

Article

Involuntary Celibacy (Incel) Identity: A Thematic Analysis of an Online Community's Beliefs and Emotional Experiences

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Abstract: The term incel is a neologism combining “involuntary” and “celibate”, describing men who experience involuntary absence from sexual and romantic relationships. Incels frequently espouse conspiratorial and misogynistic ideologies, often engaging in verbal aggression. The present study aimed at qualitatively exploring the emotional experiences and beliefs articulated within an online incel community, contributing to the formation of its collective identity. A thread (453 comments) sampled from an Italian “incel” forum was analyzed by two independent raters, using thematic analysis. Four themes emerged: (a) “non-persons (i.e., women) are not like us” revealed perceived gender inequality and misogynistic beliefs, (b) “without experiences in adolescence you are ruined” reflected the belief that early romantic and sexual experiences are crucial for later relationship satisfaction, (c) “I have no life” captured expressions of profound distress and life dissatisfaction, and (d) “only ours is true suffering” highlighted a sense of unique victimhood. Incel group identity was shaped by gender role stress, primarily stemming from the perceived failure to meet socially constructed expectations of hegemonic masculinity. Suffering emerged as the dominant emotional experience, seemingly exacerbated by feelings of hopelessness regarding romantic and sexual prospects. The perceived subordinate status of men and male suffering were exploited to rationalize and perpetuate misogyny. The observed incels’ openness in discussing experiences of suffering and trauma may present an opportunity for the development of preventive interventions aimed at increasing help-seeking behavior in this population.

Keywords: incel; involuntary celibacy; masculinity; misogyny; thematic analysis



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1. Introduction

The term incel is a neologism combining “involuntary” and “celibate”, referring to men who desire but are unable to engage in sexual and romantic relationships due to external factors such as social anxiety, failure to meet conventional aesthetic standards, or exceeding the culturally defined age for first sexual intercourse [1]. Online, incel communities are characterized not only by members’ involuntary celibacy, but also a strongly

misogynist and “macho” worldview [2,3]. Commonly, such communities exhibit gender role stress, status threat (i.e., the belief that the “dominant” male group is under threat by the “subordinate” female group), acceptance threat (i.e., failure to measure up to hegemonic masculinity), toxic masculinity, and hostile sexism [4,5]. The so-called “manosphere” collects these antifeminist and male supremacist ideologies within a cluster of websites, blogs, and online fora [6]. In 1999, the popular film *The Matrix* coined the expression: “taking the red pill”. Subsequently, this phrase was taken up by incel communities and the broader manosphere to signify an awakening from society’s supposed brainwashing (associated with the “blue pill”) and recognition of feminism’s alleged misandry, which is perceived to aim not for women’s equality but for men’s subjugation [6]. This worldview underpins incels’ perception that they are subordinate to women—a belief that they weaponize to legitimate the degradation and dehumanization of women [7]. The red pill ideology was formally codified in 2018 with the creation of *incel.wiki* (originally *incel.info*). This online encyclopedia of the incel community publishes articles on incel topics (e.g., “hypergamy”, “look, money, and status theory”) and maintains a glossary of incel terms (e.g., “non-person”, “chad”; see Table S1 in the Supplementary Materials), thereby crystallizing the incel ideology into a significant subculture [8]. Moreover, the majority of incels adopt the so-called “black pill” philosophy, representing a variant of the red pill philosophy with a more pessimistic worldview. The underlying idea of this philosophy is that each individual has an objective (i.e., quantifiable and immutable) level of attractiveness, which sets real limits on their ability to attract partners. Naturally, those in the incel community tend to believe that they were played a bad hand [9]. Virtual environments provide fertile ground for extremist communities, acting as echo chambers that amplify and reinforce information aligned with members’ beliefs [10]. Within incel communities, this echo chamber effect has become one of the primary indoctrination mechanisms of the red pill ideology [11]. Moreover, the insularity of the incel community exacerbates social avoidance among its members [12], as supported by preliminary evidence identifying a bidirectional relationship between mental health morbidity and engagement with the incel community [13]. An international online survey of 272 self-identified incels revealed that 48% experienced suicidal ideation, 64% exhibited depressive symptoms, 60% reported anxiety symptoms, and 25% displayed autism symptoms [14]. A subsequent study corroborated the heightened prevalence of depressive symptoms among incels compared to controls, though no significant differences were observed regarding anxiety symptoms and stress levels [15]. Based on the identity theory model, a self-report questionnaire known as the Incel Traits Scale (ITS) was developed to measure characteristics commonly observed within this community (e.g., defeat, rejection, vengefulness) [4]. Recently, the ITS was employed with a large sample of incels ($n = 770$) [16], finding that incels commonly exhibit paranoid thinking, anxiety, and depression, as well as a fearful attachment style. Notably, individuals with a fearful attachment style are likely to view themselves and others negatively, while demonstrating a fear of intimacy and social avoidance [17]—psychological features that have been widely observed among incels [5]. Additionally, research has shown an occasional propensity for violence in incel communities, as evidenced by seven documented cases of mass violence, including four mass murders in North America [18]. Building on the aforementioned research, qualitative studies have attempted to elucidate the most widely circulated themes within incel communities. Predominantly, such research has focused on the now-closed forum “r/braincels”, highlighting a constructed trope of women, a patriarchally informed male ideal, hypocritical approaches to gender [12], and the performance of a specific version of hybrid masculinity [9]. Despite this preliminary research, the incel phenomenon remains relatively new and understudied. In particular, little is known about online incel communities in diverse cultural contexts. Moreover, the

majority of qualitative studies on incel communities have analyzed textual material from the r/incels and r/braincels subreddits, which have the following specific characteristics: (a) these forums are part of Reddit, and thus user contributions are moderated according to platform rules; and (b) both subreddits were closed for violating Reddit's terms of service in 2017 and 2019, respectively, so the extracted data may not accurately reflect current community characteristics. The present study aimed at investigating the incel black pill ideology through a thematic analysis of narratives produced within a recent, independent (i.e., not regulated by any platform), Italian incel online community. Specifically, the study aimed at qualitatively analyzing the shared beliefs and emotional experiences that shaped and maintained the collective identity of the incel community.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

The present study analyzed textual data published by an online community whose name and URL will remain anonymous, in accordance with recommendations for studies on online communities [19]. Thematic analysis [20] was employed for several reasons: (a) the existing literature on incel black pill ideology is relatively sparse; (b) the primary research objective was to describe the incel phenomenon; and (c) online communities, by nature, yield primarily public, textual material.

2.2. The Community

The community examined, henceforth referred to as SC ("sampled community"), comprises part of a larger Italian incel forum. It was selected for analysis due to its high level of activity, as determined by a preliminary screening. As of 2 August 2023, SC's recorded statistics included 1,257,518 messages, 60,328 threads, 21,582 users and 10,758,386 visits (7727 monthly), with an average of 210 users active within a 30-min period. As a typical online forum, SC is a digital space in which registered users engage in asynchronous discussion across various threads, each centered on a specific topic. Any user has the ability to initiate a new discussion thread, prompting contributions from the community in response. While the majority of SC threads are accessible to the public without prior registration, only registered users are able to participate actively in the forum. The present research began with an SC observation phase (i.e., reading threads, becoming familiar with the group vocabulary and forum dynamics), before proceeding to the scraping and analysis of forum content. No interaction occurred between the research group and SC users.

2.3. Sampling

Caplan and Purser's [21] Reddit scraping guidance was adapted to the SC forum, resulting in the sampling of one of the most controversial posts with the highest level of engagement, as determined by the number of responses and thread visits. Choosing a thread initiated by a potentially controversial post enabled us to capture a broader spectrum of responses and opinions, which tended to be less polarized than those observed in discussions stemming from posts that were more "accommodating" to the community norms.

The chosen thread, originating from a female user's post on 31 March 2023, sparked significant user interaction, amassing 452 messages from 52 unique users and 14,173 visits. To ensure a rich dataset, the entire thread was included in the sample, comprising the initial post and $n = 453$ contributions, totaling 105,665 characters (see Table S3 in the Supplementary Materials for the initial post). All posts, originally in Italian, were translated into English while maintaining the original tone.

2.4. Data Analysis

The forum thread was consolidated into a single document and imported into Atlas.ti (v. 9.1.3.0) for analysis. The research team, comprising both a male and a female researcher, ensured a balanced approach to the content, which was deeply engaged in gender issues. Following Braun and Clarke's [20] methodology, the researchers began by thoroughly familiarizing themselves with the data. They subsequently engaged in inductive coding, identifying meaningful patterns within each comment section while retaining data that might not initially appear relevant to the research question, to foster a data-driven emergence of themes. This coding process guided the formulation of subthemes deemed directly relevant to the study aim, with non-pertinent codes subsequently discarded. The analysis culminated in the aggregation of these subthemes into four overarching themes. Both researchers analyzed the entire sample in a double-blind manner, subsequently discussing which codes fell into specific subthemes. Consensus on coding, code clustering, and (sub)theme titling was achieved in all cases.

3. Results

Themes and subthemes are reported in Table 1 and described in the following sections. The names of the themes were constructed using expressions commonly employed within the forum, to maintain the authenticity of the community's language. This choice aims to provide deeper insight into the group's shared beliefs and communicative practices, reflecting the nuances of their discourse.

Table 1. Themes and subthemes from the analysis.

N.°	Theme/Subtheme	N of Occurrences	Illustrative Quote
1	Non-persons (np) are not like us	114	<i>NPs are not like us</i>
1.1	Women prioritize LMS (i.e., look, money, status), while men seek more	45	<i>Basically, they [women] want the alpha. Combined with being a 6 [on the "decile scale" measuring physical appearance—see Table S1 "Glossary" in the Supplementary Materials], having a car, and the ability to spend some money, it means having a great chance of getting a normal girlfriend by your side</i>
1.2	The world is gynocentric	37	<i>You [women] are just a spoiled category</i>
1.3	Women cannot understand	19	<i>You are a woman and not a man, so you cannot understand</i>
1.4	Women are weak	13	<i>I hope, however, that you realize that those you describe as great sufferings [referring to the experiences reported by the female user in her presentation] are trivial compared to other lives</i>
2	I have no life	52	<i>I feel like I have never really started living</i>
3	Without experiences in adolescence, you are ruined	45	<i>The experiences you miss out on when you are young will scar you forever...</i>
4	Only ours is true suffering	42	<i>Many people here have significant issues. Your problems seem really insignificant to us.</i>

Theme 1. Non-Persons (NP) Are Not Like Us

The term non-person (NP) is widely used in Italian red pill, black pill, and incel forums to derogatorily reference the female sex and legitimize a vulgar and violent lexicon for articulating hatred towards women. The following user message exemplifies this dehumanizing and objectifying stance and illustrates the typical usage of NP in the forum:

We're here every day insulting the nps just because they are what they are. For all I care, you [referring to the female user who was writing in the forum] can flaunt all the kindness and understanding you want, you can tell me all the sob stories you like, but you're still an np.

This theme broadly encompasses beliefs about gender differences, which are explored more deeply in the following four subthemes.

Subtheme 1.1. Women Prioritize LMS (i.e., Look, Money, Status), while Men Seek More

The look, money, status (LMS) theory is a cornerstone of red pill ideology, positing that women prioritize physical appearance, financial wealth, and social status in men. This theory is often invoked to explain social success and interpersonal dynamics, with LMS considered the sole determinants of women's attention and (some) men's life success:

Women are "programmed" to go with whoever is on top... Chad/pack leader/alpha [for a definition of these terms, see Table S1 "Glossary" in the Supplementary Materials] etc. They often don't care about personality, just that he's on top. Or at least that he's the partner with the highest LMS available to choose from.

These economic–aesthetic criteria purportedly influence only women, whereas men are perceived as less focused on superficial attributes:

It seems to me that this forum is proof that many men want a woman close for reasons more related to feelings than to sex itself.

I just want an LTR [long-term relationship], with a good girl. To have kids and not much more.

While the above user's romantic yearning for a committed relationship does not reflect the entirety of opinions expressed on the forum, many users articulate cynical views, consistently underscoring the idea that women are predominantly influenced by LMS, in contrast to men.

Subtheme 1.2 The World is Gynocentric

The term *gynocentric* refers to a societal structure in which women are habitually at the center of social attention, to the detriment of men. This perception is integral to the red pill ideology, which posits a dichotomous social world in which both "handsome" men and all women (the latter solely by virtue of their gender) enjoy a satisfying life, in stark contrast to the incel "uglies". As previously described, many users perceive gender inequality in favor of women, resulting in "female privilege". Through this framework, women are believed to have easy access to sexual encounters and the ability to practice hypergamy (i.e., "marrying up" by entering relationships with men more attractive than themselves—an act deemed nearly impossible for men). They are also perceived as receiving significantly more social attention. Thus, women are thought to enjoy easier and more fulfilling lives compared to the average man. Discussions on this point often dismiss the suffering expressed by women (e.g., the woman who originally started the thread) as problems faced by those in a privileged position:

[. . .] unfortunately, they [women] are like the rich who complain about the type of car they have, not considering that at least they always have one, unlike others. There are categories of people who are only calibrated to understand certain things and not others.

Women's ascribed status is thought to grant them access to a privileged class, shared only with attractive men:

From the way you talk in the post, it seems like men in general have the same chances of finding partners as you do, which is complete bullshit. You're talking about guys who are a 7 or higher [referring to the "decile scale"; see Table S1 in the Supplementary Materials].

Through the red pill lens, the world is divided into two "classes": (a) unattractive men, such as incels (as self-described); and (ii) attractive men, along with all women. This division among men is primarily defined by socioeconomic status (see subtheme 1.1) and physical appearance, as exemplified by the "decile scale", which purportedly measures male physical attractiveness [5]. Conversely, women are deemed privileged by default, irrespective of their socioeconomic status or physical appearance. The inequality between these two "classes" is perceived to lie in the ability to form sexual and romantic relationships (as also highlighted in theme 3, below).

Subtheme 1.3 Women cannot understand

This subtheme encapsulates users' shared experiences of attributing their suffering to women, on the assumption that women are inherently inclined to cause men distress, often without awareness or understanding of the impact. This negative perception of women is central to the red pill ideology, as espoused by numerous user comments, including:

[. . .] In short, the humiliation is realizing that you've submitted to a hideous being [referring to a previous relationship], a worm that has only one positive thing: the pussy.

The above user's opinion of women is notably extreme, negative, and dehumanizing. Significantly, this same user immediately follows the above comment with:

She will never even understand how bitchy she is [. . .]

The belief conveyed is that his ex-partner was—and will remain—oblivious to the suffering she caused him. This notion is prevalent in the forum, highlighting a perceived incapacity in women to comprehend men's suffering, attributed not only to their lack of experience, but also to women's alleged general incapacity:

You don't know what true loneliness is. WE do.

You're a woman, not a man, so you can't understand.

Subtheme 1.4. Women are weak

The predominant attitude among SC users in response to the original woman's post (which primarily concerned her suffering due to a lack of significant experiences in adolescence) is one of dismissal, based on the assumption that her life is inherently happier and more fulfilling than their own:

Perhaps you [the original female poster] lack just an insignificant piece of life, where everything is frivolous. Many of us maybe have never really lived. I don't want to compete over who has more problems, but your life is really beautiful. I won't deny that I envy you a bit.

Aside from the assumption that women experience far less suffering than men, another prevalent belief among users is that women are psychologically weak and even manipulable:

[. . .] nps get depressed over the most trivial crap, they don't have a tenth of a man's mental strength. ANY np would kill themselves if they were in the shoes of an average ugly guy from the middle class.

If they're not used to suffering from a young age, you can destroy them psychologically. They have no defenses.

In this view, women's perceived weakness is attributed to their lack of psychological hardship—a situation deemed true for all women, by definition.

Theme 2. I Have No Life

The second theme describes depressive suffering, as demonstrated by the cynical, pessimistic, and resigned tone of most comments:

Life is so sad...

I wish I had never been born. A life full of horror and suffering.

[. . .] many of us are just missing life itself.

Many users choose to share their personal experiences, often relating them to those discussed by the initial female poster:

[. . .] I'm 28 years old. I'm a graduate. And I've never had a girlfriend. I've never had a requited love, I have a few friends and I'm still living with my parents for now. I've never had what you have. I'm a lone person whose only company in the evening when I come home is a cat. I've had nothing in terms of love for years and it's extremely likely that in a few years I'll be completely alone apart from those few friends. Have pity, but here we are really in bad shape. Many of us truly have nothing.

A sense of loneliness is pervasive in these narratives, which also include references to problematic parents, and even domestic violence:

I started high school, and my father began to abuse me and my mother. I lived the 5 years of high school with this burden, NEVER going out on a Saturday, a Sunday, or a holiday so as not to leave them alone, for fear of worse. Naturally, I never had a relationship; I'm shy and quite incapable, I very much like listening or just talking about serious topics (philosophy, history, physics...). I tried going to university but the problems with my father persisted, so I decided to drop out and stay home. Another 5 shitty years, I saw my father die and slowly my grandmother from cancer. I saw my mother suffer and cry every day. I fell into depression, had panic attacks. Now I do a crappy job, still alone, still not going out, after all, all my former friends have abandoned me.

[. . .] domestic violence: on multiple occasions, my father beat up my mother in front of me and verbally abused me. For years he insulted me, calling me a loser because I didn't have a girlfriend. On a couple of occasions, I was also punched. Because of the domestic violence and the fact that I was raised in a bubble by my parents, I've had huge difficulties interacting with my peers. I've been a victim of bullying by both males and females. A person I thought was my friend after using me at school, abandoned me after school ended, even though he knew my situation. My only 'friends' were mentally handicapped. People full of hate and bitterness towards everyone. Evenings spent with them were terrible and depressing. Currently, I go out alone. I attend university courses and try to finish university (I'm behind) and when I want to go out, I go out alone. Backpack on and off I go. . . I've never even had a kiss from a girl. [. . .]

Particularly striking in the above user's comments are the passages describing his father's mockery for his not having a girlfriend and the attribution of his loneliness to having "grown up in a bubble" and experiencing domestic violence. This theme of violence extends into his further narrative, in which he shares instances of self-harm:

I was extremely subservient to a girl and felt ashamed like a dog. I cut my arm when I saw that she was sleeping with someone else. I've decided that I'll never talk to one again like I did for 23 years. Only prostitutes

At 13, I used to cut my arms. I still have the scars.

Theme 3. Without Experiences in Adolescence, You Are Ruined

This theme elucidates two fundamental characteristics of forum users: the shared lack of sexual and/or romantic experiences during adolescence and the entrenched belief that the absence of such experiences precludes the possibility of achieving satisfying romantic relationships later in life. The initial post of the female user describes episodes of missed or delayed youthful experiences (e.g., social outings, smoking one's first cigarette, engaging in sexual intercourse, experiencing "hangovers") while observing peers having those same experiences. Both the initial post and the subsequent comments reveal the deep suffering caused by these shortcomings, which become (perceived) barriers to a normal and happy life. Thus, an emotional experience shared by all users may be summarized as follows:

Surely the experiences not lived during adolescence are a deep wound [. . .]

Commonly, emphasis is placed on deficiency—what has not been experienced—leading to an idealization of adolescence:

They [referring to his circle of friends] had typical high school teenager experiences, things you can only live up until you're 16/17, when you have no other worries on your mind. All things that I only started experiencing after turning 18, when you're partly still a teenager but without the carefreeness you usually have in the earlier years. Seeing how here on the forum people talk about not fully living or experiencing teen love, like in my case, which leaves a sense of emptiness... it made me want to write it down here. Unfortunately, I started waking up to life late

The most significant missed experiences appear to be romantic and sexual in nature. Without these, users believe it is impossible to establish fulfilling romantic relationships later in life. In this vein, many users report never having had a romantic relationship, and resorting to prostitution:

I never had a girlfriend as a teenager and didn't even chat with girls until a few months ago. I'm 23 and have been seeing pros [prostitutes] since I was 18. If I get a girlfriend, I'll probably end up being a cuck [short for cuckold], so better nothing.

Theme 4. Only Ours is True Suffering

This theme describes a dismissal of the suffering of outgroup members, grounded in the belief that their negative experiences are either false or incomparable to those of the ingroup, thus asserting the exclusivity of incels' own suffering. Many responses to the female user's initial post emphasize that her problems are not comparable to their own:

[. . .] no offense, but your "pain" for most users isn't really such, on the contrary. . . Here you'll be seen as a Westerner going to Congo to complain that they can't eat caviar every night, just so we're clear.

We don't accept your complaints because in your place, we'd be jumping for joy.

As a result, some users perceive the woman's post as disrespectful to their community:

What you're doing is disrespectful to the forum community. There are people here who, for many reasons, will never have the experiences you've had so far... coming to this forum, where people are really falling apart psychologically for so many reasons, to complain about what are essentially trivialities, is just not right. . .

[. . .] But actually, her attitude is a lack of respect towards those who are far worse off than she is.

4. Discussion

The present study aimed at qualitatively investigating the emotional experiences and beliefs within an Italian incel online community (for a visual presentation of the results, see Table S2 in the Supplementary Materials). While qualitative analyses of incel or black pill communities have previously been conducted [9,12], the present study was the first to examine themes emerging from an independent forum (i.e., not hosted on Reddit or another mainstream social media platform) and to provide an in-depth analysis of an incel community within the Italian cultural context.

According to our results, incels' collective identity is predominantly defined by gender role stress and, specifically, acceptance threat [22]. Among incels, acceptance threat is further enhanced by a "conspiracy theory" mindset, wherein gender roles are dramatically defined, rigidly generalized, and enforced [5]. Incels' representation of women is derogatory and dehumanizing, casting them as "non-persons" who are inherently privileged within a gynocentric society (see subtheme 1.2). This perceived gender inequality fuels a belief that women are psychologically fragile and lack resilience (see subtheme 1.3). Moreover, incels contend that women prioritize physical appearance, financial wealth, and social status (i.e., LMS) over emotional depth in partners, thereby validating a sense of male moral superiority (see subtheme 2.4). Such views engender a narrative wherein women are seen as the primary cause of male suffering (see subtheme 1.1), while remaining both oblivious and indifferent to this effect. Ultimately, these attitudes culminate in an echo chamber of misogyny and resentment.

It is noteworthy how the theme of fear of intimacy, frequently observed among the incel population [17], did not emerge among the themes identified in our analysis. This absence may be attributed to cultural differences between the Italian incel subculture and the broader international context as observed in analyses of international forums such as r/Braincels. Future research should focus on cross-cultural differences, employing both a qualitative and a quantitative approach to better investigate incel communities across the web.

Notably, incels perceive themselves as dominated by not only women, but also more attractive or powerful men. This suggests that incels do not fully engage in aggrieved entitlement, defined as men's anger over their decreasing status and their desire to "reclaim" and "restore" lost privileges [23]. As Halpin [7] observed, for incels, there is no status to reclaim, as they perceive it as irretrievably lost or never possessed. Their sense of hopelessness and victimhood fosters an external locus of control over their suffering. From a psychodynamic standpoint, incels appear to rely heavily on the defense mechanism of rationalization, constructing self-justifying yet flawed explanations (e.g., the notion of female privilege, a generalized belief in women's cruelty) for their or others' actions (e.g., being rejected in intimate relationships). These explanations are also collectively intellectualized, forming the basis of abstract theories and a deeply encoded ideology (as evidenced by the articles and glossary published on incel.wiki) [24,25].

Incels' gender-biased representation of the social world underpins their severe suffering, which is compounded by their unfulfilled deep desire for romantic and sexual experiences (see theme 3). With regards to the latter, their despair is rooted in a pervasive depressive belief in the impossibility of such experiences ever occurring in the future. This may be described as a form of *anticipatory grief*, connected to their mourning for youthful connections that were never experienced [26]. Incels also suffer from a lack of purpose and meaning (see theme 2), possibly linked to their profound isolation [27,28]. Their deep suffering is notable (see theme 4) and resonates with their heightened prevalence of depressive and anxious symptoms, loneliness, feelings of despair, and hopelessness, as reported in previous studies [5,12,29]. Their discussions frequently center on traumatic relational

experiences (see theme 4), which, paradoxically, are perceived as both a source of pain and a badge of strength that “defenseless” women cannot attain, as they lack the requisite trauma (see subtheme 1.3). This perception echoes aspects of toxic masculinity [30,31]. Given that children and women/mothers are the most common victims of domestic violence and intimate partner violence [32], it is notable that incels apparently dismiss or deny this trauma, as experienced by women, including (some of) their mothers. Their perceptual bias serves to skew power dynamics in such a way that men become the primary victims. In psychodynamic terms, this may reflect an unconscious identification with the male and paternal aggressor/abuser [33].

Interestingly, both the chronic suffering and the perceived lower status of incels in the masculine hierarchy are leveraged to rationalize and perpetuate misogyny and the degradation of women. *Masculinities theory* [34,35] may provide insight into this dynamic, distinguishing between hegemonic practices that reinforce patriarchy and the subjugation of women, and subordinate masculinities that are generally denigrated and socially marginalized. Scholars are divided on the appropriate placement of incels along this spectrum: some argue that incels reflect hegemonic masculinity [36], while others contend that their “beta” status [37] or self-victimization in response to feminism [6,9] places them outside of hegemony. Halpin [7] suggested that incel behaviors reflect a hybrid masculine practice, merging elements of both hegemonic and subordinate masculinity. This is specifically referred to as a *weaponized subordination* that allows them to use their perceived lower status to legitimize the victimization of others. As our results indicate, incels frame themselves as subordinate through the LMS theory, claiming that “female privilege”, their physical appearance, and women’s preferences for more attractive and wealthy men relegate them to sexual isolation. After collectively assuming a permanent subordinate position, they wield this status to justify misogyny and male supremacy. Essentially, incels position themselves as subordinate men who employ hegemonic practices [7].

Further contributing to this mechanism of weaponized subordination within the incel community is the perceived irretrievable nature of earlier romantic experiences (see theme 3). This aligns with a recent review [38] highlighting that incels emphasize the importance of engaging in sexual intercourse “off-time” relative to their peers, and feel (or are) stigmatized for their virginity. Our findings extend this further to encompass broader romantic experiences, which incels likewise perceive as developmental milestones. Importantly, incels are likely to be NEET (i.e., not in education, employment, or training) [39] and, therefore, prone to social isolation and loneliness. This may preclude them from participating in experiences they claim to have missed (and be missing). Thus, psychoeducational protocols must address these aspects to improve incels’ mental health outcomes [40]. Moreover, Costello et al. [41] noted that the pervasive misogyny within incel communities may indicate a low sense of self-perceived “mate value”, as also suggested by the themes that emerged in this research (e.g., subtheme 1.1). Thus, a potential intervention could include coaching on affective–sexual psychoeducation [42].

4.1. Social Policy Implications

Overall, our results show that incels openly acknowledge their pain and vulnerability, albeit in an angry and vengeful manner. Nonetheless, their apparent openness in discussing distressing and traumatic experiences could represent a potential gateway for preventive interventions. Preventive programs have already proven effective in improving mental health outcomes in various youth populations [43], and these could be adapted for incel communities on the basis of a careful selection of the most relevant outcomes. For example, one core component of good mental health is *mental health literacy*, describing “the ability to recognize and possess knowledge of a variety of different profiles of emerging and

established mental disorders” [44,45]. This could represent a relevant primary outcome in programs aimed at promoting mental health help-seeking behavior. Indeed, research has shown that incels tend to seek help in online forums, and this may have the counter-effect of reinforcing hopelessness and maladaptive beliefs, despite also providing some relief from loneliness through belonging to an online community [5]. Moreover, a previous investigation found that half of incels with mental health problems had “tried therapy”, yet only a striking 1 out of 12 considered psychotherapy helpful [46]. This suggests clinical challenges and the need for tailored intervention strategies for this community. Optimistically, an r/IncelExit subreddit has recently emerged as a community for individuals seeking to transition out of their former incel status. This is particularly relevant, given that some incels [47] have attributed their belonging to the incel community with negative emotional consequences, such as depression and loneliness. For clinical recommendations on managing potential incel patients, see [13].

4.2. Strengths and Limitations

The principal strength of the present study lies in its application of well-established qualitative approaches to explore central themes within an online incel community in Italy, thereby expanding the current understanding of the incel black pill ideology. However, the study has some limitations that should also be considered. First, the generalizability of the results is limited by their qualitative nature, rendering the findings specific to the sample analyzed. Future meta-research adopting meta-synthesis methods could aim at pooling individual qualitative investigations from various cultural contexts, thereby enhancing generalizability. Moreover, similar to all studies conducted with online communities, the present study may have been affected by the performative nature of behavior within virtual spaces, which can reduce and simplify individual differences [48]. Additionally, the analyzed sample does not include the more silent part of the community which does not post on the forum.

5. Conclusions

Within incel communities, entrenched beliefs about gender inequality and female privilege fuel misogyny and resentment. Suffering is the dominant emotional experience, serving not only to “awaken” members to the red pill, and black pill, ideology, but also to unify the community. This suffering further legitimizes a misogynistic outlook, functioning as a mechanism of weaponized subordination [7]. The present findings, along with the potential underlying mechanisms (e.g., gender role stress, acceptance threat, weaponized subordination), may inform future research on gender-based and mass violence [4,36,49]. Additionally, they highlight potential risks associated with prolonged virginity among both males and females [1,50]. Another significant finding is the emphasis incels place on past experiences. Consequently, psychoeducational interventions should focus on training social and relational skills. Moreover, subsequent studies should aim at identifying the most effective strategies for promoting help-seeking behavior within incel communities.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/soc15020044/s1>, Table S1: Glossary of Common Terms in the Incel Community; Table S2: Results Organized in Terms of Emotional Experiences and Beliefs; Table S3: Original Post in the Analyzed Thread.

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Data Availability Statement: Raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors upon request without undue reservation.

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