From Status to Identity: Unveiling the 'Othered' Adult White Male Involuntary Celibates (Incels) on YouTube

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how certain marginalized adult white male incels choose to present themselves to a global YouTube audience and address the misunderstandings about them perpetuated by often negative media portrayals. This qualitative case study, conducted on July 24, 2024, analyzed four purposively-sampled YouTube confessionals from adult white male incels of varying ethnicities and ages, published between April 13, 2022, and May 13, 2024. The study included: "YouTuber 1" (70 subscribers, 2,946 views, 16.5 minutes long, 62 likes), "YouTuber 2" (1,440 subscribers, 5,321 views, 17 minutes long, 145 likes), "YouTuber 3" (893 subscribers, 20,663 views, 8 minutes long, 552 likes), and "YouTuber 4" (2,040 subscribers, 9,933 views, 47 minutes long, 193 likes). These videos were selected for their confessional-style content. They were transcribed using a YouTube transcribing tool and analyzed thematically, following Bantugan's (2024) approach to studying males sharing on YouTube about their social marginalization. Incels often experience profound social isolation and rejection, which significantly impacts their responses to intimacy issues. Many report feeling less socially and sexually successful compared to others, which leads to feelings of inadequacy. Judgments based on appearance further exacerbate these difficulties, as a lack of validation can harm self-esteem and hinder social and romantic opportunities. Mental health issues, such as autism and borderline personality disorder, contribute to these struggles, with mental health conditions often linked to challenges in social interactions. Perceptions of fundamental gender differences also influence their interactions and expectations with the opposite sex. Despair and a nihilistic outlook are common, leading to a belief that their situation is unchangeable and fostering maladaptive coping strategies. Additionally, a deep-seated desire for recognition and understanding underscores their need for acceptance, with feelings of being misunderstood worsening negative emotional outcomes.

Keywords: Incels, YouTube, Othering, marginalization, multiple case study

INTRODUCTION

The term "incel" stands for "involuntary celibate" and refers to a subculture of individuals, primarily men, who define themselves as unable to find a romantic or sexual partner despite desiring one. This term has its origins in the late 1990s and has evolved significantly over the years. The concept of involuntary celibacy was first articulated by a Canadian woman named Alana, who in 1997 created a website to discuss her own struggles with finding a romantic partner. She coined the term "involuntary celibate" or "incel" and intended her site to be a supportive community for people experiencing similar challenges (Beauchamp, 2019). Initially, the site was inclusive and supportive, focusing on sharing experiences and providing mutual support.

Over time, however, the term "incel" and the community around it underwent significant changes. By the mid-2000s, the online incel community started to attract more men, and the tone of the discussions began to shift towards frustration and anger about their situation. This change was partly influenced by the broader evolution of internet forums and the rise of more extreme and polarized discussions online (Tolentino, 2018). The radicalization of the incel community can be traced back to several key events and trends. Notably, the 2014

Isla Vista killings by Elliot Rodger, who identified as an incel, brought significant media attention to the community. Rodger's manifesto and subsequent actions were fueled by misogynistic and violent ideologies, which resonated with some members of the incel community (Romano, 2018).

Modern Incels and Online Culture

Today, the incel community is predominantly online and often overlaps with other fringe movements within the so-called "manosphere," which includes men's rights activists (MRAs), pick-up artists (PUAs), and men going their own way (MGTOW). These groups share certain beliefs about gender roles, masculinity, and societal structures, often blaming feminism and women for their personal grievances (Ging, 2019). Online platforms such as Reddit, 4chan, and various incel-specific forums have played a crucial role in the development and perpetuation of incel ideology. These platforms provide spaces for incels to share their experiences, grievances, and often extreme views, further entrenching their sense of alienation and resentment (Jaki et al., 2019).

Demonization of Incels in Media

The term "incel" has garnered significant attention and coverage in mainstream media, particularly following high-profile acts of violence linked to individuals identifying with this subculture. This attention has contributed to the demonization of incels, often painting them as a monolithic group defined solely by their most extreme and violent members. High-profile violent incidents, such as the 2014 Isla Vista killings by Elliot Rodger and the 2018 Toronto van attack by Alek Minassian, have significantly influenced how incels are portrayed in the media. These events, perpetrated by self-identified incels, have led to widespread coverage that often highlights the most extreme and misogynistic elements of the incel community (Zweigenhaft, 2020). This focus reinforces the perception of incels as inherently dangerous and violent.

Media coverage often simplifies the complex motivations and diverse experiences within the incel community. Many articles and news segments emphasize a narrative of hatred and misogyny without delving into the underlying issues such as mental health struggles, social isolation, and the role of online echo chambers (Srinivasan, 2018). This lack of nuance contributes to a one-dimensional portrayal that overlooks the broader social and psychological context. The media's portrayal of incels can contribute to a moral panic, where the subculture is viewed as a significant societal threat. This panic can lead to increased stigmatization of individuals who identify as incels or share similar experiences of involuntary celibacy (Marwick & Caplan, 2018). The fear and moral outrage generated by media coverage can further alienate and marginalize these individuals.

Consequences of Demonization

The media's demonization of incels reinforces negative stereotypes, portraying them as angry, dangerous, and irredeemable. This can lead to increased hostility and discrimination against those who identify as incels or who struggle with similar issues (Baele, Brace, & Coan, 2019). The negative portrayal of incels can exacerbate feelings of isolation and alienation among individuals within the community. When the media focus solely on the negative aspects of the subculture, it can discourage open dialogue and understanding, making it more difficult for individuals to seek help or support (Ging, 2019). By focusing primarily on the most extreme elements of the incel community, the media can overlook opportunities for intervention and support. Addressing the root causes of involuntary celibacy, such as mental health issues, social isolation, and toxic online cultures, requires a more nuanced and empathetic approach (Hoffman et al., 2020).

Incels and Men's Coping with Life as Adults

The phenomenon of incels reflects broader issues related to how men cope with the challenges and expectations of adult life in contemporary society. This subculture highlights various aspects of men's

struggles, including mental health, social isolation, and the pressures of conforming to traditional masculine norms. Here are several ways in which incels reflect the current state of men's coping mechanisms:

Mental Health Challenges

Many men within the incel community struggle with mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. The stigma surrounding mental health, particularly for men, often prevents them from seeking help or expressing vulnerability. This can exacerbate feelings of isolation and helplessness (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). The online incel community, rather than providing support, often reinforces negative beliefs and behaviors, creating an echo chamber that deepens these struggles.

Social Isolation and Loneliness

Modern society presents unique challenges related to social connectivity. The increasing prevalence of digital communication has, paradoxically, led to greater feelings of loneliness and social isolation for some individuals. Men, in particular, may find it difficult to form meaningful social connections due to traditional masculine norms that discourage emotional openness and intimacy with others (Holt-Lunstad, 2018). Incels often express a profound sense of social disconnection, which can contribute to their frustrations and grievances.

Economic and Social Pressures

Economic instability and shifting labor markets can also impact men's sense of identity and self-worth. The traditional role of men as providers has been challenged by economic changes, leading to a sense of displacement for some men who struggle to find stable employment or achieve financial independence (Kimmel, 2013). These economic pressures can contribute to feelings of inadequacy and failure, which are common themes within the incel community.

Pressure to Conform to Masculine Norms

Traditional masculine norms, which emphasize traits such as strength, dominance, and sexual success, can create significant pressure for men. Failure to meet these societal expectations can lead to feelings of shame and inadequacy. Incels often internalize these norms and view their inability to form romantic or sexual relationships as a personal failure, leading to a negative self-image and a sense of hopelessness (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Influence of Digital Culture

The rise of digital culture and social media has transformed how people interact and form relationships. While these platforms can facilitate connection, they can also perpetuate unrealistic standards of attractiveness and success. Men who feel they do not measure up to these standards may turn to online communities like the incel subculture for validation and support, even if these communities reinforce negative and harmful beliefs (Marwick & Caplan, 2018).

Radicalization and Extremism

The incel community reflects how vulnerable individuals can be radicalized online. The sense of community and validation found in incel forums can lead to the reinforcement of extreme and misogynistic views. This radicalization is a coping mechanism for dealing with their perceived failures and societal rejection, but it ultimately exacerbates their isolation and mental health issues (Baele, Brace, & Coan, 2019).

The Need to Study Incels in the Context of Men's Socialization and Agency

Studying incels (involuntary celibates) within the framework of men's socialization and agency is essential for several reasons. Understanding the factors that contribute to the development and perpetuation of the incel

subculture can shed light on broader societal issues related to gender, identity, and social dynamics. Here are some key reasons why this study is important:

Understanding Gender Socialization

Gender socialization refers to the process through which individuals learn the behaviors, norms, and roles expected of them based on their gender. For men, traditional gender norms often emphasize traits such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and sexual prowess. These expectations can create significant pressure and contribute to feelings of inadequacy and failure when men perceive themselves as unable to meet these standards (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Studying incels can help researchers understand how these gender norms impact men's self-perception and interactions with others.

Examining the Impact of Toxic Masculinity

Toxic masculinity refers to cultural norms that associate masculinity with dominance, control, and aggression, while discouraging expressions of vulnerability and emotional openness. These norms can have detrimental effects on men's mental health and relationships. The incel community often reflects and amplifies these toxic ideals, promoting misogyny and resentment towards women and other men who appear more successful in romantic and sexual pursuits (Kimmel, 2018). By studying incels, researchers can explore the harmful consequences of toxic masculinity and identify ways to address and mitigate its effects.

Exploring Issues of Male Agency and Identity

Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and make their own choices. Many incels feel a profound sense of powerlessness and lack of agency in their social and romantic lives. This perceived lack of control can lead to feelings of frustration, anger, and despair. Analyzing the experiences and narratives of incels can provide insights into how societal structures and cultural norms shape men's sense of agency and identity, as well as the psychological and social factors that contribute to their sense of disenfranchisement (Baele, Brace, & Coan, 2019).

Addressing Mental Health Concerns

Mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, and social isolation, are prevalent within the incel community. These issues are often exacerbated by the negative reinforcement and echo chambers found in online incel forums. Understanding the mental health challenges faced by incels can inform the development of targeted interventions and support systems to help individuals cope with their struggles and reduce the risk of radicalization (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020).

Informing Policy and Prevention Efforts

Studying incels can also have practical implications for policy and prevention efforts. By identifying the root causes of incel ideology and behavior, policymakers and practitioners can develop strategies to address the underlying social, economic, and psychological factors that contribute to the formation of the incel subculture. This can include educational programs, mental health services, and initiatives to promote healthy masculinity and gender equality (Hoffman et al., 2020).

Theories of Othering

The Theory of 'Othering' examines how groups and individuals define and perceive "the other" as distinct, inferior, or less desirable compared to themselves, contributing to social divisions and inequalities. Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979), explains that individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups to maintain a positive self-image. This often results in in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination, as people derive self-esteem from their group memberships, enhancing their sense of superiority over others. Postcolonial Theory, notably Edward Said's concept of

"Orientalism" (1978), extends 'othering' to colonial and imperial contexts, showing how Western cultures historically constructed the East as exotic and inferior to justify domination and exploitation. Critical Theory, as discussed by Horkheimer and Adorno (2002), focuses on how ideologies and power structures perpetuate 'othering' to maintain dominant group power and control. Lastly, psychological perspectives offer insights into cognitive biases such as "out-group homogeneity," identified by Nisbett and Ross (1980), which cause individuals to view out-group members as more similar to each other than members of their own group, reinforcing stereotypes and negative perceptions. Additionally, scapegoating (Friedman, 2013) reveals how groups may project their own problems onto the out-group, deepening the process of 'othering'. These theories collectively illustrate how 'othering' serves to reinforce social hierarchies, perpetuate inequality, and justify marginalization.

The Theory of 'Othering' is crucial in understanding the marginalization of incels by society. Social Identity Theory (SIT) explains how incels are perceived as an out-group, enhancing in-group status through their devaluation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Postcolonial Theory parallels this by showing how historical biases, similar to Orientalism, justify and perpetuate the marginalization of incels as socially and romantically inferior (Said, 1978). Critical Theory highlights how societal norms and power structures reinforce incel exclusion, maintaining dominant group power (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). Psychologically, biases like out-group homogeneity and scapegoating further entrench incels' negative stereotypes and exclusion, attributing broader societal issues to them (Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Friedman, 2013). Together, these theories provide a robust framework for understanding how incels are socially constructed as "other" and the systemic factors contributing to their marginalization.

Statement of the Problem

This study sought to investigate the manner by which selected 'othered' adult while male incels opt to introduce themselves to the global YouTube audience and clarify issues that render themselves misunderstood by society at large given the often-demonized representation of media.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative data mining and case study interpreted on July 24, 2024 involved four purposively-sampled YouTube confessionals of white males self-identifying as incels. with different ethnicities and ages who talked about their lives as incels (published on YouTube between April 13, 2022 and May 13, 2024). First, there was "YouTuber 1" (with 70 subscribers and 2,946 views on the selected 16.5-minute confessional with 62 likes). Second, there was "YouTuber 2" (with 1,440 subscribers and 5,321 views on the selected 17-minute confessional with 145 likes). Third, there was "YouTuber 3" (with 893 subscribers and 20,663 views on the selected almost 8-minute confessional with 552 likes). Then, there was "YouTuber 4" (with 2,040 subscribers and 9,933 views on the selected 47-minute confessional with 193 likes). They were selected based on their confessional-style approach in sharing about their being incels. The videos were transcribed using a YouTube transcribing application (https://kome.ai/tools/youtube-transcript-generator) and the transcripts were read multiple times in the conduct of thematic analysis.

RESULTS

Cases Presentations

Case 1: The speaker, who identifies with the incel community, makes several points that he wants to clarify about his identity and experiences.

Incel Identity and Choice

The speaker emphasized that being an incel is not a choice but rather a condition that has chosen him, addressing the common misconception that individuals willingly choose this lifestyle. He asserted, "You don't

choose the incel life, the incel life chooses you." The speaker also mentioned physical appearance as a significant factor contributing to his incel identity, stating, "I was just born not good looking, unattractive this… punk, nothing good going for him at all."

Social Isolation and Rejection

Highlighting his experiences of social rejection and isolation, the speaker reflected on both his current life and his school years. He shared, "When I was in high school, I had no friends, sat alone at the lunch table all the time… no one ever talked to me. I was just hoping. He's a weird kid, you know, he's that weird kid and still am really in a way." Furthermore, he expressed frustration over his lack of success on dating apps, indicating his ongoing struggle with social connections and romantic relationships. He lamented, "I'm on like six dating apps right now, not one like, sent out me like a hundred messages to like all different women, never get a response back."

Faith and Religious Beliefs

Integrating his religious beliefs into his identity as an incel, the speaker views his faith as a source of strength and guidance. He encouraged his peers, "All my bro incels out there must remain strong in Christ." Additionally, he believes that people who do not follow his religious beliefs will face divine retribution, asserting, "Any Chad or Stacy, Becky you name it, they don't believe in the Lord Jesus Christ what he did on that cross, God's wrath will be poured out on them. I can guarantee you that."

Perception of Society and Gender Dynamics

The speaker discussed his views on the gender dynamics in society, particularly the disparity in relationship status between men and women. He commented, "I saw a statistic that among men in the age bracket of 18 to 25, 63 percent are single, which is insane, the same age bracket for women it's only like 28 percent, which is disgusting… the world that we live in… that is how all things are." He criticized modern women's behavior, reflecting a negative and generalized view, saying, "This is the way women act today. It's so sinful, it's so degenerate, it's just totally awful."

Self-Improvement and Its Limitations

Expressing skepticism about the effectiveness of self-improvement efforts, the speaker perceived them as futile. He argued, "Self-improvement, it's never enough… self-improvement crap gets you nowhere. I tried it… didn't end well for me at all." Despite his efforts to improve himself, he felt he remains unsuccessful in various aspects of life, admitting, "I always suck at everything. I always did… last one picked during gym class... you know the classic pick the gym class… last sitting alone at lunch."

Reference to Religious and Community Advice

Advising fellow incels to turn to religious faith for comfort and guidance, the speaker emphasized the importance of maintaining belief and not giving in to despair. He advised, "Always always… turn to the Lord Jesus Christ… Jesus loves you… he loves us all… he gave his life for us."

Case 2. The speaker emphasized several key points about the treatment of incels and judgments based on appearance.

Judging by Appearance is Wrong but Common

The speaker emphasized that judging people by their appearance is both wrong and prevalent. He reflected on this societal flaw, stating, "Judging people by the way they look is wrong, we all know that." The speaker expressed concern that he is judged based on his appearance, mentioning, "I hope it's not because of the way I look, they see some ugly fat guy or some loser-looking incel."

Social Isolation and Misunderstanding

The speaker also addressed the social isolation and misunderstanding faced by incels. He observed that despite his efforts to connect, people maintain their distance, stating, "They still want to keep their distance… they still get guarded and I'm like, I'm not trying to do anything." He further explained that there is a specific "look" associated with incels, saying, "There's a look of an incel a look of a delta omega for those of you who are familiar with the ranking system."

Social Hierarchy and Misconceptions

The speaker discussed the social hierarchy and misconceptions surrounding incels. He described the alpha as "the good looking very confident guy successful assertive and stuff like that," while contrasting this with the omega, who he described as "a dull foolish unattractive person."

Consequences of Misjudgment

The consequences of such misjudgment are significant. The speaker noted that negative events are often unfairly attributed to those labeled as omega, expressing frustration that "If something bad happens... they blame it on the omega... who in the [expletive] is gonna believe him?" He cited a movie example where an innocent man was killed "just because of the way he looks," highlighting the extreme consequences of appearance-based judgments.

Impact of Negative Stereotypes

The impact of these negative stereotypes is profound. The speaker underscored how judgments based on appearance lead to unfair treatment, noting, "Just because of the way he looks they were judging them by that." He added that in serious situations, individuals labeled as omega are treated as "so much of a pushover."

Hypocrisy in Social Perceptions

Finally, the speaker critiqued the hypocrisy in social perceptions, stating, "The real perpetrator was somebody that they... got deeply moved by and enchanted by." This observation, he believes, reveals the flawed nature of societal judgments, concluding, "It goes to show you how [expletive] up the world is."

In addressing these issues, the speaker aimed to clarify the challenges faced by incels due to societal judgments and the unfair treatment they often receive based on their appearance. This discussion highlights how such prejudices contribute to their social isolation and perpetuate negative stereotypes.

Case 3: The speaker shares his experiences and thoughts on why he identifies as an incel. Here are the main points with direct quotations to support each:

Struggles with Social and Sexual Success

The speaker discussed his early experiences with social and sexual success, noting that "ever since, you know, from a young age, I've noticed how people are generally more socially and sexually successful than me without even trying really." He reflected on his high school years, stating, "I never even had any relationships at all when I was in high school," which underscores his sense of being left out of typical social experiences.

Feelings of Isolation and Exclusion

The speaker also highlighted his feelings of isolation and exclusion. He shared, "I've never been to a party. I've never been invited to a party," and added that he often voiced his frustrations on social media: "I complained about it a lot on my Snapchat story." This sense of isolation is compounded by his mental health struggles, including diagnoses of autism at age 17 and borderline personality disorder more recently. He

described the impact of these conditions on his daily life, stating, "I've been staying awake all night and sleeping all day due to my insomnia and not having the proper medication."

Physical Appearance and Social Perception

Physical appearance and social perception are significant factors in his identity. He observed, "Nobody would ever, you know, give me compliments on my appearance like other people get," and recalled being "always shorter and shorter than most of the boys in my class, and I was always the skinniest boy." This lack of positive reinforcement contributed to his feelings of social exclusion.

Embracing the Incel Identity

The speaker revealed that he was labeled as an incel even before he fully identified with the community. He explained, "People would always associate me with incels and call me an incel before I even started identifying as one," leading him to ultimately embrace the label. He reflected on his feelings of injustice and frustration, questioning, "When everybody around you is socially and sexually more successful than you, you start to think, 'why?'."

Criticism of Social Norms and Expectations

The speaker criticized societal norms and expectations, particularly regarding appearance and grooming. He asked, "How is anybody able to style their hair? How is anybody able to know what looks good on top of their head?" His confusion and frustration with these standards highlight his struggle to conform to societal expectations.

Commitment to the Incel Movement

The speaker expressed his commitment to the incel movement and his desire for recognition. He stated, "That is why I am an incel. That is why I intend to fight for the incel cause," aiming to draw attention to the movement and himself. He emphasized, "I want people to understand the problems that I face and that they're not [expletive], they're not little problems," asserting that his struggles should not be dismissed.

Case 4: What the speaker wanted to clarify in his video about becoming an incel are as follows:

Background and Upbringing

In the video, the speaker clarified that his upbringing in a rural area played a significant role in shaping his identity as an incel. He explained, "I grew up in a rural area, isolated from peers," and noted that he moved to a different rural area in 2019. His childhood was marked by minimal social interaction, particularly with girls: "(I) had minimal social interaction with peers, especially girls, during childhood."

School Experience

The speaker recounted his negative school experience, emphasizing his dislike for school and the scarcity of friendships. He revealed, "I hated school and had very few friends," and shared his struggles with interacting with girls: "(I) struggled to talk to girls and viewed them as a different species." While he found it easier to engage with boys, he found girls more challenging: "(I) found it easy to interact with boys but not with girls."

Gender Differences

He asserted that he believes male and female brains are fundamentally different, claiming, "Men and women think differently," and cited this as evidence of inherent gender differences. He argued that there is scientific proof supporting this view.

Lack of Social Skills

The speaker attributed his social difficulties with girls to his isolated upbringing. He suggested that the lack of early socialization with girls "doomed him to become an incel," indicating that his childhood isolation has had lasting effects on his social skills.

Teenage Years

During his teenage years, the speaker began to experience negative emotions such as anger and jealousy. He reflected, "(I) began experiencing negative emotions like anger and jealousy at age 15," and described his high school crushes: "(I) had crushes on girls in high school but couldn't act on them due to shyness and introversion." He believed that the most attractive girls were "already taken or out of his league."

Family Influence

Growing up in a religious, Christian household, the speaker lacked guidance on social skills and interactions with girls. He noted, "(I) grew up in a religious household focused on Christianity," highlighting the absence of practical advice on social interactions.

Adult Life and Nihilism

In adulthood, the speaker felt a profound sense of hopelessness and nihilism. He attributed his ongoing loneliness to his early experiences and isolation, stating, "(I) feel hopeless and nihilistic about relationships and life in general," and believed that being an incel has severely impacted his emotional, mental, and physical health.

Views on Society and Women

The speaker shared his discontent with modern societal norms and women. He perceived that "modern women prefer city life, which I dislike," and "(I) see a lack of compatible women who share his lifestyle and values." He also believed that women are privileged and have an easier life compared to men: "(I) believe women are privileged and have an easier life compared to men."

Simps and Online Interactions

He criticized 'simps' who flatter women online, contributing to women's high self-esteem," and felt that this behavior makes it harder for men like him to connect with women.

Standards and Preferences

He expressed a desire for "a traditional, conservative, Christian, and preferably white virgin woman," believing these standards are realistic compared to women's high expectations. He is also concerned about "the decline of the white race and cultural values."

Pessimism and Future Outlook

Finally, the speaker held a very pessimistic view of his future. He felt that it is "over for him in terms of finding a suitable partner," and believe that societal changes are making it increasingly difficult for men like him to find relationships. His outlook on the future is deeply negative: "(I) hold a very negative view of the future and his prospects for happiness."

Recurring Themes Across the Four Cases

Social Isolation and Rejection

A central theme across the transcripts is the experience of social isolation and rejection. YouTuber 3 reflected on his lack of social success, stating, "Ever since, you know, from a young age, I've noticed how people are

generally more socially and sexually successful than me without even trying really." Similarly, YouTuber 4 described his rural upbringing and its impact on his social life: "(I) had minimal social interaction with peers, especially girls, during childhood." YouTuber 2 also highlighted the detrimental effects of social isolation, noting, "They still want to keep their distance… they still get guarded and I'm like, I'm not trying to do anything."

Judgment Based on Appearance

Another recurring theme is the judgment based on physical appearance. YouTuber 2 expressed frustration about being judged solely on his looks: "I hope it's not because of the way I look they see some ugly fat guy or some loser-looking incel." This theme is echoed in YouTuber 4's reflections on his experiences: "Nobody would ever, you know, give me compliments on my appearance like other people get." YouTuber 3 also touches on this theme, describing the effect of societal standards on his self-perception: "(I) feel these standards are realistic compared to women's high standards."

Mental Health and Diagnoses

Mental health issues are another prominent theme. YouTuber 3 discussed his diagnoses, stating, "I was diagnosed with autism at age 17 and just, uh, not too long ago I was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder." This theme resonated with the speaker in YouTuber 2 who mentions the impact of mental health on his social experiences, including his perception of being a social outcast due to his condition.

Views on Gender and Society

Each speaker reflected on their perceptions of gender and societal norms. YouTuber 4, for example, believed that "male and female brains are fundamentally different" and claims there is scientific proof for this view. Similarly, YouTuber 2 discussed societal gender dynamics, noting, "I saw a statistic that among men in the age bracket of 18 to 25, 63 percent are single which is insane the same age bracket for women it's only like 28 percent which is disgusting the world that we live in."

Despair and Nihilism

Despair and a nihilistic outlook on life are evident throughout the cases. YouTuber 4 articulated a sense of hopelessness, saying, "(I) feel hopeless and nihilistic about relationships and life in general." YouTuber 2 also conveyed a similar sentiment, expressing his belief that his "continued loneliness" and social isolation have led to severe impacts on his well-being.

Desire for Recognition and Understanding

A final theme is the desire for recognition and understanding. The speakers expressed a longing for their struggles to be acknowledged and validated. YouTuber 2, for instance, stated, "I want people to understand the problems that I face and that they're not [expletive], they're not little problems." Similarly, YouTuber 2 advised fellow incels to "turn to the Lord Jesus Christ… Jesus loves you… he loves us all he gave us and life for us," seeking comfort and validation through religious faith.

Each case revealed a complex interplay of social isolation, judgment, mental health issues, gender perceptions, and existential despair, with the speakers seeking understanding and validation for their experiences.

DISCUSSION

Recurring Themes and Incels' Responses to Intimacy Challenges

Social Isolation and Rejection

Incels often experience profound social isolation and rejection, which significantly affects their response to intimacy difficulties. Social isolation is a recurring theme in the transcripts, with individuals expressing

feelings of being excluded and judged. For example, YouTuber 3 noted, "Ever since, you know, from a young age, I've noticed how people are generally more socially and sexually successful than me without even trying really," reflecting a common sentiment among incels that they are unfairly marginalized. Studies corroborate these experiences, suggesting that social isolation can lead to increased feelings of inadequacy and a distorted self-image (Twenge, 2006).

Judgment Based on Appearance

Another significant theme is the judgment based on physical appearance, which exacerbates incels' difficulties with intimacy. YouTuber 4, for instance, lamented, "Nobody would ever, you know, give me compliments on my appearance like other people get," illustrating the impact of external validation—or the lack thereof—on self-esteem. Research supports this, indicating that appearance-based judgments can contribute to negative self-perceptions and hinder social and romantic opportunities (Miller & Major, 2000).

Mental Health and Diagnoses

Mental health issues also play a critical role in how incels respond to intimacy challenges. YouTuber 3's disclosure of diagnoses such as autism and borderline personality disorder aligns with the broader pattern of mental health struggles among incels. According to recent studies, individuals with mental health conditions often face difficulties in social and romantic interactions, exacerbating feelings of loneliness and frustration (Vasilenko et al., 2014). This can lead to an internalization of these difficulties and further isolation.

Views on Gender and Society

Incels' perceptions of gender and societal norms significantly shape their responses to intimacy issues. For instance, YouTuber 4's belief in fundamental differences between male and female brains highlights how these perceptions influence their expectations and interactions with the opposite sex. Research on gender differences supports the notion that societal beliefs about gender roles and abilities can affect personal relationships and self-esteem (Eagly & Wood, 1999).

Despair and Nihilism

Despair and a nihilistic outlook are evident in how incels approach their intimacy struggles. YouTuber 4's sentiment of feeling "hopeless and nihilistic about relationships and life in general" is indicative of a broader trend among incels to view their situation as unchangeable and bleak. Studies have shown that chronic feelings of hopelessness and despair are associated with reduced motivation to seek positive change and increased reliance on maladaptive coping strategies (Seligman, 1975).

Desire for Recognition and Understanding

Finally, the desire for recognition and understanding reflects a deep-seated need for validation. YouTuber 3's wish to have his struggles recognized as significant resonates with the broader psychological need for acceptance and empathy. Research highlights that individuals who feel misunderstood or invalidated are more likely to experience negative emotional outcomes and struggle with their social identities (Goffman, 1963).

'Othering' of Incels by Society

The 'othering' of incels by society is influenced by several social structures that contribute to their marginalization and stigmatization. These structures include:

Gender Norms and Expectations

Gender norms play a significant role in the 'othering' of incels. Traditional gender expectations often place a high value on heterosexual romantic and sexual success, particularly for men. Incels, who perceive themselves

as failing to meet these expectations, are marginalized as they do not conform to these socially endorsed standards of masculinity. For instance, research by Connell (2005) on hegemonic masculinity highlights how societal ideals of masculinity emphasize dominance, attractiveness, and sexual success, which can exacerbate the marginalization of those who fall short of these ideals.

Social Hierarchies and Status Inequality

Social hierarchies and status inequality contribute to the 'othering' of incels. These structures create a hierarchical system where individuals who are perceived as less successful or less attractive are devalued. Incels often view themselves as at the bottom of this hierarchy, which is reinforced by societal attitudes that prioritize attractiveness and social success. Bourdieu's (1984) concept of social capital explains how individuals' social worth is measured by their ability to navigate these hierarchies, contributing to the exclusion of those who struggle to do so.

Media Representation and Stereotyping

Media representation plays a crucial role in the 'othering' of incels. Media often perpetuates stereotypes and negative portrayals of incels, portraying them as socially inept or dangerous. These portrayals reinforce societal biases and contribute to the stigmatization of incels. Goffman (1963) explores how media representations can influence societal perceptions and contribute to the stigmatization of marginalized groups.

Psychological and Social Exclusion

Psychological and social exclusion further marginalizes incels. Exclusionary practices and attitudes from peers, institutions, and social groups can lead to feelings of isolation and alienation. This exclusion can be exacerbated by societal pressures to conform to norms related to social and romantic success. Honneth's (1995) theory of recognition explains how the lack of social recognition and inclusion can contribute to feelings of otherness and marginalization.

Economic and Class Disparities

Economic and class disparities also play a role in the othering of incels. Economic status can influence social mobility and access to romantic opportunities, further isolating individuals who are already struggling. Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) discuss how economic inequality affects social cohesion and can contribute to the marginalization of those at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum.

These social structures—gender norms, social hierarchies, media representation, psychological and social exclusion, and economic disparities—interact to contribute to the 'othering' of incels by society. The interplay of these factors creates a framework that marginalizes individuals who do not conform to established norms and expectations, reinforcing their sense of alienation and exclusion.

Incels' Participation in 'Othering'

Incels often participate in 'othering' by framing themselves as victims of societal and gender-based injustices while simultaneously defining and marginalizing groups they perceive as responsible for their issues. The speakers reveal several ways in which incels engage in 'othering':

Defining Themselves as 'Other'

Incels often describe themselves as fundamentally different from those who are successful in social and romantic realms. For instance, YouTuber 3 explained his sense of isolation and identity by stating, "Ever since, you know, from a young age, I've noticed how people are generally more socially and sexually successful than me without even trying really" and "I never even had any relationships at all when I was in high school." This

self-identification as 'other' is a form of internalized 'othering,' where individuals see themselves as distinct and inferior to the mainstream or successful members of society.

Marginalizing Women and Successful Men

Incels frequently 'other' women and successful men by attributing negative traits to them. In the transcripts, YouTuber 4 highlighted this by saying, "(I) believe women are privileged and have an easier life compared to men." This perspective reduces women to a monolithic group characterized by privilege, distancing them from the incel experience. Similarly, YouTuber 2 said, "The real perpetrator was somebody that they... got deeply moved by and enchanted by," reflecting a belief that successful individuals, or those perceived as part of the 'in-crowd,' are unjustly favored and not held accountable for their actions.

Criticizing Simps and Modern Social Norms

Incels also engage in 'othering' by criticizing "simps," or men who show excessive flattery to women online. YouTuber 4 criticized 'simps' who flatter women online, contributing to women's high self-esteem, portraying simps as enablers of women's perceived privilege. This view helps solidify a divide between incels and others by attributing their own social difficulties to the behavior of these men.

Victimization and Misunderstanding

Incels' narratives often include a sense of victimization, where they view themselves as misunderstood and marginalized by society. YouTuber 3 stated, "When everybody around you is socially and sexually more successful than you, you start to think, 'why?'" reflecting a perception of societal unfairness. This victim stance is reinforced by their belief that societal structures are rigged against them, as illustrated by their critiques of social norms and their inability to connect with others.

Social Isolation and Self-Identification

Incel speakers frequently discussed their experiences of isolation and exclusion, reinforcing their identity as outsiders. For example, YouTuber 3 shared, "I've never been to a party. I've never been invited to a party." This isolation reinforces their view of themselves as fundamentally different from those who partake in social activities and relationships.

The recurring themes show that incels participate in 'othering' by defining themselves as victims of societal and gender-based systems, marginalizing women and successful men, and criticizing those they perceive as contributing to their difficulties. This self- and other-division serves to bolster their identity as marginalized individuals and to justify their grievances against societal norms.

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