarcasm Within the Incel Register

These words connect to misogynistic and violent language, oftentimes under the guise of

irony and sarcasm. Reddit and 4chan (and other online, community-based, forum-posting sites)

are extremely challenging to study, as the community and register usage is constantly evolving

and ironic content is difficult to differentiate from serious (Colley & Moore, 2022). The inability

to discern intent behind extremist hate speech is a huge challenge for those researching certain

online subcultures. This is applicable to incel forums as actual violent acts have been carried out

in the name of inceldom, akin to other alt-right or extremist groups who form collectives on

online forums. It is very difficult to know if a poster is being ironic or sincere, especially without being able to see their broader offline and online activities (Colley & Moore, 2022).

However, sarcasm and irony have been established by communication researchers as inherently aggressive (Ducharme, 1994; Pogrebin & Poole, 1988, as cited in Mueller, 2016). It can reinforce in-group community and solidarity, and establish the notion of the other, or those who don't "get it" (Coser, 1959; Seckman & Couch, 1989, as cited in Mueller, 2016). Sarcasm can rely on Kleiner's (1998) idea of the pseudo-argument—one in which a group must supply an antagonist/straw man figure to consistently rail against (Mueller, 2016). A homogenous group will often post sarcastic comments in the form of the voice of another party who holds a differing opinion than the speaker who is a part of the online community (Mueller, 2016). Mueller's research on r/MensRights on Reddit shows that there are few, if any, opposing voices in the group who post on the forum. Therefore, sarcastic comments made by those who are actually involved in the forum and the cause that the forum represents must create an antagonist or antagonist's voice in the form of sarcasm (Mueller, 2016). The deadpan sarcasm is created by aping the other "side's" voice, relying on the fact that this in the group will understand their sarcasm, even though it may not be obvious to those who are not enmeshed in the forum or its ideologies.

To further research on the register used by incels, I will now explore the group identity and immersion in a certain ideology that is created when words and phrases are used in the correct manner at the correct time.

Register and Group Identity

Using certain words and phrases in the right context reinforces group identity. Incels have their own language, a certain lexicon that they use to describe certain shared experiences and/or ideologies. If not used or used incorrectly, it is clear that the speaker does not belong to the group. Belonging in the incel community should reinforce belief in the ideology that the community espouses, which, unfortunately, creates a feedback loop that can be extremely difficult to escape.

The online format of incel communications is akin to many other groups that have a largely online presence, and the community is able to emerge through certain online actions, such as "liking," "upvoting," or "commenting," as these members would never have interacted without these types of actions (Lee, Tak, Kwak, & Lim, 2020). Over time, persons involved in online communities will increasingly use the word "we" over the word "I" to reference themselves, proving greater group cohesion (Lee, Tak, Kwak, & Lim, 2020). In addition, these researchers found that increased "we-ness" in messages was associated with lower levels of analytical thinking, authenticity, and emotions (Lee, Tak, Kwak, & Lim, 2020). This is a somewhat disturbing finding, as it leads to an echo chamber in online communities with positive reinforcement for in-group beliefs. It also leads to a positive feedback loop in which one in a community is increasingly pulled into the community as they are positively reinforced for espousing beliefs that are in line. The use of the word "we" enhances group cohesion over personal identity (Lee, Tak, Kwak, & Lim, 2020).

The induction into a group can be impressive upon personal identity formation, especially the lack thereof and transition into group identity formation (Bäck, Bäck, Gustafsson Sendén, &

Sikström, 2018). When tracing individual users posts on an online xenophobic forum, researchers found that there was a decrease in "I" and an increase in the words "we" and "they." This simultaneous in-group community formation and out-group other formation is a recipe for induction into community ideology. The increased usage of plural and decreased frequency of singular nouns nods to more generalized ways of thinking and speaking (Bäck, Bäck, Gustafsson Sendén, & Sikström, 2018). In addition, the linguistic style became more similar to that of users who were already participating to the forum, and it functions to signify who is in and who is out of a group (Bäck, Bäck, Gustafsson Sendén, & Sikström, 2018).

It can be seen that the use of linguistic style in a group, adoption of generalized thinking and basic ideology, use of "we" pronouns and group thinking, and formation of out-groups leads to a cohesive group identity.

H: Use of in-group register positively predicts a higher level of group identity.

Method

A content analysis is the most logical method to test this hypothesis. While there is a sort of cause-and-effect relationship between the variables, there would be no good way to test this hypothesis using an experimental design, as "chronically online" users of Reddit and 4chan do not respond in a manner conducive to known observation, as seen in the research done by Colley & Moore in 2020. Users may try to "game" the observation and intentionally muddle the results as a form of retaliation for being watched, as they feel that their community was intruded by academic normies who do not understand them. A content analysis has been used in previous research on incel communities and has fared well in collecting quantitative data on certain words that are used. In addition, content analysis for certain themes or words can group posters in a

forum by the words that they use. If they correctly use the register, I can also track the pronouns they use, and record the number of "we-words" or words that imply group identity. Using this data, I can compare the correct use of words that are integral to the incel community to the amount of group identity they seem to have.

The population would be all incels participating in forums on forum-based social media sites. This is difficult, or impossible, to encapsulate in one content analysis due to hidden boards with more secret names than, for example, r/incels or r/braincels. In addition, incels are spread over a multitude of forum-based social media sites and on other sites, not just Reddit and 4chan. They consistently allude study by academics and banning by moderators by creating increasingly more obscure boards to post on. Because of this, the sample would be certain 4chan boards or subreddits that are tracked with as little moderation as possible. This is the best way to get the largest number of incels on one forum, as they are the most well-known.

Previous research by Maxwell et. al has triangulated themes such as "what 'Stacy' wants," "'Chad'": The socially constructed masculine identity," "Not all men, but all women," and "'Normies' do not understand." Other studies have condensed their findings into "the sexual market, women as natually evil, ways to legitimize masculinity, and male oppression" (O'Malley, R. L., Holt, K., & Holt, T. J., 2020). I would use scales of violence, misogyny, racism, self-hatred, and celibacy to properly explore the intricacies of the incel register as it relates to those topics.

Hypothesis

I.   Use of in-group register positively predicts a higher level of group identity.

II. Independent variable: in-group register

    Dependent variable: level of group identity

III. Use of in-group register is an ordinal variable, as is level of group identity.

Measurement

I.   The IV is use of in-group register. This will be evaluated by examining the use and

    frequency of certain words in posts made on a forum. I will observe this variable by counting

    the number of times the words appear. Computational text analysis as well as human coders

    can measure this, as seen in Bäck, E. A., Bäck, H., Gustafsson Sendén, M., & Sikström, S.

    (2018). In addition, the media analyzed creates anonymity of users by nature of the program.

    It has concurrent criterion validity.

II. The DV is level of group identity. This will be evaluated using computational text analysis as

    well as Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker et al., 2007; Chung &

    Pennebaker, 2007; Pennebaker, 2011b; Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth, 2001). This tool

    computes the percentage of language categories of the total words in the program. Bäck, E.

    A., Bäck, H., Gustafsson Sendén, M., & Sikström, S. used this method to analyze group

    identity and formation in 2018. This, also, has concurrent criterion validity.

Methodology

I.   I will use a content analysis because it is the most useful tool to analyze the posts made on

    forum-based social media sites. This is the best methodology because experiments where

    participants must be informed of the experiment have been shown in previous research to not

work, as users will intentionally game the system to confuse results. In addition, a content

analysis has been used in previous research on incels in online communities and has

produced good results.

II. I would have researchers code for certain keywords that are included in the incel register on

posts on forums, such as "Chad" and "Stacy," but also other, more explicit content that is a

hallmark of incels. I believe that they bond over using this vulgar language that is included in

their vernacular, such as "hole," "fuck," "sex," etc. Using a study by O'Malley, R. L., Holt,

K., & Holt, T. J. (2020) as a guide, I would have coders analyze these keywords and group

them into higher-level scales of violence, misogyny, racism, self-hatred, and celibacy. In

addition, I would build off of the computational text analysis and linguistic inquiry word

count, as shown in Bäck, E. A., Bäck, H., Gustafsson Sendén, M., & Sikström, S. (2018) to

analyze the use of we-words present in the thread. I would then combine the two separate

analyses to see how the use of the register coincides with the use of we pronouns in the

posts.

<u>Sampling</u>

III. The population is all incels participating in forums on forum-based social media sites. These

are men who cannot form a sexual relationship with other people, and who subscribe to an

ideology revolving around that issue. It is impossible to tell how many incels there are, but a

Reddit forum on incels had about 40,000 users before it got shut down. The Anti-Defamation

League reported on a poll that was released by the <u>incel.co</u> moderators, and stated that as

many as 100,000 people could self-identify as incels. However, this is not a peer-reviewed

source. The sample size calculator states that the sample size should be 1,056, however, a

content analysis using keywords is different from this. I will be taking posts straight from the forum and analyzing top threads to sample the population.

<u>Hypothesis Testing</u>

I.   I believe the Spearman Rank Correlation is the best test, because it tests association between two ordinal variables.

II. I would know that the hypothesis is significant because the test produces a significance number.

<u>Ethical Implications</u>

I.   There are many ethical implications to this study. Many researchers who research topics involving radicalization fear for their own radicalization, or the fear of being doxxed by subjects who do not want to be studied. In addition, many in the incel community have an aversion to academia and outside perspectives, as well as the thought of being studied. By analyzing forums, although they are public, I would be seeing peoples' thoughts and posts without their direct consent.

II. There is so emotional risk that subjects may be exposed to. They would not be giving their direct consent, and could be upset if they knew they were being studied.

III. The benefits of this study are numerous. Incel violence is contagious, and there are oftentimes copycat acts of violence. By understanding how the use of their communication contributes to the identification they feel with the ideology, we can more accurately track users who are a liability, or who may become violent in the future.

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Appendix

<u>Change Summary</u>

For the introduction, I chose not to incorporate the peer reviewer's changes as the

"encoded messages" portion cannot come after the introduction to the subject. It seems that the

reviewer is familiar with the incel community, but many readers may not be and would need a

definition to begin the paper and create a basis for understanding the rest of it. In the argument

development, I added examples, answering reviewer's question of "why is the author saying

this?" The growth of the online community was addressed in terms of forum-based social media,

and I connected men's rights movement with online incel community. I also accepted the

deletion suggestion of "'irrelevant" topic sentence, although I would argue that it could have

been kept. In the abstract, I deleted or changed leading words or words with emotional

attachment as to diminish the effect of opinionated writing. I also added sentences to create a

more academic style. For the instructor review changes, I stated population and sample in

methods section. I also inserted scales and cited previous research.

<u>Argument Critique</u>

I do believe that my hypothesis matches my argument quite well. I feel that the rationale

was laid out in such a way that each section built properly upon the last, ultimately leading up to

a hypothesis that appropriately synthesized that information. I feel as though this addresses a gap

in previous research—studies have been done on incels using content analysis before, but not in

the use of their unique register and the formation of group identity that that may create. To make

my argument stronger, I could address the off-line violence more, in order to stress the

importance of this paper. I'm not sure how many people realize that this violence actually occurs,

but I can personally remember a shooting in the name of incels that happened not too long ago. As the community grows online and mass shootings become more prevalent, it is important to learn more about hate groups and gain insight into how people could become radicalized on the Internet. This radicalization has grown more in the public consciousness with alt-right groups and a growing awareness of forum-based social media site such as Reddit and 4chan, but it is still mostly a younger generation of people who are aware of the horrors they create. Accessibility of this information for an older audience is important, as well.

Reflection

I've definitely learned a lot by engaging in the research proposal process. Of course, I realized they were a lot of work, but I didn't know how much work just went into the proposal! I've spent many, many hours researching and synthesizing, as well as learning about different methods for experimentation and research. I devoted ten weeks to this topic, and I didn't even do the research or any experiments! I definitely think this process has made me more critical of what I see, as well. It was enlightening to see how statistics and data can be manipulated in the media, and it made me think how important it is for all people to be literate in statistics to avoid being duped.