

UNIVERSITÉ DU QUÉBEC À MONTRÉAL

« I'M BETTER THAN THIS »: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE TURNING POINTS
LEADING TO THE DESIRE TO LEAVE INCELDOM

RAPPORT DE RECHERCHE
THÈSE DE SPÉCIALISATION
PRÉSENTÉE COMME EXIGENCE PARTIELLE
DU BACCALAURÉAT EN SEXOLOGIE

PAR
LÉA-MAY BURNS

SOUS LA SUPERVISION DE
DRE MARIE-AUDE-BOISLARD, Ph.D.

18 MAI 2023

Table of contents

Remerciements	1
Abstract	2
Introduction	3
Incels radicalization	4
Deradicalization and disengagement	5
Incels deradicalization	6
Theoretical framework	7
Life course theory	7
Turning point	7
Objective	8
Methods	9
Procedure	9
Sampling	9
Analytical strategy	10
Ethical considerations	10
Results	11
1. Attempting to meet women	11
1.1 Building Confidence	11
1.2 Dating experiences	12
1.3 Obstacles in dating	12
2. Deciding to change mindsets	13
2.1 Realizing the negative consequences of the Incel mindset	13
2.2 Focusing less energy on dating	14
3. Attempting to change mindsets	14
3.1 Actions to help leave the Incel mindset	14
3.2 Struggles in leaving the Incel mindset	16
Discussion	17
Implications for intervention	20
Study Limitations and Strengths	21
Future research	22
Conclusion	22
References	24
Annexes	31

Table 1. Occurrence of Themes and Subthemes of Turning Points Leading to the Desire to Leave Inceldom	31
---	----

Remerciements

J'aimerais d'abord remercier ma directrice de recherche, Marie-Aude Boislard, et la coordonnatrice du Projet de recherche Incels, Sabrina Laplante, de m'avoir accompagnée à travers mes apprentissages et d'avoir enrichi mes réflexions lors de la rédaction de ma thèse de spécialisation.

Je tiens aussi à remercier ma collègue et amie Sabrina Leite-Mendonca pour son encouragement, son soutien et ses idées qui m'ont inspirée et aidée à persévérer tout au long de la rédaction de cette thèse.

Un dernier merci à mes proches qui m'ont aidée de près et de loin avec leurs conseils et leur appui sur ce projet. Toute cette aide m'a été très précieuse et a alimenté mes idées lors de l'écriture de cette thèse de spécialisation.

Abstract

The misogynistic and fatalistic ideology that is promoted on Incel forums has been proven to lead to negative psychological and social consequences. However, the echo chamber dynamics on these forums make leaving them difficult. The present study explored this exit process to identify what turning points lead to the desire to leave incelism and, consequently, deradicalize from its detrimental ideology. To do so, 28 threads were extracted from the *r/IncelExit* subreddit directed at Incels who are looking for support and advice throughout this process. An inductive reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2021) was completed and three steps leading to leaving incelism were identified: attempting to meet women, deciding to change mindsets, and attempting to change mindsets. From these results, it appears that, at first, entering a relationship was seen as the way to not be an Incel anymore. However, after a few trials in dating came the turning point of realizing that their mindset is what must change to leave incelism because of its negative consequences on their well-being, and because their desire to date should not be central to their lives. Finally, they asked for advice from others on the subreddit about how to change their mindset. Different actions were suggested, notably responding to their fundamental needs, while different struggles along the way were also shared. The results highlight the need for interventions that are non-stigmatizing and adapted to this clientele's needs to accompany them through their deradicalization process.

Keywords: Incels, deradicalization, turning points, leaving, incelism

Introduction

Incels (i.e., Involuntary Celibates) are men who are unable to enter romantic or sexual relationships with women; their status is described as incelism (Brzuszkiewicz, 2020). They believe that a hierarchy exists between sexes and attractiveness levels that advantages women and good-looking people and disadvantages less good-looking men in forming romantic and sexual relationships (Baele et al., 2021). Incels fall into a wider category of online men aggregating in “the manosphere”, who share the belief that genetic determinism explains differences in men’s and women’s sexual behavior (Ging, 2019). The online setting of these groups has contributed to the rapid spread and homogenization of their beliefs across social media (Ging, 2019). One of the core beliefs of the Incel community is that women’s rejection and high expectations towards men are responsible for their incelism and its consequences (i.e., loneliness and isolation; Maxwell et al., 2020). They believe that women are sexual gatekeepers that decide whom they want to have sex with (usually Chads¹), resulting in less attractive men’s impeded access to sex (unless it is paid for) and becoming involuntary celibates (O’Malley et al., 2022). Consequently, Incels perceive themselves as an oppressed group because of their biological subordination to hypermasculine men (Heritage & Koller, 2020). In doing so, they perpetuate patriarchal beliefs by attributing negative traits to all women while perceiving themselves as victims (Furl, 2022). This fatalistic ideology prevents Incels from considering changing their behaviors or beliefs because they believe that their difficulties are an external entity’s fault (i.e., women or society), or that they cannot improve themselves (i.e., their looks or their neurodivergence) contributing to a lack of accountability and a feeling of helplessness (Boislard et al., 2023; Helm et al., 2022).

In addition, the echo-chamber dynamics² of the forums are not conducive to considering leaving incelism because the community discourages interacting with people outside of it (Regehr, 2020). Some individuals still manage to leave incelism, expressing that the mindset is “toxic” and has a negative influence on their self-confidence and social engagement (Maxwell et al., 2020). However, these individuals are met with anger, since they are seen as never having been “real” Incels (Maxwell et al., 2020). This way of thinking can also lead to negative individual and social consequences. For example, while participation in online group discussions with other Incels might

¹ Chads are seen as men who are highly desirable to women and, consequently, have unlimited sexual access to them (Menzie, 2022).

² The narrow culture and language shared by the Incel community that constrains its members into a specific perception of the world (Baele et al., 2021).

provide a sense of belonging and understanding, it also seems to increase symptoms of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and suicidality because of the potential confirmation and validation of their beliefs (Costello et al., 2022; Speckhard et al., 2021; Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2022). Additionally, this participation seems to increase misogynistic beliefs which can lead to anger and violent attitudes and behaviors (Speckhard et al., 2021). Considering that there have been multiple murders committed with links to the Incel ideology, the homicidal intent that this ideology upholds is undeniable (Anti-Defamation League, 2022; Hoffman et al., 2020). In fact, Incels have been classified as a male supremacist hate group (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2019) and an ideologically motivated violent extremism and emerging domestic terrorism threat (Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 2020). Given the adverse consequences associated with adherence to the Incel ideology, investigating the turning points (i.e., the change in direction in an individual's life course; Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997) that lead Incels to leave incelism would allow for a better understanding of the protective factors within ex-Incel's various trajectories.

Incels radicalization

Radicalization is the process in which an individual develops extremist beliefs, emotions, and behaviors (Trip et al., 2019). According to Kruglanski et al. (2014), radicalization can be understood as an interactive process between three elements: (1) the goal, which is a quest for personal significance, (2) the means, which is the violence that the ideology promotes as the path to significance, and (3) the social process of networking and group dynamics that allows the adoption of the goal and the means. In this instance, personality, culture, or situational factors can impact any or all of these elements thereby contributing to radicalization and deradicalization (Kruglanski et al., 2014). Maxwell et al. (2020) describe Incels' radicalization process as a cycle. This cycle begins with Incels attempting to attract a sexual partner, leading to romantic rejection that they interpret as a confirmation that they do not correspond to the masculine ideal desired by women. Subsequently, this rejection can either lead to a negative view of oneself because of this lack of correspondence or anger towards women because of their unwillingness to fulfill their desire to be in a relationship. In the end, they experience loneliness and social isolation leading to a need for attention that they seek to fill with the online Incel community. In the same vein, O'Malley and Helm (2022) found that perceptions of injustice and a need for esteem appear to be common concepts that lead to Incel membership. Perceptions of injustice were described as often spurring from past personal experiences of victimization by women and from perceived

marginalization from manhood because of their appearance, their level of agency, the feeling of being off time, and their social competency. Furthermore, their need for esteem (i.e., agency, self-worth, validation and comfort) may lead them to join the Incel community to reduce their feelings of distress by identifying with the Incel ideology and receiving social support (O'Malley & Helm, 2022). Moreover, according to Broyd et al. (2022), the extent of indoctrination into inceldom is determined by multiple factors. First, there is a triad of risk of developing the Incel ideology comprised of blaming women for their frustrations, a fixation on their lack of sexual experiences, and cognitive distortions (e.g., overgeneralizations, lack of empathy). In addition to this triad, symptoms of depression and hopelessness as well as certain difficulties associated with autism in a certain context (e.g., difficulties navigating social interactions, literal thinking) seem to contribute to the level of indoctrination into inceldom.

Deradicalization and disengagement

It is important to distinguish deradicalization from disengagement to better understand individuals' processes of leaving extremist groups. Deradicalization refers to an individual's rejection of an extremist ideology and entails a change in beliefs, whereas disengagement refers to the act of leaving an extremist group implicating a change in behavior without the renouncement of beliefs (Windisch et al., 2017). These processes can happen separately or simultaneously. In terms of disengagement, a common factor that can entice members of ideology-based groups to leave their group is disillusionment : a lack of satisfaction with one's current life situation, frustration with the group, their place in the group, or the direction of the group are common causes of disengagement (Bubolz & Simi, 2015; Simi et al., 2019; Windisch et al., 2017). Another common factor that can incite disengagement is social relationships; whereas isolation and disconnection may lead to joining an extremist group, developing a social circle can influence former extremists' decision to leave their group (Barrelle, 2015; Bérubé et al., 2019; Simi et al., 2019; Windisch et al., 2017). Violence is also a common influence in extremists' decision to leave their group. In fact, violence among group members can lead to reduced legitimacy of the group and frustration of members, while violence towards bystanders could surpass participants' "thresholds" of their tolerance for violence and lead to their disengagement (Simi et al., 2019; Windisch et al., 2017). Also, former members of right-wing extremist groups commonly felt exhausted from the hate, anger, and negativity which led to their withdrawal from their group (Bérubé et al., 2019). Concerning deradicalization, Aarten et al. (2018) highlight the entitlement to

retaliation for past experiences, perceptions, and narratives of victimization that underlie many radicals' narrative identity. They found that, in the process of deradicalization, the (former) radical must understand the negative experiences in their past that influenced their violence while recognizing that the violence they utilized was unwarranted. They also noted that during this process, it is helpful for radicals who want to leave their group to exchange with former radicals that serve as an example of a counternarrative and that provide credibility that allows radicals to open up to them. Similarly, Bubolz and Simi's (2015) results reveal that some members of white supremacist groups left the movement with one or more other individuals because of their common expression of doubts which facilitated their exit.

Incels deradicalization

Although there are common factors that lead to deradicalization for individuals of all extremist groups, there are also some that are specific to each group. For Incels, Regehr (2020) identified that they found it difficult and needed 'a lot of reprogramming' to leave Incel communities because of their dynamics and culture. Hintz and Baker (2021) identified two elements that incited Incels to begin questioning their identity: a new life experience and realizations. New life experiences included going to college, moving away, growing up, or having sexual encounters. Realizations could be unrelated to specific events (e.g., deciding to start working on oneself), about the effects of incelism (e.g., being confronted by the violence that the mindset can lead to), about their sexual orientation or gender identity (e.g., figuring out that they were asexual, transgender, gay, ...), or resulting from substance use (e.g., using alcohol to be more comfortable when talking to women). In addition, two strategies were identified concerning leaving incelism: sedimenting their Incel identity or subverting binary Incel logics (Hintz & Baker, 2021). Sedimentation was either done by keeping their same beliefs while distancing themselves from the discourse of incelism or by confirming the Incel/sexually active binary by describing sexual activity as the reason for their change in identity. Subversion happened when an Incel articulated that leaving incelism requires more than simply becoming sexually active, when Femcels repositioned their identities as women Incels or by affirming both their previous Incel identity and their current identity as important to their self-concept. In another study, the Organization for the Prevention of Violence (Hastings et al., 2020) suggests that practitioners encourage their Incel clients who are heavily involved in their community to gradually disengage by first exploring Incel forums that encourage self-improvement and peer support. In this case, complete disengagement

from the Incel community and joining pro-social groups is the long-term goal. They also suggest supporting Incel clients in forming intimate relationships to negate their desire for dominance. However, DeCook and Kelly (2022) are critical of this suggestion because they believe it validates Incel's sense of victimhood and does not consider the possible harm they could do to the women they become partners with. They also highlight that it does not address the misogynistic ideology of Incels but perpetrates the popular belief that women should "fix" men. Further, Incels seem to have similar beliefs to domestic abuse perpetrators like the feeling of entitlement, of being wronged when they do not get what they want and of being justified in their use of violence, which need to be addressed during their deradicalization process (Kelly et al., 2021).

Theoretical framework

Life course theory

Life course theory posits that trajectories are defined as sequences of roles and experiences made up of transitions (i.e., changes in state or role; Elder et al., 2003). As stated by Mortimer and Shanahan (2003), this theory considers that human development is a lifelong process, meaning that adults can also experience fundamental changes in their development. It also stipulates that people are agentic because the decisions and actions that they take, within the constraints of their circumstances, contribute to the construction of their life course. Time is another important element of life course theory, at the sociohistorical and individual level. An individual's life course is influenced by the historical times and places they experience. Also, the antecedents and consequences of transitions vary according to their timing in an individual's life. In fact, transitions can be considered turning points depending on their context in one's life course (Mortimer & Shanahan, 2003).

Turning point

According to Wheaton and Gotlib (1997), a turning point is defined as a change in direction in the life course, the new direction leading to an alternative destination than the previously well-established trajectory. Recognizing a turning point requires time, stability, and an established baseline. It can only be recognized after it has happened because it is more than a temporary detour, it must have lasting effects. A turning point can be identified by observing certain elements: (1) the new direction is stable across life transitions, (2) there is the presence of resistance to re-establishing a former trajectory, (3) the new direction transforms the person's identity, and (4) there

is an indication of a role commitment inherent to the new trajectory. Different perspectives exist in representing the concept of a turning point: it can be a change in an individual's life course with respect to their prior stable trajectory, it can be defined in reference to social or historical normative life transitions (e.g., graduating, becoming a parent), or it can be a compensation for a loss in trajectory which brings someone back onto their original trajectory. Turning points can, therefore, lead to lives going "off track" or getting back "on track".

Other important elements to consider in determining whether a transition is a turning point are sequence, timing, and context (Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997). Sequence refers to the normative order of transitions which is characterized by their social meaning and the age at which they occur. Timing refers to the expected age for a transition to occur, determining whether it happens at a normative time or "off time". Contextual factors include role context (i.e., the contrast between new and former situations or roles), life history context (i.e., the story leading to the transition or whether its initial occurrence was expected), social context (i.e., the social circumstances in which the transition occurs like the availability of psychosocial resources), and historical context (i.e., how historical events can influence how a life transition is experienced). The greater instrumental function a transition has, in changing one's identity, resolving conflict, or providing an escape from former stress, the higher the probability that it will be considered a turning point (Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997).

Objective

To our knowledge, this study is the first to explore the turning points that lead Incels to leave incelism through their online discussions. More precisely, we aim to identify common factors that bring about this change in mindset. Research is at the beginning stages of understanding the trajectory of Incels deradicalization process and we believe that our study can bring valuable insight into this process by investigating key life changes that motivate Incels to part with the incelism's misogynistic ideology. This research falls within efforts to better understand Incel's needs and experiences to help prevent negative individual and social consequences of incelism while promoting strategies to exit this detrimental mindset.

Methods

Procedure

This study utilized a constructivist paradigm (Santiago Delefosse & Del Rio Carral, 2017) because its objective is to better understand the experiences and trajectories of Incels who have left or want to leave incel-dom through reflexive interpretation of their discussions online. To begin, between September 2020 and January 2021, a non-participant observation was conducted by lurking³ on the two most active Incel forums at the time (*Incels.is* and *r/IncelsWithoutHate*). This step, in accordance with virtual ethnographic research, aimed at gaining knowledge about the dynamics on these forums, a key part of the “data-thickening” process (Latzko-Toth et al., 2016).

Sampling

Considering that the population aimed by this research is Incels that have left or want to leave the community, only the *r/IncelExit* subreddit was selected for data collection. In fact, this subreddit has the goal of “help[ing] people find a way to get back on track” (*IncelExit*, n.d.) by targeting Incels who want to leave the Incel community and are looking for support in doing so. This is the only forum with this purpose that was identified during the lurking process.

To identify threads⁴ that specifically discussed leaving incel-dom, keywords (i.e., exit, leaving, left, quit, got out of, and escape) were entered into the search field on *r/IncelExit*. All results to these searches were examined to determine if the original post was (1) about someone who had left incel-dom who was recounting his experience leaving, (2) someone asking for advice on how to exit incel-dom, or (3) someone with the intention of leaving incel-dom explaining his process. The initial sampling only considered the first inclusion criteria to pinpoint experiences that correspond to the main elements of a turning point (i.e., a change in direction in the life course and lasting effects; Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997), but taking into account the scarce number of corresponding threads, the inclusion criteria were broadened to include individuals who are at the beginning of their departure from incel-dom. Threads and comments written by people who stated never being an Incel or being a woman were excluded from the sample. A one-year timeframe since the original post was also an inclusion criterion to gather current data. Data was first collected

³ Lurking is complete unobtrusive observation of online group discussions (Garcia et al., 2009).

⁴ A thread is defined as a post and all the comments that reply to it (Aragón et al., 2017). However, the comments that were below the second level and therefore were not visible on the initial page of the thread were not considered in the data because they often did not refer to users’ firsthand experiences (Hintz & Baker, 2021).

between September and November 2022. In total, 20 threads were deemed relevant and made up our original sample. After a subsequent extraction in February 2023, our final sample consisted of 28 threads. Since the community description asserts it is “for people who got drawn into the Incel community but want support and help with a way out” (i.e., anyone can offer advice; *IncelExit*, n.d.), that the forum is publicly available on *Reddit* and that most users did not disclose demographic information about themselves in the threads, constructing a clear portrait of our sample was not possible. However, the sample presumably consists of men who formerly or currently identify as Incels considering the inclusion and exclusion criteria used in this study.

Analytical strategy

An inductive reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2021) was used to gain insight into Incel’s experiences of leaving incelhood. The lurking phase was followed by an initial coding period aimed at describing the content of the dataset⁵. The QSR NVivo version 12 software was used by the first author to code the data between November 2022 and February 2023. This author and another researcher analyzed 15% of the data together to verify inter-rater agreement. The inter-rater agreement was deemed satisfactory because the two researchers agreed on the classification of almost all excerpts. The codes were then grouped into themes and subthemes that seemed to best represent patterns in the data. This process was iterative and continued until empirical saturation was reached (i.e., no new themes were identified in the data; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Considering the lack of saturation after analysis of the 20 original threads, a second extraction of 8 additional threads was carried out in February 2023. Very few new themes were identified during the analysis of these additional threads which served to confirm empirical saturation.

Ethical considerations

No ethical certification was required to analyze the data that was collected from the *r/IncelExit* subreddit because its threads are public material, meaning that they are accessible to anyone without the need for a membership. However, considering that the users that posted the content being analyzed did not explicitly consent to it being used in our study, their identities have been kept anonymous to prevent the possibility of tracing them (Beninger, 2016). The quotes

⁵ A code represents a segment that conveys a single idea, which can group one or multiple words or sentences (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Titles and text were coded, but usernames and non-textual elements were not.

provided have been altered by rewording and combining excerpts while maintaining their original significance to attain anonymity (Barnes, 2004).

Results

During the inductive analysis of the threads extracted from the *r/IncelExit* subreddit, similarities between the exit pattern of different users were observed. These served as a guideline to develop themes that represent the different steps leading to exiting incelism. Next, the subthemes and sub-subthemes were organised according to which step they were part of (see Table 1).

---- Insert Table 1 here ----

1. Attempting to meet women

A common discussion topic that was observed on *r/IncelExit* is the desire to meet women. This desire led to attempts to meet women through building confidence and dating experiences all the while being confronted by obstacles in dating. Meeting women was seen as an avenue to leave incelism because of the change in status that this experience could provide, from being an involuntary celibate to having sexual and/or romantic experience. Therefore, *attempting to meet women* was identified as a first theme with the subthemes of *building confidence*, *dating experiences* and *obstacles in dating*.

1.1 Building Confidence

Building confidence was targeted by users as a strategy to become more attractive to women and more comfortable approaching women. Specifically, three approaches to building confidence were discussed: *being attractive to certain women*, *fitness*, and *drug use*.

1.1.1 Being attractive to certain women. Concerning this first sub-subtheme, certain individuals came to the realisation that they may not be conventionally attractive to every woman, but that certain women are attracted to them. This led to an increased confidence in their dating abilities. The following altered quote demonstrates this realisation: “I know I’m not every girl’s type, but a few find me good looking”.

1.1.2 Fitness. Regarding fitness, certain users touched on its positive effect on their mental health and physical appearance. One shared it’s benefits on his social life: “Exercise has helped to

ease my anxiety and give me a boost of confidence which has led to me better connecting with others.”

1.1.3 Drug use. As for drug use, one user viewed it as his way of getting out of incelism: “I think drug use is the key to leaving incelism and entering the dating scene because it gives me the confidence to approach women.” Even so, it is important to note that most of the people who replied to this user did not agree with his conclusion and did not encourage drug use.

1.2 Dating experiences

This subtheme includes romantic and sexual experiences they have had with women (*being in a romantic relationship* and *sexual experiences*) as well as places users suggested (or not) to meet women (*dating applications* and *engaging in new activities*).

1.2.1 Sexual experiences. Some users were more concentrated on the goal of having sex to leave incelism. They shared their desire to have sex, their sexual experiences, and the consequences of these experiences. Here is an example of one individual originally seeing sex as a way to leave incelism: “Initially, I thought that if I lost my virginity, all my issues would go away.”

1.2.2 Dating applications. Dating applications are one of the places that users mentioned, but usually did not suggest, to meet women: “For me, the issue with dating apps is that they condition people to have unrealistic expectations while putting in very low effort.”

1.2.3 Being in a romantic relationship. A few users got into a romantic relationship while leaving incelism. They shared their experience to update their peers on their progress and to encourage them by showing that it could be possible for them too. For example, one user shared how he met his girlfriend: “I met my girlfriend when I started working at a bar and we have been healthily and happily dating ever since.”

1.2.4 Engaging in new activities. Trying new activities where women could be present was identified as a relevant way to meet them: “I try going out to places where I can meet and interact with women (for example hobby clubs, bars, game nights...).”

1.3 Obstacles in dating

Although some have success in the dating world, multiple users shared their difficulties in approaching women and developing romantic relationships with them.

1.3.1 Being unable to develop a long-term relationship. While developing friendships or having casual sex with women was possible for certain users, they noted that developing a long-term romantic relationship was more difficult. Some blamed their appearance or their mindset for this difficulty whereas others did not understand why they were having it. The following altered quote is an example of a user sharing his struggles in developing a long-term relationship: “My main issue is not being able to have a romantic relationship. I want a girlfriend that I can call mine.”

1.3.2 Having difficulties approaching women. A few users mentioned how difficult they found approaching women was. This obstacle spurred from a fear of being rejected which can be seen through this quote: “I’m afraid to talk to women because I’m scared they won’t like me so I don’t approach them.”

2. Deciding to change mindsets

After some time dating, many users concluded that their incelness was not defined by their relationship status, but rather by their mindset. This made them reflect upon the negative consequences associated with maintaining their Incel mindset and the need to change mindsets to be able to have a healthy relationship with themselves and eventually a partner. This brought up the realization that they should focus less energy on dating to instead focus on themselves.

2.1 Realizing the negative consequences of the Incel mindset

Realizing that leaving incelness is about changing mindsets entailed a reassessment of their current Incel mindset and its negative consequences. This second subtheme is comprised of the three following sub-subthemes: *desiring better for oneself*, *addressing internalised racism*, and *reading the Isla Vista killer’s manifesto*.

2.1.1 Desiring better for oneself. A few users addressed their desire for better for themselves, specifically by letting go of the toxic Incel mindset. This desire can be seen in the following quote: “Being blackpilled has prevented me from being social. I need to escape this poisonous mentality, I’m better than this.”

2.1.2 Addressing internalised racism. One user admitted that addressing his internalised racism is what aided him in reconsidering his beliefs: “I realised that I have always tried to gain approval from white women who held racist beliefs. This led me to developing misogynistic beliefs which negatively affect my interactions with women, but I want to change.”

2.1.3 Reading the Isla Vista killer’s manifesto⁶. In addition, a couple users stated that reading the Isla Vista killer’s manifesto is what incited them to reassess their beliefs:

When I read the Isla Vista killer’s manifesto, it was a turning point. I feared I would become like him if I continued down the path I was going on and realised that I had to rethink my beliefs and fight to get out of this mindset.

2.2 Focusing less energy on dating

This second subtheme of *focusing less energy on dating* seemed to arise from the realisation that they must focus on changing for themselves instead of searching and changing for potential partners. This subtheme separates into two sub-subthemes: *accepting being single* and *making changes for oneself*.

2.2.1 Accepting being single. Accepting and even preferring being single was expressed by a few users after discovering that they can be happy or at least content about their singleness. One user shared his experience in accepting his single status: “I stopped caring so much about being in a relationship and started enjoying life while being single. If I find the right person some day I might give a relationship a shot, but for now I’m content with my life.”

2.2.2 Changing for oneself. The importance of changing for oneself and not for someone else or in the hope of getting into a relationship was also seen as a reason to focus less energy on dating. The following example demonstrates this sentiment: “If your objective is to get into a relationship, nothing is going to work. I’m telling you as someone who was in the same place as you, make changes for yourself and no one else.”

3. Attempting to change mindsets

After coming to the realisation that leaving incelism is about changing mindsets, many actions as well as struggles were discussed as being part of this journey. Consequently, the theme of *attempting to change mindsets* is divided into the two subthemes of *actions to help leave the Incel mindset* and *struggles in leaving the Incel mindset*.

3.1 Actions to help leave the Incel mindset

This subtheme has the most subdivisions because of the number of actions that were discussed as social and psychological activities that could help in leaving the Incel mindset.

⁶ Isla Vista killer, Elliot Rodger, killed 6 people (including himself) and injured 14 people in 2014, leaving behind an autobiographical manifesto signifying his loneliness and misogynistic beliefs (Witt, 2020).

Specifically, six actions were shared between users: *staying busy*, *socializing*, *disconnecting from online groups that confirm their mindset*, *no longer carrying labels*, *self-care*, and *treating women with respect*.

3.1.1 Self-care. Self-care was the most common code and therefore a significant strategy that helped multiple users escape incelism. Self-care was seen as prioritizing taking care of and loving oneself: “I started by loving myself. I made it a habit of taking care of myself by limiting my time doing activities that drain my energy and focusing on validating and comforting myself instead of searching for that in someone else.” Specifically taking care of one’s mental health came up often: “The most important thing for me was taking care of my mental health. Going to therapy helped me gain insight on my needs and identify my intrusive thoughts.”

3.1.2 Socializing. Ways of socializing that were mentioned were joining a club, making new friends and relying on social support. Joining a club was mentioned as a strategy to discover hobbies all the while making social connections: “Joining a club helped me take the first step of getting out of my apartment and into a new social environment.” Making new friends was often identified as a strategy to exit incelism: “I need to work on my social life. Isolation isn’t good for anyone, and I want to make friends to be able to make memories with them.” New and old friends as well as loved ones were also considered as an important source of social support to rely on throughout the exit process: “I realized that my friends understand and care for me. They have really helped me change.”

3.1.3 Staying busy. A general recommendation was to stay busy to keep their mind off of their difficulties: “Doesn’t matter with what but stay busy. Find anything that will keep your mind off dating, that you will enjoy and that will help you spend time with others.” There were also more specific ways to stay busy that were discussed. For example, the positive repercussions of getting a job were reflected in conversations between users: “When I got a job, I lost most of my insecurities. It has helped me gain confidence, a sense of purpose and money which have helped me tremendously.” Developing hobbies was also suggested as a way to spend time doing things that bring joy: “I really enjoy my time playing baseball even though it doesn’t help me meet women because it helps me feel stronger and it’s fun.”

3.1.4 Disconnecting from online groups that confirm their mindset. Disconnecting from online groups that confirm their mindset was seen as a way to distance oneself from incelism:

“Get off any kind of incel or dating focused forums. You’re trying to change your mindset, and these will bring you down. Time away from them makes me feel like I’m more in the real world.”

3.1.5 Treating women with respect. Finally, learning to treat women with respect was also mentioned as a means to change mindsets throughout conversations: “I learned that women are human. They also feel pressured to correspond to gender norms. There are women who are horrible people, but that doesn’t mean they all are. Respecting women is the bare minimum.”

3.1.6 No longer carrying labels. A few users also talked about how no longer carrying labels helped them accept who they are: “I no longer carry labels. I am not an Incel, I’m simply a single guy who fears being alone.”

3.2 Struggles in leaving the Incel mindset

This subtheme includes difficulties that Incels face during their journey of changing mindsets as well as ways to deal with these difficulties. Four sub-subthemes compose *struggles in leaving the Incel mindset*: *struggling to let go of the Incel mindset*, *not seeing desired progress*, *ways to maintain hope*, and *the uniqueness of the experience of leaving incelhood*.

3.2.1 Struggling to let go of the Incel mindset. The sub-subtheme *struggling to let go of the Incel mindset* was one of the most common codes. Multiple users discussed how difficult it was for them to let go of certain Incel beliefs. Here is an example that bears witness to this struggle: “I still believe in part of the blackpill because of bad experiences. I keep thinking that I don’t deserve to be loved.”

3.2.2 The uniqueness of the experience of leaving incelhood. Others also pointed out how unique the experience of leaving incelhood is, necessitating self-reflection and perseverance: “Everyone’s going to have to find their own way out. Barely anyone can understand how disorienting and difficult it is, but in the end it’s good.”

3.2.3 Ways to maintain hope. Even through these struggles, some users shared how to maintain hope: “The best thing to do is to focus on the future and on the small victories instead of the past and the desire for big changes.”

3.2.4 Not seeing desired progress. Another struggle that confronted certain users was not seeing desired progress in their exit journey: “It’s getting difficult to believe that anything will ever work. It seems like despite all the changes I’m making, things stay the same.”

Discussion

This study's objective was to identify common factors that lead to a change in mindset in Incels, particularly the turning points that lead to their deradicalization from the incel's misogynistic ideology. For many Incels, the initial motivation to leave incel's misogynistic ideology seemed to stem from the desire to meet women. This motivation was identified through the first theme of attempting to meet women composed of the three subthemes of *building confidence*, *dating experiences* and *obstacles in dating*. However, after a certain period of trial and error in the dating world, most Incels seem to come to the realisation that leaving incel's misogynistic ideology is not about getting into a relationship, but about changing mindsets. This revealed the second theme (*Deciding to change mindsets*) with its two subthemes: *focusing less energy on dating* and *realizing the negative consequences of the Incel mindset*. This realisation brought about an *attempt to change mindsets*, the third theme, through the subthemes of trying actions proposed by other users while having certain struggles along the way. This process seemingly leads to exiting incel's misogynistic ideology.

Considering that the contributors of the *r/IncelExit* subreddit have already started interacting with people outside the Incel community, they have already taken a first step towards leaving incel's misogynistic ideology by escaping - albeit only partly at this point - the echo-chamber dynamics of forums exclusively dedicated to Incels (Regehr, 2020). In this case, they have begun disengaging (Windisch et al., 2017) with the radical beliefs that can be found on Incel forums such as *Incels.is*. Nevertheless, disengaging from these online spaces does not mean that they have deradicalized and stopped being an Incel because they have not gone through the process of changing mindsets. This is where the *r/IncelExit* subreddit comes in to aid individuals who desire help leaving the mindset (i.e. deradicalize; Windisch et al., 2017), because they can receive advice from others who have gone through the same experience and feel hopeful about their ability to change.

The desire to attempt to meet women seems like an initial motivator to leave incel's misogynistic ideology. This search for partners falls within the Incel belief that exiting incel's misogynistic ideology is about having sex or getting into a relationship which maintains a fixation on their lack of sexual experience (Broyd et al., 2022). This step also stays within the Incel radicalization cycle beginning with the attempt to attract a sexual (or romantic) partner and ending with loneliness and social isolation because their attempt was unsuccessful (Maxwell et al., 2020). However, in this search, there is also evidence indicating the beginning of the deradicalization process from the Incel mindset. Specifically, users

have a sincere desire to get dating advice from ex-Incels or others that are on the same exit journey as them (Aarten et al., 2018). A certain level of self-esteem was also observed through the subtheme *building confidence* that refers to finding agency and self-worth from oneself instead of searching for it through others, implicating a less pronounced need for esteem (O'Malley & Helm, 2022). The *obstacles in dating* that users face as well as their *dating experiences* also point to an evolution in their beliefs from believing women are sexual gatekeepers and blaming women for their lack of success in dating to taking a certain level of accountability for their success and difficulties.

The second theme of *deciding to change mindsets* seemed to be a turning point (Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997). The users well-established trajectory would be to continue radicalizing into the Incel mindset. However, when they decide to change mindsets, they undergo a change in direction in their life course that transforms their identity and can have lasting effects. In fact, this decision is also the definition of deradicalization (Windisch et al., 2017). This change of mindset is based on *realizing the negative consequences of the Incel mindset* and that they should be *focusing less energy on dating*. *Realizing the negative consequences of the Incel mindset* resembles the realization about the effects of incelism that Hintz & Baker (2021) identified as an element leading Incels to question their identity. This realization seems to push users towards disengagement (Windisch et al., 2017). Specifically, *reading the Isla Vista killer's manifesto* seemed to have surpassed certain user's threshold or tolerance for violence leading them towards disengagement (Simi et al., 2019; Windisch et al., 2017), and *desiring better for oneself* suggests a certain disillusionment based on a lack of satisfaction with one's current life situation (Bubolz & Simi, 2015; Simi et al., 2019; Windisch et al., 2017). The sub-subtheme of *addressing internalised racism* is an element that was not brought up in other studies about Incels deradicalization, but that makes sense considering the perceived value of whiteness in the dating sphere by Incels (Gheorghe, 2023). In this case, the member who shared his experience with internalised racism caused by his desire for approval from white women was beginning to question this belief and realising that it is negatively affecting his relationships with others and with himself. As for the subtheme of *focusing less energy on dating*, singlism (i.e., the societal belief that everyone desires to be in a romantic relationship and that people in these relationships are happier and more fulfilled than those who are not; DePaulo & Morris, 2005) seems to contribute to joining incelism in that it pressures people to want to be in a romantic relationship and to see not being in one in a negative light. This contributes to the original desire to date because they believe that getting into a relationship will

solve their problems and make them feel better. However, by *focusing less energy on dating* through *accepting being single* and *making changes for oneself* instead of in the goal of pleasing potential partners, the users defy this belief by redefining what being single means to them. Instead of continuing to believe that someone else is at fault for their lack of relationships and that being in a relationship would be the solution to their problems, they begin to see that they have a certain amount of control over their relationship status and that they should focus on other aspects of their life to feel better. Consequently, their potential satisfaction with their current relationship status can lead to lowered psychological distress and higher life satisfaction (Lehmann et al., 2015).

The last theme of *attempting to change mindsets* echoes to certain elements that define a turning point like the resistance to re-establish a former trajectory and an indication of a role commitment inherent to the new trajectory (Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997). Not only have the users decided to change mindsets, but they are also actively looking for ways to accomplish this change. The subtheme *actions to help leave the Incel mindset* is comprised of two actions that contribute to disengagement: *socialization* and *disconnecting from online groups that confirm their mindset* (Barrelle, 2015; Bérubé et al., 2019; Simi et al., 2019; Windisch et al., 2017). They can also lead to deradicalization because leaving the echo-chamber dynamics of the forums and interacting with people outside of the Incel community can help them decenter their dating difficulties and reduce the confirmation and radicalization of their mindset (Regehr, 2020). *No longer carrying labels* and *treating women with respect* also came into contradiction with their former misogynistic beliefs and their quest for personal significance through the adoption of the Incel label and the membership to the Incel community which were part of their radicalization process (Furl, 2022; Kruglanski et al., 2014). *Self-care* being the most common code speaks for the importance of prioritizing one's fundamental needs (Maslow et al., 1987). In fact, some users talked about the importance of eating and sleeping well which shows how, for some Incels, physiological needs are not met. Next, the need for love and belongingness is central to the Incel discourse, which makes sense because men tend to rely more on romantic partners for social support meaning that single men can suffer from lower social well-being and greater loneliness than women (Girme et al., 2022). However, when leaving incelism, the way of responding to this need pivots to *socializing* (i.e., making new friends and relying on social support). The need for esteem can be interpreted through the action of *staying busy* which was seen through getting a job and developing hobbies to feel accomplished. Finally, *self-care* as a part of self-love seems to contribute to self-actualization (Henschke & Sedlmeier,

2021). In accordance with this, Barrelle (2015) states that self-care is “necessary for an individual to move from surviving to thriving in society”, especially for former extremists because it can contribute to and even accelerate their disengagement. The other subtheme *struggling to let go of the Incel mindset* serves as an example of the need for ‘a lot of reprogramming’ that Incels brought up in Regehr's (2020) study. It acts as proof of the difficulties in leaving such a mindset and shows that the process of leaving incelhood is non-linear. It also brings up the importance of hope and perseverance during the exit process.

Implications for intervention

It is clear that, to begin the process of deradicalization, there has to be an internal desire to change. To help in developing this desire, the narrative that Incels are dangerous people should not continue to be perpetuated. The misogynistic ideology and the echo-chamber dynamics on Incel forums are what can cause harm. However, according to Moskalenko et al. (2022), most Incels in their study rejected violence, reported a history of bullying and/or persecution and reported suffering from various mental health issues. Considering this, Moskalenko et al. (2022) suggest that it does not seem prudent to stigmatize and further traumatize these individuals by classifying them as terrorists while only a small proportion of them enact violence. It is instead recommended that interventions catering to Incels specific needs be developed. The results of the current study tend to coincide with this recommendation. Interventions with Incel clients should be made in a personalized approach that addresses their negative experiences that led them to joining Incel forums and the needs they were trying to fulfill through these memberships, educates them on the negative consequences of maintaining their misogynistic beliefs and the social pressures that could contribute to their distress, and helps them identify their motivations to leave this mindset and the strategies they should use to put this plan into action. The strategies proposed by the users on *r/IncelExit* analysed in this study (*staying busy, socializing, disconnecting from online groups that confirm their mindset, no longer carrying labels, self-care and treating women with respect*) could serve as a good starting point because they seem to have led to positive results and to be catered towards their specific needs. In addition, as suggested by Hastings et al. (2020), considering the positive outcomes seen in this study, joining Incel forums that are based on peer support and self-improvement, like *r/IncelExit*, seems like a good first step towards leaving incelhood.

Study Limitations and Strengths

The main limitation in this study is that only one forum was analyzed. Even considering the popularity of *r/IncelExit* (14.3k members) and the fact that it is the only forum dedicated to helping Incels leave incelism, only analyzing one forum is a limit because we don't have access to former Incels that could be sharing their exit process on other social media platforms. We also don't have access to the original motivation that brought the users to leave Incel forums and join *r/IncelExit*. The individuals whose posts were analyzed in this study were in majority currently in their exit process. A few users said they were former Incels coming back to the forum to offer advice to comment on posts of people who were attempting to exit, but there were also people who said that they needed to disconnect from the forum completely as part of their exit journey. Consequently, we couldn't confirm the temporal aspect of turning point theory, that the changes have lasting effects and are recognized by the person in retrospect. However, the fact that the data analyzed was from individuals who were still in their exit process is also a strength of this study because a retrospective study could be more tainted by forgetting elements, wanting to be liked by the interviewer, and having a biased view of their journey since it happened in the past. Having access to the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of the users during the process gave us access to rich data on their lived experience in the moment which would be hard to have otherwise.

Another limitation of this study is that the definition of being an Incel is variable from one person to another. Due to this, the meaning of leaving incelism can also vary. For some, leaving incelism is limited to developing a sexual or romantic relationship while still maintaining misogynistic beliefs. The exit process that was observed in the present study took into consideration deradicalization and is only a general trend that doesn't represent all former Incels experiences. However, it seems more pertinent to concentrate on the deradicalization process because of its more positive outcomes. For instance, maintaining an Incel mindset has negative consequences on one's mental health and relationships with others (Costello et al., 2022; Speckhard et al., 2021; Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2022). Also, getting into a sexual or romantic relationship can harm their potential partners (DeCook & Kelly, 2022).

A final limitation is that the level of depth in the users posts and comments was lesser than what could have been retrieved in interviews. However, analysing data from a forum can also be

seen as a strength because we could access a lot more viewpoints and data than would be possible by doing interviews.

Future research

Future studies should interview people who identify as former Incels to be able to access information about their complete trajectory of leaving incelism and to be able to form a more accurate step by step process leading towards their exit. This would also give access to the experience of Incels who left incelism without joining *r/IncelExit* and to the differences in their trajectories in comparison to the individuals who joined this forum. Equally, it would help in deepening our understanding of the full process of leaving incelism including what brought Incels to join *r/IncelExit* in the first place and of potential “relapses” into the Incel mindset considering the difficulties linked to leaving incelism. Furthermore, large-scale surveys with men no longer identifying as Incels would be helpful to inform us on whether there are common turnings points in their attempts to leave incelism characterized by lasting effects or not. A retrospective or longitudinal study could help confirm this temporal aspect of turning point theory. Otherwise, in line with the first theme of attempting to meet women, future studies could investigate the trajectories of psychological well-being of Incels or individuals beginning to leave incelism in relation to their dating experiences. It could also be interesting to analyze if having success or being unsuccessful in dating tends to bring about the desire to change mindsets more often or more rapidly.

Conclusion

This study’s findings offer an insight into the process of leaving incelism with an original desire to attempt to meet women, the turning point of deciding to change mindsets, and a final desire to attempt to change mindsets. These findings are valuable in understanding how deradicalization from the Incel mindset operationalizes itself and how to help people who are in this process. Considering that it is not easy to start contemplating leaving incelism because of the forums echo-chamber dynamics, it is important to develop empathy and offer adapted help to individuals that begin this process. The main realizations that lead to changing mindsets that were identified in this study were linked to the negative consequences of having this mindset and the need to decenter dating from their lives. Consequently, it seems appropriate to lean on these realizations to try and aid clients who are attempting to leave incelism. Additionally, multiple

actions that helped former Incels leave incelism, notably by responding to their fundamental needs, were discussed which could serve as interesting leads towards deradicalization. Finally, the place of struggles in the exit journey is also important to keep in mind seeing as a former Incel's exit trajectory will probably not be linear.

References

- Aarten, P. G. M., Mulder, E., & Pemberton, A. (2018). The Narrative of Victimization and Deradicalization: An Expert View. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, *41*(7), 557–572. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1311111>
- Anti-Defamation League. (2022, August). *Incels (Involuntary celibates)*. <https://www.adl.org/resources/background/ncels-involuntary-celibates>
- Aragón, P., Gómez, V., García, D., & Kaltenbrunner, A. (2017). Generative models of online discussion threads: State of the art and research challenges. *Journal of Internet Services and Applications*, *8*(15), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13174-017-0066-z>
- Baele, S. J., Brace, L., & Coan, T. G. (2021). From “Incel” to “Saint”: Analyzing the violent worldview behind the 2018 Toronto attack. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *33*(8), 1667–1691. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1638256>
- Barnes, S. B. (2004). Issues of Attribution and Identification in Online Social Research. In M. D. Johns, S.-L. S. Chen, & G. J. Hall, *Online Social Research: Methods, Issues, and Ethics* (pp. 203–222). Peter Lang.
- Barrelle, K. (2015). Pro-integration: Disengagement from and life after extremism. *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism & Political Aggression*, *7*(2), 129–142. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2014.988165>
- Beninger, K. (2016). Social media users’ views on the ethics of social media research. In *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods* (pp. 57–73). SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473983847>
- Bérubé, M., Scrivens, R., Venkatesh, V., & Gaudette, T. (2019). Converging patterns in pathways in and out of violent extremism: Insights from former Canadian right-wing extremists. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, *13*(6), 73–89.

- Boislard, M.-A., Lafortune, D., Millette, M., Fournier, E., & Morozov, M. (2023). *Whose fault is it that “I will be alone for the rest of my life”? Locus of control theory applied to Incels’ online discourses*. Manuscript in preparation.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol 2: Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 57–71). American Psychological Association.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). To saturate or not to saturate? Questioning data saturation as a useful concept for thematic analysis and sample-size rationales. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 13*(2), 201–216.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1704846>
- Broyd, J., Boniface, L., Parsons, D., Murphy, D., & Hafferty, J. D. (2022). Incels, violence and mental disorder: A narrative review with recommendations for best practice in risk assessment and clinical intervention. *BJPsych Advances, 1–11*.
<https://doi.org/10.1192/bja.2022.15>
- Brzuszkiewicz, S. (2020). *Incel radical milieu and external locus of control* (Vol. 1–1 online resource (pages 1-20)). International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT).
<https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2020/11/Special-Edition-2-1.pdf>
- Bubolz, B. F., & Simi, P. (2015). Leaving the world of hate: Life-course transitions and self-change. *American Behavioral Scientist, 59*(12), 1588–1608.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764215588814>
- Canadian Security Intelligence Service. (2020, April). *CSIS Public Report 2019*. Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness. <https://www.canada.ca/en/security-intelligence-service/corporate/publications/2019-public-report.html>

- Costello, W., Rolon, V., Thomas, A. G., & Schmitt, D. (2022). Levels of well-being among men who are Incel (involuntarily celibate). *Evolutionary Psychological Science*, 8, 375–390. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40806-022-00336-x>
- DeCook, J. R., & Kelly, M. (2022). Interrogating the “incel menace”: Assessing the threat of male supremacy in terrorism studies. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 15(3), 706–726. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2021.2005099>
- DePaulo, B. M., & Morris, W. L. (2005). TARGET ARTICLE: Singles in Society and in Science. *Psychological Inquiry*, 16(2–3), 57–83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2005.9682918>
- Elder, G. H., Johnson, M. K., & Crosnoe, R. (2003). The emergence and development of life course theory. In *Handbook of Life Course*. Kluwer Academic Publishers. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uqam/detail.action?docID=3036036>
- Furl, K. (2022). Denigrating women, venerating “Chad”: Ingroup and outgroup evaluations among male supremacists on Reddit. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 85(3), 279–299. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01902725221090907>
- Garcia, A. C., Standlee, A. I., Bechkoff, J., & Yan Cui. (2009). Ethnographic approaches to the internet and computer-mediated communication. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 38(1), 52–84. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241607310839>
- Gheorghe, R. M. (2023). “Just Be White (JBW)”: Incels, Race and the Violence of Whiteness. *Affilia*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08861099221144275>
- Ging, D. (2019). Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the masculinities of the manosphere. *Men and Masculinities*, 22(4), 638–657. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X17706401>
- Girme, Y. U., Park, Y., & MacDonald, G. (2022). Coping or Thriving? Reviewing Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, and Societal Factors Associated With Well-Being in Singlehood From a

Within-Group Perspective. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 1–24.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916221136119>

Hastings, Z., Jones, D., Stolte, L., Smyth, P., Rsw, M., & McCoy, J. (2020). Involuntary celibates: Background for practitioners. *Organization for the Prevention of Violence*, 1–13.

Helm, B., Scrivens, R., Holt, T. J., Chermak, S., & Frank, R. (2022). Examining incel subculture on Reddit. *Journal of Crime and Justice*, 1–19.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0735648X.2022.2074867>

Henschke, E., & Sedlmeier, P. (2021). What is self-love? Redefinition of a controversial construct. *The Humanistic Psychologist*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/hum0000266>

Heritage, F., & Koller, V. (2020). Incels, in-groups, and ideologies: The representation of gendered social actors in a sexuality-based online community. *Journal of Language and Sexuality*, 9(2), 152–178. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jls.19014.her>

Hintz, E. A., & Baker, J. T. (2021). A performative face theory analysis of online facework by the formerly involuntarily celibate. *International Journal of Communication*, 15, 3047–3066. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/16847>

Hoffman, B., Ware, J., & Shapiro, E. (2020). Assessing the threat of Incel violence. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 43(7), 565–587. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1751459>

IncelExit. (n.d.). IncelExit. Retrieved November 11, 2022, from

<https://www.reddit.com/r/IncelExit/>

Kelly, M., DiBranco, A., & DeCook, J. R. (2021). *Misogynist Incels and male supremacism*. New America. <http://newamerica.org/political-reform/reports/misogynist-incels-and-male-supremacism/>

- Kruglanski, A. W., Gelfand, M. J., Bélanger, J. J., Sheveland, A., Hetiarachchi, M., & Gunaratna, R. (2014). The psychology of radicalization and deradicalization: How significance quest impacts violent extremism. *Political Psychology, 35*(S1), 69–93.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12163>
- Latzko-Toth, G., Bonneau, C., & Millette, M. (2016). Small data, thick data: Thickening strategies for trace-based social media research. In *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods* (pp. 199–214). SAGE Publications Ltd.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473983847>
- Lehmann, V., Tuinman, M. A., Braeken, J., Vingerhoets, A. J. J. M., Sanderman, R., & Hagedoorn, M. (2015). Satisfaction with Relationship Status: Development of a New Scale and the Role in Predicting Well-Being. *Journal of Happiness Studies : An Interdisciplinary Forum on Subjective Well-Being, 16*(1), 169–184.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-014-9503-x>
- Maslow, A. H. (Abraham H., Frager, R., & Fadiman, J. (1987). *Motivation and personality* (3rd ed). Harper & Row.
- Maxwell, D., Robinson, S. R., Williams, J. R., & Keaton, C. (2020). “A short story of a lonely guy”: A qualitative thematic analysis of involuntary celibacy using Reddit. *Sexuality & Culture, 24*(6), 1852–1874. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09724-6>
- Mortimer, J. T., & Shanahan, M. J. (2003). *Handbook of the life course*. Kluwer Academic Publishers. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uqam/detail.action?docID=3036036>
- Moskalenko, S., González, J. F.-G., Kates, N., & Morton, J. (2022). Incel ideology, radicalization and mental health: A survey study. *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare, 4*(3), 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.21810/jicw.v4i3.3817>

- O'Malley, R. L., & Helm, B. (2022). The role of perceived injustice and need for esteem on Incel membership online. *Deviant Behavior*, 1–18.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2022.2133650>
- O'Malley, R. L., Holt, K., & Holt, T. J. (2022). An exploration of the involuntary celibate (Incel) subculture online. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37(7–8), NP4981–NP5008.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520959625>
- Regehr, K. (2020). In(ce)l doctriNation: How technologically facilitated misogyny moves violence off screens and on to streets. *New Media & Society*, 24(1), 138–155.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820959019>
- Santiago Delefosse, M., & Del Rio Carral, M. (2017). *Les méthodes qualitatives en psychologie et sciences humaines de la santé*. Dunod. <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb452054375>
- Simi, P., Windisch, S., Harris, D., & Ligon, G. (2019). Anger from within: The role of emotions in disengagement from violent extremism. *Sociology Faculty Articles and Research*, 7(2).
https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/sociology_articles/53
- Southern Poverty Law Center. (2019). *Male supremacy*. Southern Poverty Law Center.
<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/male-supremacy>
- Speckhard, A., & Ellenberg, M. (2022). Self-reported psychiatric disorder and perceived psychological symptom rates among involuntary celibates (incels) and their perceptions of mental health treatment. *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2022.2029933>
- Speckhard, A., Ellenberg, M., Morton, J., & Ash, A. (2021). Involuntary celibates' experiences of and grievance over sexual exclusion and the potential threat of violence among those active in an online Incel forum. *Journal of Strategic Security*, 14(2), 89–121.

- Trip, S., Bora, C. H., Marian, M., Halmajan, A., & Drugas, M. I. (2019). Psychological mechanisms involved in radicalization and extremism. A rational emotive behavioral conceptualization. *Frontiers in Psychology, 10*, 1–22.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00437>
- Wheaton, B., & Gotlib, I. H. (1997). Trajectories and turning points over the life course: Concepts and themes. In B. Wheaton & I. H. Gotlib (Eds.), *Stress and Adversity over the Life Course: Trajectories and Turning Points* (pp. 1–26). Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511527623.001>
- Windisch, S., Simi, P., Ligon, G. S., & McNeel, H. (2017). Disengagement from ideologically-based and violent organizations: A systematic review of the literature. *Journal for Deradicalization, 9*, 1–38. <https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/72>
- Witt, T. (2020). ‘If i cannot have it, i will do everything i can to destroy it.’ the canonization of Elliot Rodger: ‘Incel’ masculinities, secular sainthood, and justifications of ideological violence. *Social Identities, 26*(5), 675–689.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2020.1787132>

Annexes

Table 1. Occurrence of Themes and Subthemes of Turning Points Leading to the Desire to Leave Inceldom

Themes and Subthemes
1. Attempting to meet women
1.1. Building confidence
1.1.1. Being attractive to certain women (23)
1.1.2. Fitness (14)
1.1.3. Drug use (14)
1.2. Dating experiences
1.2.1. Sexual experiences (24)
1.2.2. Dating applications (21)
1.2.3. Being in a romantic relationship (11)
1.2.4. Engaging in new activities (9)
1.3. Obstacles in dating
1.3.1. Being unable to develop a long-term relationship (23)
1.3.2. Having difficulties approaching women (10)
2. Deciding to change mindsets
2.1. Realizing the negative consequences of the Incel mindset
2.1.1. Desiring better for oneself (8)
2.1.2. Addressing internalised racism (8)
2.1.3. Reading the Isla Vista killer's manifesto (2)
2.2. Focusing less energy on dating
2.2.1. Accepting being single (12)
2.2.2. Changing for oneself (6)
3. Attempting to change mindsets
3.1. Actions to help leave the Incel mindset
3.1.1. Self-care (66)
3.1.2. Socializing (50)
3.1.3. Staying busy (30)
3.1.4. Disconnecting from online groups that confirm their mindset (13)
3.1.5. Treating women with respect (10)
3.1.6. No longer carrying labels (4)
3.2. Struggles in leaving the Incel mindset
3.2.1. Struggling to let go of the Incel mindset (39)
3.2.2. The uniqueness of the experience of leaving inceldom (6)
3.2.3. Ways to maintain hope (5)
3.2.4. Not seeing desired progress (3)