



The Rage of Lonely Men: Loneliness and Misogyny in the Online Movement of “Involuntary Celibates” (Incels)

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Abstract

In this article, we investigate the relationship between loneliness and misogyny amongst the online movement of “involuntary celibates” (incels) that has become widely known through several violent attacks. While loneliness plays a prominent role in the incels’ self-descriptions, we lack a comprehensive analysis of their experience of loneliness and its role in their radicalization. Our article offers such an analysis. We analyze how loneliness is felt, described, and implicitly understood by incels, investigate the normative presumptions underlying their experiences, and critically reflect on the political function of their discourse of loneliness. We claim that it is the affective mechanism of *ressentiment* that transforms loneliness into antagonistic emotions and show how loneliness is exacerbated rather than alleviated through the incel community. Finally, we point to the relevance of our analysis for contemporary philosophical and feminist loneliness studies.

Keywords Loneliness · Involuntary celibates (incels) · Misogyny · Antagonistic emotions · *Ressentiment* · Online radicalization

1 Introduction

The online groups of young men self-proclaimed as involuntary celibates (incels) have received much media attention due to the mass murders in Isla Vista (2014), Oregon (2015), Toronto (2018), Hanau (2020), and Plymouth (2022). The attacks revealed the deeply misogynistic and often racist ideology of the digital incel movement. Its online forums have been strongly associated with violence and aggression, misogyny, anti-feminism, and political movements on

the extreme right (Daly and Reed 2022, 15; Maxwell et al. 2020, 1853; O’Donnell and Shor 2022, 337; Regehr 2022).

When Naama Kates, an investigative journalist and the producer of an extensive podcast series on the topic, was asked what she thinks the incels have in common, she replied:

Overwhelmingly a lot of them are just lonely, in general. [...] A lot of them have trouble with just platonic friendships too and don’t feel they have like a strong social group. And just with other aspects of purpose in life, a lot of them just aren’t happy. (Kates 2021, direct transcription)

Similarly, loneliness plays a prominent role in incels’ own accounts of their misogynistic attitudes and violent behavior. Elliot Rodger, for instance, who committed the Isla Vista mass murder, killing six and injuring fourteen people before killing himself, left a 137-page manifesto that mentions the word “lonely” 49 times, “loneliness” 30 times, and “alone” 52 times (Rodger 2014). Blaming women, men who are sexually more successful than him, and society at large for his lonely existence, he finally decides to take revenge on the world that fails to give him what he so desperately needs, craves, and believes himself to be entitled to – attention,

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admiration, affection, love, sex, and recognition. The digital incel community, or so it seems, primarily appeals to lonely young men and converts them into angry and potentially violent young men (Regehr 2022), thereby (at least sometimes) ultimately aggravating rather than alleviating their loneliness by creating a negative cycle of social isolation (Maxwell et al. 2020).

It thus seems imperative to understand these experiences of loneliness in order to understand the processes of misogynistic online radicalization that, in some cases, culminate in violent attacks. Surprisingly, however, loneliness has not been thematized as a topic in its own right in academic research on incels, although the issue is mentioned frequently. Empirical studies that thematize loneliness (e.g., Daly and Reed 2022; Maxwell et al. 2020; Regehr 2022) usually presuppose a common understanding of what loneliness is rather than offering a critical analysis of the underlying phenomenon, description, conception, and dynamics of loneliness. Within philosophical studies of loneliness, on the other hand, it is much more common to analyze loneliness in the context of health and associate it with affective phenomena such as grief, withdrawal, and depression (e.g., Motta 2021; Ratcliffe forthcoming; Seemann 2022) rather than with antagonistic emotions such as misogyny, hatred, and anger. Although studies in psychology have surveyed the relationship between loneliness and aggression by statistical means (e.g., Check et al. 1985; Martens and Palermo 2005; van Tilburg et al. 2019; Yavuzer et al. 2019), the transformation of loneliness into misogynistic emotions has remained underexplored.

In this paper, we aim to fill this lacuna by offering a philosophical analysis of the relationship between loneliness and misogyny in the violent factions of the digital incel community. We draw on both empirical and philosophical research on the incel movement, loneliness, misogyny, antagonistic political emotions, and online radicalization. More specifically, we use qualitative empirical studies on incels for describing the movement and analyzing the reinforcement of loneliness in the online community. Together with Rodger's manifesto, these qualitative studies help us to capture the subjective experiences of loneliness in the incel movement. In our analysis of the experiences and dynamics of loneliness, we employ conceptual tools from the philosophy of emotions. Overall, our analysis is committed to the project of critical phenomenology (Guenther 2019; Loidolt 2022; Oksala 2022); it explores the incels' experiences from the standpoint of subjectivity, while critically reflecting on their social embeddedness and analyzing how these experiences, their description, and political mobilization are permeated by and used to reproduce and reinforce oppressive structures such as patriarchy, white supremacy, heteronormativity, and racism. In this regard, our analysis

is in line with the key presumptions of feminist theory, in that it treats misogyny and loneliness not as psychological features of individual subjects but rather as social and political phenomena (Magnet and Orr 2022; Manne 2018, 2021; Srinivasan 2022; Wilkinson 2022).

By offering a critical phenomenological analysis of the relationship between loneliness and misogyny in the digital incel movement, this paper first helps us to gain a better understanding of the incel movement itself. Second, it allows us to refine our understanding of loneliness by exploring its relationship with aggression. Importantly, our claim is not that loneliness is the *only* or even the *most important* factor in misogynistic online radicalization. Rather, we claim that in order to understand online radicalization in the context of the incel movement, we need to understand the experiential and argumentative role that loneliness plays in these processes. Other factors (e.g., self-victimization) and grievances (e.g., shame, humiliation, and feelings of inferiority) might play a similarly important role (see, e.g., Cottee 2021), but here we largely bracket them to focus on the underexplored role of loneliness. A more comprehensive analysis of the incel movement would need to take into account all these factors as well as their interrelation. Although our focus is on the digital incel movement, we believe that our analysis is also relevant for understanding other forms of online and offline radicalization (see, e.g., Pfundmair et al. 2022; Vukčević Marković et al. 2021). However, exploring this hypothesis is beyond the scope of our article.

The structure of the article is as follows. First, we introduce the incel movement, thereby giving an overview of its history, structure, and misogynistic worldview and embedding it in the larger context of the so-called "manosphere." Second, we offer a philosophical analysis of the incels' loneliness by drawing on the contemporary philosophy of emotions. We illustrate our claims with reference to Rodger's manifesto, whose first-person account of loneliness has played a key role in the formation of the movement. Our aim is not only to report how loneliness is felt and described by incels but also to analyze by philosophical means how it is implicitly understood and upon which normative presumptions it is based. We ask how the analysis of incels contributes to recent philosophical discussions of loneliness and how it helps us to broaden current conceptions of the phenomenon. Third, we investigate how loneliness gets transformed into misogyny through the affective mechanism of *ressentiment*. Moreover, as the incel movement creates online communities for the lonely, we critically explore the question of whether, and in what sense and at what price, the incels' collective alleviates their loneliness.

2 The Incel Movement

The word “incel” refers to “involuntary celibacy.” However, it does not cover everyone who lives unwillingly without having sex. Rather, it is a much more narrowly defined, self-proclaimed political identity formed in online forums such as the now-banned Reddit subforums r/Incel, r/Braincels, and Incels.me. The websites and online forums which continue to function, such as Incels.wiki and Incels.is, emphasize that incels come from different backgrounds, hold different attitudes toward women, and do not constitute a uniform movement with shared political views. Research that focuses on the mental health challenges faced by incels also stresses that only a small minority of incels support violent activity (Moskalenko et al. 2022a, b). However, studies that analyze misogyny and oppressive attitudes in the online forums note that they are characterized by a particularly pronounced misogynistic worldview conducive to the support for and engagement in violence (Baele et al. 2021; Maxwell et al. 2020; Regehr 2022). Self-identification as an incel involves accepting a set of beliefs about gender relations which are justified as “scientific facts” in the community. In what follows, we describe these beliefs and attitudes in their context.

Ironically, the movement has its origin in “Alana’s Involuntary Celibacy Project,” a website created in 1997 by a young queer woman, Alana, to offer a space for people of any sexual and gender identity struggling with loneliness and dating problems to share their experiences, and to provide them with support (on the history of the movement, see Beauchamp 2019; on this and other hermeneutic resources arrogated by the incel movement, see Alfano & Catapang Podosky forthcoming). Although the community still appeals to people struggling with loneliness and dating problems, promising them “understanding” and “support,” both its membership structure and character have changed. The incel community has morphed into an exclusively male community with hostile, misogynistic, heteronormative, and often racist attitudes. Given the complex network and dynamics of the community – YouTube channels, websites, and forums are regularly banned from the web, forcing them to reappear under different names or in different places – its size and demographic structure are notoriously difficult to estimate. The original r/Incel forum had 40,000 members. According to recent surveys, the members are predominantly young white European and North American men identifying as middle-class (Regehr 2022, 141; Speckhard et al. 2021, 95–97).

The incel movement is usually located in the loose network of online forums, blogs, and vlogs called “the manosphere,” which consists of different groups of men who promote anti-feminist and misogynistic attitudes (Daly and Reed 2022, 15; Ging 2019). Apart from the incel movement,

the groups include men’s rights activists (MRAs) who advocate political changes that favor men, fathers’ rights groups, Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), who wish to avoid women altogether because of their alleged toxicity, and pick-up artists (PUAs) who share techniques for seducing women. What unifies these groups, despite their partly diverging ideologies and adversarial relationships, is a set of beliefs according to which women have caused their problems in particular and problems in society more generally. Therefore, women are insulted, mistreatment and hatred are encouraged, and sexual violence is belittled. Moreover, they share a certain narrative around becoming enlightened about how life and social relations “really work” (Ging 2019, 640). This narrative draws on the late 1990s science fiction movie *The Matrix*. In the movie, the protagonist is faced with the decision of either taking a blue pill, which would keep him in a state of ignorance but also allow him to continue living as before, or a red pill, which would reveal the world to him as it is, with all its ugly truths. In the context of the manosphere, taking the red pill is synonymous with realizing that feminism is a hoax, that men do not have a privileged position in society anyway, and that women are “irrational, hypergamous, hardwired to pair with alpha males, and need to be dominated” (Ging 2019, 649).

Within the manosphere, the incel movement occupies “a very specific, extreme position in the ideological landscape” (Baele et al. 2021, 1686). Its extremism manifests in both its “logic of social categorization” and its “logic of explanation” (Baele et al. 2021, 1669). In terms of social categorization, according to the incel worldview, society is rigidly and hierarchically structured into three groups: “Alphas,” “Normies,” and “Incels.” Incels believe that the primary criterion of classification is the outer appearance of people (“lookism”). “Alpha” males, who are called “Chads,” are at the top of the hierarchy. They are the epitome of masculinity and high social status, are tall, and have sophisticated facial features. They are what (all) women want. “Alpha” females, or “Stacies,” are ideally beautiful (“hot,” “white”) women. They are what incels (and all other men) want but cannot have. The group of “Normies” is divided into several different subcategories based on their alleged sexual desirability, but in general, the term refers to anyone on the ranking scale who is average and still “a sex-haver.” Incels are at the bottom of the social hierarchy and are excluded from sexual relationships due to their physical appearance and unwillingness to content themselves with anything “less” than a “Stacy.”

While similar forms of categorization can also be found in other parts of the manosphere, the incel movement stands out in that it conceives of these social categories as immutable and the boundaries between them as impermeable, thereby exhibiting one of the key features of extremist worldviews

(Baele et al. 2021, 1675). The reification of social categories manifests itself in a variation of the enlightenment narrative described above that adds a black pill to the choice of options (Baele et al. 2021, 1675). Taking the black pill makes one aware not only of the fact that society is structured by the laws of physical attraction but also that these “laws” are immutable. This claim is further underlined by a belief in genetic determinism and superficial interpretations of evolutionary psychology (Baele et al. 2021, 1675; Daly and Reed 2022, 24; Ging 2019, 649; Maxwell et al. 2020, 1860). The conceptions of what women want are construed with references to statistics and “biological facts,” while at the same time, the discussions are filled with extreme stereotypes, and racist, heteronormative, and sexist vocabularies (Ging 2019, 649). For example, according to the incel ideology, 80% of women are only interested in the 20% of most attractive men, leaving only 20% of women for the remaining 80% of men (Baele et al. 2021, 1675). While those who have taken the red pill may still harbor the hope that their knowledge might allow them to change something about the social structures – e.g., through political activism – or to change position within the social hierarchy – e.g., through working out, undergoing cosmetic surgeries, or learning the art of seduction – those who have taken the black pill are condemned to despair. This gives the incel worldview a particularly nihilistic character and leaves its adherents with only three options: they can accept the world and their situation as it is and try to cope with it, thereby risking being downgraded as “copes” by their peers; they can decide to die by suicide; or they can engage in retaliatory violence. Elliot Rodger’s (2014, 134) rationale for the last option is as follows: “If I don’t do this, then I only have a future filled with more loneliness and rejection ahead of me, devoid of sex, love, and enjoyment. I have to do it. It’s the only thing I can do.”

In terms of explanation, the incel worldview identifies two main villains: women and feminism. Women are represented as primitive – driven by biologically hardwired desires, letting “Chads” do everything with them; shallow – purely interested in physical appearance, status, and money; untrustworthy and morally corrupt – betraying their “Beta” husbands with “Chads” and exploiting men and the welfare state. However – and this is especially the case with “Stacies” – they are also powerful because it is they and their desires that primarily determine who gets the scarce resources of sex, love, attention, and offspring (Baele et al. 2021, 1675). The incels’ depiction of the status quo is complemented by their account of history, which depicts uncontested patriarchy as a golden age in which people married early and followed traditional gender roles, providing all men “access” to sex (Baele et al. 2021, 1679). From the 1960s onward, or so they tell us, feminism has led to the increasing erosion

of the rules, norms, and laws that determined traditional patriarchal societies, resulting in the current situation of a highly competitive sexual market exclusively ruled by the laws of “lookism” and feminine “hypergammy.” This second explanation, which identifies feminism and feminists as the source of the problem, accounts for why, despite the movement’s nihilistic ideology, violence may not only be retaliatory but might also be seen as a means to bring about political change.

After this introduction to the incel movement, its history, and its ideology, we now turn to the role of loneliness in the incel movement.

3 The Incels’ Loneliness

Humanity ... All of my suffering on this world has been at the hands of humanity, particularly women. It has made me realize just how brutal and twisted humanity is as a species. All I ever wanted was to fit in and live a happy life amongst humanity, but I was cast out and rejected, forced to endure an existence of loneliness and insignificance, all because the females of the human species were incapable of seeing the value in me. (Rodger 2014, 1)

This opening passage of Rodger’s manifesto exemplifies the prominent role that incels attribute in their self-accounts to loneliness, experiences of social exclusion, and the unfulfilled desire to belong. But what exactly do they mean when they talk about “loneliness”? What kind of experiences are they describing? What understandings of social relationships, love, human existence, and a life worth living are presupposed in their descriptions? And what – if anything – makes their experiences and understanding of loneliness inappropriate? In this section, we discuss these questions, drawing on contemporary philosophical theories of loneliness and making use of conceptual tools from the philosophy of emotion. Our aim is, first, to gain a better understanding of the incels’ loneliness and, second, to outline the implications of our analysis for both our philosophical understanding of loneliness and feminist studies of the phenomenon. Accordingly, while we start with a relatively narrow definition of loneliness as an emotion of absence, we also integrate other perspectives in the course of our analysis.

3.1 Loneliness as an Emotion

At a first estimation, loneliness can be conceptualized as the painful awareness that one has a social desire or need that is not being met (Motta 2021; Roberts and Krueger

2021; Seemann 2022). This may, for example, be the need for belonging, companionship, friendship, or love; or the desire for attention, admiration, understanding, recognition, or acknowledgment. In this sense, loneliness may be analyzed as an emotion – i.e., as an intentional affective state of mind that evaluates one’s current situation in the face of that which one cares about (see, e.g., Helm 2001; Roberts 2003). Loneliness differs from other emotions in terms of its characteristic affective intentionality. As an “emotion of absence” (Roberts and Krueger 2021, 185), it involves the experience that a specific type of good is either absent or – temporarily or irrevocably – out of reach, and this absence or unattainability is experienced as painful. Loneliness differs from other emotions of absence, such as nostalgia or homesickness, in that the absent good, in the case of loneliness, is a *social* good. It differs from “aleness” and “social isolation” in that the latter are objective conditions while loneliness is a subjective condition.

What social good is it that incels want, need, desire, or crave, yet experience as absent or out of reach? In the most general sense, their longing can be described as the desire to belong. The most pronounced form this desire takes in the movement is the desire for intimate relationships and, even more specifically, sexual relationships. “Intimate loneliness” – i.e., “the perceived absence of a significant someone (e.g., a spouse)” (Cacioppo et al. 2015, 240) – is not, however, the only form of loneliness they feel, and it is not only sex that they seek in intimate relationships but also, more generally, a sense of validation. Almost similarly prevalent in the incels’ self-accounts are descriptions of “relational loneliness,” i.e., “the perceived [...] absence of quality friendships or family connections” (ibid.). In other words, incels not only lack sexual partners, but they also suffer from a lack of friends. In the case of Elliot Rodger, this takes the form of the trope of wanting to be part of “the cool kids” (2014, 17). On the one hand, he senses that because he is not “cool” the women he desires despise and reject him; on the other, he believes that having an attractive partner is what would provide him access to the larger social good of having friends, thereby making him “cool.” If he cannot be part of “the cool kids,” he at least desires understanding – understanding that he finds neither in his family nor in his few friends, not even the best ones. The third layer of loneliness that is present in the incels’ self-accounts is the felt absence of integration into the larger society and the corresponding lack of social recognition. Again, incels see intimate relationships as an instrument to gain access to this larger social good. In their eyes, only being a partner and (potentially) a father in a family would allow them to live a respectable life, bestow their life with value and meaning, and provide them with social recognition.

To summarize, incels feel or portray themselves as social outcasts. Their loneliness covers the realm of intimate relationships as well as friendships and social relationships at large. However, they portray their involuntary celibacy as the sole cause – and, accordingly, overcoming it as the ultimate solution – of their loneliness. As Rodger phrases it: “If only one pretty girl had at least given me a chance and tried to get to know me, everything would have turned out differently” (2014, 93). If only one of those women would be willing to have an intimate relationship with them, or so they believe, this would solve all their problems. First, it would provide them with sex, love, attention, recognition, and other social goods directly connected to having a sexual relationship. Second, being valued by someone – and not just by anyone but by someone on the top of the social hierarchy – would allow them to value themselves. Third, it would allow them to become part of social networks (beyond the incel and online communities), find friends, and develop a sense of belonging. Fourth, being an intimate partner would make them respectable and respected members of society. Fifth, this is all – at the very least – seen as a precondition, if not the ultimate fulfillment of a happy life, a life worth living. Finally, as Rodger (2014, 32) claims in his manifesto, the desired attention from a “pretty girl” would have prevented his anger, frustration, and sense of worthlessness from escalating into violence. In other words, sex becomes something like the incels’ *idée fixe* – the cause and solution of all their personal and political problems. This fixation on one particular socio-political issue is another feature that the incel movement shares with other forms of extremism.

Beyond being an emotional experience of absence, loneliness sometimes involves a comparative dimension (Ratcliffe forthcoming). In cases like these, loneliness is not just the experience that a specific type of social good is absent or out of reach; it is also the experience that the very same good that one lacks is available or even superabundant for others. This comparative dimension of feeling excluded is central to incels’ loneliness.

So far, we have offered a *descriptive* analysis of incels’ loneliness. However, as concern-based evaluative, representational, and affective states of mind, emotions in general and the emotion of loneliness in particular also give rise to normative questions. So far, we lack a comprehensive normative analysis of loneliness. It is common in the philosophy of emotion to distinguish between the fittingness or correctness and moral appropriateness of emotions, and their prudential value (D’Arms & Jacobson 2000). Even though the details of the distinction are controversial, it has been applied to a number of specific emotions, prominently for instance to anger (see Cherry 2021). Applied to the case of loneliness, we can ask whether the emotion “gets things right” – that is, whether the emoter *is* indeed lonely

(fittingness); whether it is moral for them to feel lonely (moral appropriateness); and whether – against the backdrop of certain goals – it is productive or unproductive for them to feel lonely (prudential value).

In the scarce philosophical discussions on the normative status of loneliness, it has been pointed out that it is unclear whether loneliness has correctness conditions – that is, whether “one can feel lonely when in fact one is not” – and that the answer to this question has “considerable impact on the design of remedial measures” (Seemann 2022, 2–3). This question-setting is, however, problematic for two reasons. First, when loneliness is defined as a subjective condition, as it would be understood from a critical-phenomenological perspective, it is more consistent (and relevant) to ask *how* one experiences loneliness rather than question whether one actually *is* lonely. Second, the question-setting stems from a context in which loneliness is primarily conceived of as a mental health problem.

By contrast, our socio-political perspective suggests focusing on questions of moral appropriateness. A person might be “right” to feel lonely – i.e., their loneliness might be “fitting” – and yet their loneliness might be (morally) problematic or even inappropriate (see Cherry 2021, for a similar analysis of the various ways in which fitting anger can go wrong). In the case of incels, it seems hard to deny that their loneliness is fitting – from the first-person perspective, they *do* experience loneliness – and yet their loneliness seems to get things wrong most profoundly. How does it do so?

First, as anti-oppressive theorists frequently point out, our desires in general and our social and sexual desires in particular are not simply a given; they are historically grown and socially shaped (Beran 2021; Manne 2018; Srinivasan 2022). Incels’ preoccupation with heteronormative coupled love can be understood as a particularly pronounced version of the cultural ideal of romantic love that was developed in the nineteenth century and tells us that only with a “special someone” can we become “complete” and live a happy and meaningful life (for a critical analysis, see Ahmed 2010; Bound Alberti 2019, 61–82). In the case of incels, this ideal – which originally focused on the idea of a “soulmate” – takes the specific form of a preoccupation with sexual relationships that become the mythologized symbol of a fulfilled social life. Against the backdrop of the powerful cultural ideal of heteronormative romantic love, it is thus not surprising that incels feel lonely. As Fay Bound Alberti (2019, 62) puts it, “if loneliness represents a gulf between the emotional and social connections that are desired and those that are achieved, and the cultural ideal is for a soulmate, then how can a person be truly fulfilled without one?” But even if it is powerful, this ideal and the social desires and norms connected to it are culturally and historically

contingent. So, even if incels’ loneliness is “fitting” against the backdrop of the ideal of heteronormative romantic love, the (morally) appropriate reaction to it is a socio-political critique of the underlying ideals, social norms, and desires.

Second, incels’ desires are deeply misogynistic and often racist, heteronormative, and ableist. In many cases, they do not want sex with just anyone, they want sex with a “hot white girl” – a “Stacy.” Presuming that our emotions and concerns co-constitute each other (see, e.g., Helm 2001), this implies that incels’ loneliness is both *based on* and *reinforcing of* misogynistic, racist, heteronormative, and ableist desires. In addition to having these desires, incels also misrepresent them as being biologically determined. This is both wrong and morally problematic in that it immunizes their desires against criticism. For a normative assessment of the incels’ loneliness, this implies that they might be right in feeling lonely and yet wrong in interpreting and/or experiencing their loneliness as a reaction to an unfulfilled biologically determined social need.

What does this imply for our understanding of loneliness in general? Philosophical loneliness studies have done a good job of accounting for the plurality of social goods for which people might strive and the absence or unavailability of which might be experienced as painful (see, e.g., Roberts and Krueger 2021, 191–199). However, as our analysis of incels’ loneliness demonstrates, this pluralistic and individualistic account needs to be complemented by a socio-political critique of our social desires and needs.

Third, and finally, incels’ understanding of loneliness itself is also problematic. The community’s ingrained set of beliefs and models of explanation foster very specific ways of perceiving oneself and others. Mirroring their sense of entitlement, it is *others* who are supposed to give them what they desire or need. However, as much as alleviating loneliness is about *receiving* certain social goods, it is also about giving – gifting – them to others and learning what others might desire and need (Tietjen and Furtak 2021). Moreover, their belief that if only they had an intimate partner, all their problems would be solved, reveals a naïve understanding of loneliness that fails to acknowledge how loneliness can and does occur even in our most intimate friendships and loves (Tietjen and Furtak 2021). In this way, the role of communication in connecting with others is severely overlooked.

3.2 Loneliness as an Existential Feeling

In the previous subsection, we introduced a discussion of loneliness as an emotion. Although, following their self-descriptions, it is certainly true that incels’ lives are pervaded by emotional episodes of loneliness, the pervasive character of this loneliness gives rise to the question of whether, beyond its emotional component, incels’ experience of

loneliness might also involve a dimension better described as a “mood” or “existential feeling.” Emotions are intentional states of mind that evaluate our current situation in the face of what we care about. Existential feelings, by contrast, are pre-intentional feelings that reflect our situation *as such*; they are ways of being in the world that constitute our sense of possibility (Ratcliffe 2008). Applied to the case of loneliness, this means that it is characteristic of loneliness as an existential feeling that we experience specific social goods, people, or relationships as *principally* – and not just temporarily – absent and out of reach for us (Ratcliffe *forthcoming*; Roberts and Krueger 2021, 199–201; Seemann 2022, 7–8; Tietjen and Furtak 2021, 443–447).

It is exactly this sense of impossibility that characterizes incels’ nihilistic black pill ideology. This does not mean that all incels committed to the black pill ideology experience loneliness as an existential feeling; there might be a discrepancy between their self-proclaimed ideology and their experiential world. It means even less that all existentially lonely individuals are prone to incelism; not only are incels committed to a specific version of nihilism, there is also much more to their worldview than just nihilism. However, incels’ nihilistic black pill ideology and the existential feeling of loneliness still seem to be interdependent. On the one hand, the adoption of the nihilistic black pill ideology might contribute to the transformation of emotional loneliness into an existential feeling; on the other, it might (at least in part) be a result and expression of the existential feeling of loneliness.

Importantly, incels’ existential loneliness is not formed in a vacuum but in a specific social setting that advocates particular social norms and ways of thinking. At first blush, it might seem that the earlier theories of existential feeling focus mainly on the *individual’s* way of finding oneself in the world, sensing belongingness, and perceiving one’s possibilities (Ratcliffe 2008, 2012), whereas other accounts emphasize the social context and cultural variation of these background feelings (Slaby and Stephan 2008). More recent formulations, however, integrate a developmental aspect to the theory, binding existential feelings to the processes of social interaction (see Ratcliffe 2020, 257–258). The idea is that existential feelings develop gradually in interaction, in the circular movement between anticipation and (un)fulfillment (*ibid.*). Similarly, Rodger’s manifesto expresses his anticipation that he will make friends and interact with girls while also describing how these expectations are continuously disappointed. This anticipation is repeatedly unfulfilled, to the extent that the possibility of having a social life at all is gradually excluded. As noted above, the anticipations or desires about how to interact with others are highly normative, implying particular standards about how to be “a cool kid,” how ideal masculinity and femininity

are performed, who is “fuckable” or “unfuckable,” and what types of social hierarchies these social dynamics form. In other words, existential loneliness could be characterized in this context as a background sense of (im)possibility with certain normative standards and a high degree of socio-cultural specificity (see Slaby and Stephan 2008, 510–511).

Together, these reflections on the formation of the existential feeling of loneliness and its interdependence with incels’ ideology demonstrate that the politicization of (our understanding of) loneliness needs to be extended beyond the realm of emotions to the realm of existential feelings.

3.3 Implications for Feminist Loneliness Studies

So far, we have described how incels’ emotional and existential feelings of loneliness are shaped in a specific socio-political setting. But the reference to and descriptions of loneliness in sources such as Rodger’s manifesto are not just *expressions* of loneliness that aim to reveal the “truth” about incels’ motivations. They are also means of political propaganda that equip their audience with hermeneutical tools that allow them to reinterpret their own grievances and, in some cases at least, lead ultimately to a transformation of their loneliness (see Alfano & Catapang Podosky *forthcoming*). Loneliness is thus political in a twofold sense. It is shaped by prevailing social norms and ways of thinking, and the language of loneliness is used as a political tool to reshape our emotional and existential feelings, beliefs, and norms.

In conceiving of loneliness as a socio-political phenomenon, our analysis of incels’ loneliness is in line with the key presumption of feminist loneliness studies. In several case studies, anti-oppressive theorists of loneliness have pointed to its socio-political dimension, focusing on the loneliness of oppressed and marginalized groups (see Magnet and Orr 2022; Wilkinson 2022, 25). Our analysis complements these case studies by focusing on the loneliness of the oppressors who, when seen from a different perspective, might be said to suffer from social exclusion and discrimination themselves. Indeed, the incels’ loneliness seems to be a highly ambiguous phenomenon. On the one hand, it is the experience of a “failure” to live up to the social norms of romantic love and coupling that makes incels feel lonely (Magnet and Orr 2022, 9). In this regard, incels might share something with other misrecognized groups. However, rather than questioning this ideal, they present a radicalized – misogynistic, heteronormative, racist, ableist – version of it. Incels politicize their own loneliness in that they use loneliness, its description, and its evocation, to justify and consolidate their misogynistic worldview.

For the field of feminist loneliness studies, this implies that we must pay attention both to cases in which loneliness

is misconstrued as a purely individual experience or private problem *and* cases in which loneliness is politicized in a problematic way – that is, when it is used as a political weapon to reinforce oppressive social norms. So far, it has been highlighted that a primary goal of feminist loneliness studies is to “understand the ways that systems of oppression – white supremacy, settler colonialism, anti-queer bias, misogyny, neoliberal capitalism and so on – create our lonely world” (Magnet and Orr 2022, 4). Based on our analysis of incels’ loneliness, we claim that this goal needs to be complemented by a second, equally important goal; namely, to understand how loneliness, its experiences, descriptions, and conceptualizations, have been used to reinforce such systems of oppression. While we are not calling for a depoliticization of loneliness, incels’ loneliness reminds us that there are not only good but also problematic and bad, oppressive, ways of “politicizing” loneliness.

After this analysis of loneliness and how it is experienced and understood within the incel movement, we now turn to the relationship between loneliness and misogyny.

4 Loneliness, Misogyny, and *Ressentiment*

The more lonely I felt, the more angry I became. The anger slowly built up inside me throughout all of the dark years. (Rodger 2014, 56)

In this passage, Rodger describes a direct link between his anger and his experience of loneliness. How can we understand the relationship between loneliness and misogynistic anger? In order to answer this question, we first need to take a closer look at incels’ antagonistic emotions. What kind of antagonistic emotions do they describe and what makes them misogynistic? We then turn to the question of how, through the affective mechanism of *ressentiment*, loneliness gets transformed into misogynistic antagonistic emotions. Finally, we address the question of whether, in what sense, and at what price incels’ community alleviates their loneliness.

4.1 Misogyny and Antagonistic Emotions

The ways of explaining social interaction in the incel community are profoundly rooted in misogynistic views. Moreover, without the activating antagonistic emotions misogyny implies, inceldom could only be considered a form of self-pity (Gillet and Suzor 2022). There are two clusters of antagonistic emotions connected to the incel movement and misogyny at large (on antagonistic emotions, see Brogaard 2020; Tietjen and Osler [forthcoming](#)). The first cluster

involves emotions such as anger, hatred, resentment, and indignation. As moral emotions, these emotions are based on a specific set of moral norms and expectations – in this case, *gendered* moral norms and expectations that mirror incels’ patriarchal ideals of femininity and masculinity (Manne 2018; Brogaard 2020, 209–214). According to this ideal, women owe men goods such as emotional labor, care, attention, love, and sex, and (white) men, due to their maleness (and whiteness) are entitled to goods such as social status, recognition, and jobs. Incels blame women and society at large for not providing them with these goods, or for taking them away. In particular, they express anger, resentment, and hatred for women – especially those they deem “attractive” – who fail to adore, love, and have sex with them and thereby divest them not only of these distinctive social goods but also, as described above, of their capacity to value themselves, build up friendships, gain social recognition, and live a happy and meaningful life. Importantly, the anger may target both women and all those who implicitly or explicitly support feminism or profit from the existing social order. The emotions in question can be described as experiences of “aggrieved entitlement” (Kimmel 2019). Incels depict themselves as victims of unjust deprivation, thereby putting themselves and their desires at the center of their story while being ignorant of the desires of all others (Yap 2019, 20) and remaining “unable to acknowledge their own privilege” (Regehr 2022, 141–142).

Incels’ anger is misogynistic in that it is based on and reproduces unjust patriarchal structures. Misogyny, therefore, is not just a peculiar psychological feature of individual persons. It is also “a property of social systems or environments as a whole, in which women will tend to face hostility of various kinds because they are women in a man’s world (i.e., a patriarchy), who are held to be failing to live up to patriarchal standards” (Manne 2018, 33–34). Misogyny involves the attempt to maintain and enforce the subordinate status of women in the social system (Yap 2019, 19). As they reproduce and are based on unjust patriarchal structures, incels’ antagonistic emotions are morally inappropriate and, because they are rooted in “a *false* sense of entitlement,” they are “unjustified” (Brogaard 2020, 203, 204, our emphasis). Moreover, rather than aiming to overcome oppression, e.g., through challenging hierarchies of “fuckability” that privilege some while discriminating against most other bodies (Srinivasan 2022, 73–122), incels demand to become the beneficiaries of this unjust social system (Yap 2019, 20).

The second cluster of antagonistic emotions connected to the incel movement and misogyny at large portrays women as filthy and inherently inferior to men due to their “female essence” (Brogaard 2020, 207). It involves emotions such as contempt and disgust. These emotions are based on

the “myth of feminine filth” (Brogaard 2020, 214). Those incels who despise women due to their allegedly inferior feminine nature depict them as, for instance, primitive and shallow. Moreover, they express derogatory attitudes toward women with dehumanizing vocabulary, including, for example, referring to women as “femoids,” somehow alien and not fully human (Chang 2022; Baele et al. 2021, 1675; Maxwell et al. 2020, 1859). Interestingly, in this context, women are simultaneously depicted as both human and subhuman (Yap 2019, 20). On the one hand, “femoids” have a human form and are expected to provide men with distinctively human social goods (e.g., love and care); on the other, there is something profoundly uncanny in women’s essence (Yap 2019, 20), which makes them opaque, incomprehensible, scary, and unapproachable. Accordingly, even though women are despised and considered disgusting, they are not rejected but rather obsessed about. Theories of disgust similarly emphasize that disgusted aversion may entail both repulsion and attraction – that one does not necessarily just turn away from the repulsive, disturbing object but may remain fixated on it (Heinämaa 2020, 381–385).

4.2 *Ressentiment* and the Transformation of Loneliness into Misogyny

In the previous subsection, we argued that there are two clusters of antagonistic emotions connected to the incel movement that mirror what have been described as hateful and contemptuous forms of misogyny (Brogaard 2020, 199–237). We now turn to the question of how these antagonistic misogynistic emotions relate to incels’ loneliness, proposing that it is the affective mechanism of *ressentiment* that transforms their loneliness into misogynistic antagonistic emotions.

As a distinctive type of affective mechanism, *ressentiment* has come to prominence within philosophy through the work of Friedrich Nietzsche (2017) and Max Scheler (1994). Indeed, the particular account of *ressentiment* on which we rely, that by Mikko Salmela and Tereza Capelos (2021), heavily draws on these resources. Following Salmela and Capelos, we conceive of *ressentiment* as an emotional mechanism that transforms the painful feelings of impotence, inferiority, and powerlessness manifest in emotions such as inefficacious anger, envy, and shame into shared antagonistic emotions such as anger, hatred, and vengefulness, that target an “all-bad” other. In what is called “strong” (as opposed to “weak”) *ressentiment*, this process involves a “transvaluation of the self from inferior, failing, a loser, into a noble, pious, and superior victim, and of an unattainable object or valued identity into an undesired one” (Salmela and Capelos 2021, 200). As a psychological defense mechanism, *ressentiment* aims at protecting the

vulnerable self from repeated experiences of failure. While, in the first stages, it may be an effective tool for this end, in advanced ones, rather than offering a resolution for the original problem, it leads to self-deception and a distortion of reality. As such, *ressentiment* has been described as central in reactionary and fanatical political movements (Katsafanas 2022; Salmela and Capelos 2021; Salmela and von Scheve 2017).

Feelings of shame, envy, and inefficacious anger have been identified as the most important emotional triggers of *ressentiment* and it has been argued that what they share is a sense of impotence, inferiority, and powerlessness. All these feelings feature prominently in incels’ writings. Rodger’s experiences as a child and a young person included feeling ashamed of his weak physical condition and Asian look; intense envy of sexually active men; (increasing) impotent anger toward women (and men) who fail to give him attention and recognition; and feelings of humiliation that combine elements of impotent anger and shame. Moreover, he indulged himself in obsessive thoughts of revenge, to the extent that revenge became his only reason for living (Rodger 2014, 118). The aim of this revenge was to correct the injustice that girls had not had sex with him, but it also targeted popular, good-looking adolescents, young adults and couples who had made him feel like an outcast.

How does loneliness fit into this picture? We propose that, in a certain sense, loneliness and its transformation play a role in many occurrences of *ressentiment*, not only in the incel movement, but also in other reactionary and extremist movements. It is central to the process of “empowerment” connected to *ressentiment* that it transforms not only the *inferior* self into a superior one but also the *lone* self into a member of a group. Indeed, it has been highlighted that the efficacy of the affective mechanism of *ressentiment* relies, in part, on its consolidation through social interaction with peers who confirm and share one’s transformed values and identity (Katsafanas 2022; Salmela and Capelos 2021, 199). So far, however, little attention has been paid to the role of loneliness in this context. Loneliness is perhaps another key feature that all emotional triggers of *ressentiment* share, in addition to feelings of impotence, inferiority, and powerlessness. More plausibly, at least in some cases, loneliness is one of the triggers of *ressentiment*. At any rate, more attention needs to be paid to the role of loneliness in both group radicalization and lone actor terrorism.

However, the role that loneliness plays in the incel movement is still special. First of all, incels suffer from a specific type of loneliness, namely *intimate* loneliness. By contrast, in other *ressentiment*-driven political movements, different forms of loneliness might be more prominent, e.g., cultural or spiritual loneliness. Even if, as we have argued above, other types of loneliness (e.g., relational loneliness) also

play a role in incels' felt lack of belonging, their suffering still centers around their failure to live up to a specific gendered idea of identity, namely patriarchal masculinity. It is the lack of understanding of this specific suffering – their lack of sex – that makes them feel misunderstood. But it is not only that they suffer from a specific type of loneliness, it is also the fact that sex – or lack thereof – becomes their primary preoccupation that is distinctive of the incel movement. While it is a general characteristic of the affective mechanism of *ressentiment* that the *ressentimentful* person develops an “almost obsessive preoccupation [...] with victimhood” as well as with the unattainable good or identity to which they aspire (Salmela and Capelos 2021, 198), the goods and identities aspired to by different *ressentiment*-driven political movements differ significantly from each other.

The two types of misogyny that we identified above – hateful and contemptuous misogyny – might thereby fulfill two different functions in *ressentiment*. While hateful misogyny operates on the level of morality and helps incels to restore their moral self-esteem, contemptuous misogyny operates on the level of “nature” and allows them to recalibrate their feelings of bodily inferiority.

4.3 The Community of the Lonely?

We have described how the affective mechanism of *ressentiment* transforms painful feelings of impotence, inferiority, and powerlessness into shared antagonistic emotions targeting an “all-bad” other and highlighted that, in this process, the lone self is transformed into a member of a group. Does this imply that loneliness is in fact overcome if the affective mechanism of *ressentiment* is successful?

Incels form online communities to seek support and acceptance. A study by Speckhard et al. (2021) shows that 58.1% of survey participants felt less lonely when spending time in the forums (Speckhard et al. 2021, 102). However, 54.4% felt more hopeless, and other empirical studies have concluded that these groups do not alleviate incels' loneliness in the long run (Maxwell et al. 2020; Regehr 2022). According to Regehr (2022), the informants of her study spent considerable time online in general, and many reported outright addictions to games and/or porn (Regehr 2022, 144–145). Although gaming communities may create a strong sense of belonging in many cases (see Osler 2020), in Regehr's study the incels interviewed reported that excessive gaming negatively impacted their daily functioning and their opportunities for forming relationships. Instead of social bonding, the preoccupation with video games and pornography had the effect of shutting out these incels from other forms of social interaction which might involve the possibility of being rejected. In a similar vein,

Rodger describes how online communication in his video game communities “temporarily filled the social void,” but as the only social interactions took place online, he also started to feel lonely when playing (2014, 40; 56). Instead of presenting gaming communities as places of long-standing friendship and compassion, he describes them as places to *hide* from the outside world where he felt rejected, frightened, weak, and humiliated (ibid., 124). Similarly, other incels have often faced bullying and long-term rejection and struggle with insecurities, low self-confidence, and mental health issues (Regehr 2022, 152).

Self-identifying as part of the incel community thus seems to deepen their social isolation and aggravate their sense of low self-worth (Maxwell et al. 2020, 1867–1869; Regehr 2022, 152). First, the hierarchical view of social relations does not allow the alleviation of their intimate loneliness: even if the community criticizes the (patriarchal) standards of ideal masculinity incorporated by the “Chads,” it applies these problematic standards to women, leaving the incels in the position where they are only interested in those with whom, according to their own view, they cannot form any kind of relationship (Maxwell et al. 2020, 1866). Second, the community has immunized itself from outside views that try to challenge the negative self-conceptions and find ways out of loneliness. A study by Helm et al. (2022, 9) highlights that the possibility of changing the incel worldview and behavior is a prominent theme in the forums. However, even though encouraging comments are common, they are mostly posted by those considered to be “normies,” and critical views are met with rejection (ibid.). As noted, everyone categorized as “not-incel” is construed as “other” and simply unable to understand what they are going through (Maxwell et al. 2020, 1863). Therefore, any suggestions coming from these “others” are considered to be platitudes lacking insight into their condition and the depth of their despair (ibid.). Furthermore, the community places not only women but also incels themselves “back in their place”: if someone has even talked to a girl, they are easily accused of bragging and attacked by others (Kates 2021).

In general, the incel community employs indoctrination patterns familiar from other radicalized communities which insecure individuals enter when seeking understanding and a support network. From the beginning, they are provided with a rich body of knowledge with a highly specialized vocabulary which at first blush seems to explain the rejection and struggles they have faced in their lives. In the discussion forums, “the facts of life” are accompanied by emotional responses of anger and hatred which are normalized through repetition (Regehr 2022, 152–153). In other words, the explanatory models and opinions are repeatedly presented alongside emotional reactions which become seen as “normal,” usual, and legitimate ways of perceiving one's

situation. Loneliness thus starts to matter *in a particular way*: even though the insecure individuals would have been both lonely and angry before, in the community their loneliness becomes intimately connected to collectively justified and encouraged anger with clearly defined and categorized targets. Importantly, our point is not to take all responsibility away from the individual and project it on the group; it is simply to note that even if the online community offers some sort of social acceptance, it does not provide incels with the broader social recognition for which they are longing, as the community does not promote solidarity beyond the narrow in-group and so does not foster feelings of belonging in other social environments. By contrast, self-identified incels in the forums mostly continue to provide deterministic explanations, and being lonely becomes, almost paradoxically, part of the group’s identity.

As described above, strong forms of *ressentiment* involve a transvaluation of the self and a valued object (in this case e.g., women, sex, social recognition) or identity. This helps us to better understand empirical findings that show that the incel community reinforces rather than alleviates loneliness. On the one hand, the community provides its members with a specific – if limited – sense of understanding and connection. On the other, the original desire for meaningful relationships and connection is not only unmet, but it is also hidden behind new values and desires. This, however, does not mean that the original desires and needs cease to exist. It is exactly because they still are there that the *ressentimentful* person constantly needs confirmation of their – chronically unstable and fragile – new sense of identity and values (Salmela and Capelos 2021; Tietjen 2023).

5 Conclusions

In this article, we have explored incels’ experiences of loneliness from the first-person perspective, while critically reflecting on how the description and political exploitation of these experiences reproduce and reinforce oppressive social structures, attitudes, and patterns of thought. As we have pointed out, incels’ loneliness spans from the spheres of sexuality and intimacy to friendships to social relationships at large, yet incels themselves are primarily preoccupied with (their lack of) sex, which they see as the primary source of and solution to all their private and political problems. As our critical reflections on incels’ loneliness have demonstrated, if we want to better understand the phenomenon, we need to pay attention to the social norms that condition experiences of loneliness and allow us to perceive and conceptualize loneliness in a particular way. This is equally true whether loneliness is analyzed as an emotion or an existential feeling.

Moreover, we have shown how the affective mechanism of *ressentiment* transforms loneliness into misogynistic emotions. As we have argued, both the focus on intimate loneliness and the primary preoccupation with loneliness are distinctive to the incel movement as compared to other reactionary and extremist political movements driven by *ressentiment*. In the online community, loneliness starts to matter in a specific way, even to the extent that it becomes part of incels’ shared identity to be lonely and rejected. This and other factors explain why the movement creates a vicious circle of social isolation that reinforces its members’ loneliness rather than alleviates it. Accordingly, even if we ascribe loneliness and misogyny to individual persons, they cannot be understood independently of the socio-political structures in which they are embedded. As our analysis demonstrates exemplarily, beyond objective factors such as social isolation, subjective experiences of loneliness may play a crucial role in processes of radicalization. Accordingly, more attention should be paid to loneliness in the study of processes of radicalization and deradicalization in the context of other online and offline extremist movements.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest We have no conflict of interest to declare.

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