

Denigrating Women, Venerating “Chad”: Ingroup and Outgroup Evaluations among Male Supremacists on Reddit

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Abstract

Can negative evaluations of a broad outgroup paired with positive evaluations of a broad ingroup, sustain willing affiliation with even intensely self-derogating online communities? Synthesizing concepts from masculinities scholarship, social identity theory, and self-verification theory, this study compares language from two distinctive misogynist communities active on Reddit.com—Men Going Their Own Way, male separatists who positively frame members as superior to other men and men as superior to women, and Involuntary Celibates (incels), who openly derogate incel community members—to understand what sustains misogynist incels’ willing affiliation with the self-derogating incel community. Using thematic qualitative analysis, I find that while male separatists favor both their own narrower online community and the broader ingroup of men, misogynist incels engage in a patriarchal bargain, using relatively benevolent depictions of some men alongside negative depictions of all women to perpetuate broader gender inequality.

Keywords

ingroup and outgroup evaluations, misogyny, online communities

Can negative evaluations of a broad outgroup, coupled with positive evaluations of a broad ingroup, sustain willing affiliation with even intensely self-derogating online communities? Two theories in social psychology, psychological social identity theory (SIT) and self-verification theory (SVT), a subtheory of sociological identity theory (IT), provide a partial understanding of how such affiliations may occur. Although SIT reveals several factors motivating group affiliation, it cannot fully explain willing affiliation with intensely self-derogating communities.

Although SVT provides an understanding of why individuals affiliate with positive or negative social groups, it does not interrogate the role of broader, social-structural dynamics potentially influencing such affiliations. This article

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synthesizes concepts from masculinities scholarship with tenets from SIT and SVT, applying thematic qualitative analysis to two misogynist online communities active on Reddit.com to understand how even intensely self-derogating communities, like misogynist Involuntary Celibates (incels), can leverage complex combinations of positive and negative, ingroup and outgroup evaluations to sustain willing community affiliation. The study furthers ongoing efforts to construct a comprehensive theory of self by bridging concepts from masculinities studies with social psychological theories and offers a unique empirical contribution through in-depth analysis of misogynist online communities.

According to SIT, individuals strive to maintain positive social identities by promoting positive distinctiveness for aligned social groups, attributing positive traits to the ingroup and negative traits to the outgroup to increase individual and collective self-esteem (Hornsey 2008; Reid and Hogg 2005; Tajfel et al. 1971; Turner, Brown, and Tajfel 1979). Although SIT helps explain why individuals affiliate with social groups portraying themselves positively, it does not fully explain affiliation with social groups portraying themselves negatively—per SIT, individuals would avoid affiliation with social groups that are intensely self-derogatory, instead choosing to affiliate with groups better able to maximize positive self-esteem.

Aiming to better understand what motivates individuals to seek out such negative, self-derogating social groups, SVT proposes individuals look for evidence confirming their self-perceptions regardless of whether those perceptions are positive or negative (Swann 2011; Swann and Read 1981; Talaifar and Swann 2020). Although SVT helps clarify why individuals might associate with social groups portraying themselves

negatively, seeking out negative self-verification becomes maladaptive when negative self-views are excessive, inappropriate, or all-encompassing (Swann 2011; Talaifar and Swann 2020). SVT is also not especially focused on broader social-structural factors that may also be at play when individuals willingly associate with self-derogating communities. To consider how larger, intergroup power dynamics may help sustain affiliations with even intensely self-derogating social groups, I additionally examine concepts prominent in masculinities studies. Here, scholars note that men embodying more subordinated and marginalized masculinities within a broader masculine hierarchy are not prevented from enacting patriarchal bargains, facilitating their own subordination within this masculine hierarchy to reap some benefits from patriarchal social structures (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Herzog and Yahia-Younis 2007; Kandiyoti 1988).

This study applies iterative, thematic analysis to language from two misogynist online communities on Reddit.com—Involuntary Celibates, or incels, and male separatist Men Going Their Own Way, or MGTOW—to understand how themes in community language aid misogynist incels' willing affiliation with the incel community despite the community's intense self-derogation.¹ Whereas male separatists favor men over women and community members over other men, misogynist incels place themselves at the bottom of a community-constructed masculine hierarchy and encourage belief in the futility of efforts toward personal betterment. I find that while male separatists are more likely to favor both their own narrower online community and the broader ingroup of men, misogynist incels

¹See online Appendixes A and B for further information on iterative thematic analysis. Additional data are available on request.

ultimately join male separatists in favoring the broader ingroup of men even as they derogate incels as a narrower online community. While misogynist incels categorize women and men alike in line with a number of masculine and feminine prototypical stock characters (and all of these stock characters face some degree of vitriol), they portray feminine characters in a more uniformly negative light than masculine characters—a double standard exemplified in depictions of the equally physically attractive, masculine “Chad” and feminine “Stacy” stock characters. While both are criticized by misogynist incels, Chad often receives a relatively benevolent, occasionally aspirational depiction, while Stacy is derogatorily conflated with all feminine stock characters under a misogynist, gender-essentialist conviction that *all* women are manipulative, self-interested, and cruel.

Whether these communities pair positive evaluations of men as a broader ingroup with similarly positive evaluations of the narrower online community (as do male separatists) or, instead, view the online community generally negatively (as do misogynist incels), relatively positive evaluations of men as a broad ingroup present in both communities serve a male supremacist worldview, enforcing material, ideological, and institutional conditions that provide men with higher social value, agency, and access to power than women (Schwalbe 1992:29–30). Much like male separatists, then, misogynist incels perpetuate the subordination of women and forward a patriarchal dividend (Connell 2009), although each community forwards this patriarchal dividend through different means. Rather than openly positioning themselves toward the top of a masculine hierarchy as male separatists do, misogynist incels instead enter into a patriarchal bargain (Herzog and Yahia-Younis 2007; Kandiyoti 1988), willingly positioning

the narrower online community of incels toward the bottom of a masculine hierarchy while nevertheless contributing to (and, to some extent, benefiting from) patriarchal social structures by favoring the broader ingroup of men and derogating the broader outgroup of women. This study’s findings illustrate how even intense self-derogation does not necessarily preclude willing affiliation with a community so long as it is possible to employ relatively positive evaluations toward a broader ingroup upon which community membership is prerequisite. Thus, intense negative evaluations of a narrower community, when coupled with positive evaluations of a broader ingroup, retain the capacity to bolster prejudice toward a broader outgroup, potentially contributing to the maintenance of broader social inequalities in a manner meriting additional study.

BACKGROUND

Social Identity, Self-Categorization, and Self-Verification

In navigating the social world, individuals encounter intra- and intergroup processes facilitating the development of social identities, or self-images derived from salient membership in a number of social categories (Hornsey 2008; Tajfel and Turner 2004; Trepte and Loy 2017). The development and importance of social identities is central to social identity theory (SIT), which provides a systematic framework for understanding belongingness and intergroup discrimination (Mummendey 1995). Integral to social identity development is self-categorization, the self-referential processes enabling distinction of the ingroup (“us”) from the outgroup (“them”; Leonardi and Toh 2015; Trepte and Loy 2017). One key aspect of self-categorization in SIT involves creating a sense of positive distinctiveness for one’s social group to

foster a positive social identity (Mummeny 1995; Trepte and Loy 2017; Turner et al. 1979). Positive distinctiveness is achieved through a combination of ingroup favoritism, or intergroup social comparisons favoring the ingroup, and outgroup derogation, or intergroup social comparisons deriding the outgroup (Trepte and Loy 2017).

Members of disadvantaged groups also occasionally exhibit outgroup favoritism, or biases favoring corresponding advantaged groups (Dasgupta 2004; von Hippel 2006). Outgroup favoritism aligns with a systems-justification approach, where members of disadvantaged social groups rationalize their collective disadvantage to maintain the status quo and to justify preexisting social structures and hierarchies (Jost and Banaji 1994; Kay et al. 2007). While this desire to maintain the status quo helps explain social groups' occasional tendencies to positively assess the outgroup and to intermittently endorse negative ingroup stereotypes, it does not fully address the processes aiding willing affiliation with intensely self-derogating communities.

Given SIT's limitations, scholars have long sought to bridge psychological SIT with sociological identity theory (IT) to establish a more complete theory of the self (Stets and Burke 2000). Considering tenets from self-verification theory (SVT), a subtheory of IT, may aid in constructing this cross-theoretical bridge. In contrast to SIT, SVT clarifies why individuals seek both positive and negative group affiliations. According to SVT, people actively pursue evidence confirming their preexisting self-conceptions, whether those self-conceptions are predominantly positive or negative (Swann 2011; Swann and Read 1981; Talaifar and Swann 2020). Proponents of SVT note the utility of negative self-verification when negativity is directed toward occasional, "objective" self-deficiencies; however, negative self-

verification becomes much less adaptive when these deficiencies are unwarranted, all-consuming, or both (Swann 2011; Talaifar and Swann 2020). Too narrow a focus on self-verification also blinds us to larger, social-structural power relations possibly influencing affiliation with self-derogating communities.

Polarization and Essentialist Stereotypes on Social Media

Recent social psychological research illustrates social media's integral role in bridging theoretical gaps between SIT and IT (Davis, Love, and Fares 2019). Several aforementioned identity processes are reflected and exacerbated in online communities, where strongly held group affiliations lead to intergroup polarization and increasingly extreme community norms. Past scholarship observes shifts in online interactions from arguing to learn—where participants in a conversation are invested in listening and coming to conclusions based on information presented by all parties—to arguing to win—where the goal is to competitively “score points” against those who disagree and where arguments are presented as objective truths (Fisher et al. 2018). In a manner aligning with SVT, Internet forums allow users to self-sort into bounded networks serving as like-minded echo chambers, where users can seek out positive feedback loops affirming preexisting worldviews and catalyzing extremist beliefs (Garimella et al. 2018; Quattrociochi, Scala, and Sunstein 2016; Schmalz, Carter, and Lee 2018).

Bounded, self-reinforcing online communities also promote circulation of stereotypical media, enabling self-categorization and self-verification within and across communities. Memetic image macros and other media can represent stock characters embodying stereotypical traits and behaviors, often associated

with widely recognized social categories (e.g., race and gender; Milner 2013; Shifman 2014). Stereotypes associated with particular social groups serve to confirm *essentialist* worldviews, where characteristics and behaviors observed among groups are presumed to be rooted in biology, “historically invariant,” and “culturally universal” such that they cannot be attributed to subjective processes of individual choice, socialization, or institutional and organizational forces (Haslam, Rothschild, and Ernst 2000:114). Essentialist, stereotypical media can delineate ingroup and outgroup status and identity, allowing stereotypes to gain community consensus and building a sense of emotional connection and ideological coherence within communities (Abrams and Hogg 1990; Haslam et al. 1999).

The Manosphere and Reddit.com

Intergroup polarization and essentialist stereotypes can be seen throughout the *manosphere*, a collection of contemporary antifeminist and misogynist online communities connected through their disdain toward women (Ging 2019; Marwick and Lewis 2017). Manosphere communities tend to embrace male supremacist ideologies, supporting the enforcement of material, ideological, and institutional conditions providing men with higher social value, agency, and access to power than women (Schwalbe 1992:29–30). Research indicates individuals aligned with manosphere communities often migrate toward increasingly extreme facets of the manosphere (Ribeiro et al. 2020) and that the manosphere’s misogyny, antifeminism, and threats of sexual violence are increasing with time (Farrell et al. 2019); with these trends in mind, a comprehensive understanding of what sustains affiliation with manosphere communities is vital.

Several manosphere communities have congregated on Reddit.com, a social

media platform allowing users to create their own forums, or “subreddits.” Reddit users, or “Redditors,” subscribe to any number of subreddits, from which content appears on their front pages. Subreddits serve as self-contained communities, “operat[ing] on a very specific shared set of languages and conventions, rules, expectations, and rituals” (Robards 2018:193). Past research has documented how Reddit’s infrastructure and governance systems can amplify antifeminist and misogynist communities and activism (Massanari 2017), making Reddit a critically important environment from which to analyze manosphere communities.

Male separatists: Men Going Their Own Way. An explicitly male supremacist ideology is at the forefront of the Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) community, a male separatist facet of the manosphere. Male separatists adhere to the “red pill” philosophy, a term lifted from *The Matrix* film franchise in which “swallowing the red pill” entails apparent enlightenment to the female-favoring, or “gynocentric,” slant of the modern Western world. Red pill adherents resist this slant and fight to restore men’s “rightful place” in the social hierarchy (Dignam and Rohlinger 2019; Ging 2019). Male separatists circumvent their perceived oppression under a “gynocentric” system by voluntarily avoiding relationships with women (Ging 2019; Lin 2017). In addition to a male supremacist ideology favoring the broader ingroup of men, male separatists similarly favor their own community, praising members’ strength and virtue in foregoing relationships with women; these favorable evaluations align with expectations of positive distinctiveness in SIT.

Misogynist incels. While male separatists and other facets of the manosphere adhere to ideologies explicitly favoring

both their online community and the broader ingroup of men, misogynist Involuntary Celibates (incels) instead hold intensely negative views of themselves and other community members.² Rather than the red pill philosophy common elsewhere in the manosphere, misogynist incels adhere to the “black pill,” which affords members little hope for the future and urges them to give up on potential happiness and social betterment and instead “LDAR,” or “lie down and rot” (Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019; Ging 2019). Self-directed negativity among misogynist incels is both intense and normative, with incel community members regularly positioning themselves at the bottom of community-constructed, romantic-sexual hierarchies (Ging 2019). Rampant cynicism among misogynist incels promotes a community-wide toxicity linked to numerous instances of often fatal violence (Hendrix 2019; Lovett and Nagourney 2014; Porter 2018), underscoring the importance of understanding what sustains affiliation with misogynist incel communities.

The misogynist incel community’s propensity for intense, normative self-derogation seemingly contradicts the desire to establish positive distinctiveness for aligned social groups put forward in SIT. At the same time, while misogynist incels may seek out self-derogating communities to validate their own pessimistic worldviews and their own social positions (as would be predicted in SVT), considering only self-verification’s role in misogynist incels’ affiliations with these communities presents two limitations: (1) Misogynist incels’ negativity is all-

consuming and excessive to the point of being maladaptive, and (2) considering the role of self-verification in affiliation with the incel community in isolation tells us little about broader, social-structural power relations that may influence this affiliation. Given this, what other factors, in combination with and beyond self-verification, sustain misogynist incels’ willing identification with the incel community?

Masculine Hierarchy, Subordinate Masculinity, and the Patriarchal Bargain

Drawing from masculinities scholarship, I integrate concepts related to larger, gendered social-structural power dynamics, including the existence of multiple, inter-related masculinities within a broader and unequal gender order rather than a single, monolithic masculinity (Connell 1995; Messerschmidt 2018). Among these multiple masculinities exists a *masculine hierarchy*, where intersections of race/ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, and other aspects of one’s social identity play into a ranking of men’s masculine legitimacy and thus their degree of access to power and influence within a broader gender order (Bird 1996; Collins 2004; Nemoto 2008). While hegemonic masculinity may hold undue cultural dominance and social influence, nonhegemonic masculinities still have the capacity to further men’s dominance within the gender order (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

One specific behavioral mechanism capable of maintaining the gender order involves entering into a *patriarchal bargain*, wherein individuals or groups accept certain costs under a patriarchal social structure to, at least in part, benefit from aspects of the patriarchy (Herzog and Yahia-Younis 2007; Kandiyoti 1988). Entering into patriarchal bargains

²To emphasize the antifeminism and misogyny associated with incel communities examined in this study and to differentiate them from other individuals identifying as involuntarily celibate online, I refer to the incel communities presented here as specifically *misogynist* incel communities (see Kelly, DiBranco, and DeCook 2021).

was initially observed among women (Kandiyoti 1988), but the capacity to do so has since been observed among men as well, and is a particularly viable strategy for men embodying subordinated or otherwise nonhegemonic masculinities (Herzog and Yahia-Younis 2007). These concepts from masculinities literature—namely, the existence of multiple masculinities along a masculine hierarchy and the capacity for men embodying more subordinated masculinities to enter into patriarchal bargains—seem to shore up theoretical puzzles related to the willing affiliation of misogynist incels with the intensely self-derogating incel community left behind when solely approaching their affiliation from the standpoint of either social identity or self-verification theories.

To investigate whether larger, intergroup power dynamics linked to a broader gender order can help explain misogynist incels' willing affiliation with the incel community, this study employs iterative cycles of thematic analysis to compare positive and negative ingroup and outgroup evaluations among two misogynist online communities—male separatists, whose open favoritism toward both their own online community and toward men more broadly aligns with the pursuit of positive distinctiveness put forward in SIT, and intensely self-derogating misogynist incels, whose open derogation of the incel community seems at odds with SIT and is only partially explained through an exclusive focus on negative self-verification via SVT.

METHODS

Data used in this study were obtained through the Reddit Pushshift application programming interface, or API (Baumgartner et al. 2020). An online repository of social media data, Pushshift allows researchers to obtain the majority of

forum submissions posted to a number subreddits. To capture the breadth of misogynist incel language on Reddit, I looked at submissions from three previously active misogynist incel subreddits: r/incels,³ r/braincels, and r/shortcels. I also examine submissions from the r/MGTOW subreddit to make comparisons between language from the intensely self-derogating misogynist incel community and the more openly self-favoring male separatist community. All subreddit texts used in iterative qualitative coding come from a larger corpus of texts scraped using the Pushshift API; this larger corpus contained 102,401 texts from r/MGTOW, dating from July 2012 to April 2020; 21,152 texts from r/incels, dating from July 2016 to November 2017; 68,144 texts from r/braincels, dating from October 2017 to September 2019; and 9,471 texts from r/shortcels, dating from January to March 2020.

R/incels was the primary hub for misogynist incel activity on Reddit prior to its ban on November 7, 2017, following widespread condemnation of the community promoting violence against women (Hauser 2017a, 2017b). Following the r/incels ban, r/braincels became the de facto “evasion” subreddit replacing r/incels. The subreddit was quarantined on September 27, 2018, requiring Redditors to explicitly opt in to viewing its content in their feeds. R/braincels was subsequently banned on October 1, 2019, due to offensive content on the subreddit.⁴

³On Reddit, subreddit names are preceded by “r/.”

⁴A portion of r/braincels data was not archived in the months immediately following the r/braincels quarantine, and this unarchived content is not available through the Pushshift API. I have made a deliberative decision that accessing data not made publicly available through the Reddit API is both beyond the scope of this study and has the potential to cross an ethical boundary regarding user privacy (see Markham and Buchanan 2012).

Table 1. Comparison of Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) and Misogynist Incel Communities

	MGTOW	Misogynist incels
Ideology	Follow <i>red pill</i> philosophy, claim awareness of woman-favoring, “gynocentric” slant of modern western world	Follow <i>black pill</i> philosophy, believe in futility of romantic prospects and efforts toward happiness/personal betterment
Affiliated Subreddits	r/MGTOW (quarantined January 31, 2020; banned August 3, 2021)	r/incels (banned November 7, 2017)/r/braincels (quarantined September 27, 2018; banned October 1, 2019); r/shortcels (Banned March 24, 2020)
Total submissions collected (by subreddit)	r/MGTOW: 102,401 (from July 2012–April 2020)	r/incels: 21,152 (from July 2016 to November 2017); r/braincels: 68,144 (from October 2017 to September 2019)/r/shortcels: 9,471 (from January to March 2020)

The final misogynist incel subreddit analyzed in this study, r/shortcels, focuses primarily on members’ heights as the basis of their perceived involuntary celibate status. R/shortcels emerged during the life span of its predecessor, r/braincels, and was similarly banned on March 24, 2020. R/MGTOW, a subreddit serving male separatists, was also included to compare themes in language across male separatist and misogynist incel communities on Reddit. R/MGTOW was quarantined on January 31, 2020, and banned as of August 3, 2021. Information on all examined subreddits is provided in Table 1.

Iterative Coding

Iterative qualitative coding cycles using thematic analysis provided an increasingly thorough understanding of themes present in language across misogynist incel and male separatist subreddits. Taking a thematic approach to data analysis, coding cycles focused on identifying commonalities and patterns of meaning occurring across the data set (Vaismoradi et al. 2016). Qualitative coding cycles were approached abductively, informed

both through increasing understanding of community norms and jargon and through recurring consultation of extant, relevant literature (Tavory and Timmermans 2014).⁵ In all coding cycles, I produced brief justification memos indicating why a text was coded as containing a particular theme. All qualitative coding, save for line-by-line hand coding of a subset of 24 particularly salient texts, was completed using Microsoft Excel spreadsheets.

First-cycle, open coding focused on classifying texts based on the presence or absence of multiple broad themes, looking at 759 randomly sampled submissions from the r/braincels subreddit collected from the month following the subreddit’s quarantine (September–October 2018) and the month preceding the subreddit’s ban (March 2020) and 501 randomly

⁵As the sole coder for this study, I am not able to establish intercoder reliability. Because I provide a transparent description of the cyclical coding process, numerous examples of raw data, and examples of negative cases to illustrate the complexity and ambiguity of themes in coding, multiple alternative measures have been taken to ensure quality criteria in the qualitative coding process (O’Connor and Joffe 2020).

sampled submissions from the r/MGTOW subreddit collected from the month following the r/braincels quarantine (September–October 2018). Second-cycle coding was influenced both by reflections on first-cycle coding and returns to relevant literature and evolved throughout the coding process to better accommodate emergent themes in texts. Second-cycle coding looked at random selections of 250 submissions and 125 comments from r/braincels and 250 submissions and 125 comments from r/MGTOW from across each subreddit's life span, and additional subsets of 250 submissions and 125 comments with a high number of net likes from each community.⁶ Twenty-four submissions exceptionally illustrating themes identified in earlier coding cycles were selected from the second coding cycle for more in-depth analysis. These texts were coded line-by-line, with annotations detailing implications and rhetoric employed in language. Line-by-line coding was conducted as a process of decoding, in which I reflect[ed] on a passage of data to decipher its core meaning (Saldaña 2021:5). The third and final coding cycle in this study examined a random sample of 1,500 misogynist incel and male separatist submissions—250 each from the r/incels, r/braincels, and r/shortcels subreddits and 750 from the r/MGTOW subreddit. Submissions in this final-stage coding data set were randomly selected from all submissions containing two words or more across each subreddit's life span out of all submissions retrieved through the Pushshift Reddit API. As a form of values coding, this final coding cycle focused on “captur[ing] and label [ing] subjective patterns” across texts (Saldaña 2021:7).

⁶See online Appendix A for detailed information on what constitutes a high number of net likes.

RESULTS

This section illustrates the relative presence of a variety of positive and negative, ingroup and outgroup evaluations among male separatists and misogynist incels on Reddit, and emergent themes from iterative qualitative coding using salient quotations from each community. Usernames of misogynist incel and male separatist Redditors have been replaced with pseudonyms and quotations, and they are provided only in enough detail to sufficiently illustrate examples of positive and negative evaluations of ingroups and outgroups in each community to conceal both the online and “real world” identities of submission authors. Themes are organized based on whether they refer primarily to positive outgroup and negative ingroup evaluations or to negative outgroup and positive ingroup evaluations (it should be noted, however, that themes in each category frequently co-occurred throughout texts from each community). A summary of the relative prevalence of each form of evaluation is provided in Table 2.

Positive Outgroup and Negative Ingroup Evaluations

Particularly among misogynist incels, several texts tie the possession of a desirable trait or traits to an outgroup or outgroups, deny possession of these desirable traits among an ingroup or ingroups, or perform both positive outgroup and negative ingroup evaluations simultaneously. In final-stage coding, language exhibiting positive outgroup evaluations, negative ingroup evaluations, or some combination thereof occurred more frequently among misogynist incels than among male separatists, being present in approximately 413 of 750 (≈55 percent) misogynist incel texts but only in approximately 76 of 750 (≈10 percent) male separatist texts.

Table 2. Relative Frequencies of Evaluations in Final-Stage Coding

Evaluation type	Definition	Misogynist incel (<i>N</i> = 750) <i>n</i> present (% present)	MGTOW (<i>N</i> = 750) <i>n</i> Present (% Present)
Positive outgroup and negative ingroup evaluations	Tie desirable trait(s) to outgroup(s), deny desirable trait(s) to ingroup(s), or contain positive outgroup and negative ingroup evaluations	413 (≈55%)	76 (≈10%)
Negative outgroup and positive ingroup evaluations	Tie desirable trait(s) to ingroup(s), deny desirable trait(s) to outgroup(s), or contain negative outgroup and positive ingroup evaluations	297 (≈40%)	547 (≈73%)

Comparative physical appearance. Misogynist incels often unfavorably compare their physical appearances to the appearances of nonincel men. Differences in physical appearance are nearly always presented as inevitable, with incels' apparent undesirability framed as both inherent and biologically predestined. Misogynist incel Redditor SLK04's post illustrates the community's typical framing of incels' supposedly innate unattractiveness:

Title: Your genetics are GARBAGE

Submission Text: It wasn't mouth posture. It wasn't your nutrition. It wasn't your chronic basement dwelling vitamin D deficiency. . . . The ONLY reason you look like a pathetic incel is because your parents, and their family tree HAD SHIT GENETICS. . . . Genetic ELITES don't suffer from recessed chins, hair loss, bad skin.

SLK04's post directly portrays incels' physical attractiveness unfavorably when compared to an outgroup of "genetic elites," attributing the attractiveness of both ingroup and outgroup to characteristics

portrayed as both biologically predetermined and invariant. Misogynist incels' reliance on genetically deterministic rhetoric aligns with tenets of SVT—a community-wide belief that genetics destine incels to miserable existences confirms the community's bleak worldview. Misogynist incels' fixation on predestined life outcomes also extends beyond the incel community, as seen in depictions of men clearly demarcated as outside the community in the following section.

"Chad" and prototypical, idealized masculinity. In a submission to the r/braincels subreddit, misogynist incel Redditor DTO20 describes an encounter with "this 6'2" dude with a square jaw and a strong chin." This individual is later referred to as "Chad," a common stock character used by both misogynist incels and male separatists to signal traits aligned with an idealized embodiment of masculinity: popularity, romantic-sexual success with women, and a very specific combination of physical attributes. Misogynist incel Redditor HDD73 observes a Chad in a supermarket and notes they are "blond," "fit," and "good looking";

fellow misogynist incel Redditor HHZ55 similarly describes a Chad as having “Full Blond hair,” a “Good jaw,” and “Looking clean.” Chad is one of several stock characters created through both communities’ employment of prototypical language—or community-constructed terms rooted in stereotypes and distinguishing ingroup from outgroup (Hogg 2016)—which establish and perpetuate gendered stereotypes while also serving to categorize individuals and groups.

Traits exhibited by Chad are largely considered desirable by misogynist incels and male separatists; however, misogynist incels are more likely to valorize these traits as something worth aspiring to. In a post titled “My Grandmother now calls me Chad,” misogynist incel Redditor CE19 relates how after they “told [their grandmother] about Chads,” their grandmother began referring to them as such; CE19 recalls how “when I helped [my grandmother] open a jar, she said ‘it’s nice to have a strong young man in the house, you’re a real Chad.’” CE19 “felt so validated” by this and similar exchanges because their grandmother “knows [they] want to be a Chad.” Another misogynist incel Redditor, FGL48, depicts Chad as an almost aspirational figure while simultaneously enforcing a disconnect between Chads and incels: FGL48 “dream[s] of being a chad” and considers these dreams “god’s way of telling them, ‘well if you are not [a] chad at least you can dream of being one.’” Here, FGL48 uses Chad to define their own identity (and the identity of the incel community) within a masculine hierarchy, with Chad representing an idealized form of masculinity FGL48 both aspires to and simultaneously believes they can never embody themselves.

Other aspects of social identity, including race and ethnicity, influence misogynist incels’ and male separatists’ construction of masculine hierarchies and

interact with Chad status in determining one’s position within these hierarchies. Although in both communities Chad is frequently considered White unless otherwise stated, there are a number of similar, explicitly racialized and stereotypically racist variations on the stock character: more frequent variants include “Tyrone,” “Chang,” and “Chadpreet,” which serve as Black, East Asian, and South Asian analogues to the presumed White Chad, respectively. Portrayals of these racialized, idealized masculine stock characters occur more frequently among misogynist incels and are often either racist, xenophobic, or both. As one example, Tyrone is frequently portrayed both as bestial and voraciously sexual, bringing to mind historical racist narratives intended to dehumanize Black men (Hodes 1993; Mann and Selva 1979). Even as their portrayals betray community norms of racism and xenophobia, however, traits associated with these racialized and racist variations of the Chad stock character are still frequently portrayed by misogynist incels (and, less frequently, by male separatists) as desirable: misogynist incel Redditor DLN85 claims “[women] move from chad/Tyrone to chad/Tyrone,” depicting Tyrone and Chad’s appeal to women as equal to the point of being interchangeable, while fellow misogynist incel Redditor GSO43 laments being “mogged [a phrase originating from the acronym AMOG, or alpha male of the group, and implying the person being mogged is being dominated by another man] by Tyrone.”

Despite Chad’s relatively favorable portrayal among misogynist incels, the community’s overwhelming cynicism means the character still faces some degree of vitriol; even here, however, derision of Chad is often interspersed with allusions to Chad’s superiority relative to incels. Misogynist incel Redditor IAW84 illustrates the vitriol commonly

directed at Chad in a post summarizing “a film about Chads.” IAW84 derides the Chad character in the film as “unintelligent, unhygienic, rude and degenerate” while still noting the character “is muscular and has made a lot of money.” IAW84 extends this latter analysis of the Chad character from the film to anyone considered a Chad: “simply being Chad is a job for these people. They get money for existing. Such opportunities are forever denied to the incel man.” IAW84’s derision of the Chad character portrayed in the film co-occurs with depictions of Chads as a whole being muscular, financially successful, and supposedly afforded opportunities IAW84 and other incels lack access to.

While Chad and other idealized masculine stock characters appear less frequently among male separatists, their occasional appearances are less reverent than misogynist incel portrayals. Male separatist Redditor THR97 wonders “why . . . everyone assume[s] Chad’s [*sic*] have it good” because from their perspective, many men aligned with the Chad stock character “lost everything over women.” Here, THR97 doubts the superiority of Chads while implying the superiority of male separatists—because they voluntarily avoid women, male separatists cannot “lose everything” to them.

Hopelessness and suicidality. Among misogynist incels, a slightly less direct form of negative ingroup evaluation involves a sense of hopelessness tied to the community’s nihilistic black pill ideology, often taking the form of suicidal ideation. “Daily reminders” frequently assert “it’s over” for incels, while suicidality is expressed (and sometimes encouraged) through posts labeled “suifuel,” short for “suicide fuel.” The characteristic futility of these negative self-evaluations is illustrated in misogynist incel Redditor EZO5’s post claiming “literally no aspect

of your life can work out when you’re an incel . . . every cog in the machine of life is working against [you].” In EZO5’s post and others from the community, misogynist incels assert their collective misery is inescapable. Framing incels’ misery as inevitable aligns with expectations in SVT—misogynist incels confirm for one another the impossibility of a better future. The extreme and maladaptive nature of such behavior, however, is clearly illustrated by the community-wide presence, even encouragement, of suicidality. To gain a more complete understanding of what sustains affiliation with the misogynist incel community, then, we must turn our attention to occurrences of negative outgroup and positive ingroup evaluations more readily apparent in—although by no means exclusive to—the male separatist community.

Negative Outgroup and Positive Ingroup Evaluations

While the prevalence of self-derogatory rhetoric among misogynist incels is striking, another, oppositional theme appears in misogynist incel and male separatist texts alike: language tying possession of a desirable trait or traits to an ingroup or ingroups, denying possession of these desirable traits to an outgroup or outgroups, or performing both negative outgroup and positive ingroup evaluations simultaneously. In final-stage coding, language exhibiting negative outgroup evaluations, positive ingroup evaluations, or some combination thereof was more common among male separatists than among misogynist incels but was nevertheless a common occurrence in both communities, being present in approximately 547 of 750 (≈ 73 percent) male separatist texts and in approximately 297 of 750 (≈ 40 percent) misogynist incel texts.

Pro-community sentiment. Positive evaluations sometimes occur at the level of

the online communities themselves, where positive traits attributed to the community are often paired with disparaging evaluations of noncommunity members. The majority of this language occurs among male separatists. Male separatist Redditor GTW2, for example, attributes their newfound ability to “feel truly at peace” to adhering to a male separatist ideology and to “go[ing their] own way.” In doing so, GTW2 went from feeling “frustrated” and “like [they were] missing out” to “feel[ing] amazing.” In GTW2’s submission and other male separatist texts, aligning oneself with the male separatist identity and associated tenets purportedly allows for a higher quality of life than could be achieved otherwise. GTW2’s submission asserts the superiority of a specific subset of men: those who have “gone their own way” and aligned themselves with the male separatist community. Other male separatist Redditors follow suit: TNW1 urges fellow community members to “continue . . . spread[ing] the word” of male separatism “as it is already making a huge impact” for the better, while male separatist Redditor DKH65 seeks advice on how to “be MGTOW on [their] finances,” conflating the male separatist identity with more adept approaches to male separatists’ financial circumstances.

Although it occurs much less frequently than in male separatist texts, positive evaluations toward the community also occasionally appear among misogynist incels, often in a manner emphasizing incels’ superior intelligence. Misogynist incel Redditor GST57, for example, looks forward to the day “incels will finally take their rightful place as masters of the planet by wielding the powers of Artificial Superintelligence” over nonincels. As in the male separatist texts earlier, GST57 directly attributes a positive trait (here, ability to harness

“Artificial Superintelligence”) to the online community of misogynist incels.

Male supremacism. Additional parallels in positive ingroup evaluations among misogynist incels and male separatists can be seen in evaluations of men as a broader ingroup. Texts openly claiming men’s superiority over women by directly attributing a favorable trait or traits to men are common among male separatists, and frequently attribute a corresponding negative trait or traits to women. Male separatist Redditor PMR29 states they “love being male” because “the male body in peak condition . . . embodies strenght [*sic*], dominance and leadership.” PMR29 goes on to claim “anyone can be feminine” because “you just need to sit on your ass . . . and gossip”; in PMR29’s view, “femininity seems far more toxic” than masculinity. Fellow male separatist Redditor BCG79 lists “things men naturally gravitate towards” as “Invent[ing],” “Innovat[ing],” “Creat[ing],” “Lov[ing],” “Protect[ing],” and “Giving,” while “(modern) women resort to . . . Entitlement,” “Chronic unhappiness,” “Gossip,” “Sexual innuendos,” “Claiming Victimhood,” and “Refraining from responsibilities.” Here, desirable traits are attributed to the broad ingroup of men and concurrently denied to the broad outgroup of women.

While direct male supremacism remains more common among male separatists, misogynist incels also occasionally espouse language very directly favoring the broad ingroup of men. Misogynist incel Redditor DPH91 claims “men . . . will give their lives even for a woman they don’t know that well,” while “women . . . are incapable of empathizing with [men] or loving [men] for who [they] are.” As previously mentioned, DPH91 directly attributes desirable traits to the broad ingroup of men while

simultaneously denying their possession among the broad outgroup of women.

Prototypical, nonidealized masculinity. Evaluations both within and between the broad, gendered groups of men and women are interlinked and complex; this can be seen in evaluations of men who, while not positioned at the bottom of a masculine hierarchy as aggressively as are incels, also do not meet the criteria for idealized Chad status. This can be seen in a text from male separatist Redditor GTW2, who attributes their newfound ability to “feel truly at peace” to membership in the male separatist community. GTW2 reveals how this newfound peace allows them to “easily ignore” women and contends:

Besides, [women] get enough attention on Tinder from pussy-thirsty *manginas* [men considered too effeminate], *simps* [a misogynist acronym short for sucker idolizing mediocre pussy], and *cucks* [cuckolds]. They don't need attention from yet another *beta male* [a man who does not live up to community standards of idealized, “alpha” masculinity; emphasis added].

Men referred to with nonideal masculine terms like “simp” or “cuck” are not necessarily excluded from the male separatist community—GTW2 even refers to themselves as “yet another beta male.” Misogynist incel Redditors, however, largely consider traits associated with this nonideal masculinity to apply to a distinct, third category of men, falling somewhere between idealized masculine Chads (at the top) and incels (at the bottom) in the community's masculine hierarchy.

Misogynist incels and male separatists alike deride men they consider too accepting of the modern world's perceived feminist agenda (mirroring the *Matrix*-

inspired red pill terminology by referring to such men as “blue pill”). Misogynist incel Redditor YU43 states they “dislike blue pill males in the west even more than femoids [a dehumanizing term misogynist incels use to refer to women]” because YU43 believes it is these men “betraying and throwing men under the bus left and right as soon as a femoid complains.” A post from male separatist Redditor APK32 carries a similar sentiment: “Women are not the problem. The problem is the simp White Knight [a man who champions women online unprovoked] who panders to their bullshit. Women can only gain and hold power over men through other men.” In both texts, derision of nonidealized outsider men rests on these men's perceived support for women and a shared, foundational hatred toward the broader outgroup of women among both male separatists and misogynist incels.

Misogyny as indirect male supremacism. Excluding women from participation on both male separatist and misogynist incel subreddits plays a vital role in one of the most common forms of intergroup evaluations in each community: attributing negative traits to the broad outgroup of women and thus implying possession of corresponding positive traits among the broad ingroup of men. While male separatists clearly advertise their exclusion of women, women are similarly excluded from misogynist incel subreddits. Misogynist incel Redditors guard the “incel” identity from women Redditors interested in potentially engaging with these subreddits, with “femcels” (as women adopting an incel identity are often called) typically facing hostility on misogynist incel subreddits. Misogynist incel Redditor BPT44 does not believe these women are “be[ing] honest” with themselves about whether or not they truly belong in the community. Another misogynist incel

Reddit, UO52, reports they were “ghosted” by a woman they considered physically unattractive, ending the submission “jfl [just fucking lol, or laugh out loud] at femcels.” In this submission, UO52 implies women who cannot find a suitable partner are just overly choosy and do not merit inclusion within the incel community.

Misogynist incels also tend to use the denigration of women to positively evaluate the broad ingroup of men, as seen in misogynist incel Redditor JE36’s submission:

I’ve noticed incels have started talking about how they don’t have friends. Dude, that has nothing to do with hypergamous [an adjective form of “hypergamy,” a belief that women are able to be more selective than men when choosing opposite-sex romantic-sexual partners] whores. Stacy [one of several feminine stock characters used to categorize women] is not preventing you from having guy friends. *Guy friends don’t fucking care if you’re ugly* [emphasis added].

The rhetorical work in JE36’s submission is more nuanced than more direct positive evaluations toward men common among male separatist Redditors. Juxtaposing misogynist slurs (“hypergamous whores”) with a relatively positive depiction of men (“guy friends don’t care if you’re ugly”) might not directly stake the claim that men are superior to women, but it implies as much through invoking a cynical portrayal of women as shallow and looks-obsessed and an optimistic portrayal of “guy friends” looking beyond physical appearance in quick succession.

Misogynist gender essentialism. Misogynist incel Redditor XPM14 considers themselves “somewhere between incel and volcel [voluntary celibate],” explaining:

I don’t like women. *They aren’t good people*. . . . I can imagine good scenarios, with good chicks, in a [sic] imagined world. This world’s not that though. *Women are absolutely evil*. . . [they] only care about pizza, Netflix, pride themselves on being bitchy and basic. . . it’s just evil [emphasis added].

XPM14’s submission illustrates a common conviction in content across misogynist incel and male separatist subreddits—that all women are the same. XPM14’s submission exhibits *gender essentialism*, or a belief in the existence of universal, immutable traits and behaviors linked to gender (Wood and Eagly 2012). XPM14 adds a layer of misogyny to their gender essentialism, asserting not only that all women are universally similar but that their universal similarity results in all women being “absolutely evil.”

XPM14 is far from alone in holding this belief. In thematic qualitative coding, “all women = same” or some derivative thereof (“all female YouTubers = same,” “all feminists = same,” “all women = triggered”) appear frequently in justification memos, and misogynist gender essentialism is common enough among misogynist incels and male separatists to be given its own acronym: “All Women are Like That.” While traits universally attributed to women vary across content, they are almost exclusively characteristics disparaged by misogynist incels and male separatists alike: misogynist incel Redditor RSA80 claims “every single woman is deceptive and inherently trash,” while male separatist Redditor DMK11 believes “women are herd animals . . . just follow [ing] the most popular opinion.” Both texts unilaterally attribute a negative trait or traits to women as a broad outgroup.

Misogynist gender essentialism can also be less direct, as seen in male separatist Redditor BLR3’s submission to the r/MGTOW subreddit:

Title: I've never met an abusive man that wasn't good with women.

Submission Text: Crazy now that I think about it.

In this submission, BLR3 plays into a narrative common among misogynists online and offline: that women are somehow naturally predisposed to attraction toward men who treat them poorly or even abuse them. BLR3 does not state this outright, instead framing their submission as an observation for community members to interpret as they will. Nevertheless, the post's implication falls in line with gendered essentialism—its underlying message is that *all* women are attracted to abusive men.

Comparing prototypical masculinity and femininity. Both misogynist incels and male separatists often refer to women with pointedly dehumanizing terms (e.g., the use of the robotic “foid” and “femoid”) and perceive women as neatly aligning with one of a handful of feminine stock characters (e.g., the conventionally attractive and sexually desirable Stacy or the less attractive, ordinary “Becky”). In contrast to the Chad stock character—who, despite occasional vitriol, still receives a relatively favorable depiction compared to other misogynist incel stock characters—feminine stock characters are portrayed nearly universally negatively among both misogynist incels and male separatists, even when considered attractive or desirable. Contrasting portrayals of the idealized, masculine Chad character and the equally attractive (but less idealized) feminine Stacy character further illustrate this distinction.

Although frequently envied and sometimes reviled, Chad is still portrayed relatively benevolently by misogynist incels

given the community's overwhelming cynicism. While he is commonly ignorant to misogynist incels' perceived hardships, Chad is nevertheless often depicted as well-meaning, regularly encouraging incels to improve their lives or providing them with comfort or friendship, in contrast to depictions of women as inherently shallow, uncaring, and manipulative. A post from misogynist incel Redditor YBN14 exemplifies Chad's relatively benevolent portrayal within the community: YBN14 claims “the chads [they]’ve met at school were good guys. They had no reason to bring [YBN14] down.” Because “everything was going well” for these Chads, however, YBN14 eventually “stopped hanging out with them . . . because [they were] sick of girls always approaching [Chads] and not [YBN14].” YBN14 illustrates Chad's comparative success with women while also favorably portraying Chads as friendly toward YBN14 despite their incel status. Similarly, although stereotypically racist and xenophobic, racialized variants of the Chad stock character are nevertheless often depicted as ultimately benevolent: misogynist incel Redditor WG31 titles a submission to the r/braincels subreddit “wholesome Tyrone,” while fellow misogynist incel Redditor OTD4 titles their own r/braincels submission “Based [a general term of praise within these and other online communities] Tyrone stops the creating [*sic*] of another mentalcel [an incel whose involuntary celibacy is linked to mental health issues].”

Contrasting with Chad's frequent (if not exclusive) depiction as either benignly ignorant or sympathetic toward incels' perceived struggles, Stacy is instead portrayed as manipulating incels' loneliness and romantic-sexual failure to her own advantage. Misogynist incel Redditor GFE52, for example, accuses Stacy of “try[ing] to make [them] her slave”

when Stacy asks for help on a homework assignment. Notably, Stacy's attractiveness and desirability do not afford her the same degree of hierarchical differentiation from other women that separates Chad from other men. Misogynist incels' disparagement of all women is illustrated in misogynist incel Redditor TCL91's assertion "all femoids . . . are the same:" "[they] like similar things," "behave in the same manner," and are "identical in their thought processes." TCL91 applies this uniformity across different types of women, including "your mother, your sister, or [your] hot stacy neighbor down the street." TCL91's post illustrates how as a man, Chad is favored even compared to his closest woman counterpart in Stacy, who, despite her physical attractiveness and sexual desirability, is still lumped in with all other women as cruel, manipulative, and inferior to men through the misogynist, gender essentialist conviction that "All Women Are Like That."

DISCUSSION

This study uses thematic qualitative coding to compare positive and negative ingroup and outgroup evaluations among two misogynist communities on Reddit .com—male separatist Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), whose open favoritism toward both the male separatist community and toward men more broadly aligns with the pursuit of positive distinctiveness put forward in social identity theory (SIT), and Involuntary Celibates (incels), whose open and normative self-derogation is incongruent with SIT and is partially, although incompletely, understood through an isolated focus on the influence of negative self-verification posited in self-verification theory (SVT). Considering theoretical concepts from masculinities scholarship in addition to these social psychological theories, this

study investigates what factors, in addition to and in combination with those proposed in SIT and SVT, sustain misogynist incels' willing affiliation with the intensely self-derogating incel online community. Results reveal that while male separatists more positively evaluate both the narrower ingroup of their online community and the broader ingroup of men more directly, misogynist incels nevertheless join male separatists in positively evaluating the broader ingroup of men even as they derogate the narrower ingroup of the incel community. This is accomplished through selectively favoring *some* men (as seen in the relatively benevolent, sometimes aspirational depiction of the Chad stock character) and through the misogynist, gender essentialist conviction that *all* women are cruel, manipulative, and self-interested. Relatively cynical portrayals of all women and comparatively benevolent depictions of certain men function to favor men over women even as misogynist incels profess the supposed inferiority of their own online community within a masculine hierarchy.

While favoring the broad ingroup of men may aid in sustaining misogynist incels' affiliation with the incel community, frequent, ongoing, and intense ingroup derogation can lead to depression, suicidality, and in some cases, potentially fatal offline violence (Hendrix 2019; Lovett and Nagourney 2014; Porter 2018). In combination with the community's rampant cynicism and vitriol—directed both inward and outward—and the recurring presence (even endorsement) of suicidality among its members, the negative self-verification provided through affiliation with the misogynist incel community would be rendered too extreme and potentially maladaptive if analyzed via an exclusive focus on SVT. Considering macro-level dynamics within a broader gender order noted in

masculinities scholarship, however, reveals that by favoring *some* men over *all* women (even if they themselves are not the men being favored), misogynist incels enter into a patriarchal bargain. Misogynist incels willingly place themselves at the bottom of a community-constructed masculine hierarchy and in so doing accept (and even enforce) their own subordination within this masculine hierarchy to reap some, if not all, of the benefits of continued enforcement of hegemonic masculinity (Herzog and Yahia-Younis 2007; Kandiyoti 1988). Thus, misogynist incels' affiliation with the incel community works to further the patriarchal dividend, affording certain social respects exclusively to (some) men in a manner perpetuating broader gender inequality (Connell 2009). Similar to young, White, cisgender men embodying hybrid hegemonic masculinities (Bridges 2021; Bridges and Pascoe 2014), misogynist incels' claims to inferiority and victimhood allow them to "creatively resis[t] an understanding of themselves as privileged" (Bridges 2021:664–65) and, alongside relatively positive evaluations of some men over all women, serve to bolster a patriarchal social structure and to legitimate gender inequality even as incel community members deride themselves for their perceived inferiority compared to other men.

This study furthers ongoing efforts in social psychology to construct a complete theory of self (Stets and Burke 2000), synthesizing social-psychological theories (SIT and SVT) with concepts from masculinities scholarship (a masculine hierarchy and entry into a patriarchal bargain), and joins recent research in bridging this theoretical gap through applying these concepts to online communities (Davis et al. 2019). The study reveals how, beyond a more simplistic drive toward positive distinctiveness as put forward in SIT and the search for evidence


verifying one's preexisting worldview (whether positive or negative) in SVT, misogynist incels' willing affiliation with the intensely self-derogating incel online community is bolstered through the potential benefits of entering into a patriarchal bargain: even a self-positioning at the bottom of a masculine hierarchy still promises benefits within a broader, patriarchal social structure.

Beyond maintenance of a patriarchal status quo, however, the intensely hateful character of much of the language employed by misogynist incels also perpetuates a sustained, subtle violence toward members of targeted social groups outside the community: women, racial and ethnic minorities, and nonheterosexual and noncisgender individuals may not all be actively engaging with misogynist incel language, but its presence online serves as both a deterrent and a harm toward those targeted nonetheless. This vitriol can silence members of targeted outgroups and limit their access to the increasingly important opportunities and social networks provided through digital publics (Kilgo et al. 2018; Sobieraj 2020), emphasizing how language in the community ultimately furthers the patriarchal dividend—while derogation directed toward the incel community may be mitigated through positive evaluations of the broader ingroup of men, blanket derision toward women and other targeted outgroups remains unchecked and creates obstacles to equal access to digital spaces based on gender and other identities.

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SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

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BIO

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