**Incels, in-groups, and ideologies: The representation of gendered social actors in a sexuality-based online community**

*Abstract*

We present a study of the online forum Reddit, specifically a sub-forum for (typically heterosexual) men who identify as involuntary celibates or ‘incels’. Incels are an online imagined community/community of practice who wish to, but do not, have sexual relations with women. Owing to this identity, they view themselves as non-normative within broader society and see women and societal standards of masculinity as the cause of their problems.

In this paper, we take a small corpus of 67,000 words generated from 50 threads created, and commented on, by incels. We analyse keywords, word frequencies, and concordance lines to explore the representation of gendered social actors. Keyword analysis reveals that references to gendered social actors are particularly salient within this community, leading to an analysis of all such social actors in the corpus. The findings suggest that incels position different groups of men in a hierarchy in which conventionally attractive men occupy the top position. Notably, we find that female social actors are not placed in a similar hierarchy. An additional appraisal analysis of the most frequently occurring male and female social actors shows that men are judged as incapacitated while women are seen as immoral, dishonest and capable of hurting men. Members of the online community also seem preoccupied with physical attractiveness.

The study opens up a number of avenues for future research, especially into the complexities with which members of non-normative heterosexual groups simultaneously orient to and reject social norms.

*Keywords*: corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS), heterosexuality, incels, masculinity, misogyny, (non-)normativity, online community

*Content warning*: All sections except the introduction and conclusion include quotes which may be distressing to some readers. These quotes feature racist and sexist language, and make reference to sexual violence and suicide.

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**1. Introduction**

On 23 April, in Toronto, Canada, 25-year-old Alek Minassian killed ten people and injured 16 others in the deadliest vehicle-ramming attack in Canadian history. After the attack, it was discovered that Minassian had written in a Facebook post: “The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys!” While the words *Chads* and *Stacys* denote conventionally attractive men and women, the term *incel* is a portmanteau of the words *involuntary* and *celibate.* Minassian identified as part of a large online community of incels, formed around the belief of its members — mostly white, heterosexual young men — that they are sexually and romantically undesirable.[[1]](#footnote-1) It is this online community which is the focus of this paper. In general terms, we are interested in how incels use language to create particular ideologies around gender and sexuality and thereby build an in-group online.

To date, there is no research-driven definition of what incels are nor does the source of the data presented in this paper, the r/braincels sub-forum of Reddit, provide a definition. However, the forum Incels.co, which was created as a reaction to the banning of the r/incels subreddit, defines an incel as:

a person who wants to be in a loving relationship but is unable to find a partner despite his best effort. [...] Being ‘incel’ is a state of being, not an identity. It is not a movement, ideology, or behavior, and there is nothing political about it. (Incels.co, 2018)

However, having been created by a member of the incel community, the above definition is likely written to portray incels in a positive way. Importantly, it makes no mention of the misogyny that is a hallmark of incel communities and that has led to various subreddits being banned or quarantined.[[2]](#footnote-2) Perceiving oneself as being unable to find a sexual and romantic partner does not in itself predict a hateful attitude towards the would-be partners (i.e. women) and those who do form relationships with them. Yet, our data shows that these attitudes are very pronounced (for gendered hate speech on social media, see also Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2015; Hardaker and McGlashan, 2016; Russell, 2019).

The online incel community used to be most active on the r/incels subreddit (see Hawtin, 2018). However, following a revision of Reddit’s policies relating to content which encourages, glorifies, incites or calls for violence or physical harm against an individual or a group of people, the subreddit was banned in November 2017. Some of the content which Reddit deemed to be in breach of the new regulations included posts which actively encouraged rape as a means to escape inceldom. Within the r/incel subreddit, incels argued that the world was set up to value only conventionally attractive men (Chads) and women (Stacies). Their view was that Stacies would actively seek Chads to engage with in sexual relations and ignore men who do not fit societal ideals of attractiveness. In turn, incels viewed themselves as conventionally unattractive in comparison to Chads and thus lower in a perceived male hierarchy (see Figure 1 in section 4).

Within the published research on incels, Zimmerman et al. (2018) argue that incels are comparable to other extremist groups and therefore policies should be implemented to prevent radicalisation. However, the authors do not draw upon empirical data to support the assumption that incels hold misogynist ideologies. Similarly, Srinivasan (2018) has linked incels to the idea of aggrieved entitlement, suggesting that incels’ belief in having a right to sex has been challenged by a long history of feminist-inspired socio-political development.

Our own findings suggest that incels as a wider social group constructed themselves as having difficult lives through no fault of their own. They believe that their genetic disposition makes it impossible for them to ever have relationships with women. In addition, incels represent themselves as hated and persecuted. As a consequence, in-group members are talked about as having a high risk of ending their own lives. Group identity is often thought of in terms of such first-personal pronoun usage, as *us* (or *we*) against *them* (see e.g. van Dijk, 1993; Wirth-Koliba, 2016) and indeed most uses of those pronouns in our data construct incels as a social group or, more specifically, the r/braincels subreddit as an in-group, often in contrast to an out-group. The more specific community of the r/braincels subreddit is mostly constructed in contrast to out-groups, chiefly the r/IncelTears subreddit, which describes itself as ‘a part-mocking, part-watchdog subreddit’[[3]](#footnote-3) monitoring incels online. Such antagonism not only promotes self-identification as victims but also fosters in-group solidarity.

We draw on these findings as well as previous literature on incels to propose the following characterisation of the incel community:

an online community built around sexuality whose members are mostly men who wish to, but do not, have sexual relations with women. Members of the community share a sense of being both sexually and romantically undesirable, which leads to a self-definition as victims of women and society, and hatred towards women and their male partners. Members of the community draw on essentialist theories to define gender and sexuality and to explain their perceived problems.

Within this characterisation, we also reflect on the findings of our analysis (see section 4), namely that incels view themselves as victims of women and society, and display hatred towards women and the men who have relationships with them. Considering the violent actions of incels such as Minassian, who claimed his attack was motivated by incel ideology, the claim that ‘being “incel” is a state of being, not an identity […] movement, ideology, or behavior’ can not only be contested but also requires further research.

The data used in this study derive from a number of threads in the r/braincels subreddit. Assuming that communities are held together by ideologies, our general aim in this paper is to identify how members of this online incel community use language to construct ideologies around gender and sexuality. (Ideology is here defined as a ‘network of beliefs that gives rise to expectations, norms and values about … people [and] organize[s] social life’ [Author 2014: 207-208].) More specifically, we are interested in how gendered social actors are evaluated by members of this community. We have singled out evaluation because it is particularly pertinent to constructing ideologies, expressing as it does values, norms and beliefs about individuals and groups along with the emotions that accrue to them.

In order to better conceptualise the incel community, we start our investigation by briefly discussing whether a subreddit such as the one we analyse constitutes an online community of practice. Following that, we argue that linguistic work on incels helps to address two research gaps, namely on language use in sexuality-based online communities and on the role of language in constructing non-normative heterosexual identities. To make our point, we look at existing linguistic research about online communities formed around gender and sexualities, before outlining work on language and non-normative heterosexuality. As we implement a corpus-linguistic approach to the data, we pay particular attention to previous research which has utilised corpus methods. The overview of relevant work to date leads to us formulating the following research questions:

How do members of an online incel community use language to present ideologies around gender and sexuality? Specifically, what gendered social actors are evaluated in what ways by members of the community?

Section 3 then introduces our data and the methods we used to analyse them, in particular the corpus software Wordsmith 7. We discuss why and how it was employed for identifying keywords, generating word frequency lists and displaying concordance lines. We also discuss the methods for our qualitative analysis of how gendered social actors are evaluated. Section 4 presents the findings of our analyses, showing keywords in the incel corpus, providing word frequencies for gendered social actors, and investigating the relevant words in their co-text to see how those actors are evaluated. Finally, in section 5, we summarise the findings and point out directions for future research.

**2. Theoretical positioning and previous work**

A central tenet underlying this research is that incels are a social group who utilise online spaces, especially social media platforms, to construct an in-group identity through ideologies of gender and sexualty. The nature of social media is complex, with different platforms featuring different communities, different linguistic practices and different explicit and implicit rules (see Zappavigna, 2018). On the Reddit platform, subreddits are monitored and regulated by established members of the community that gathers there, in order to ensure that contributors comply with community guidelines. Thus, moderators enforce explicit and implicit rules and practices, which in turn sustain community values. Arguably, individual subreddits, such as r/braincels, therefore constitute a community of practice (CofP). CofPs are outlined by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2007: 28) as follows:

the construct ‘community of practice’ focuses on groups of people in virtue of their regular engagement in common practice. The notion of social practice emphasizes the social significance of what people do, going beyond simple individual acts and activities to socially regulated, repeated and interpreted collaborative doings.

Therefore, people who identify as incels and regularly post, reply to threads and interact with each other in a specific subreddit arguably form an online community of practice (see Al-ghamdi & Al-ghamdi, 2015). The sheer size of this online CofP (69,760 members as of May 2019) makes it resemble Anderson’s (1983) notion of an imagined community, whereby there are imagined links with thousands, if not millions, of people who share an identity and have similar values, but will never meet each other. However, this concept does not capture the repetitive practices and regular interactions between members of the community. Thus, we conceptualise the incel community as a hybrid between an imagined community and an online CofP. The members of the community are likely to engage in the same practices, read the same materials, and share the same values, but due to the size of the community they are unlikely to know all of the other members and many members may never interact directly with each other.

As an imagined community/CofP, the online community of incels that we are interested in is not only based on sexuality, but can also be theorised as non-normative: the absence of sexual relationships for mostly young men runs counter to a societal expectation that they be sexually active. Our data show a clear ‘orientation to heteronormativity as a dominant discourse in society at large’ (Coimbra-Gomes and Motschenbacher, 2019: 571), in that incels construct themselves as the binary opposite and enemies of ‘normies’, i.e. representatives of heteronormativity:

1. It’s a cope [coping strategy] to pretend that normies think different, they ALL want us dead. They’re sick scum. Incels are right to hate all normies.

At the same time, however, members of the imagined community/online CofP of incels create and police prescriptive norms about what constitutes incel identity, as is evidenced by the term *truecel* and its opposite, *fakecel*:

1. the nerve of a millenial SJW [social justice warrior] fakecel telling an incel that a “incel” subreddit isn’t the place for him. I hope you fakecel scum are banned from reddit soon, this sub[reddit] has become such a disgrace.

Delineation from both normies and fakecels establishes a normative incel identity, demonstrating that members of the online community that we study are engaged in ‘navigating normativities’ (Hall et al., 2019), positioning themselves as normative at the level of the in-group that they construct but non-normative in relation to societal ideals.

We will provide an overview of previous work on language non-normative hererosexuality below; for now, it should be noted that our study is situated in the growing sub-discipline of corpus-linguistic approaches to gender and sexuality (e.g. Baker, 2014; Motschenbacher, 2018). Within this growing body of research, Motschenbacher (2018: 148-149) notes that studies can be typically categorised into three thematic groups:

a. Studies focusing on the linguistic representation and communication of LGBT people [...] b. Studies documenting public discourses associated with sexual relationships [and] c. Studies concentrating on the role of linguistic practices in sexualised communication and communication about sexuality.

The present study falls into the third category, as we focus on communication amongst an imagined community/CofP which has formed around sexuality.

Previous studies which have used corpus approaches to examine the representation of gender and sexuality on social media and in online fora include Milani’s (2013) research on the self-presentation and sexual desire in personal profiles on the forum ‘Meetmarket’ (a forum for men seeking sexual relationships with other men). Milani focuses on content words to identify the different terms used for desired male partners (such as *guy* and *man*). Beyond lexical semantics, he also looks at collocates and prosodies of the two most frequent terms for desired male partners, noting that although *guy* and *man* may appear synonymous, personal adverts on Meetmarket use these terms in a polarised way. Elsewhere, King (2009) has explored queer chat room language, noting how different queer men interact with each other and in particuar how they express friendship and (sexual) desire. More broadly, Del-Teso-Craviotto (2008) has investigated how gay male, lesbian and heterosexual participants in online dating chat rooms authenicate themselves as legitimate chat partners, namely by drawing on normative constructions of gender and sexuality.

Other researchers have explored the representation of gender and sexuality in communities with purposes other than finding sexual/romantic partners. For example, Potts (2015) notes that the interactions between YouTubers and commenters on YouTube videos were characterised by intertextuality, with commenters referencing the video and the people in the video discussing what the commenters said. From a gender and sexuality perspective, Potts’ findings demonstrate that male users and creators drew heavily on homosociality while explicitly stating that they do not identify as homosexual, suggesting that such a stance can be used as part of in-group constructions on social media. While sexuality is relevant in the community studied by Potts, it is not a community that is based on sexuality or sexual identity. In that regard, Potts’ (2015) work is similar to Myketiak’s (2015) study of how members of a non-sexual online community use private virtual spaces to co-construct cybersex narratives which, while reciprocal, often instantiate heteronormativity, both in sexual agency and in how the partners relate to each other conversationally in the interaction.

There is then a dearth of studies addressing the role of language in sexuality-based online communities, other than those set up to find sexual partners within them. Perhaps the closest is the research by Lawson and McGlashan (2017), who have investigated constructions of masculinity in a sub-community of the so-called ‘manosphere’, a network of misogynist online communities that also includes incels and which, as Ging (2017) observes, finds a nexus on Reddit. Lawson and McGlashan (2017) specifically investigate a forum on Reddit for ‘pick-up artists’ (PUAs), i.e heterosexual men sharing stories and suggestions on how to have non-committal sex with as many women as possible. Their main findings are that PUAs objectify women and also include intertextual references to books meant to prime potential PUAs. In a similar vein, Wright (2019) has examined constructions of misogyny on a PUA online forum, specifically looking at how PUAs address resistance to sexual advances and negotiate consent. On a broader level, Krendel (2019) has compared three different communities in the so-called ‘manosphere’: PUAs, Men’s Rights Activists, and Men Going Their Own Way (a movement of men advocating separatism). Looking at posts using the tags within the ‘flair’ function on Reddit, she found that female social actors were typically both grammatically and semantically passivised and were appreciated in ways more commonly associated with objects than people.

The fact that there are few studies to date that explore the language used by online communities formed around sexuality, but not dedicated to finding sexual partners, means that linguistic research on incels and other ‘manosphere’ communities is also in its infancy. To the best of our knowledge, there are so far only one published (Jaki et al., forthcoming) and two unpublished studies (Hawtin, 2018; Tranchese, 2019) on incels, although more work is ongoing. Among these, Jaki et al.’s (forthcoming) work uses machine learning approaches to language, identifying misogynist linguistic patterns via automatic detection software, e.g. examining gender-based offensive words such as *bitch, landwhale* and *whore*. However, their work focuses primarily on quantitative computational approaches to the data and does not necessarily provide the fine-grained analysis required to explain why and how something is sexist or how in and out-groups are constructed. By contrast, Hawtin’s (2018) corpus-linguistic work focuses on the r/incel subreddit and particularly on the intertextuality between Eliott Rodger’s manifesto and the r/incel forum. Finally, Tranchese (2019) found similar keywords to those presented in this paper within the r/incel forum when comparing the data to a corpus of general Reddit language. She argues that the incels appear to feel entitled to women’s bodies and that their language resembles that of pornography. .

While there is thus a gap in linguistic research on sexuality-based online communities, we do not yet know much about the links between language and non-normative heterosexuality either. One insight is offered by Baker’s (2011) analysis of how the term ‘cougar’, i.e. a woman having sex with younger men, is used in samples of North American discourse. He finds that despite explicit positive evaluation in terms of lexis, the women are grammatically positioned as passive and placed below their younger male partners on a hierarchy of power and attractiveness. Struggles and anxieties around societal sexual norms are investigated by Coimbra-Gomes and Motschenbacher (2019) in their corpus linguistic study of an online forum for men who suffer from an obsessive-compulsive disorder that makes them doubt their heterosexuality. The authors note that posters employ conditionals to denote the possbility of being gay or straight, and that sexual identity labels feature prominently. Posters also tend to refer to gendered actors as groups rather than individuals, constructing men and women ‒ and hence homo- and heterosexuality ‒ as binary opposites, with reference to male social actors showing greater lexical variation. As we will show in section 4, the authors’ overall conclusion that ‘sufferers orient to heteronormativity in their posts in the sense that they feel they fall short of embodying the imperatives of male heterosexuality as idealised by them’ (2019: 581) is one that also holds true for our data.

Hinderliter’s (2016) work on an online forum for people identifying as asexual offers another insight into a non-normative community. Combining a diachronic corpus linguistic analysis of identity labels with a survey on how asexual people’s identity changed after joining the forum, the autor finds that *asexual* gradually gains dominance as a term for self-reference. Moreover, becoming a member of the online community leads to a stronger identification as asexual rather than abstinent, celibate or non-sexual, and to seeing asexuality as an orientation instead of a lack. Other work on non-normative sexuality includes Motschenbacher’s (2014) study of a phone-in show featuring callers whose primary sexual and romantic attachment is to inanimate objects. Motschenbacher shows how callers and host interact at the micro-level to approximate their sexuality to societal norms at the macro-level, e.g. by personifying and gendering the objects they desire, and by placing their behaviour on a hierarchy above other non-normative sexual practices, e.g. polyamory.

This review indicates two main gaps in the literature: first, linguistic studies on online communities based on sexuality — other than those dedicated to finding sexual partners — are to date few and far between. Secondly, not much work has yet been done on how language is used to negotiate non-normative forms of heterosexuality at the micro-level of text and interaction. Although choosing a corpus-based rather than an interactional approach, the present study nevertheless seeks to address these gaps by exploring how ideologies around gender and sexuality are discursively constructed in an online incel community. To answer this question, we will look at what gendered social actors are evaluated in what ways by members of that community.

**3. Data and methods**

In this section, we discuss how we selected and collected the data for our study, and what methods we used to analyse them.

Our corpus consists of 50 threads from the r/braincels subreddit, collected in August and September 2018.[[4]](#footnote-4) The data represents the five posts which were generating the most conversation at different intervals within the data collection period: a few days were left between collection points to make sure that the threads were not duplicated. Both the initial post on a topic and the subsequent comments were collected. This enabled us to create a corpus totalling 67,710 tokens,[[5]](#footnote-5) which, although small, is illustrative of the language used within this single subreddit. Although we assume that it is primarily incels who will post on this subreddit, it must be remembered that Reddit is a public-facing forum and that contributors can fabricate information about — in our case — their sex life. Similarly, members outside this community may post on the forum as well. To maintain community standards and prevent outsiders from contributing on a regular basis, prominent community members are given the unpaid but powerful position of moderator, which allows them to remove posts and keep topics on track. This restriction shows how communities that would be regarded as non-normative at a societal level develop their own interactional and ideological norms at the local level.

With regard to how the data was analysed, we first looked at keywords using Wordsmith 7 (Scott, 2016). We chose the software because it is rigorous in imposing three different statistical tests (log likelihood, log ratio and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC); see Scott, 2016; Hughes, 2018) before a word is considered statistically ‘key’, i.e. overused when compared to a reference corpus (see Rayson, 2019 for ‘over-/underuse’ as technical terms). Given that the majority of posters in or data used American English, we used the American English 2006 (AmE06) corpus (Baker, 2010) as a reference corpus when generating keywords. AmE06 is a corpus of written American English consisting of approximately 1 million words across 15 genres, such as fictional prose, biographies, and news reports . While we acknowledge that there may be more suitable corpora for comparison, other corpora of American English, for instance COCA (Davies, 2008-), or of internet language, such as GLOWbE (Davies, 2013), were not freely available for statistical comparisons.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The keywords revealed the salience of gendered social actors such as *women* and *girls* to the incel community*.* We therefore followed up by generating word frequency lists for all social actors in the data, paying attention to the lexemes which denote gendered groups, and ascertaining whether the lexical semantics of the terms suggest a particular positive or negative evaluation. The final step of our analysis involved a manual qualitative analysis of a random sample of extended concordance lines to see how gendered social actors were evaluated. To this end, we drew on the appraisal framework (Martin and White, 2005) to see what judgements were made about the most frequently mentioned social actors, if and how they were appreciated, and what emotions were ascribed to them.

Martin and White’s (2005) framework contains three categories: engagement (which is associated with dialogic positioning), attitude (which is associated with judgements, evaluations and feelings) and graduation (which is associated with grading evaluations and (de)focusing categorisation). We looked specifically at the three sub-components of attitude: judgement (which relates to comparing people and their behaviour against a set of norms), appreciation (which relates to evaluating objects, concepts and processes) and affect (which relates to describing emotional responses, either on the part of the text producer or ascribed to represented actors). For the former two categories, we limited ourselves to the authorial appraisal expressed by text producers themselves.

The judgement sub-category consists of five ways of appraising people and their behaviour: normality (how special someone is as a person or in their behaviour), capacity (how capable someone is), tenacity (how resourceful someone is), propriety (how moral someone is) and veracity (how honest someone is). In the appreciation sub-category, processes, concepts or objects are evaluated for their impact, quality, composition, significance, and benefit or harm. Finally, the affect sub-category comprises four basic emotions, namely (un)happiness, (dis)satisfaction, (in)security and (dis)inclination. In our analysis, we coded a few references to gendered social actors for more than one sub-category; for example, the clause *beautiful white women have every door on Earth open to them* was analysed as expressing both appreciation of positive aesthetic quality (*beautiful*, here referring to a person) and judgement of positive capacity.

Taken together, these three analytical steps provided cumulative evidence to answer both our general research question about how members of the incel community use language to construct ideologies of gender and sexuality, and the more specific question of how gendered social actors are evaluated.

**4. Analysis**

Our analysis starts by providing a broad picture of the data through exploring keywords in our corpus. These show that reference to social actors is a highly salient feature of the data, and as such warrants further investigation, especially with a view to what gendered actors are evaluated and how. In the second step of the analysis, we therefore focus on male and female[[7]](#footnote-7) social actors who are mentioned ten times or more within the corpus. We identify a hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity being constructed and note that there is a higher proportion of derogatory terms used for women. We also argue that while some words appear positive or neutral in terms of lexical semantics (e.g. *woman*), they require a close reading of extended concordance lines to fully understand the ways in which they are used. This leads to an application of the appraisal framework to the most frequent gendered social actors (*men/he* and *woman/she*). We use the findings to argue that *men* and *women* are judged and appreciated to a different extent and in different ways: while men are often seen as incapacitated, female social actors are judged as immoral, dishonest and capable of actions which run counter to the ideology and interests of the incel community. Both male and female actors are appreciated for their looks, but female ones more so. And finally, posters ascribe wants and wishes to female social actors more than they express their own emotions.

4.1 Keywords

Keywords are often used as a ‘way into’ the data (Baker 2012: 248), because they provide a broad overview of what is salient in a corpus. Such a snapshot can both direct and shape subsequent analysis. As Baker (2004: 347) argues: ‘Keywords will direct the researcher to important concepts in a text (in relation to other texts) that may help to highlight the existence of types of […] ideology’. The top 25 keywords for our corpus are shown in Table 1, ordered by significance as measured by BIC score.

[Table 1 here]

Broadly speaking, the top 25 keywords can be divided into four categories: social actors, most of whom are gendered (e.g. *women*, *girl*, *Chad*, *dude*), swear words (*fuck*, *fucking, shit*), discourse markers (e.g. *just*)and (desired) actions expressed either in verbal or nominal form (such as *fuck\**,[[8]](#footnote-8) *cope, rope*,[[9]](#footnote-9) *sex*)*.* The category with the most terms and the highest frequency of terms is social actors, as presented in Table 2.

[Table 2 here]

One key social actor is *incel(s)*, used for self-references in the third person. In three quarters of all instances, *incel(s)* is used to position the group in opposition to other social groups, as in the following examples:

(4) [T]he odds of an incel terrorists are the same of a ‘normal person’ terrorist.

(5) And this is the reason hypergamy exists and normies aren’t incels.

This self-reference in the third person could be used to explain incels to any newcomers to the forum. However, this should not distract from the fact that first person plural pronouns (*we*, *us*, *our*) are used more often than *incel(s)* for self-reference — 293 compared to 194 instances — and that it is only due to the frequency of those pronouns in general English that they do not show up as keywords in our corpus.

The keywords demonstrate that gendered social actors are particularly salient within this community. In the following sections, we explore terms for such social actors within the corpus as a whole, rather than only examining those in the keywords> This will help us gain a better understanding of how gendered social actors are represented more generally in this imagined community/CofP.

4.2 Word frequencies for gendered social actors

In our data, gendered social actors are typically positioned in a male/female dichotomy, suggesting that forum posters construct binary gendered pairs that sustain and reinforce problematic, normative societal views of gender. Thus, despite being a non-normative group based on sexuality, the incels on this forum appear to sustain normative ideologies of gender.

The words for gendered social actors which occur ten times or more are presented in Table 3, ordered by frequency and with pejorative terms shown in bold. Where a lexical item could represent more than one word class (e.g. *bitch*, *feminist*), we only included the number of its occurrences as a noun.

[Table 3 here][[10]](#footnote-10)

These lexical frequencies show that women are sometimes identified in terms of their relationship to men (see van Leeuwen 2008: 43-44), e.g. as *gf* (i.e. girlfriend), *girlfriends*, *wife* and *whores*, and represented as men’s possessions. Syntactically, such possesivisation is indicated by terms for female social actors functioning as pre-modifiers or in prepositional phrases other than *by*-constructions:

(8) A famous, rich, wife-having actor, that’s certainly not a Chad.

(9) But yeah fuck that guy for working to provide for his spoiled child of a wife.

The fact that there are no male social actor equivalents suggests not only a heterosexual male viewpoint — which is unsurpring given that this perspective defines the incel community — but also a difference in how gender and gender roles are viewed. This could indicate an asymmetric representation in which female social actors are more likely to be seen as desired objects that are linked to men’s social capital. Additionally, the proportion of pejorative terms for female social actors is more than twice as high as it is for male social actors (38.1 vs 18.18 per cent). In sub-section 4.3, we will show that even the seemingly neutral term *women* often comes with negative evaluation.

Male social actors are represented with more complexity. Members of the incel community construct a male hierarchy (similar to heteronormative hierarchies, see Cameron and Kulick, 2006), in which some types of men are positioned as having greater social and sexual capital than others. The different groups of men are very much characterised in deterministic ways, for example in these references to chads:

(13) [E]ven female dogs love Chad

(14) [G]irls are gonna cum harder/more often with Chad simply because he’s Chad

(15) Just be yourself and get a hobby, you'll magically become an 8/10 Chad with a chin that can open cans

Example (13) implies that chads inevitably attract affection, while in example (14), the writer claims that a woman will enjoy sex more with a partner who is categorised as a chad. The sarcasm of example (15) implies that ‘chadness’ is innate and cannot be acquired. Previous research (Hawtin, 2018; Tranchese, 2019) has suggested that incels have a pseudo-scientific view of different types of men, according to which chads are superior because of their genetic make-up. Interestingly, ‘Chad’ is capitalised in all three examples and only takes an article once (‘an 8/10 Chad’). This suggests that the posters think of ‘Chad’ as a prototypical and powerful figure. As a result, chads occupy the highest position in the following taxonomy of how incels view different kinds of men (Figure 1).

[Figure 1 here]

As mentioned at the beginning of section 4, this taxonomy derives from a close reading of expanded concordance lines for terms for male social actors. *Chad(s)* are placed at the top because they are evaluated for their sexual prowess and good looks (see examples (13)-(15)). However, it should be noted that the position of *chad*(s) on the scale in Figure 1 represents what incels think society values; incels’ own view of Chads is characterised by a mix of admiration, envy and resentment. Going down the hierarchy, we find *guy(s)* as a neutral term, followed by *cuck(s)* (short for *cuckold[s]*), *manlet* and *incel(s)*, and finally, at the bottom of the hierarchy, *faggot*.

(16) I’d say we suffer a comparable amount to cucks in relationships [...] The biggest pain from both us and the cucks is that there is no way out for either of us, we’re trapped. Difference is they’re trapped due to bad life decisions leading them to be a spineless cuck, we’re trapped because of genetics.

(17) What a stupid thing to say why would a woman go for a good looking manlet when she can go for a good looking giant.

(18) Make sure to report that faggot so he gets banned. People like that just need a life.

Example (16) illustrates that *cucks* are often scorned by the writers as negative examples of less than capable men who allow themselves to be exploited by their female partners. However, cucks still rank above incels because although they choose to yield power to women, they at least have female partners. In example (17) *manlets*, i.e. short men, are evaluated negatively because of their looks. Some members of the incel community state that they are manlets themselves and even where they do not identify as such, they see manlets as unable to have relationships with women, just as incels.

Given that incels are a relatively new community, it is possible that members are still in the construction phase of their in-group identity (see Wodak et al. 2009). The expanded concordance lines for some male social actor terms suggest that posters explicitly debate their place in the male hierarchy:

(19) Are you defining a cuck to be everyone between a chad and incel? Because yeah, I’m saying be somewhere between Incel and Chad

(20) Anyone who’s not a Chad or an incel is a cuck basically

In our data, the term for the lowest category of men, *faggot*,is used in a pejorative way, even though it is not employed as a term of abuse for gay men specifically. Rather, it appears to resonate with how terms such as *gay* have been used to denote something undesirable in general (see e.g. Lalor and Rendle-Short, 2007; Woolley, 2013). This sense shows a slight shift in the way *faggot* is used as a generic out-group marker.

While it may be possible to construct a similar hierarchy for women using terms (such as *Stacies* and *Beckies*) found in other research (see for example Jaki et al., forthcoming), these words do not appear within the most frequent terms for social actors in our data. Rather, the female social actors listed in Table 3 are positioned as either neutral (e.g. ‘women’) or negative (e.g. ‘foids’[[11]](#footnote-11)).

Going beyond lexical semantics, we engaged in an appraisal analysis of a random sample of 50 concordance lines for each of the most frequent terms for gendered social actors. With the four most frequent social actor terms in Table 3 all seemingly neutral, we wanted to confirm whether or not they are used in a pejorative way in context.

4.3 Appraisal analysis of frequent gendered social actors

We applied Martin and White’s (2005) appraisal framework to a random sample of 50 concordance lines each for the terms *he, men, she* and *women*, i.e. the two most frequently occurring terms for male and female social actors.The categories of appraisal were then quantified for each term (see Figures 2-4).

The first finding of the appraisal analysis is that *he* and *men* are statistically more likely to occur than *she* and *women* (t-value= 3.36051; *p* ≤ 0.039). However, a t-test on the random samples of 50 concordance lines revealed that there is no statistical significance in the frequency with which *he/man* are appraised when compared to *she/woman* (t-value= -0.41785. *p* ≤ 0.339). The raw frequencies at which these terms are evaluated are presented in Table 4 below.

[Table 4 here]

As demonstrated in Figure 2, male social actors are judged more often than their female counterparts in terms of capacity, i.e. for being powerless(-ful) or (in)competent.

[Figure 2 here]

For example:

(21) [E]very year less and less men are going to post secondary school and are being replaced by girls.

(22) He will probably never be a “Chad/Tyrone”, but he will be a decent betabucks kind of guy later on in life.

(23) If a normie ascends by looksmaxxing, careermaxxing or statusmaxxing, he may get someone who is couple of points down his looksmatch.

In (21), the poster draws on social values relating to the number of people entering post-secondary education, something which is seen as positive. Stating that ‘less and less men’ are doing so is therefore a negative judgement of a capacity: men are becoming less educated and thus less able to have professional careers. Examples (22) and (23) demonstrate once more how members of the incel online community negotiate a hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity (see Figure 1), here by discussing how certain groups of men may be (in)capable of moving up the hierarchy. In example (23) in particular, normies are positioned as being not as desirable as chads but, by implication, more desirable than incels can ever be. This suggests that those who meet or approximate societal views of heteronormativity are seen as more positive than members of the non-normative incel community. At the same time though, the use of *normie* demonstrates how normativity is a central issue to incels. Incels have a negative view of both normies and themselves (e.g. “Incels and normie men bring down the average [rating of looks] significantly”); they reject what is seen as socially normal but also suffer from perceiving themselves as non-normative.

The data do not show much judgement of social actors in terms of normality itself. Normality is a complex category as both its presence and absence can be seen as either positive or negative: in example (24), the poster positively judges a man for becoming special, while example (25) negatively judges a woman for becoming increasingly ordinary and less discerning in her choice of boyfriend.

(24) since he went viral he’s become a model [...] He has status.

(25) She went from a diamond heir to a university student to a low tier movie star to a TV show actor.

Examples (24) and (25) also illustrate a tendency in the data that female social actors are more likely to be judged negatively: they are judged in eight negative categories, while male social actors are judged in only six negative categories, and just over half of all negative judgements (55.56 per cent) are made about female rather than male social actors. This suggests that incels are resentful of women, negatively judging who they cannot get close to. In particular, female social actors are judged more often in terms of negative propriety and only they are judged for being dishonest. In other words, incels view female social actors as immoral and deceitful. Judgement as immoral is evidenced in the following example:

(26) I’ve seen plenty of women admit to doing sex work for easy dough whilst studying.

When women engage in (usually sexual) non-committal relationships, contributors to the forum view such behaviour as reflecting the decline and immorality of modern society. In contrast, men are not judged negatively for being in non-monogamous relationships in the data, suggesting a double standard. At the same time, women are themselves judged negatively for being two-faced and dishonest:

(27) Don’t forget, “it’s ok to cry! You can show me your emotions!” Then as soon as you do, you’re a pussy and she’s gone

Incels thus view women as both dishonest and immoral, expressing a sexist ideology that sees women as a group as negative. In a similar vein, the appraisal analysis revealed that when incels judge women as having capacity, it is in all but one instance the capacity to victimise men. For example:

(28) Women can manipuate a kid [to have sex with her].

(29) It really shows the power of women if you are that ugly and bragging about using men.

Although Martin and White state that appreciation is the way speakers and writers can express their attitudes to ‘things we make and performances we give, but also [...] natural phenomena’ (2005: 56), appreciation is used to evaluate male and female social actors in our data. Summarised in Figure 3, the analysis of appreciation demonstrates a preoccupation with looks and physical attractiveness.

[Figure 3 here]

In line with the overall negativity found in the corpus — 56.3 per cent of all appraisal tokens are negative —, gendered social actors are more likely to be negatively appreciated for aesthetics, albeit with some differentiation:

(30) Women in their 30’s who are starting to get saggy and out of shape start wearing those.

(31) She does look retarded indeed. Still her bones are pretty good so people who dont mind her “retarded” look will find her very attractive.

(32) [H]e should put on at least 30 pounds, other than that he looks pretty good.

The final appraisal category, affect, is slightly different from the attitudes encoded as judgement and appreciation (Bednarek, 2009: 167). Affect can either express an emotional reaction to the behaviours and characteristics evaluated by the other two categories or ascribe the potential to cause a feeling to a person, entity or process (e.g. *a lovable bloke*, *a worrying development*). Our analysis of the random 200 concordance lines for the most frequent gendered social actors confirmed that although female social actors are appraised more often overall (56 instances compared to 63 instances for male social actors), the percentages of affect are very similar for both groups, namely 17.68 per cent for male vs 17.46 percent for female social actors.

[Figure 4 here]

However, what emotions are ascribed to them differs: only male social actors are represented as being (un)happy (e.g. “Men feel bad about themselves when they are socially isolated”), but their female counterparts are more often presented in terms of what they do (not) want. Such inclination is almost always towards or against men, providing further evidence that women are not seen independently of men in the corpus:

(35) You’re unnapealing to women because you are too desperate.

(36) [T]his guy might have options with women but he’s by no means a looks-Chad.

Tellingly, women do not even feature as actors in the above examples, instead appearing in prepositional phrases while the focus is on the emotions and looks of men.

To sum up our analysis, we can say that especially gendered social actors play a crucial role in the incel community, which is after all defined by the sexuality of its members. Notably, while there is little differentiation between women other than in terms of their ‘sexual market value’, different types of men are ranked in a hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity. Women are largely defined in relation to men, and the lexical semantics of the relevant terms show a more pronounced negative evaluation of female social actors. This is corroborated by patterns of appraisal, as female social actors attract negative evaluation more frequently than men (55.56 vs 44.44 per cent). There are also differences in how gendered social actors are evaluated: although appreciation in terms of aesthetics is shared, men tend to be represented as (in)capable and women as immoral, dishonest and capable of hurting men. In the subsequent concluding section, we will discuss what these findings mean for the ideologies displayed by the in-group of incels.

**5. Discussion and conclusion**

We have demonstrated that normativity is a central concept to the incel community: incels construct themselves as normative at the level of the in-group but non-normative in relation to societal ideals. This non-normative identity in relation to societal values appears to make incels construct female social actors and certain other male social actors as out-groups. Male social actors which conform to social norms and expectations of masculinity are seen as inherently more desirable than incels and hence perceived as the reason why incels are unable to have sex with women. Incels therefore both admire and resent the men they see at the top of the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity. Female social actors, on the other hand, are not placed in a hierarchy of different groups.

Moving beyond lexical semantics allowed for a deeper understanding of how the most frequently mentioned male and female social actors were judged. One of the benefits of approaching texts with both corpus methods and a critical focus derived from queer linguistics is that doing so ‘facilitat[es] a more comprehensive analysis that is not restricted to the (detailed qualitative) analysis of a limited number of examples and, as a consequence, provides results that are taken to be generalisable and replicable’ (Motschenbacher 2018: 150). This corpus-assisted critical discourse study has revealed multiple aspects about how incels use language to lexicalise ideologies towards gendered social actors. The sexist language used about female social actors suggests that there is a level of frustration in the incel community towards women and society more generally. We further argue that incels use language to position themselves as inferior to some other men, establishing men who are seen as normative within broader society as an out-group.

The findings of this paper open up several lines of future inquiry. For example, future research could examine how the incel community construct ideologies towards gendered social actors in comparison to other groups within the manosphere. Although some work has already been conducted on this (see Author 2019), especially appraisal analysis of gendered social actors would be needed to examine whether or not these sexist ideologies are confined to the incel fora or extend to the manosphere more generally. Additionally, more studies are needed that examine different types of non-normative heterosexualities, as the incel community is unlikely be to representative of all such communities.

This research has laid the groundwork for identifying the ideologies shared within he incel community on Reddit, but more work is required to explore how these ideologies are linguistically manifested in different fora. Furthermore, we still need to understand how this community is able to attract others who may then adopt these problematic ideologies. In other words, how do people find the incel community and begin to identity as one if its members? We need to better understand how the media represent incels and how incels on different fora attempt to engage with those who could be interested in incel ideology and how they try to mainstream these problematic ideologies.

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1. The fact that incels wish to have sexual relationships sets them apart from asexual people. See Hinderliter (2016) on the online discourse of the latter group. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A subreddit is banned when Reddit deletes it altogether, while quarantining means that the subreddit can no longer be found by searching the platform itself and can only be accessed after a warning about its offensive content. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.reddit.com/r/IncelTears/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The subreddit was quarantined at the time of data collection and has since been banned (October 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. We retained all idiosyncrasies of spelling, grammar and punctuation as we found them in the original posts. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. We also ran a keyword analysis in SketchEngine using the EnTenTen 15 reference corpus, but found that usernames and low frequency words came up as the most statistically significant keywords. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. We are aware that by using phrases such as *men and women* or *male and female*, we reproduce a gender binary that does not give justice to the dynamic multitude of gender identities that people can experience. However, the notion of a gender binary is a cornerstone of incel ideology and as such reflected in our data. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 22.22 per cent of all instances of *fuck* and 12.14 per cent ofall instances of *fucking* are used literally in the corpus. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Cope* refers to the methods incels use to make themselves temporarily feel better about their situation. *Rope* is a metonymic reference to suicide. The two terms can be combined, as in *i’m going to cope on a rope*, meaning that the only way that a person can deal with the situation is by ending their life. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Roasties* refers to women who have sex regularly. A cross between a metaphor and metonymy, the word refers to a woman’s labia, which incels believe to resemble roast beef when women are sexually very active [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Foids* is is short for *femoids*, a derogatory term for women who do not give attention to incels. They are typically characterised as being more interested in chads and being active feminists. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)