A Performative Face Theory Analysis of Online Facework
by the Formerly Involuntarily Celibate

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Individuals identifying as involuntarily celibate (i.e., "incels"), who are unable to have sex despite wanting to, often later no longer wish to identify as incels. This transition requires former incels to perform facework to reconfigure these otherwise rigid identity categories. Guided by performative face theory, this study analyzed 77 narratives posted to Reddit by users who at one time identified as incels in which they discuss the transition away from inceldom. This analysis elucidates how former incels employ meta-facework strategies online to reimagine their identities and become deradicalized. Findings indicated seven factors that contributed to the initial "doing" of inceldom, two major categories of inciting incidents that catalyzed the "troubling" of performed incel identities, and two sedimenting and three subversive meta-facework strategies employed by Reddit users to facilitate the "undoing" of inceldom. Theoretical and practical implications are offered.

Keywords: critical interpersonal communication, incel, involuntarily celibacy, performative face theory

In what has been called the "Great American Sex Drought," between 2008 and 2019, the percentage of men under the age of 30 reporting having no sexual intercourse in the previous year nearly tripled, jumping from 10% to 28% (Ingraham, 2019, para. 9). Many of these men (and some women) identify as involuntarily celibates, or *incels* (Incels Wiki, 2020). Believing that a variety of unchangeable aspects of one's identity such as genetics, race, height, and ability status predetermine one's value within the *sexual marketplace* (Fetterolf & Rudman, 2017), incels adopt a radical deterministic belief system, largely perpetuated online, that shapes their perception of sex and relationships (Eddington, 2020). These belief systems, innately tied to a person's identity, are later constraining to individuals who become sexually active or no longer wish to identify as incels. Yet, identity is *performative* (Butler, 1990) because performances of identity are the means by which those identities become permitted, are made intelligible to others, and why performed identities must be "enacted and legitimated" (Moore, 2017, p. 260). Hence, to reconfigure their identities, former incels must engage not only in *performative facework*, the practices through which one constructs and defends *face*, "the positive

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social value a person effectively claims for [them]self" (Goffman, 1967, p. 5), but also in *meta-facework*, facework that occurs online when individuals discuss facework performed offline (Moore, 2020).

Guided by performative face theory (PFT; Moore, 2017), we analyzed 77 narratives of formerly involuntarily celibate Reddit users to understand how they renegotiate face to reposition their identities. We conceive of *inceldom* (this term refers to the discourse and ideology of incels, whereas the term *incel* refers to the identity) as discursive and historical to link negotiations of face to operations of power (Moore, 2017). Study findings illuminate pathways by which former incels reposition their identities through facework and elucidate the implied process within PFT. Our purpose is not to endorse inceldom, but rather to critique how inceldom constrains individuals seeking to rid themselves of it. These findings extend PFT by illustrating the holds that the complex and multifaceted tendrils of inceldom have on the identities of current and former incels, why abdications of inceldom are effortful and facework-dependent, and why it is thus necessary to reposition one's identity through facework.

Defining Involuntary Celibacy

Although sometimes used to refer to committed romantic or marital relationships in which sexual intercourse has ceased (e.g., *dead bedrooms*; Donnelly & Burgess, 2008; Donnelly, Burgess, Anderson, Davis, & Dillard, 2001), the term *involuntary celibacy* for the purpose of this study refers to an individual's inability to find a romantic or sexual partner despite desiring one (Beauchamp, 2018). Although research about inceldom remains scant, scholars have since 2001 examined involuntary celibacy and the development of incel communities online (e.g., Burgess, Donnelly, Dillard, & Davis, 2001). The involuntarily celibate represent an array of life experiences. Most report having had some sexual experiences (not necessarily intercourse), not dating as teenagers, experiencing prolonged gaps between sexual partners, and encountering barriers to forming sexual relationships such as having poor social skills and physical appearance (Donnelly et al., 2001). Incels report feeling behind their peers in terms of romantic and sexual prowess (Donnelly et al., 2001), often leading to feelings of hatred and victimhood (Ging, 2019; Labbaf, 2019). Such perceived deviations from norms for masculinity, in particular, may then coalesce into fantasies about committing acts of mass and gender-based violence (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). For instance, in the 2014 Isla Vista massacre, Elliot Rodger, motivated by his incel beliefs, killed six women (Hill, 2014).

Incels belong to a larger collection of men's rights communities online dubbed the *manosphere*, where male frustrations and experiences of discrimination (e.g., dissatisfactory child custody arrangements and compulsory military enlistment) are foregrounded and women and feminist views are typically targeted (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Farrell, Fernandez, Novotny, & Alani, 2019; Ging, 2019). Discussing the manosphere, Ging (2019) notes that "the technological affordances of social media are especially well suited to the amplification of new articulations of aggrieved manhood" (p. 638), indicating the importance of examining discussions of inceldom online. Online, members of the incel community discuss these frustrations, so producing stereotypical, often derogatory, depictions of femininity and masculinity (Maxwell, Robinson, Williams, & Keaton, 2020). Analyses of language use on incel Reddit forums (many of which are now banned or shut down), websites, and content on platforms such as YouTube (Papadamou et al., 2020) illustrate high degrees of misogyny, homophobia, and racism (Jaki et al., 2019). The discourse of inceldom is reviewed next.

The History and Discourse of Involuntary Celibacy

Inceldom is a *discourse* (Eddington, 2020; Wright, Trott, & Jones, 2020), a system of meaning used to make sense of reality (Galvin & Braithwaite, 2014), that is complex and historical. As PFT requires understanding the history and discourse of involuntary celibacy, this is reviewed next. The term *incel* was first coined in 1993 as *invcel* by a feminist university student known only as Alana (due to the name of her website, "Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project"; Ling, Mahoney, McGuire, & Freeze, 2018, para. 3). Alana later started a mailing list for *incels*, dropping the *v*, to reach "anybody of any gender who was lonely, had never had sex or who hadn't had a relationship in a long time" (Taylor, 2018, para. 11). Although the term was coined by a woman, the contemporary Internet subculture of inceldom rejects the notion that women can be incels (Incels Wiki, 2020). Thus, for incels inceldom is not a movement or subculture, but rather a life circumstance (Incels Wiki, 2020). We argue that inceldom is also a discourse.

Although typically *broadbrushed* (i.e., generalizations made about incels, all characterized as belonging to one unified Internet subculture or belief system), it is important to note that those identifying as incels compose many perspectives and particular ideological positions, not all of which are misogynistic or sex-focused despite common perception. Understanding the purview of inceldom is necessary for explicating this discourse and contextualizing study findings. Inceldom is unified through *determinism*, the notion that events occur as a result of external causes, for instance, that one's incel status is attributed to unchangeable characteristics (Incels Wiki, 2020). Incels are then factioned by who (or what) is blamed for their involuntary celibacy. Incels blaming *no one* for their circumstances, for example, congregate on the /r/IncelsWithoutHate subreddit and disallow blaming others for one's inceldom, making personal attacks, and advocating self-harm or suicide (Reddit, 2020c).

Incels blaming *normies* (i.e., someone who is average and able to have sex; Incels Wiki, 2020), *Chads* (i.e., dumb, conventionally attractive men who are the archetype of traditional White masculinity; Incels Wiki, 2020), *Stacies* (i.e., vain, entitled, conventionally attractive archetypes of White femininity; Incels Wiki, 2020), society, or their genetics tend to view their involuntary celibacy as arising from *ableism* (i.e., incels calling themselves *mentalcels* because of mental health issues) or *lookism* (e.g., incels pointing to specific physical features believed to contribute to their involuntary celibacy, calling themselves *heightcels*, *facecels*, *weightcels*, or *racecels*; Reddit, 2020b, since banned). Demographic data about incel communities support the self-reported presence of these features. For example, a survey of 550 incels (conducted by incels.co) revealed that its user base is racially diverse (i.e., 56.1% White, 8.8% other, 8.2% Black, 8.2% Middle Eastern, 8.4% Latino, 5.4% Asian, and 5.0% Indian), majority underweight or at a healthy weight (77%), and physically or neurologically disabled (57%; Incels Wiki, 2020). Incels define themselves by these unchangeable features, where they both are celibate and cannot do anything about it (e.g., exercise, hygiene, therapy), whereas those able to change these facets are called *volcels* (i.e., voluntarily celibate) and *fakecels* (i.e., fake incels; Reddit, 2020b). Those who later renounce inceldom are viewed by other incels as having always been fakecels, further emphasizing the purported permanence of inceldom as a life experience.

Incels who blame women (i.e., who they call *females* or *femoids*) for their involuntary celibacy can be further divided into two factions. First, there are incels who blame women but who swear off seeking romantic or sexual relationships with women altogether, called *Men Going Their Own Way* (Men Going Their

Own Way, 2020; Wright et al., 2020). Conversely, there are men who blame women, espouse radical misogynistic views, and share these views online (Reddit, 2020b). This subgroup of incels has been connected to 14 discrete attempted or executed mass murder and domestic terrorist attacks around the world between August 2009 and June 2020, resulting in more than 61 deaths (e.g., Bell, Russell, & McDonald, 2020; Bever, 2019; Bostock, 2020; Branson-Potts & Winton, 2018; Collins & Zadrozny, 2018; Dickson, 2018; Hill, 2014; Solomon, 2019; Strzepa, 2009; Theobald, 2018). Given these events and the connotations ascribed to incels, many individuals adhering to incel beliefs may be reticent to identify with the incel label.

Exploring the Plurality of Incel Belief Systems

The Southern Poverty Law Center (2019) contemporarily characterizes incels as a "male supremacy" group that espouses a "hateful ideology advocating for the subjugation of women" (para. 1). This often-hateful ideology stems from the numerous complex theories created by incels that govern human sexuality and mate selection. These theories are called *pills*, as they are consumed by incel readers (e.g., "taking the redpill") and are used to explain the various forces contributing to their involuntary celibacy, laying the groundwork for inceldom. Two primary pills are discussed here. First, the *bluepill* is the gynocentric status quo to which normies ascribe (Incels Wiki, 2020). Arguments made to incels or about inceldom by non-incel individuals and mainstream media sources that reinforce these beliefs about sex and dating are viewed as *bluepilling* incels, as these comments represent the status quo.

Second, the *masculinist redpill* marks a rejection of the gynocentric bluepill and status quo notions of sexual relationships and women (Incels Wiki, 2020). Redpill beliefs include the notion that dating is a sexual marketplace in which women are granted advantages because of feminist views and independence, women have many sexual partners (and lie about these experiences), and that looks (particularly one's face) are the most important part of oneself in the sexual marketplace (Incels Wiki, 2020). Those taking the redpill also believe that heterosexual relationships are *hypergamous*, facilitated by online dating websites and apps, whereby women date and marry men who are above their own social status or level of attractiveness, suggesting that most men will never be desired by women (Incels Wiki, 2020). This perspective is further ossified by the *blackpill*, a bio-essentialist view whereby a man's sexual marketplace value is predetermined based on genetic composition, and therefore involuntary celibacy is permanent and hopeless, and the logical solution is to LDAR (lay down and rot; Incels Wiki, 2020). Blackpilled incels make posts encouraging suicide (i.e., called *suifuel*; Incels Wiki, 2020) and violence, stemming from the belief that they can never be happy because of these genetic disadvantages. Taking the blackpill is common among incels. For example, in 2019, among 550 surveyed users of incels.co, 82% reported considering suicide and 78% reported living with constant sadness, anxiety, and stress (Incels Wiki, 2020).

From this description of the systems of meaning that make up inceldom and the extant research reviewed here, it is clear that those identifying as incels view involuntary celibacy as a fixed and unchangeable part of their identity. It should also be apparent that inceldom is about more than just not being able to have sex (despite it largely being characterized this way and this being the unifying feature of inceldom). It is rather a series of belief systems attached (to varying degrees) to a person's sense of worth and value, and stemming from a variety of insecurities (e.g., one's bodily ability, race, height, facial structure, personality, genetics, social status, education) and the perceived injustices (e.g., difficulties with

online dating) experienced by (mostly) men. Inceldom becomes an identity on which (mostly) heterosexual boys and men hinge ideas about masculinity, women, and dating. Hence, those who once identified as incels but are now sexually active (or no longer wish to identify as an incel or associate with inceldom) must renegotiate their identity and reconcile competing belief systems across online and offline life domains. For these reasons, PFT was selected to guide this analysis.

Performative Face Theory

Goffman (1967) asserted that face is a social concept: the means through which a person ascertains how they "should" act. Moore (2017) combined Goffman's face theory and Butler's (1990) theory of performativity to create a framework useful for exploring how individuals negotiate face to subvert otherwise naturalized identity categories. For example, PFT has been used to explore facework performed to rearticulate one's identity following a change in one's beliefs (e.g., formerly childfree women who later become mothers; Moore, 2018). PFT has four guiding principles.

First, PFT asserts that discourses circulate in negotiations of face. Within PFT, *power* is conceptualized as a discursive force that "construct[s], maintain[s], and subvert[s] norms of socially intelligible identity categories" (Moore, 2017, p. 261), such that discourses gain power as they are repeated over time. For instance, mothers who once articulated themselves as voluntarily childless (i.e., childfree) reported receiving face-threatening statements about having children that served to circulate pronatalist discourses and disregard childfreedom as a legitimate identity (Moore, 2017).

Second, PFT asserts that negotiations of face are influenced by their historical conditions (Moore, 2017). For example, childfree individuals requesting voluntary sterilization experience talk that repeats pronatalist discourses emerging from cultural histories of eugenics and interactants' personal histories related to sterilization (Moore, 2020). Medical providers' professional identities are shaped by decades of history, training, and policy that reinforce them (Cullinan, Purtell, & Canary, 2020). In this study, for example, discourses of female subservience often circulate in inceldom, whereas discourses of female sexual liberation often circulate in the broader sexual and romantic sphere.

Third, PFT asserts that the repetition of discourses reinscribes power by *sedimenting* identity categories and their material effects such that they become naturalized. For example, formerly childfree mothers, especially White, able-bodied, and financially stable mothers, are told that they ought to have children for these reasons (Hintz & Brown, 2020; Moore, 2020), sedimenting identity categories by naturalizing motherhood. In another example, medical providers' identities where they are viewed as possessing expert knowledge are sedimented by highly structured interactional protocols (Cullinan et al., 2020). Here, incels adhere to a belief system that sediments identity categories by emphasizing the unchangeable biological factors perceived to warrant their involuntary celibacy.

Finally, PFT asserts that negotiations of face are often *subversive*, denaturalizing the either/or logic of hegemonic identity categories (Moore, 2017). For instance, childfree women who later become mothers subvert the otherwise taken-for-granted identity categories of "never mother" and "mother" by rejecting the notion that such categories are binary logics and instead honoring both identities as important to their

self-concept (Moore, 2018). Medical providers who separate their personal and professional identities find these boundaries blurring in times of high stress (Cullinan et al., 2020). Here, former incels may denaturalize identity categories of "incel" and "sexually active" by subverting these binary logics and producing new understandings of their experiences through meta-facework.

This study extends PFT by explicating the implied process (Poole, 2013) that undergirds these four tenets of PFT, whereby (a) a person's individual history leads them to espouse a particular identity at one point in time, at which point those performances of facework circulate discourses (e.g., women once viewing their personalities as being incompatible with motherhood perform a childfree identity; Moore, 2018); (b) an event or interaction "troubles" the performance of that identity (e.g., childfree women experience "bingos" that challenge their choice; Hintz & Brown, 2020; medical providers' professional identities are threatened by poor adherence to protocols governing patient care; Cullinan et al., 2020), (c) which requires that they engage in performative facework (or meta-facework online) to either subvert, sediment, or otherwise reposition their identities. Throughout this implied process, power is visible when (a) individuals must grapple with the difficulty of "undoing" identity ties to the discourse of inceldom that has circulated in prior negotiations of face and garnered power as it has been repeated by individuals over time, and when (b) individuals call on new discourses to "do" a new identity that is intelligible to others. Thus, despite it being largely characterized this way in the extant literature, we argue that it is facework, not the experience of having sex, that facilitates the "undoing" of inceldom.

Given the four tenets of PFT and the implied facework process they represent, the three research questions guiding our study asked:

RQ1:   What factors led to and/or sustained Reddit users' former incel identities?

RQ2:   What inciting incidents "troubled" those incel identities and prompted the renegotiation of face?

RQ3:   How do former incels negotiate face through meta-facework in Reddit narratives?

Method

Data were sampled from Reddit, consisting of both first- and second-level comment replies to one post within the /r/AskReddit subreddit (an online community of 29 million in which users' questions are posed to strangers; Reddit, 2020a), which asked, "People who had considered themselves 'incels' (involuntary celibates) but have since had sex, how do you feel looking back at your previous self?" (Reddit, 2020d). Replies below the second level were not included as these replies tended not to include users' firsthand experiences. This post was selected because, to our knowledge, it is the largest public discussion by former incels of leaving inceldom on the Internet. The more than 10,100 comments made in response to this post were sorted by "Top," a parameter applied to sort comments in reference to Reddit's upvote/downvote system that produces a total "score" for each comment. Comment scores ranged from 100 to 32,100 upvotes.

The entire thread of 10,100 comments was searched, and all 73 first-level replies were extracted manually for inclusion in the study. We then returned to the thread to sample second-level replies (i.e., replies

to the first-level replies) that described users' firsthand experiences in response to the prompt, at which time an additional eight second-level replies were extracted. The final sample consisted of 81 first- and second-level comment replies. We then coded the sample for relevance. Posts excluded from the final sample were not firsthand accounts of the users' personal experiences with involuntary celibacy (i.e., friends of former incels; n = 4). We participated in two rounds of coding, coding eight articles in each round (n = 16 total articles constituting 20% of the total sample; Krippendorff, 2018) to achieve reliability (KALPHA = 1.00). After reliability was achieved, the remaining sample was divided approximately in half (n = 32/33); each of us coded one half for relevance. The final sample contained 77 posts (M = 297 words, SD = 335); posts were assigned random identification numbers to which they are referred in the Results section.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) then proceeded with the final sample (n = 77 posts). The analysis was guided by *a priori* sensitizing concepts derived from PFT that aimed to explicate the implied process of performative facework, including the (a) historical conditions (factors) that preceded inceldom, (b) inciting incident, and (c) performative meta-facework strategies users employed to renegotiate their former incel identities online. Following the procedure of *referential adequacy* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we divided the sample in half (n = 38). This first half of the sample was used for the initial coding phase of thematic analysis, in which posts were coded for each of the three sensitizing concepts from PFT by each of us independently. Throughout this process, we recorded *memos* to summarize findings and potential theoretical connections. We then met to discuss findings, compare notes, and resolve initial coding disputes and discrepancies. For example, our *code*, an "interesting feature of the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87), "factors contributing to inceldom" that initially only included factors that led individuals to inceldom, was expanded to include factors that were also described as having sustained inceldom.

Next, to identify themes across coded portions of text regarding the (a) historical conditions, (b) inciting incidents, and (c) meta-facework strategies, we independently conducted a second phase of coding using the coded excerpts from the same half (n = 38) of the entire data set. During this phase of the coding process, we each kept an *audit trail* to create a living document that traced analytical decisions made in the second phase of coding (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We then met again to compare identified *themes* (i.e., "patterned response[s] or meaning[s] within the data set"; Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82), resolve disputes, and arrive at final coding categories. For example, one dispute occurred when one of us had created content-based meta-facework strategy categories (e.g., talking about regrets of earlier behavior) and the other had created function-based categories (e.g., reflecting on my past self) that better mapped onto PFT's theoretical tenets. We then compared notes and arrived at a final series of conceptual categories to capture the function of the meta-facework strategy in terms of performing one's identity online (i.e., humanizing the former self/now other).

We then recoded all 38 transcripts using this new facework strategy coding schema and met again to resolve any coding discrepancies. No coding discrepancies appeared in this second round. Moving forward, we then compared final themes against the second half of the data set to ensure that no new categories emerged (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). No new categories or changes to coding definitions emerged. After interpretations from the first half of the data set were verified against the second half, we jointly engaged in *exemplar identification* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to select quotations that best characterized each theme. In sum, four verification procedures were enacted to augment the validity of our interpretations: (a) referential adequacy, (b) memoing, (c) audit trail, and (d) exemplar identification.

Results

Our findings map onto the implied process of PFT and specify (a) factors that contributed to the "doing" of inceldom, (b) the inciting incidents that "troubled" inceldom, and (c) the meta-facework strategies employed online to "undo" inceldom (see Figure 1).
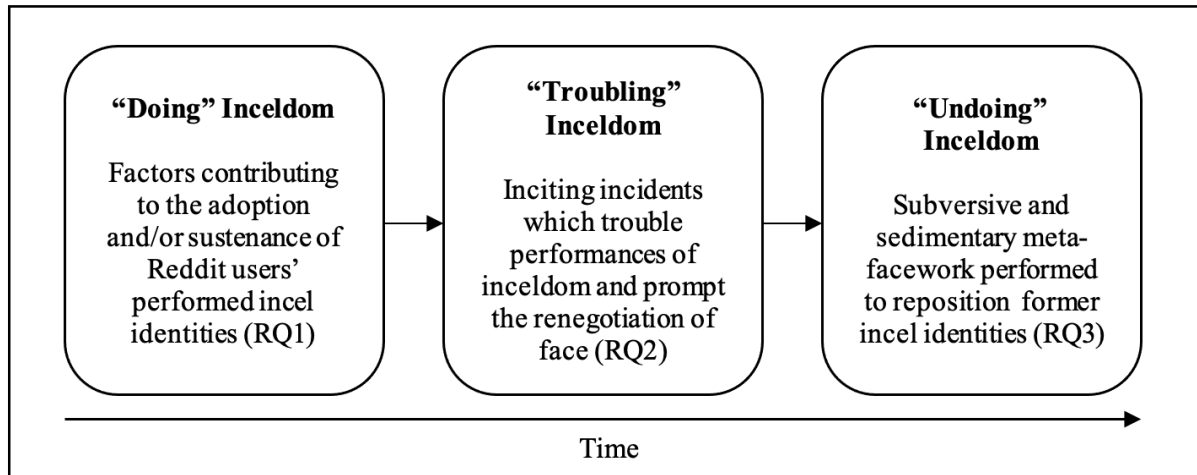

Figure 1. Process of performative meta-facework by former incels.

Factors Contributing to Inceldom: "Doing" Inceldom

Seven factors together explain how incel identities were developed and sustained (RQ1). These factors appeared early in narratives about leaving inceldom, were included to explain how post authors first became incels and serve as "evidence" for their permanent poor sexual marketplace value that drew them to inceldom (e.g., "I didn't blame girls for not liking me. I blamed myself for not being physically attractive enough"; ID#36).

First, *physical appearance* and *ability status* were factors that contributed to inceldom (e.g., "I was fat and awkward and physically disabled"; ID#34), including specific factors such as being overweight or obese (e.g., "In high school I was 300 pounds"; ID#23), being short ("I was so ugly and short that [I] can't get a girl"; ID#43), being a minority ("I was Asian in a school with like 85% Asians, and you weren't attractive to the girls if you weren't White or Black"; ID#72), having poor facial features (e.g., "I have a terribly bad jaw line, both my nose and jaw go to one side"; ID#31), having a physical disability (e.g., "I'm bedridden, can't work . . . [girls] only wanted to know what [sex] is like with a 'wheelchair guy'"; ID#2), and having a speech impediment (e.g., "I'm shy, ugly, and had a stutter on top of it all"; ID#67) or a learning disability (e.g., "I had a whole can of issues. ADHD, autism, etc."; ID#38).

Second, *mental health issues* contributed to inceldom, most notably depression and persistent depressive disorder (e.g., ID#3, 28, 39), social anxiety (e.g., ID#75), or undiagnosed mental health issues

(e.g., ID#38). Third, having a *tumultuous home life* contributed to inceldom, as users reported emotional and physical abuse (e.g., "[My] emotionally abusive controlling mother made close relationships with people difficult"; ID#38. "I was basically [my dad's] emotional and physical punching bag"; ID#41).

Fourth, knowing but being *closeted about one's sexual orientation or gender identity* contributed to inceldom, such as being bisexual (e.g., "I'm bi and at the time I hated the boys at school who seemed to only have eyes for the 'conventionally attractive' girls"; ID#38) and being transgender (e.g., "I was a deeply closeted trans teenager. Part of my 'incel-dom' was hating the girls I knew for 'taking for granted' that they got to be girls and I was stuck as a guy"; ID#35).

Fifth, *personality issues* contributed to inceldom, including being a "nice guy," a phenomenon characterized by male sexual entitlement for good deeds (i.e., holding doors, offering emotional support). This is sometimes viewed as synonymous with inceldom (e.g., "I am a former nice guy/incel"; ID#44). For instance, one user wrote, "I had a dose of that 'nice guy' attitude. . . . 'Why don't I deserve to be with you? I'm such a nice guy!?'" (ID#34). Users also reported social ineptitude as a factor (colloquially, being "cringey" or "creepy"), for example, "I used to be the creepy ass weirdo who, by the time I had graduated, had asked every single girl out" (ID#17), and "High school me wore fedoras and believed my 'superior intellect and science-based social theories' were too much for everyone" (ID#7).

Sixth, *beliefs about masculinity, sex, and relationships* compounded by inexperience with sexual and romantic relationships and tied to seemingly permanent aspects of oneself contributed to inceldom. For example, one user explained, "I never had a date, never kissed a girl, never had sex. I developed a theory that all women wanted guys who were tough, or big, or rich. I believed I was naturally not meant to have a mate" (ID#72). Often such views were derived from religious beliefs, for example, "I had been indoctrinated into Christianity and felt that women were inferior" (ID#46).

Finally, a *lack of effort* (e.g., "I was involuntarily celibate in that I wanted to have sexual relationships, but never met anyone interested. I didn't put any effort in, so it was kinda my fault"; ID#8) and other habits of introversion contributed to inceldom. Among these habits were an intense interest in video games (e.g., "All I did was play video games, and so women just weren't interested in me, and I never put myself into situations to meet people"; ID#51) and insular friend groups (e.g., "My main issue was my social groups were all male. We were a closed circuit of sexual frustration and loneliness"; ID#40). These seven factors together fuel the development of incel identities.

Inciting Incidents: "Troubling" Inceldom

To address Research Question 2, inciting incidents "troubled" incels' performance of their identity and prompted incels to begin the process of repositioning their identities through facework (discussed next). Users reported two categories of inciting incidents: (a) new life experiences and (b) realizations.

First, users reported that a variety of *new life experiences* began to "trouble" their performances of their incel identity. For some, new life experiences meant going to college (e.g., "It wasn't until I got to college and went on a period of self-discovery that I knew the error of my ways"; ID#17), moving away

(e.g., "Eventually, on a total whim, I decided to move a few states away. This resulted in me meeting a new group of friends, and luckily it wasn't all guys this time"; ID#40), growing up, (e.g., "I grew out of it simply because it became clear none of it was true [nor was their 'Blue Pill'—all of the 'pills' are dumb]"; ID#69), or sexual encounters (e.g., "Then I spent a semester studying abroad in Europe. I went to brothels in Amsterdam and Frankfurt and had sex with probably 20–30 women"; ID#66).

Second, users reported *realizations* that troubled performances of their incel identities. Some users reported realizations unrelated to specific events (e.g., "At some point I just thought man I don't have any friends and can't get a girlfriend, if no one else likes me maybe I can learn to like me. So, I started working on myself"; ID#45. "Ex-incel here. Haven't had sex yet. Nothing awesome happened, just realised I had issues and went into therapy to change"; ID#71) as well as realizations about the effects of inceldom (e.g., "I walked past a normally-dressed woman and thought 'god, what a fucking slut.'. . . It kind of hit me then that I really didn't like the person I was becoming"; ID#35. "What snapped me out of it was the Isla Vista massacre. When Elliot Rodgers killed all those innocent people I was disgusted and outraged like many others. I checked out and have rarely looked back"; ID#59).

Other users reported previously unknown realizations about sexual orientation or gender identity including being asexual/aromantic (e.g., "I've also learned that I'm possibly aromantic"; ID#51. "Eventually I went on a date and learned that I don't like that type of attention. I'm asexual/aromantic now and comfortable being a virgin"; ID#52), being transgender (e.g., "I realized my hatred was all from jealousy [of women] and I came out as trans"; ID#46), being bisexual (e.g., "I discovered my bisexuality. . . . Most women want dominant and assertive men. I'm a huge sub . . . dating a very cute guy now"; ID#76), and being gay (e.g., "Turns out I was gay and my jealousy of 'Chads' was attraction to them"; ID#43. "Turns out I was gay but so deep in the closet my zip code was Narnia"; ID#7).

Finally, users reported realizations resulting from substance use (e.g., "Started experimenting with psychedelics and had a spirit journey where I took a good hard look at myself and was ashamed of what I was"; ID#27. "I went to a work party and got drunk. I found out later that I talked to girls and asked for one's number. I started drinking, and it changed everything for me"; ID#72). Despite inceldom being defined primarily as the inability to procure sex, these findings illustrate that a variety of life events, not only having sex, troubled incels' performances of inceldom. These inciting incidents were events that prompted former incels to begin to reposition their identities. Meta-facework strategies used to accomplish this are next described.

Meta-Facework Strategies: "Undoing" Inceldom

To address Research Question 3, users reported two meta-facework strategies whereby they either sedimented incel identity as they attempted to abdicate inceldom or subverted inceldom's binary logics to reorient both identities (i.e., from incel to former incel) within their self-concept.

Two practices of sedimenting were noted, in which users engaged in meta-facework by affirming binary incel logics in their online retellings of offline behavior. First, users sedimented the incel identity through "former me/still me" meta-facework by foregrounding their continued involuntary celibacy and

deterministic beliefs but simultaneously distanced themselves from the hateful ideologies of inceldom. As one example, a user wrote, "Still an incel. . . . I've put myself out there just been rejected a lot. . . . I've stopped trying. Couple of my closest friends are women so I don't think I have any Incel ideologies, but I might and may just be unaware" (ID#39). In this example, involuntary celibacy and its connection to incel identity are reinscribed, but the user attempted to remove himself from the discourse of inceldom.

Second, users also sedimented the incel/sexually active binary by describing inceldom and their sexually active lives as existing in entirely separate domains. This meta-facework strategy occurred when sex was described as both a positive and negative experience. For example, one user recalling sex as a positive experience remarked, "I always felt that just one sexual experience was all I needed to 'sort myself out.' . . . I was right. I'm a completely different person. My confidence is restored, I feel normal, my anxiety has gone" (ID#28), whereas another user reflecting on sex as a negative experience remarked, "I had sex and it was very disappointing. Since then I don't care about pursuing women anymore. They have almost no relevance in my life anymore. But I'm glad that I had it" (ID#74). In these examples, users are sedimenting (i.e., naturalizing) the incel/sexually active binary by describing sexual activity as the catalyst for the "undoing" of inceldom, thereby repositioning their identity.

Three meta-facework strategies were noted that subverted binary incel logics. First, users subverted the incel/sexually active binary by articulating that "undoing" inceldom requires more than only becoming sexually active. As one user explained, "Even though I have had sex since that time, sex isn't what vindicates you. Inceldom is a state of mind which requires strength and guidance to overcome" (ID#4). Another user similarly wrote, "I did end up having sex later, but it wasn't the cure by any means—analyzing the causes of my hatred towards women and doing what I could to correct them was" (ID#35). Another agreed, "I've always considered myself dangerously close to the incel mindset. Then I had sex. And you know what changed? Nothing" (ID#51). Here, these users are engaging in meta-facework by subverting the notion that sex "cures" inceldom—that inceldom and sexual activity are mutually exclusive—and affirming that one can be both an incel and sexually active.

Second, a few users engaged in meta-facework by subverting the incel/female binary, making it known that they were femcels and offering a female perspective on inceldom (e.g., "As a girl I thought that 'only seeing the hot girls' thing was normal for guys"; ID#12. "I sort-of bought into the femcel 'not like other girls and that's why no one will ever want me' ideology in high school"; ID#52). Here, these former femcels reposition their identities as women incels, subverting the masculinist depiction of inceldom as being an identity occupied only by men.

Third, users subverted incel logics through positioning their identity as "former-self/now-other." This allowed users to humanize and empathize with their previous self and affirm both their incel and current identities as important to their self-concept. For example, one user wrote, "I still see myself as both people. The guy obsessed with video games and the guy who loves working out and partying. As I type this it is odd reflecting on how I lived two different lives over 15 years" (ID#23). Here, this user is subverting the binary logic that one is either an incel or not an incel by affirming both parts of his life as important parts of his identity. Other users discussed how these past experiences allowed them to empathize with incels (e.g., "Those years [as an incel] made me much more sympathetic to these fools . . . a very large majority are

just deeply lonely and insecure kids who stumbled upon a community with similar thoughts and feelings"; ID#29. "When I see incels or people like that I just can't hate them, they are in pain and struggling and need help"; ID#16. "I understand really well the concept of 'toxic masculinity' because I was part of it"; ID#48). These users are subverting the former-self/now-other binary by rejecting the notion that one must forsake all aspects of their former incel identity.

In sum, these findings demonstrate the seven factors that first contributed to the "doing" of inceldom, the two types of major incident types that incited the "troubling" of performed incel identities, and two sedimenting and three subversive meta-facework strategies employed by users toward the "undoing" and repositioning of their identities.

Discussion

Guided by PFT (Moore, 2017), this study contributes to a growing body of critical interpersonal and family communication scholarship (Moore & Manning, 2019; Suter, 2016, 2018). This study analyzed narratives posted by formerly involuntarily celibate Reddit users to explore factors that contributed to the performative "doing" of the incel identity, incidents that "troubled" these performances, and meta-facework strategies that sedimented or subverted incel identity while "undoing" inceldom. Results indicated seven factors contributing to inceldom, two major incident types prompting the repositioning of incel identities, and two practices of sedimenting and three practices of subverting that were used in the repositioning of one's identity. Contrary to dominant (and often simplistic) notions within the extant literature that regard inceldom as solely male frustration about the inability to solicit a sexual or romantic relationship despite wanting one, these findings instead suggest that a variety of life events and circumstances, not only involuntary celibacy, lead both (typically teenaged) men and women to inceldom and sustained incel beliefs. Such factors intersect multiple discourses about conventional notions of physical appearance and attractiveness, mental illness, ability status, sexual orientation, gender identity, and traditional conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity that often result in perceptions of social ostracism and "otherness."

The discourse of inceldom, when discovered (often through online forums), offers these individuals an alternative system of meaning that explains experiences of involuntary celibacy as the result of unchangeable personal characteristics. By linking histories of rejection to these characteristics (e.g., appearance, disability, etc.), the discourse of inceldom becomes sedimented and naturalized. Then, as individuals repeat the discourse of inceldom across time and in conversation with other incels online, the discourse accrues power, further sedimenting the permanence of an individual's incel status, centralizing inceldom as the most important features of an individual's identity, and offering a collective lens through which to view and perform in interactions with others. As the incel identity becomes further sedimented, radicalization may occur as interactions become increasingly colored by this discourse.

For the users in our sample, incidents (realizations or life events) then "troubled" these performances of the incel identity. Contrary to popular consensus, few former incels reported that becoming sexually active incited a movement away from inceldom; users instead reported that other life events catalyzed this repositioning. Some even reported that becoming sexually active further affirmed incel beliefs about women and relationships. However, because the discourse of inceldom has accrued power as it has

been repeated (online), for former incels, repositioning their identity is a (meta-)facework-dependent process. This process forces them to reckon their former identity as an incel with their current identity (e.g., decentralizing the importance of sex), reconstructing their identity outside of inceldom. Users reported denouncing their former incel self altogether (sedimenting) or choosing to affirm both identities as important to their self-concept (subverting).

Theoretical Implications

This study also extends PFT. First, this study is among the first to apply PFT (Moore, 2017) empirically beyond the context of voluntary childlessness. These findings demonstrate the versatility of PFT for examining performative facework across many contexts and social issues. Second, this study responds to calls for clarifying the use and utility of critical and poststructural theorizing in interpersonal research (Moore, 2017; Suter, 2018) by clarifying and operationalizing the implied process inherent in PFT (i.e., the "doing," "troubling," and "undoing" of identity through meta-facework) and in doing so creating heuristic value for future PFT scholars. Theorizing process (Poole, 2013) offers scholars of communication ample opportunity to map communication processes as they unfold across time without relying on variance methods. In particular, future PFT scholars may build on these findings by developing formal *teleological* process theorizing, presuming the establishment and maintenance of a facework-dependent identity as a steady end state, by seeking out patterns in enactments of performative facework and the voicing of discourses across time and tracing the multiple sequences of stages through which individuals arrive at the desired identity end state (see Poole, 2013, for a review). This article serves to catalyze PFT research for examining additional contexts in which facework is required to reposition one's identity.

These findings also suggest the potential for future integrations with other theoretical frameworks. For example, although not the purpose of this analysis, the discourses of the bluepill and redpill are dialectical and interact within individuals and groups, across interactants, and across time. Relational dialectics theory 2.0 (Baxter, 2011; Suter & Norwood, 2017) suggests that *diachronic separation* occurs where different discourses are dominant at particular points in time or in particular contexts (e.g., an incel may give voice to the redpill online but give voice to alternative discourses offline). Diachronic separation, then, would be realized in this study when those once giving voice to the discourse of inceldom (e.g., the redpill) later become former incels and eschew inceldom. PFT would be extended by exploring not only how individuals engage in performative facework to transition between different discourses across time, but when or in which contexts individuals give voice to certain discourses.

Second, although these findings add needed nuance to findings of feminist scholarship on involuntary celibacy as a male-centric phenomenon, these findings suggest additional possibilities for fruitful endeavors in critical masculinity studies (e.g., Berggren, 2014; Gardiner, 2002; O'Neill, 2015). In tandem, critical feminist and masculinity studies critique the gender politics and operations of power that establish, construct, and problematize performances of masculinity. Young men and women in this study reported adopting an incel identity, suggesting that PFT could be extended via an analysis of the shared Western cultural notions of gender that establish often-unachievable archetypes for gender and sexuality that enable and constrain an individual's self-concept (Forbes, Collinsworth, Jobe, Braun, & Wise, 2007). These critiques are important considering that more than a third of incels are reportedly between the ages of 18 and 20

(Incels Wiki, 2020), a period of emerging adulthood when communication with friends (online and offline) has a considerable effect on one's outlook on sexuality (Mastro & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2015).

Finally, although this project employed critical and poststructural theorizing, these findings also speak to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Social identity theory understands identity as created through intergroup processes and "derive[d] from the social categories . . . as well as the emotional and evaluative consequences of this group membership" (Hornsey, 2008, p. 206). Social identity theory offers a framework for understanding how incels create perceived salient in-group and out-group identities. Theorizing about how former incels create and articulate in-group/out-group identities through facework across time would extend PFT by elucidating how inciting incidents prompt former incels to reposition their identities online and the mechanisms by which they are able to eschew inceldom and reposition their face within a new salient in-group.

Practical Implications

Finally, these findings suggest practical implications with regard to intervention. These findings illustrate that the many factors which pushed users toward inceldom are near-universal human experiences (e.g., rejection, dissatisfaction with one's appearance). Yet, not everyone who has these experiences becomes an incel, pointing to the discourse of inceldom as the site of intervention. The warrant for the necessity of intervention for incels is twofold. First, some incels become radicalized and commit acts of violence. Second, incels report a high degree of suicidal ideation (82%; Incels Wiki, 2020). The discourse of inceldom strips individuals of their perceived deservingness of human connection; for example, both domestic terrorism and suicidal thoughts are derived from the blackpill.

In this analysis, rather than merely pointing to the misogyny, self-hatred, and derogatory Internet slang inherent in incel discourse, we instead aimed to understand how the discourse of inceldom operates (through power), what factors create and sustain it, and what communicative labor specifically must be undertaken to break free from inceldom and reconstruct one's identity through (meta)facework. These findings identify specific "hurdles" that former incels must overcome to abdicate inceldom (e.g., How do I reckon who I was with who I am now? How do I refocus my view of sex?). These findings also suggest reasons why intervention may be difficult. Inceldom may become so sedimented that it becomes a lens through which incels interpret attempts to proselytize them away from inceldom. For example, incels often hear "bingos" (Hintz & Brown, 2020, p. 244) from others such as "just go to the gym and shower more," which are attempts to encourage prosocial behaviors in contra to inceldom. However, the discourse of inceldom paints involuntary celibacy as a permanent aspect of oneself, negating the potential utility of heeding such advice and the impetus for making changes to oneself. These findings further suggest the importance of counseling (former) incels to assist with the "undoing" of inceldom and the thoughts and beliefs that sustained it. In sum, these findings indicate that there are opportunities for intervention to facilitate the process of eschewing inceldom.

Limitations, Future Directions, and Conclusion

Despite the strengths of this study, some limitations and future directions should be discussed. First, unless explicitly mentioned (e.g., use of pronouns or mentions of ages), no demographic data about

the users in this sample were available on Reddit. Future analyses of inceldom should solicit data from individuals who are able to offer demographics, particularly as inceldom intersects with discourses about race/ethnicity, physical appearance/ability status, gender, and socioeconomic status. The inclusion of these data allows for examining differences in incel identification at various sociodemographic intersections. Second, these narratives were written from the perspective of former incels; hence, these accounts of interactions with others reflect one point of view. It is unknown to what extent the former incels in this sample differ from individuals who do not ever leave inceldom, or how multiperspectival data from the interactional partners of former incels might change accounts of these interactions. Including dyadic data would elucidate additional strategies employed to sway incels away from inceldom.

In conclusion, this study offers a novel explanation of why some individuals may become incels, how the discourse of inceldom grows in power and sustains incel beliefs across time, why it is difficult for incels to leave inceldom, and which facework strategies former incels employ to reconstruct new identities. As the insidiousness of inceldom continues to propagate, scholars and practitioners must understand and critique these discursive practices, while simultaneously advocating for transformational communication practices that promote deradicalization and support for former incels.

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