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“Don’t Work for Soyociety:” Involuntary Celibacy and Unemployment

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ABSTRACT

Surveys of involuntary celibates (“incels”) suggest that they tend to be not in education, employment or training (NEET) at disproportionately high rates. However, it remains unclear whether and how being NEET is connected to incels’ ideology and life circumstances. To investigate this, we conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of over a thousand comments posted on the main incel forum, *incels.is*. We found that many users promoted unemployment and social disengagement as a form of retaliation against a society they feel has harmed them. These users often encouraged other incels to embrace a life of isolation and used employment status as an assessment of commitment to the incel identity. Users also reported experiences of discrimination, bullying, and feeling incompetent at workplaces and educational institutions. We conclude that, for incels, being unemployed can be both an ideological stance and a consequence of their experienced or perceived marginalization.

1 | Introduction

Involuntary celibates, better known as “incels,” are the subject of increasing media and scholarly attention. The term incel represents a male-dominant community, whose members are defined not only by their inability to find a romantic or sexual partner but also by extreme and sometimes violent misogyny. The limited demographic data on incels who are active in on-line communities suggest that they number in the tens of thousands and are primarily young men under the age of 30 living in Europe and in North America (Beauchamp 2019; Anti-Defamation League 2020).

Incels are considered part of the “manosphere,” an umbrella term that includes a number of interconnected misogynistic communities (Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2022). The manosphere also includes groups such as Pick-Up Artists, Men’s Rights Activists, and Men Going Their Own Way. These groups espouse different ideologies and grievances but are

united behind anti-feminist, dehumanizing ideas about women, and the belief in male supremacy. For incels, women—as well as the larger society that enables them—are to blame for their sexlessness. They argue that prior to the feminist movement of the 1960s, all men were easily able to find sexual partners. Nowadays, however, women are said to have total control over the sexual marketplace, which allows them to elevate their social status. As a result, a small number of ultra-masculine men—“Chads”—end up with all potential partners, leaving a large number of lesser-status men alone. Being deprived of the sexual experiences they feel they deserve leads many self-identified incels to anger, nihilistic depression, and in some cases, violence (Jaki et al. 2019; Tolentino 2018).

Most of the previous scholarly work on incels has focused on their misogynistic rhetoric and propensity to commit violent acts (e.g., O’Donnell and Shor 2022; Hoffman, Jacob, and Shapiro 2020; Speckhard et al. 2021). Well-known incidents of incel violence include the attack of Elliot Rodger, who killed six people and

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injured 14 more in Isla Vista, California, and of Alek Minassian, whose van attack in Toronto was responsible for another 11 deaths. Since then, scholars, governments, and activist groups have increasingly referred to incels as a potential terrorist group (Sganga 2022; O'Donnell and Shor 2022; Hoffman, Jacob, and Shapiro 2020).

Despite this growing scholarly interest in the incel community, some aspects of the incel subculture, particularly those less directly related to misogyny and violence, remain understudied. One such aspect is the relationship between incels and higher education/employment. Existing research indicates that many North American young men today are struggling in the labor market (Yarrow 2018), and that women are rapidly outpacing men in work and education (Reeves 2024). However, incels appear to be struggling with employment and higher education to an even greater extent. Popular incel forums contain discussions of being unemployed on nearly every page.

Empirical research has recently begun to uncover new evidence regarding the employment status of the incel community. One survey of 670 incels, conducted by the Canadian-based Organization for the Prevention of Violence, found that nearly one in four participants reported that they were NEET—not in education, employment, or training (Jones, Hastings, and Stolte 2020). More recently, Costello et al. (2022) found that incels were significantly more likely to be NEET than their non-incel peers, and relatedly, more likely to still be living with their parents. Similarly, in a study of 561 incels, Whittaker, Thomas, and Costello (2024) found that 18% reported being NEET. Despite evidence establishing the correlation between being an incel and being NEET, the precise nature of this connection and its possible sources remain underexplored in the academic literature.

Studying this relationship may provide additional insights into the life circumstances and motivations of incels. It may also be important for designing potential interventions and programs for assistance to community members who are, or feel that they are, marginalized. In this article, we therefore explore incels' discourse around employment and education, seeking to better understand how they perceive the status of being NEET.

1.1 | Theoretical Framework: Why Might Those Who Are NEET Become Incels?

1.1.1 | Women's Preferences and NEET

Studies suggest women have a strong and consistent preference for men with higher status and demonstrated ambition, as these men are more likely to provide resources for them and their offspring (Buss and Schmitt 2019). Although some scholars attribute this preference to evolutionary causes, women's preference for high status men is also clearly shaped by social factors. Historical economic disparities between men and women—the result of patriarchal norms and structures that have forced women to economically depend on men—have encouraged women to select higher status partners (Moore and Cassidy 2007). Societal gender roles also influence partner preferences, as the endorsement of traditional gender roles is predictive of women's

desire for a high-status mate (March and Grieve 2014). In cultures where the ideal of men as breadwinners is stronger, unemployed men are less likely than employed men to maintain a relationship (Gonalons-Pons and Gangl 2021).

This preference renders men who are not participating in higher education or the labor market likely to have a harder time finding a romantic/sexual partner. This, in turn, may make them more likely to identify with the incel community and to fall victim to its misogynistic rhetoric. Indeed, evidence suggests that men who perceive themselves to be low in mate value are most inclined toward misogyny (Bosson, Rousis, and Felig 2022). Thus, men who improve their economic prospects and status may be more likely to succeed in the dating market, which in turn could reduce their misogynistic beliefs.

This body of research suggests that being NEET is likely to hinder young men's success in finding a romantic partner. However, some caution is needed in regard to evolutionary arguments, as incels tend to selectively focus on certain findings from evolutionary psychology research and overstate their importance. As Costello et al. (2023) explain, "Incels (and non-incel single men) significantly overestimated the importance of physical attractiveness and financial prospects to women, and underestimated the importance of intelligence, kindness, and humor" (p. 1). Incels also tend to cite scientific claims about the importance of attractiveness and socio-economic status in mate selection in a highly deterministic manner, often leading them to an anti-self-improvement ideology (i.e., Preston, Halpin, and Maguire 2021). In addition, evolutionary explanations of women's behavior are often used in harmful ways in incel's rhetoric, whereas the role of misogyny in shaping their beliefs is downplayed. For example, incels frequently weaponize the concept of "hypergammy"—the idea that women are biologically wired to find a mate with the best possible genes—to not only support their hyperbolic sense of victimhood, but also to argue that women are responsible for their own experiences of violence and domestic abuse (Sugiura 2021).

1.1.2 | Marginalization and NEET

Men who join the incel community may share certain characteristics that contribute to their marginalization and inability to find a partner while also making them less likely to successfully pursue higher education or obtain employment in the first place. Such traits include social awkwardness and ineptitude, various mental disorders (e.g., mood disorders, anxiety, emotional disorders, and drug abuse), autism, and failure to complete high school education.

Indeed, the literature suggests that depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues are common in incel communities (Costello et al. 2023; Brunt and Taylor 2020; Speckhard et al. 2021; Jones, Hastings, and Stolte 2020). Even more than other extremist groups, incels suffer from feelings of hopelessness, estrangement, nonbelonging, and feel that their identity has been imposed on them rather than carefully chosen (Radicalisation Awareness Network 2021). There is also evidence of a strong link between incelism and autism. A recent study from

the Anti-Defamation League found that 40% of over 600 incels on *incels.co* self-reported a diagnosis of autism (Anti-Defamation League 2020; Broyd et al. 2022; Williams et al. 2021). Because autism, social ineptitude, and mental disorders are tightly tied to difficulties in pursuing higher education and employment (Palumbo 2021; OECD 2012), it stands to reason that many incels would be rendered NEET regardless of the ideologies they adopt. However, it is also plausible that incel ideologies push certain individuals to consciously choose to be NEET. In the next section we thus explore the role of incel ideology and rhetoric in shaping these beliefs.

1.2 | Why Might Incels be Overrepresented in NEET?

1.2.1 | The Blackpill Ideology and NEET

The relationship between inceldom and NEET may be at least partly motivated by the fundamental incel ideology, often referred to as “the Blackpill.” Members of manosphere groups, including incels, generally converge around the idea of the “Redpill,” the belief that modern society is inherently gynocentric. In this view, women only seek hypergamous relationships and are highly deceptive toward men, who they see as disposable (Van Valkenburgh 2021; Hodapp 2017; Ging 2017). To cope with the harsh realities represented by the Redpill, members of manosphere groups commonly turn to self-improvement and related strategies aimed at becoming more successful with women. The pick-up artist (PUA) community, for example, aims to teach men how to manipulate women into sleeping with them. Even some more mainstream communities, like bodybuilding and self-help forums, frequently reference Redpill ideologies when teaching men how to become their most masculine and confident selves.

The incel community shares common roots and multiple ideologies with the PUA community (Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019). However, incels split off from the PUA community primarily because many men were frustrated with their continual lack of success attracting women and disillusioned by using the techniques promoted by PUA. They therefore formed their own community and developed an alternative to the Redpill: the Blackpill. The Blackpill refers to the idea that dating and social success are determined entirely by looks and genetics (“lookism”), and that men who lack specific physical attributes have no hope of ever becoming attractive to women or even accepted by society (Preston, Halpin, and Maguire 2021; Fowler 2022; Green, Fowler, and Palombi 2023). Unlike PUA and other Redpill groups, incels tend to reject the traditional notions of alpha male and dominant charismatic masculinity, also known as hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995). Instead, they regularly embrace a self-deprecating model of masculinity, in which being the least masculine, or most “beta,” is prized (Ging 2017).

The incel wiki explains that “the Redpill promotes an individualistic approach to dating that often blames incels and low-status men’s attitudes for their lack of mating success. These differences in outlook frequently enable tensions between Redpillers and Blackpillers.” In other words, those who believe

in the Redpill advocate self-improvement, while most of those who have become Blackpilled believe there is nothing they can do to improve their chances of success with women. Being Blackpilled is a near universal feature of incel community members. A 2020 poll from the Anti-Defamation League’s Center on Extremism, which surveyed 655 members of *incels.co*, found that 95.4% of these respondents believed the Blackpill ideology to be an accurate reflection of their reality.

The Blackpill ideology suggests that trying to improve one’s life circumstances is futile because no effort will be sufficient to alleviate inceldom. Indeed, many incels question their agency and locus of control, often leading to general nihilism and feelings of hopelessness (The Moonshot Threat Bulletin 2020; O’Malley et al. 2020). This may, in turn, contribute to a desire to disengage from mainstream society, particularly as a higher degree of social alienation may be taken as a sign of “true” inceldom and therefore be praised by other incels. A recent report from the radicalisation awareness network of the EU suggests that being unemployed is considered a well-respected status amongst the incel community because it “represents the act of removing oneself from an oppressive society” (2021). As such, although initially understood as confined to the domain of sexual success, Blackpill ideology can be extended to other domains and used to praise unemployment as an act of commitment to nihilism and social disengagement. Moreover, the Blackpill ideology provides a rationale for incels’ self-perception as victimized men who are not afforded the same status and benefits in society as their “alpha” counterparts. Being Blackpilled may therefore contribute to a rejection of hegemonic masculine norms and activities, including the norm of being the only or primary breadwinner and of holding a high-status position in the workforce.

1.2.2 | Misogynistic Ideologies and NEET

The rise of incels, as well as other groups that form the manosphere, has been concurrent with women’s greater presence in universities and some sectors of the labor force. Bratich and Banet-Weiser (2019) suggest that the failures of the neoliberal economic system following the 2007 economic crisis has led to declining self confidence among men, mirrored in the shift from pick-up artists to incels. From this perspective, changing economic circumstances have pushed these men away from the self-help oriented, “bootstraps” mentality associated with neoliberalism and toward nihilism and blaming others for their situation. For instance, some men believe that women are “stealing” jobs from more deserving men due to affirmative action initiatives (Crosby, Iyer, and Sincharoen 2006; Carlsson and Sinclair 2021).

For incels specifically, misogynistic beliefs regarding the presence of women in the workforce may be contributing to widespread disengagement from the labor market. These beliefs include the notion that women are more likely to be hired at the expense of men due to “diversity hiring,” as is common amongst men’s rights and other far-right groups, or that female HR staff actively discriminate against men, particularly unattractive men (Watson 2024; Carian et al. 2022). But they may also be related to a more general desire among many incels to avoid women’s company. Certain orthodox religious individuals, such as orthodox

Jews, sometimes explain their avoidance of certain positions and workspaces with the exposure to “immodest” women and the danger of temptation (Ben-David, Zaidman, and Ben-Porat 2022; Kalagy 2020). Similarly, incels may also avoid workplaces where women abound, as these spaces may serve as a constant reminder of their failure to obtain or maintain romantic and sexual relationships.

In sum, there is compelling evidence that young men who are struggling with employment and education are more likely to be involuntarily celibate, and that men who join the incel community are exposed to ideologies that encourage them to be NEET. The present study will analyze incels’ discourse surrounding work and education in order to further explore how both their marginalization and ideology contribute to their overrepresentation in the NEET population.

2 | Methods

2.1 | Data and Sampling

We conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of threads posted to *incels.is*. We chose *incels.is* as our data source due to the high amount of traffic it receives—having accumulated almost 20,000 regular members since 2017—as well as its ease of public access. We scraped 100 pages of the website using Python code, yielding approximately 10,000 total discussion threads posted between October 12 and December 3, 2022. Each thread consisted of a title post and replies from other users. In a pilot study we looked at all threads in the discussion board over the course of two nonconsecutive weeks and selected all those whose titles contained language relating to employment, school or studying. We found 10 keywords that appeared most commonly in these threads (titles and replies): “study, school, NEET, job, work, money, career, wage, employ, rot.” We then sampled the 516 threads whose titles contained these keywords from the larger sample of 10,000 threads mentioned above. To make the analysis more manageable, we randomly selected one third of the threads from this subsample of 516 threads. This resulted in 171 discussion threads, which we analyze in the present study. The majority of these threads included numerous replies from other users, averaging around 6 replies per title post. This yielded a total sample of 1258 comments (171 title posts and 1087 replies). Given that we analyzed data that are publicly available online and did not attach any identifiable information to any members of the discussion board, no ethical approval was required for this study.

2.2 | Coding

We based our analytical strategy on two guiding questions, corresponding with the theoretical literature discussed above: (1) how is being unemployed or NEET related to incel ideologies? and (2) What nonideological barriers do incels present as reasons for their lack of participation in work, education, and training? We adopted an inductive coding strategy to analyze the comments in our sample. All comments were first sorted into six basic themes: pro-NEET arguments, anti-NEET arguments, describing harm at school/work, describing the struggle to find work, blaming women

for a lack of success with work and school, and inquiring with others. Replies to threads were coded independently of the thread’s title. For instance, one thread titled “I’ve had over 50 job interviews and I’m still unemployed” was categorized as “inability to find or perform work.” But the response of “just spare yourself the agony of endless rejection and NEETmaxx” was categorized as “pro-NEET arguments.” Similar themes were then clustered together to generate organizing themes, which are the higher-order concepts that capture the shared meanings underlying multiple basic themes (Attride-Stirling 2001). This process resulted in four organizing themes: political/ideological arguments about being NEET, boundary policing, perceived discrimination, and bullying and marginalization (see Supporting Information S1: Parts I through IV of the Appendix for a more detailed description of themes and the process of moving from the original quotes to basic themes and then to higher-level organizing themes).

In the findings section we include direct quotes from users. We chose not to identify these users by their usernames to protect their identities. Some quotes contain terms that are part of incel jargon and are not commonly used outside of the community. Definitions for the most salient of these terms can be found in Supporting Information S1: Part I of the Appendix (most definitions are taken from the Incel wiki page).

3 | Results

The analysis yielded four main themes: political/ideological arguments about being NEET, boundary policing, perceived discrimination, and bullying and marginalization. Most of the findings relate to unemployment and participation in the workforce, whereas several comments in the bullying and marginalization theme also discuss higher education/school.

Many of the users in the sample promoted unemployment as a way of getting back at a society they feel has harmed them. They therefore advocated that others should also embrace a life of isolation and disengagement. A smaller proportion of users disagreed with this argument. However, in doing so they risked being labeled “fakecels” by other users due to the intense boundary policing on *incels.is*. Users also commonly believed that they were discriminated against in the hiring process and reported experiences of bullying, as well as feelings of incompetence in work and education.

3.1 | Political and Ideological Arguments

Approximately one quarter of the total comments in the sample discussed the ideological basis for refraining from working or studying (“being NEET”) and debated the ways in which incels should interact with work and school.

3.1.1 | “We All Should be NEETs Where Possible”: Arguments Against Working (Pro-NEET)

Most posters engaging in this debate argued that “NEETdom,” the state of being NEET, should be praised and encouraged because it

represents a form of incel rebellion against society. For instance, one user stated that “We all should be NEETs where possible. If not, at least we should minimize our contribution to the soyociety which hates us all as much as possible.” Another user wrote:

You should go and get welfare from the soyociety. Abuse the generosity they afford to foids and get money that way as long as they let you get it there. If taking from society isn't an option, go and work as little as possible.

In response to a post outlining the decision of one user to quit his job, another user added, “Based. Don't work for a society that hates you.” These users believe that incels should be encouraged to take back from a society that they feel has harmed them rather than contribute to it by working or becoming educated. Some of them further argue that incels should be entitled to recompense from the government, such as “they should give us as much money as we want. It's just a compensation for our sufferings” or “I think we should be exempt from taxes or at least get some kind of social services.” The sufferings referred to by the user stem from the absence of a female romantic partner. Many users share the belief that this absence renders working pointless. As one of them wrote:

What's the point of going out and putting those 8 hours of hard work only to come home to loneliness and nobody to enjoy your money with. How can you even be motivated to do anything if you can't even have no bitch at home waiting for you and congratulating you.

Another user concurred, stating: “All of those hard labor jobs were created back then when men actually had spouses and families to feed. Now you need it to live but don't have the same important incentives.” Similarly, working is deemed useless if it does not directly serve the goal of improving relationship prospects. Or as one user put it: “Moneymaxxing is pointless. It won't cure your incelldom.”

3.1.2 | “Go Outside and Try at Least”: Anti-NEET Arguments

Although the majority of comments relating to the NEETdom debate encouraged users to disengage from participation in the workplace, a nontrivial proportion—approximately one quarter of such comments—expressed resistance to this narrative. Many of these arguments were linked to general self-improvement strategies, a sharp contrast from the idea of surrendering to a life of isolation. For instance, one user wrote:

We should be doing our absolute best to self-improve... even if it means working and suffering 10 × more than everyone else. You guys should start adopting good habits like going for walks, eating healthy, and getting sunlight. While normies are partying like crazy, eating like shit, destroying their bodies through all the dumb-assery like alcohol; we should be focused on doing the opposite so we can ultimately be the biggest winners.

This logic was applied by some users to the realm of employment. In reference to getting a job, another user stated that “It's a much better place to start instead of being a LDARcel. Actively working toward something will make you proud of yourself. Your brain will even make feel good hormones. The depression will lessen.” A user who responded to this comment agreed: “LDAR destroyed my dopamine receptors, at least wageslaving and doing something productive gives me a meaning.” Others expressed frustration with the glorification of the NEET lifestyle and a desire for a more positive and encouraging rhetoric: “We need to celebrate also, not just moan and cry... Being depressed or bragging how you suffer in depression doesn't make you based. Go outside and try at least.”

Users who were opposed to the glorification of NEETdom could sometimes be found providing advice and encouragement to those who wanted to be involved in the labor market. For example, one user asked: “I quit my job, where do I go from here?” Although most responses told the poster to embrace unemployment, some did give concrete suggestions: “Find something you're good at, something you enjoy,” “Taxi drivers make decent money,” “Temp agencies will always get you a new office gig,” or “Work for the government, there's a million open jobs.”

Although this anti-NEET stance represents a minority of the comments, it is a vocal one, pushing back on the nihilism that permeates the incel subculture and advocating for self-improvement and social integration.

3.1.3 | “Only Fakecels and Normies Get Jobs”: Gatekeeping Incelldom Through NEETdom

The pro- and anti-NEET debate is inherently shaped by certain social dynamics within the incel subculture. *Incels.is* is intentionally designed to maintain rigid boundaries around the incel community. Only men are permitted to create accounts on the forum, and members deemed to have the potential to be successful with women—which might simply mean being above average height—are regularly banned by moderators. As part of the active process of policing and maintaining these boundaries, users often accuse others of being “fakecels,” which is constructed as the opposite of the real incel, the “trucel.”

“Trucels” argue that they experience incelldom more intensely than their “fakecel” peers. Although incelldom itself is defined only by a lack of sexual/romantic success, “trucels” claim to be alienated from society in a deeper and more authentic sense. In the context of the debate for and against working, those who do choose to work may have that choice used as evidence for them being fakecels. For example, one user argued that “only fakecels and normies get jobs and help the soyociety who hates them and wants them dead. Real trucels are based NEETS.” Another said “trucels enjoy neetmaxxing in their basement while normie scum go and break their backs wageslaving.” Some users even described the contrast between trucels and fakecels in terms of a moral obligation: “as trucel you need to avoid wageslaving at all” or “trucels shouldn't work.” Similarly, those who mentioned being successfully employed were often singled out with comments like: “Fakecel if you have a job, no one wants to hire a trucel” or

“only fakecels wageslave.” Some employed members even faced direct hostility through strong language such as “STEP THE FUCK OFF FUCKIN FAKECEL SCUM!!” As such, incels who work or push back against pro-NEET narratives risk alienation from what many of them perceive as their primary community.

3.2 | Perceived Discrimination in the Job Market

The most common theme discussed in our sample—appearing in approximately 30% of all comments—pertained to various sources of perceived discrimination, which many incels believe hinder their ability to find or maintain work.

3.2.1 | “Job Discrimination Against Unattractive Men Is Reality:” Lookism and the “Blackpill”

The Blackpill ideology—the idea that physical appearance is the primary determinant of men’s dating success—was not limited to sexual and romantic prospects. Rather, many users in our sample relied on Blackpill narratives to explain why they struggled to be hired. For example, one thread that asked “Does ugliness have a large effect on your career?” received overwhelming affirmative responses. One user wrote: “Not only does it affect your career opportunities, but pretty much every aspect of your entire life. Lookism in society goes far deeper than just being a virgin.” Another agreed, writing: “Job discrimination against unattractive men is reality... if you were a woman you would have been easily hired with no experience at all.” One user even seemed angry that the question was being posed in the first place:

Looks permeate everything. EVERYTHING. How many times does this need to be said? How many studies showing parents love ugly children less, that for every inch of height your earnings go up or the million halo effect examples need to be posted before you fully swallow the Blackpill?

Some incels further argued that looks matter in the workplace even beyond employability and hiring processes: “Ugly and/or short men are less likely to get promotions and are thought to be lazier and harder to work with than their good looking/tall counterparts,” “it’ll be much harder for us to be promoted,” and “to do well you have to look like you’re good at your job, rather than also being good at it.” Such comments demonstrate the extension of the premise that looks determine romantic success, with incels adopting a similarly deterministic attitude in other realms of life, such as the labor market.

3.2.2 | “Every Single Time I’ve Been Hired Was by a Male Manager”: Blaming Women and Progressivism

Incels believe that the discrimination they experience on the basis of looks is perpetuated predominantly by women. The entry of women into the job market is therefore viewed by many of them as a primary reason for their struggles to find work. One user lamented that “it used to be [that] toilets stayed home and didn’t disrupt the job market. Now they are direct competition

driving down wages and career moggging incels.” Indeed, women now outnumber men in the college-educated labor force (Fry 2024), and 58% of BAs awarded in 2020 in the United States went to women (Reeves 2024). However, the misogynistic views held by incels are likely leading them to disproportionately focus on this factor while neglecting other elements that likely also contribute to their NEET status.

The growing entrance of women into the workplace is also associated with larger ideas of liberalism, progressivism, equity, and diversity, which many incels see as threat to their success. One user explicitly blamed affirmative action policies for his difficulties in obtaining a job:

You know why we can't get the job? It's basically because we are not a black foid. Seriously, every fucking job I apply to have this note at the end of the advertisement: “Application of women, people of color and LGBTQ individuals are especially desired”... If that's not a discrimination, then I don't know what is.

The idea that men are being discriminated against in the job market is commonplace amongst many manosphere communities (Dickel and Evolvi 2022). However, incels believe they experience this worse than other men due to discrimination based on physical appearance. Most incels further believe that HR and hiring roles are largely populated by women, which in turn decreases their odds of securing a job. Or as one user explains to another who complained about not getting interviews:

After you get an interview, you'll see it's mostly foids who do this kind of thing. So if they don't like your face or anything else it's pretty much over. They can be as petty and arbitrary as they want and there is no accountability or way to come back from it.

Another user concurred:

Too many worthless young, liberal minded hiring manager foids who will not give me a chance despite a hard work ethic, intelligent mind. Every single time I have ever been hired was by a male manager. Even in this sense women are insanely entitled.

In sum, although many incels believe that all members of society discriminate against them based on their looks, the increasing presence of women in the workplace, along with diversity and inclusion policies, are perceived as especially threatening. Belief in the Blackpill leads these users to believe that no amount of effort they exert will significantly change their career prospects or improve their life circumstances.

3.3 | Experiences of Bullying, Estrangement, and Marginalization

Although Blackpilled and misogynistic discourses were very common in our sample, some incels ascribed their lack of

participation in higher education and the workforce mainly to mental health challenges and past experiences of social humiliation, harassment, bullying, and ostracization.

3.3.1 | “Coworkers Are Bullying Me:” Harassment Experiences

Approximately 15% of the comments in the sample reflected on experiences of harassment and bullying at school or at work. Multiple users reported being bullied at school. For instance, one user wrote: “I still have bad dreams about school horrors and bullying to this day.” Another user responded: “The scars of bullying last a lifetime, what you experience in your formative years shapes who you become.” And yet another similarly commented that “everyone bullied me. Only a few didn’t, but usually because they themselves were outcasts or victims of bullying.” These negative experiences mostly begin at school, but they then often spill over into the workplace. Many conversation threads began with lines such as “Coworkers don’t stop teasing me about my looks” or “Coworkers are bullying me.” In contrast to much of the incel rhetoric, which blames women for the obstacles they experience, bullying is primarily reported to be perpetuated by other men. One user wrote that “middle school and high school are basically giant genetic contests for males. Any male with even the slightest physical flaw is a potential target for bullying. Those with the most flaws are targeted by males with fewer flaws.”

Although none of the users in the sample directly cited bullying as their reason for being NEET, it is nevertheless a prominent pillar in their experiences of both school and work. These experiences often lead incels to feel alienated from both male friendships and male communities. Self-protecting from experiences of harm may therefore be one of the main reasons for incels’ disengagement from both higher education and workplaces.

3.3.2 | “This World Wasn’t Made for People Like Us:” Feelings of Estrangement and Incompetence

Many of the incels who struggle in school and at work—15% of the comments in our sample—pointed to a general feeling of incompetence and/or nonbelonging in these settings. For example, one user wrote: “I’ve been looking for [a job] the whole year. I’ve had many interviews but i’m not wanted.” Another user responded: “This world wasn’t made for people like us.” Many others believed that their lack of social skills was a major reason they struggle to be hired. Users wrote comments such as “I don’t even bother sending the applications in because I’m too socially anxious” or “I get called to interviews every now and then but I never pass them because I have no social skills.” Even incels who were able to secure jobs often reported struggling to maintain them. One user wrote that “I was never able to hold a job for more than 5 months. After that point I actually feel even being homeless would be more desirable.” Another said: “I used to work but I just can’t anymore.”

Similar narratives were used regarding experiences with higher education, which often serve as a precursor to employment

difficulties: “I tried to go to [a] community college. I failed all my classes because I’m horrible at taking tests and leaving my house for classes. I can’t do wage jobs for the same reasons. It all gives me anxiety.” In sum, many users were clearly struggling to participate in normative institutions, such as school and work, largely due to social anxiety, social awkwardness, feelings of estrangement, and a host of mental problems and challenges.

3.3.3 | “Autists Have No Place in the Job Market:” Autism and Neurodivergence

Finally, autism was often mentioned in conversations around bullying and feelings of incompetence. The terms “autism” and “autistic” were mentioned over 100 times in relation to experiences of bullying and struggling to fit in, both at school and at work. This finding is consistent with previous literature, which suggests that the incel community includes a relatively high share of individuals with autism (Costello et al. 2022; Whittaker, Thomas, and Costello 2024; Broyd et al. 2022, Williams et al. 2021). Many of the comments referring to autism expressed deep feelings of a lack of belonging and unemployability. These included comments such as “no one wants to hire an autistic because they will have to work with us everyday,” “no one likes interacting with an autistic. It’s over for us,” and “autists have no place in the job market.”

4 | Discussion

We conducted a thematic analysis of comments on *incels.is*, examining users’ experiences with school and work. Our findings show that most incels who participate in these discussions support and even glorify a NEET lifestyle. For some, it is an ideological stance: a way to exact revenge on society by not contributing to the economy and to a society which they believe has wronged them. Others, however, appear to simply embrace unemployment/NEET as an unavoidable destiny given their (perceived or real) physical, social, and mental limitations. Those who do hold jobs or push back against the glorification of the NEET lifestyle risk being labeled “fakecels” and consequently becoming ostracized from the community. The belief that incels experience discrimination in the hiring process due to lookism and the perceived power of women to determine workplace hiring and promotion decisions was also common. Finally, many users reported experiences of bullying or nonbelonging in school and the workplace, as well as feelings of incompetence and incapability.

The findings suggest that a large proportion of incels believe that they and others should disengage from society and embrace a solitary lifestyle. That is, rather than being confined to the realm of sexual relationships, the nihilism represented by the incel Blackpill ideology permeates other aspects of life. Most incels seem to reject the self-improvement strategies advocated by other online masculinity groups, emphasizing their hybrid masculinity, in which traditionally masculine attributes or behaviors are not always prized (Ging 2017; Bridges and Pascoe 2014).

The hybrid masculinity performed by incels supports the notion that the forms of masculinities considered dominant, hegemonic,

and normative vary over space and time (Giazitzoglu 2019). Incels are performing a form of masculinity in which rejecting many aspects of hegemonic masculinity becomes hegemonic itself. Moreover, many workplaces are pervaded by a particular form of hegemonic masculinity—"corporate masculinity"—in which men are expected to be highly rational, ruthless, ambitious, and aggressive. Those who do not meet these criteria may be marginalized and experience discrimination (Giazitzoglu and Muzio 2020). Incels may further isolate themselves from these spaces due to their inability or unwillingness to perform the "corporate" masculinity expected of them in many professional workplaces. These tendencies suggest that intervention efforts and attempts to reach out to incels must be specifically tailored to this group, as arguments that address the beliefs held by other male supremacist groups may not appeal to incels.

Notably, a large share of the comments in our sample (30%) focused on perceptions of workplace discrimination. More specifically, many incels believe that women's entry into the labor market has reduced available opportunities for men. In addition, many argue that women are not only the gatekeepers of their sexual experiences but also of job opportunities. This perception offers an interesting extension of incel ideology, suggesting that women's perceived omnipotence is not limited to their ability to withhold romantic and sexual favors. Instead, it extends to other social realms, including the power to determine incels' fates in the workplace. This claim regarding women's control over the workplace may also be an example of incels weaponizing their subordinate status to justify misogyny, as their self-perception as victims allows them to rationalize their hateful beliefs about women (Halpin 2022). More generally, despite our focus on employment and the workplace, misogynistic beliefs were prevalent in many of the discussions in our sample. This serves as an important reminder that misogynistic beliefs are fundamentally intertwined with most of the other beliefs espoused by the online incel community.

In addition, many incels believe that their lack of physical attractiveness is a large barrier for obtaining jobs. Physical appearance and attributes, including men's height, can matter in hiring and promotion decisions (e.g., Mobius and Rosenblatt 2006; Agerström 2014). However, it is also important to note that this argument by incels selectively ignores research showing that discrimination based on appearance affects women more than it does men (Marlowe, Schneider, and Nelson 1996; Adomaitis, Raskin, and Saiki 2017).

Although most comments we analyzed supported a NEET lifestyle, a significant minority of users pushed back on this nihilistic ideology and encouraged others to find something meaningful to do. This debate highlights ideological tensions within the incel community regarding the extent to which incels can and should participate in normative societal structures. Such tensions echo other conflicts within the incel community reported by previous studies. These include the simultaneous hostility toward women coupled with the desire to be with them, the animosity toward successful men ("Chads") alongside the wish to be more like them, or the desire to "ascend" and get a girlfriend versus wanting to remain a member of the incel community (Costello et al. 2023; Radicalisation Awareness Network 2021).

The debate for and against working on *incels.is* also highlights the prevalence of gatekeeping and ideological/behavioral policing by incels. Community members often draw firm boundaries around who is part of their group and who is an outsider ("fakeincels"), with users who have steady jobs often labeled as the latter. According to Andersen (2022), "negotiating and policing these boundaries also increases the sense of cultural belonging, by making distinctions or excluding inauthentic incels" (p. 1095). Indeed, our findings suggest that through gatekeeping, incels strengthen their sense of community and uniqueness. Being a "true" incel (a "truecel") is not just a matter of being physically unattractive, failing to initiate or maintain romantic relationships with women, or being a loyal and steady participant in the online incel community. Instead, for some incels, obtaining a truecel status requires commiseration with others through actions that show solidarity by actively rejecting normative culture and separating oneself from it. Despite the anonymous nature of the incel community, these policing discourses can be a powerful driver of ideological adherence. Such policing may be particularly powerful given that about two thirds of incels report not having friends in their real lives (Sparks, Zidenberg, and Olver 2022), and may therefore feel highly dependent on this online community and eager to please its self-appointed gatekeepers.

More broadly, our findings highlight the importance of considering the social and psychological pressures informing incels' beliefs. For instance, the phenomenon of group polarization—which occurs when a group of like-minded people reinforce each other's opinions such that these opinions become more extreme the more they are discussed—has been found to play a significant role in shaping beliefs of extremist communities, particularly within online contexts where dissenting voices can be easily shunted (Sunstein 1999; Gregory and Piff 2021; Del Vicario et al. 2016). One way in which group polarization occurs is through in-group social comparisons, in which expressions of extreme opinions draw greater admiration from members than milder expressions (McCauley and Moskaleiko 2008). A similar process may be occurring regarding pro-NEET sentiments among incels. Therefore, it may be revealing to track changes in the status and dominance of this position over time.

Although avoiding higher education and workplaces may be a conscious decision driven by polarized ideologies, our findings suggest that at least some incels—and possibly many—are NEET due to substantial barriers to integrating and participating in the workforce and in educational institutions. Many incels recount experiences of bullying and estrangement in both school and at work, driving some of them to conclude that they do not belong in higher education institutions nor the workplace. Many of them also reported being unable to find a job or perform at work due to social anxiety and feeling incompetent and unwanted.

These reported difficulties in integrating into the workforce and higher education institutions may be closely linked to the high reported prevalence of autism within the incel community. Indeed, certain aspects of autism—namely, a literal thinking style, as well as difficulties with social cognition and forming intimate relationships—may make some individuals on the

autistic spectrum more susceptible to incel ideology, particularly in online contexts (Williams et al. 2021; Broyd et al. 2022). Moreover, studies estimate that a staggering 50%–75% of adults with autism in the United States are unemployed (Palumbo 2021). As such, it is possible that a disproportionate number of individuals with autism are part of the incel community, and many of these individuals are likely to also be unemployed. The ubiquity of unemployment and being NEET more generally in the incel community may therefore be expected, and the discourse enforcing it may be at least partly a reaction to and rationalization of these realities.

It is important to clarify that the vast majority of people with autism are not violent or hateful, nor do they identify as incels or hold explicit misogynistic views. Rather, autism, when combined with other mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and hopelessness, may make young men more vulnerable to incel ideologies (Broyd et al. 2022). Further research into the social and psychological profiles of incels is needed to better understand the relationship between autism and membership in this community.

Future research should continue to explore ways in which interventions might affect incels and young men who are susceptible to incel ideologies. Although such interventions may be helpful in primary and secondary school settings, the tendency of incels to isolate online may make these strategies less effective with adults. Intervention efforts in schools may focus on demystifying the job market, better preparing students (especially male students) for its challenges, and equipping them with coping techniques to make higher education and the workplace more accessible to marginalized students and those who suffer from mental issues.

The findings of this study should be treated with some caution. First, beyond the discourse on *incels.is*, there is also a more focused unemployment forum known as *neets.net* that has about one thousand members and has been advertised on *incels.is*. Although this forum is not exclusive to incels, research suggests that most of its members also likely participate in incel forums (Center for Countering Digital Hate 2022). Because this may divert some of the unemployment discussions to that forum, the fact that only 5% of the posts on *incels.is* contained keywords relating to this topic is likely an underestimation of the frequency with which incels are discussing being NEET. Future research efforts focused on *neets.net* may examine whether the discourses on this platform are similar to the ones we report here. In addition, there are some limitations to our sampling strategy. Posts not containing our selected keywords may have been overlooked, or important threads that were pulled may have been omitted through our decision to randomly sample one third of our total threads.

We should also be cautious not to generalize our findings to all incels. Our sample is confined to just one incel forum (although it is the largest and most active one) and may not be representative of the discussions on other platforms—or of incels who are not active in online communities at all. Additionally, there may be some selection bias in who posts comments, as successfully employed incels or those who are in higher education may be less likely to participate in discussions because

they have less free time. Finally, supporters of incels' integration into workplaces and educational institutions may also be cautious about speaking up in support of such practices, perhaps attempting to avoid conflict and being labeled “fake-incels.” Nonetheless, our findings are consistent with previous research, suggesting that a disproportionately high number of incels are, in fact, NEET (Costello et al. 2022; Jones, Hastings, and Stolte 2020).

In conclusion, the findings of this study demonstrate that incel ideology is not contained to the realm of sexual relationships. Instead, the Blackpill ideology is clearly linked to a more pervasive disengagement from normative social structures, including educational institutions and workplaces. This reality reflects the fact that many incels are marginalized young men who struggle to feel accepted or competent in places such as school and the workplace. Adopting the Blackpill ideology may therefore serve as a coping mechanism not only when making sense of their failure to achieve romantic relationships but also in rationalizing and legitimizing their difficulty to integrate into educational institutions and the workplace.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.