Ince bonding: Stories and storytelling in online misogynist spaces
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Abstract
Involuntary celibates, or incels, are part of a misogynistic, extremist subculture that has been linked to acts of mass violence. Unlike other alt-right communities, the incel subculture exists entirely online, and participants rarely, if ever, interact in face-to-face settings. Using an original dataset of 76 discussion threads drawn from two self-identified incel Web sites, this paper investigates how participants on incel discussion boards engage in bonding activities that foster a sense of commitment to the online incel community. We build on sociological understandings of narrative and storytelling to identify and describe three interactive storytelling practices that are facilitated by the affordances of these digital spaces: repetition, co-creation, and elaboration. These practices enable incel participants to share similar experiences, apply elements of the incel ideology to interpret off-line events, and elaborate boundaries between incels and those that they perceive as “normies”. Our study reveals how online bonding activities generate robust collective identities in the incel subculture. It also highlights crucial differences between online and face-to-face storytelling practices in alt-right communities.

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Introduction
Among the many communities centered around hate is the incel subculture. Short for “involuntary celibate,” inceldom is “predominantly comprised of socially alienated men who describe themselves as being unable to find women who are willing to engage in romantic relationships with them.” [1] Misogyny characterizes the incel subculture, as participants often blame and denigrate women for their frustrated romantic and sexual desires (Heritage and Koller, 2020).
On occasion, self-identified incels have sought violent retribution in the form of mass shootings and other acts of violence (Beckett, 2021). The most infamous of such shootings occurred in Isla Vista in 2014, when Elliot Rodger killed six people and injured 14 others before ending his life. Many members of the incel subculture now use Rodger’s initials to refer broadly to such acts of violence. Even though most participants in the subculture do not perpetuate mass violence, many affiliate strongly with the community and believe deeply in the ideology that justifies such acts.

Sociologically, these patterns of identification with the incel community and ideology are puzzling. One of the key features that distinguishes the incel subculture from many other hate-based, extremist groups is that members of the subculture interact primarily in online environments, while rarely, if ever, meeting in person. Within the broader literature about alt-right social movements, face-to-face interaction in so-called “free spaces” has been theorized as an essential element in the formation of robust collective identities (Futrell and Simi, 2004; Polletta, 1999; Polletta and Jasper, 2001).

The persistence of the incel subculture and the commitment that many participants feel towards their incel identities challenges this thesis. The goal of this research is therefore to determine how participants share their ideology and develop a sense of commitment despite the subculture’s online character. Drawing from a grounded discourse analysis of 76 threads posted across two incel forum Web sites, for a total of roughly 1,200 unique posts, we highlight the central role of interactive storytelling practices in incel bonding and collective identity formation.

As social movements scholars have noted, stories can function as powerful tools for recruitment and commitment in the absence of formal social movement organizations (Polletta, 1998). We build on this literature by identifying prominent themes that appear in stories that are exchanged in incel Web sites, but we also extend this line of inquiry to consider how participants in these online forums collaborate in the creation of narrative storylines. We argue that shifting from an analysis of stories as cultural texts to an analysis of interactive practices of storytelling in online environments offers insight into the puzzle of incel collective identities.

Using our data, we identify and theorize the effects of three interactive storytelling practices. First, storytelling by repetition, in which participants offer a number of virtually identical narratives, cultivates solidarity based on knowledge of experiences that are shared among members of the subculture. Second, storytelling by co-creation, in which participants respond to one another’s suggestions to create a coherent narrative, enables members to become familiar with essential elements of incel ideology. Third, storytelling by elaboration, in which participants amplify central themes in an initial narrative, brings members together against perceived outsiders and “normies,” who are viewed as enemies of the subculture.

We construct this argument in several stages. First, we review existing literature about the demographic, ideological, and psychological characteristics of self-identified incels. In subsequent sections, we introduce sociological concepts of free spaces, collective identity, and bonding activities, which inform our analysis of participants’ commitment to the incel subculture. We then describe our research approach and present the central findings of our study.

What we know about incels: Demographics, ideology, and psychological characteristics

The amorphous and fluid character of the incel subculture has made it difficult to collect precise data about the number and demographic characteristics of adherents. Available data comes from surveys administered through incel discussion boards, which indicate that participants in online fora are almost entirely men below the age of 30, who live primarily in North America and Europe (Anti-Defamation League, 2020).

Perhaps surprisingly, given the strong presence of white supremacist and antisemitic sentiment within the
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online alt-right universe and the “manosphere” (Daniels, 2009; Sugiura, 2021), survey respondents identified with a variety of racial identities, although the majority were white. In an exploratory study of seven self-identified incels who committed or planned to commit violent attacks, Williams, et al. (2021) described similar demographic patterns. Regehr (2022), discussing a sample of 50 participants in online incel communities in the U.K., similarly noted that respondents were entirely male and under the age of 40, with limited racial diversity.

Researchers have also identified a number of ideological elements that make up the incel belief system, although different participants in the subculture may embrace these beliefs to a greater or lesser extent. The first such element, the sexual marketplace, is the idea that women seek partners bio-deterministically as they pursue evolutionary advantage and social status (O’Malley, et al., 2022). As Lindsay pointed out, the idea of the sexual marketplace is reinforced within the incel subculture by misogynistic depictions of women as “cruel, callous, and having simplified emotions (e.g., being guided by biological wiring).” [2]

A corollary concept is sexual market value, which is the notion that women sort potential sexual partners into alpha (or desirable) men, referred to as “Chads”, beta (or tolerable) men, referred to as “normies”, and undesirables (Ging, 2019). Participants in the incel subculture generally interpret their lack of mates as evidence that they fall into the lowest category and refer to themselves using derogatory terms, such as “ugly, monstrous, or manlet’ (O’Malley, et al., 2022).

Contrary to some work (e.g., Heritage and Koller, 2020) examining the categorization of the in-group and out-groups of the subculture, our data indicate that incels similarly subdivide women based on appearance. While there are terms used to refer to women as a whole, such as “foid” or “femoid”, a combination of “female” and “droid”, others, specifically names in the style of “Chad” and “Tyrone,” refer to subsets of women: “Stacys” and “Beckys” (Scotto di Carlo, 2022). Despite distinctions between them, women on the whole are understood to control the sexual marketplace by acting as gatekeepers to intimate relationships.

Like members of other extremist communities, incels claim access to knowledge and forms of understanding that are allegedly suppressed by mainstream culture. Referencing an iconic scene from the 1999 film The Matrix, participants in the incel subculture often distinguish between men who are “bluepilled”, or oblivious to the workings the sexual marketplace, and men who are “redpilled”, or who embrace the ideas that men are exploited in sexual relationships and disadvantaged by political movements for gender equity (Ging, 2019). Incels have also added a third concept, the “black pill,” which refers to the idea that one’s sexual market value is immutable and thus that the incel identity is permanent (Sugiura, 2021).

While there are active debates within the subculture about whether individual men can increase their sexual market value through concerted strategies of self-improvement (referred to as “maxxing”), researchers have argued that the black pill concept may justify mass violence by positioning incels as victims of a ruthless sexual marketplace and through its nihilistic suggestion that, absent systemic change, sexual and romantic satisfaction will remain inaccessible (Zimmerman, 2024; Witt, 2020).

Finally, researchers have identified psychological characteristics that may drive individuals’ affiliation with the incel subculture. For instance, Donnelly, et al. (2001) suggested that incels suffer from loneliness, which can lead to depression and despair and which can prevent incels from seeking out the very relationships that would end their involuntary celibacy. These conditions, in combination with the ideology, can also lead to a cycle of rejection and bitterness for incels who do seek out relationships, further intensifying their belief in their incel status (Maxwell, et al., 2020). Examining the writings of self-identified incels who have committed violent acts, Williams, et al. (2021) also highlighted connections between feelings of hopelessness and helplessness and a desire for revenge.

Other studies have cited acceptance threat — a fear of not measuring up to a socially valued identity — and status threat — the fear that the value of one’s social identity is being undermined — as important drivers of incel affiliation (Branscombe, et al., 1999). For instance, Brunson (2021) suggested that incels suffer
from acceptance threat, holding the idea that part of what makes a man masculine is sexual success with women, and that it is their lack thereof that makes them less of a man. Reporting on one experiment, Scaptura and Boyle (2019) also noted that men who suffered from acceptance threat were one and a half times as likely to fantasize about the use of powerful weapons or about committing rape, as compared to men who did not.

Collective identity and bonding activities

This study diverges from literature described earlier by focusing not on incel ideology itself, nor on the psychological characteristics of self-identified incels, but on how interactions between participants in the subculture foster incel collective identity. This term, drawn from the sociology of social movements, refers to “an individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community,” which typically springs from “a perception of shared status [with] or relation [to]” that community.

Along with other researchers, we begin from the assumption that collective identity is more of an activity than an object. In other words, collective identity exists in and through the shared practices and interactions of movement participants. We use the phrase bonding activities to refer to all sorts of practices and interactions that forge relationships between participants in a movement or subculture and that build a sense of belonging to the movement or subcultural community.

Bonding activities and collective identity have become important topics of research for scholars studying the resurgence of extremist, “alt-right” groups in the United States and around the world (Futrell and Simi, 2017; Kincaid, 2017; Lo, 1982). The alt-right encompasses a loose network of groups linked by shared racist and misogynistic ideologies and a rhetorical — and sometimes actual — embrace of violence as a means of political change (Hawley, 2017).

Alt-right groups are often labeled (and label themselves) based on whether they emphasize white racial domination or male domination, but in practice, racist and misogynistic ideologies overlap and amplify one another within these groups (Wilson, 2022). For instance, white nationalist discourse constructs women as innately inferior to men, glamorizes female subordination and traditional gender roles, and sometimes calls for violence against “feminists” and white women who enter interracial relationships (Ferber, 1998). On the other hand, incels and other misogynistic groups use a variety of derogatory terms to refer to men who are not white and employ coded antisemitic language.

Scholars aiming to understand alt-right participation initially focused on individual characteristics, such as social isolation and psychological maladjustment (Blee and Creasap, 2010). However, this approach has largely been replaced by research that emphasizes the role of interpersonal dynamics in sustaining participants’ commitment and sense of collective identity (e.g., Blee, 2002). In their extensive ethnographic research into the U.S. white power movement (WPM), for example, Simi and Futrell (Simi and Futrell, 2015; Futrell and Simi, 2004) identified several sorts of bonding activities that created collective identity amongst participants. These included (1) the acquisition and display of movement symbols, such as racist tattoos, clothing, shaved heads, and so forth; (2) participation in informal gatherings, such as house parties, white power concerts, and Bible study groups; and, (3) unconstrained talk among movement members, including sharing stories that express movement beliefs and ideals.

Simi and Futrell explained that these activities occurred in WPM “free spaces” — settings that were sequestered from others who did not share the movement’s beliefs. As one WPM activist put it, “When you live in the world like we do, you have to find places where you don’t feel you have to hold back on being racist; where other people act and feel the same way you do” [4]. Thus, they argued, free spaces and the bonding activities that occur within them are essential for the formation of alt-right collective identities.
Digital free spaces and online bonding

In Simi and Futrell’s view, the most important free spaces are those that enable face-to-face interactions. While they acknowledged that virtual free spaces also exist in the form of WPM Web sites, discussion boards, and chat rooms, they asserted that the relationships that activists form online are relatively thin and that digitally mediated interactions generate only weak solidarity (Simi and Futrell, 2006).

This argument follows a broader tendency amongst social movements researchers to position cyberspace interactions as ancillary and of secondary importance to those that occur in face-to-face settings (Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011; Hwang and Kim, 2015; Tufekci and Wilson, 2012). While this literature acknowledges that online interactions may increase the scale and speed by which movements are able to mobilize adherents (Earl and Kimport, 2011), many of these researchers have hesitated to characterize the Internet as a robust space in itself for creating and sustaining politicized communities (for exceptions, see Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Earl, et al., 2010).

We believe that this dismissal of online interactions is problematic. In the first place, it is an obstacle to understanding the persistence of the incel subculture. Incels have numerous ideological affinities with other extremist groups and are widely recognized as part of the contemporary alt-right constellation, but this subculture exists entirely online. Unlike the WPM, there are no physical incel free spaces to complement the subculture’s digital presence. Yet, the subculture has a strong collective identity and generates substantial commitment among many of its adherents.

This critique highlights a deeper problem with the tendency to dismiss online interactions: it has prevented scholars, including those that focus on alt-right groups, from closely examining the nature of interactive bonding activities in online free spaces (Marwick, et al., 2022). While certain types of bonding activities, such as the tattooing rituals that Simi and Futrell described, obviously cannot occur online, the affordances of digital platforms may actually enable other sorts of bonding activities to unfold in new ways.

In exploring this possibility, we have been guided by the efforts of a growing number of researchers to investigate how the affordances of digital platforms enable the development of alt-right collective identities. This work is wide-ranging. For instance, Caren, et al.’s analysis of the white nationalist Web site Stormfront demonstrated that participatory discussion boards foster collective identity by allowing users who identify with white nationalism to “discuss ongoing political news, debate movement strategies, share narratives [and] discuss mundane life events.” [5] On the other hand, Massanari’s (2017) study of anti-feminism on Reddit identified features of the platform’s design and algorithm that support the formation of alt-right cultural communities. Considering the incel subculture, Regher (2022) documented how posting and replying to online comments about incel-created videos, which featured misogynistic humor and the glorification of violence, draws participants into deeper engagement with the incel ideology.

Our approach complements this emerging stream of research by providing a close analysis of how narratives that circulate on incel discussion boards contribute to the creation of alt-right collective identities. Our signal contribution is to consider both the character of incel stories as cultural objects and the nature of storytelling as an interactive practice. As De Fina and Johnstone (2015) have noted, “shared stories, as well as shared ways of telling stories, constitute an integral part of the life of communities, contributing to their cohesion.” [6] Below, we describe the design of our empirical research. We then elaborate on the distinction between stories and storytelling, before applying these analytical categories to our data.

Data and methods
We examined storytelling dynamics through an analysis of posts written by users of two online incel forums: www.blackpill.world, which hosts 1,377 users, and www.incels.is, which hosts 20,480 users. Each site allows users to write and publish posts, which can either be standalone, starting a new “thread”, or in response to an already existing post, which will cause the post to appear in the same thread as the post it is responding to. Each site sorts the threads its users post into a general category, which contains all threads, and a “Best Of” category, which contains a list of threads curated by the site’s moderators. The posts on each site varied in length from single phrases or sentences to extensive, multi-paragraph texts. To our knowledge, neither site imposed length restrictions on members’ posts. Both sites also make their posts available to the general public without a need for site registration or membership.

During data collection, the first author collected as many posts as possible from threads whose most recent post was made between 1 November 2022 and 1 February 2023. On both sites, all threads that met this criterion were collected from the “Best Of” category. Due to the number of threads that appeared in the general category on both sites during this time period, several additional criteria were employed to select data relevant for this study. Threads that contained only one post were excluded and threads whose first post contained only a link to external content were kept to a minimum. In total, 76 threads were collected, containing roughly 1,200 unique posts.

Our interpretation of the posts was guided by established frameworks in narrative and discourse analysis (Riessman, 2008), which we merged with a grounded, inductive coding approach (Charmaz, 2008). On one hand, we employed a thematic framework that directed attention to the content of the posts (Forchtner, 2021). Using this framework, we identified recurring topics, experiences, and affective states mentioned in the posts, while also documenting the lexicon of terms used in the incel subculture. On the other hand, we considered how storytelling, as a social activity, can involve multiple participants engaging in different patterns of interaction. This “interactional framework” (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2011) directed our attention to ways that discussion board users collaborated in the production of stories, which we theorized as a crucial bonding activity within these online communities.

Posts were read and analyzed using a grounded approach, in which themes were identified as they emerged in particular posts and then developed and cross-checked through comparison with other posts. Analysis of the data followed an iterative process. The first author developed a tentative coding structure on the basis of an initial encounter with a subset of the data, but this structure evolved through the research process as he incorporated initial data that led him to revise or elaborate these first impressions. Concept mapping tools provided by the Web site Miro were used through this process to keep track of the coding structure and guide conversations with the second author, who served in an advisory role during the study.

**Storytelling as a bonding activity**

*Stories* are discursive forms in which events are arranged in temporal and causal sequences in order to construct a plot and impart a particular message or interpretation (Polletta, *et al.*, 2011). *Storytelling*, on the other hand, refers to acts in which individuals present stories to or co-construct stories with others. Scholars have noted that, within social movements and beyond them, stories and storytelling help to forge common identities and create feelings of solidarity between people (Grazian, 2007; Vaynman, *et al.*, 2020).

As text, stories can be analyzed through an examination of key themes and narrative structure. Acts of storytelling, though, need to be analyzed as “social performances that are interactively constructed [and] socially regulated.” [7] In this section, we separately discuss the stories and storytelling practices that we observed on the incel Web sites we studied. We also compare our findings to Simi and Futrell’s account of stories and storytelling in face-to-face WPM free spaces. Our goals are threefold: (1) to demonstrate the ability of online free spaces to support rich and complex bonding activities; (2) to investigate how the
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Stories that circulate in the incel subculture differ from those that appear within the WPM; and, (3) to explore how the affordances of digital spaces structure storytelling performances.

Themes in incel stories

Stories that circulate in social movement and countercultural free spaces often feature the theme of injustice (Gamson, 2023). As Polletta has explained, the most impactful stories in these settings have “a clear ‘we’ — those to whom the injustice is done — and an obvious ‘they’ who are responsible for the injustice”. Such stories emphasize commonalities in the experiences of storytellers and the audience, cultivating a sense of shared identity and solidarity, while also encouraging action to correct or respond to the perceived injustice. Moreover, impactful stories tend to be “empirically credible,” that is, consistent with shared beliefs about the nature of reality within the movement or counterculture, even if they appear distorted or farfetched from the perspective of people outside the community (Benford and Snow, 2000).

According to Simi and Futrell, the sharing of “injustice tales” about personal experiences that narratively illustrate “how the deck is stacked against whites” is a common bonding activity in the physical free spaces that help to sustain the WPM. These stories, which narrate the storytellers’ perceived experiences of unfair treatment and betrayal by elites and people of color, “amplify solidarity and purpose among veterans and introduce initiates to the Aryan culture of hate”.

The theme of injustice also figured prominently in anecdotes and parables shared by participants on incel websites. Participants implied that the sexual marketplace was a rigged game that incels could not win, as in the following post:

`Imagine if you woke up and everyone on the planet had an expensive sports car, all you see are people around you driving it, everyone with a sports car gets treated differently than those who don’t, they have higher social status, etc. For some reason you can’t get one no matter how much you adhere to the advice suggested by sports car owners. Everytime [sic] you complain about the biased system that keeps you from getting one, someone tells you — “there are more important things in life than sports cars”, they then later proceed to talk with their friends about all the awesome sports cars they drove.`

This participant’s account of sexual frustration, with the metaphor of a sports car standing in for female attention, communicates not only the writer’s perception of being denied an entitlement but also, to add insult to injury, a sense that “normies” are toying with his suffering.

In a way that is similar to the WPM “injustice tales” that Simi and Futrell described, stories shared on incel websites suggest that unfairness justifies an aggressive, even violent, response. For example:

`Sex is clearly a vital part of every human’s existence, a man doesn’t even “become a man” in a sense within society until he has sex, in essence a lot of men have not undergone their “right [sic] of passage” to become part of the “tribe” that is modern human civilization ... Society expects us not to burn the village down when it won’t initiate us into the tribe, that’s what’s truly outrageous, not the violence of disenfranchised men, but the fact that society actually expects us to just remain docile and accept this reality that has been forced upon us.`
Simi and Futrell point out that WPM activists extend the idea that injustice justifies violence by telling “fortifying tales,” or stories “about small victories that foreshadow greater future triumphs” and give Aryans “confidence to keep fighting in the face of disbelievers.” With occasional exceptions, we found few examples of such “fortifying tales” on incel discussion boards. Instead, the theme of hopelessness figured prominently. For instance, some incel threads featured long rants about how they “will never be happy because ... I will never get a hot girlfriend ... like Chad.”

Such threads were met with mixed reactions, with some users agreeing with the sentiment, others blaming women, and, in rare cases, some telling hopeless users to pick up a hobby. Others went one step further and argued that having hope that one will eventually find romantic success is folly, and that peace and satisfaction will be found by abandoning that hope. For instance, one user described posts that suggest abandoning hope of romantic success as “a good read for those who are ... beginning to get blackpilled.”

Other scholars have also noted that hopelessness tales are prominent in the incel subculture and within other communities that comprise the online alt-right “manosphere”. Noting that posts on incel Web sites often communicate a sense of personal failure about participants’ inability to achieve sexual conquests defined as benchmarks of successful (hegemonic) masculinity, Johanssen explained that “incels use humour, irony, and discourses of self-victimization and self-hatred to retreat into apathy and hopelessness, which is coupled with toxic and abusive posts about women.” It might seem that such hopelessness tales would not contribute to participants’ sense of solidarity and affiliation with the incel subculture, but would rather produce feelings of isolation and despair. However, Scotto di Carlo argued that these statements about personal worthlessness and undesirability “resemble other forms of homosocial male ‘banter’, whose function is basically to establish online brotherly connections.”

In a similar fashion, our evidence suggests that participants on incel Web sites bonded by sharing stories about their experiences of hopelessness and their efforts to manage it, whether through passive acceptance or through self-harm. However, to understand how incels’ hopelessness tales and other narrative types operate as bonding activities, it is important to not only consider themes contained in these stories, but also to investigate practices of storytelling that occur on incel sites.

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**Storytelling practices**

To analyze storytelling as a bonding activity, it is important to consider how the settings in which the stories are told affect the interaction styles through which stories are shared (Eliasoph and Lichterman, 2003). While Simi and Futrell did not perform this analysis explicitly, their descriptions of storytelling practices in physical WPM free spaces emphasized unidirectional and hierarchical styles, as in the following accounts:

During a Southern California house party, Dylan stood at the center of six Aryans, regaling them with his disbelief of whites “not down with the cause.”

At an Idaho house party, Matt, an Aryan Nations veteran, told seven young skinheads gathered around him that his moment of racial consciousness came when “I was stabbed in the 1980s during the racial uproar [over desegregation].”

If these anecdotes are typical, it would seem that WPM storytelling is often done by experienced, “veteran” activists, while younger movement participants play a more passive role as audience members. The loud and chaotic environment of house parties, coupled with the WPM culture that celebrates violence and
physical domination, may contribute to this interactive style.

In contrast, we found that a more multivocal, dialogic style of storytelling prevailed on incel Web sites that we studied. We identified three forms that this style took: repetition, where a thread begins with one member telling a story, but then continues with other members sharing similar stories; co-creation, where one participant starts a thread by sharing a fragment of a story, and others fill in the details; and elaboration, where one member makes a claim about the world, and others either elaborate upon that claim or attempt to explain it.

**Repetition**

This form of storytelling appeared in many threads that had hopelessness as a central theme. One such thread discussed the ways in which members of the incel culture have attempted to commit suicide. It began with one participant sharing the story of how they once tried to kill themselves (see Figure 1):

“I was 16 when I tried to commit suicide. I was drunk and I snuck out the house. I was trying to reach this overpass but by the time I reached the place the alcohol had dissipated from my body so I pussied out. Fell asleep on the side of the street. I got sent to a psych ward a few hours later. Any other faggots ever tried to rope but failed?”

Other participants continued the thread by describing similar stories of intending to commit suicide before either backing out or failing. This repetitive storytelling can foster the bond that each participating member has to the community by revealing common experiences between members. This sharing of experience allows members of the community to feel safer and more accepted among their peers, knowing that they are not the only ones to go through such suffering. This thread, for example, reveals that those who participated not only share the experience of being unable to find a romantic partner, but also the experience of attempting to commit suicide, both very emotionally charged experiences. These storytelling sessions could be considered to contribute to what Lin, *et al.* (1999) referred to as “a perception of expressive support,” that is, the feeling that other members of the community are willing to emotionally support the individual. Such a perception is negatively correlated with symptoms of depression, thus highlighting the importance of such storytelling rituals.
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Another thread contained members posting narrativized versions of their romantic history, expressing hopelessness due to their lack of romantic history at their age: “By your late 20s into your 30s, any woman that may give you a chance is put off that you’re [unable to afford to move out of your parents house].” Ultimately, the user who began the thread worried that life has passed him by, saying “What a waste my life has been.” Other users expressed similar fears, and not only stated that their lives have been similar, but elaborate upon the differences, some in specific experiences, others on outlook on their situation, as while the original poster sounded rather distraught, another explained he’s “with [his] cat, in peace, sipping some nice lemonade, planning [his] next trip abroad.”

Both of these threads highlight the repetition method of collaborative storytelling, wherein one user begins the thread by telling a personal story, and members of the audience proceed to tell their own, similar stories. These storytelling practices are similar to those employed by confessional styles of group therapy. This practice transforms hopelessness from an isolating emotion to a basis for interpersonal connection and bonding.

Co-creation

Other times, participants on Web sites did not actually have an entire story at the beginning. They implied many of the details, and discussion stemmed from writing the story, rather than reacting to or reading it. In example of this storytelling form, a story was woven using only a screenshot of a few YouTube comments as source material.

The thread in question was titled “Based user Blackpills cucks on love,” which roughly translates to “cool user explains to idiots that love isn’t real.” The term “cuck” is a shortened form of the word “cuckold” that has become popularized on the Internet, particularly in alt-right circles where it has ties to conspiracy theories including the idea that men of color are cuckolding white men en masse (Kosse, 2022). This thread began with a screenshot of comments left on a YouTube video, where one YouTube user, Dylan24, had left a comment that said just “Love isn’t real,” to which others disagreed, arguing “oh, it is real, my friend” and asking “who hurt you?” The final comment visible in the screenshot read “I thought this was a [fitness]
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The thread title suggests that this is an example of Dylan24 introducing others to the incel ideology despite there being no evidence presented that Dylan24 has any affiliation with any incel forum. Any connection between Dylan24 and the incel subculture has been fabricated by the user who created this thread and one YouTuber commenter who replied to Dylan’s comment. The comments of this thread are disorganized, but those of substance preach the falsity of love, agreeing with Dylan24 and elaborating on the claim, with one commenting that “Love is only for [the very attractive],” and another claiming that “He'll believe in love till she leaves him for Chad. Then he'll be hating on women again,” referring to one of the commenters who disagreed with Dylan.

Another thread was titled “Incel has enough and attacks bully.” This thread represented one of the few “fortifying tales” that we identified. The first post was only a link to a video on Twitter which showed one young white man getting something thrown at his head. He then says, “I have had enough of you” and proceeded to get into a fight with a young Black man, presumably the one who threw something at his head. A young white woman and a second Black man attempt to break up the fight, though the video ends before the situation is resolved.

Something of note here is that while nothing in the video suggests that anyone in it is an incel, that attribution was given by the forum users. While some users simply left racist comments on the video, others began attempting to make assumptions about the situation, thus developing a story. Many stereotypes were invoked in these comments, including both Chad, the stereotypical successful man, and Stacy, the stereotypical attractive woman, as well as a less frequent character, Tyrone, the stereotypical Black man. One user in particular left this comment: “Of course the cumskin whore rushes to defend tyrone once the incel rises up,” implying a sense of solidarity between the commenter and the person being bullied in the video.

![Figure 2: Entries in a co-creation storytelling thread.](image-url)
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Ultimately, the activity of co-creating a story, within the incel subculture, at least, takes the form of injecting details into an external series of events to allow members of the subculture to align characters within those events with characters within their own narratives, such as their referring to the YouTube Commenter as a “based incel.” While such tales could also be told about the enemies of the incel subculture, those tales are often constructed differently.

Elaboration

This form of storytelling often appears in threads that focus on the alleged enemies of the incel subculture and that emphasize the theme of injustice. As none of those enemies are active on the forums, incels bond over piecing together the ideas that oppose their own.

One such thread began with “[women] and normies want us to kill ourselves. They want us to die. Don’t give in, don’t listen to them. Don’t let them win. Be a nuisance to society.” While spiteful, the anti-suicide message is relevant, due to the prevalence of such ideation on these sorts of forums. This initial post claimed that those not in the subculture, particularly women, hold such hatred for incels that they would wish them dead.

Other users left comments that elaborated upon this claim and added additional points to it. While the initial message was simply “they want us to die,” others expanded upon it by offering reasons to explain the alleged hatred. Examples include the following posts: “They want you to kill yourself because they see you as weaker than them”; “Not only that but women are scared of us”; “They also want to seem like a REAL MAN by punching down at targets they can reasonably go after.”

![Elaboration](image)

**Figure 3:** Entries in an elaboration storytelling thread.

Another thread in this genre is titled “It’s human to feel anger and lust”. The initial post read, “Society not only denies our desires, but labels these feelings as abnormal and evil. I believe they’re trying to make us hate ourselves so much that we feel like we deserve to be punished.” Similar to the previous thread, this one
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began with a statement of belief in an active attempt by society at large to worsen the lives of incels. Also similar to the previous thread, another user elaborated upon the sentiment: “A foid can complain online and get money, companionship, attention, all sent to her within minutes. We? We get nothing.”

This form of storytelling is similar to the repetition form, though each contribution was not a full narrative in itself, but merely a claim about the world meant to be supported by the audience’s experience, rather than the author’s explanation. Where the participants in a repetition storytelling session shared the role of author and audience in a series of narratives, and all participants bonded over sharing those narratives, an elaboration activity saw the participants seemingly as an audience for a story that had already been told: they bond in the shared experiences of their lives without elaborating upon the experiences themselves, but instead upon how those experiences had made them feel, particularly about those outside the community. This was the key similarity with repetition. To properly understand these tales required already being familiar with the frame in which they were being constructed.

Polletta explained that stories need not necessarily be empirically true if they are at least consistent with dominant narratives and held beliefs, and stories of this type often find themselves to be consistent with the previously held beliefs of incel forum users (Polletta, et al., 2011). The stories referenced above were consistent with a shared belief within the subculture that, because participants had lower sexual market value, those with greater market value seek to cut them out of society. The congruence of the claim made by the first post in an individual thread with the frame held by the subculture made the claim credible to its audience, even if no evidence was provided. These claims could be drastic, reinforcing the “us vs. them” part of the frame, thus inspiring the audience to remain steadfast and united against their fictional foes.

Discussion and conclusion

To summarize, we have argued that incels bond in online free spaces through interactive practices of storytelling. Our research suggests that these practices take three basic forms: (1) repetition, in which participants offer similar stories focused on common experiences; (2) co-creation, in which participants respond to one another’s suggestions to create a coherent storyline; and, (3) elaboration, in which participants expand on a theme or idea presented in an initial story.

These interactive storytelling practices cultivate collective identity within the incel subculture in several ways. By participating in repetitive storytelling, participants on incel Web sites develop a sense that their individual experiences of sexual rejection, frustration, and self-harm mirror those of other members of the subculture, while also receiving emotional support for the feelings of hopelessness that these experiences evoke. By co-creating stories, participants practice applying central elements of incel ideology to interpret ambiguous situations, while observing how contributors engage in the same activity. Finally, through elaboration, participants strengthen perceived boundaries between incels and so-called “normies,” who are believed to be simultaneously hostile to incels and naive to the operation of the sexual marketplace.

This research has important implications. In the first place, our study emphasizes the importance of treating online free space as independent sites for bonding and collective identity formation. This approach contrasts with the tendency of social movements researchers to position the virtual world as ancillary and of secondary importance to in-person movement activities. We do not disagree that many of the bonding activities that occur within social movements, whether alt-right or otherwise, do require physical co-presence. However, we assert that the affordances of online spaces enable bonding to occur through activities that would be more difficult to accomplish in face-to-face settings.

One illustration of this point appeared in the contrast between face-to-face storytelling practices that had been documented among white power activists and the online storytelling practices that we have discussed in this paper. Because white power storytelling often occurs in crowded, noisy house parties that
experienced activists organize to encounter and recruit new members, storytelling tends to be univocal and one-directional: movement veterans regale neophytes with "fortifying tales" and "injustice tales" without interruption (Simi and Futrell, 2015).

In contrast, the asynchronous and largely anonymous character of incel discussion boards promoted the more polyvocal and dialogic storytelling practices that we described in this paper. Increased attention to the sorts of bonding activities that are enabled by the affordances of online environments has particular relevance for the study of alt-right and extremist groups. Not only can it help to explain the persistence of groups like incels, in which interactions among participants occur almost entirely online, it can also shed light on how online recruitment and radicalization of new adherents to other violent, countercultural movements may occur.

Second, our study illustrates the value of treating stories developed in social movement contexts not only as text to analyze in narrative and thematic terms, but as interactive practices in which movement members participate. While the former approach has dominated research about social movement framing activities, a storytelling-as-practice perspective offers insight not only into how movement stories are constructed, but also into how they become meaningful for movement members. From this perspective, the power of a story lies not only in its ideas and dramatic structure, but also in the experiences and interactions that surround its telling.

This approach can easily be extended outside the study of online movement communities to different ways that members of social movements participate in storytelling in face-to-face settings. Sociologists could productively examine the variety of storytelling practices in a range of movement contexts, from extremist movements to moderate ones, to explore connections between group storytelling styles, movement cultures, and essential processes like mobilization and collective identity formation.

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Notes

1. Lindsay, 2022, p. 211.
2. Lindsay, 2022, p. 218.
6. De Fina and Johnstone, 2015, p. 159.
8. Polletta, 2009, p. 44.
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