

Taking The Black Pill: A Symbolic Convergence Theory Analysis of the Black Pill Incel Community

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Abstract: *This article offers an analysis of ‘blackpilled’ incels, a subgroup from within the broader involuntary celibate community that regard incelhood as biologically determined. While other incel communities view incelhood as impermanent, those who subscribe to the black pill ideology argue that incelhood is ingrained in one’s genetics and is, therefore, inescapable. Here, I draw upon Ernest Bormann’s concept of symbolic convergence to highlight the black pill community’s rhetorical vision. The article explores and examines this group’s fantasies, symbolic cues and fantasy types regarding feminism, biological determinism, ostracism and hopelessness. The original version of this article was submitted as an essay for the CM389 ‘Applying Communication Theory’ module (2021-2022).*

Keywords: *Incelhood; black pill; symbolic convergence theory; biological determinism; anti-feminism*

Introduction

Involuntary celibates, also known as ‘incels’, are an online subculture, mostly consisting of heterosexual men who have formed an identity around their inability to find romantic or sexual partners. The term ‘incel’ is an umbrella term which includes hundreds of unique subgroups. This article will focus on one dominant subgroup within the involuntary celibate community: blackpilled incels. This subgroup differentiates itself from other incel communities through its biological determinist view on incelhood. While other incel communities – specifically red pill groups – view incelhood as impermanent, often promoting pickup artistry as a means of escape, the black pill incel community believes that incelhood is ingrained in one’s genetics and is, therefore, inescapable. This hopeless worldview has led many members to commit mass shootings as a last act of revenge against a world which, in their perspective, has wronged them. This article utilises Ernest Bormann’s symbolic convergence theory to highlight the black pill community’s rhetorical vision that: incelhood is genetically predetermined and therefore, one’s future is hopeless (Hintz and Baker, 2021). In order to explore this rhetorical vision, this article explores this group’s fantasies, symbolic cues and fantasy types regarding the following themes: feminism, biological determinism, ostracism and hopelessness.

Symbolic Convergence Theory

Ernest Bormann’s symbolic convergence theory (SCT) is a complex communication theory that explores and provides structure to the process by which individuals transform into cohesive unified groups. In this theory, Bormann claims that individuals develop rich private inner-worlds of symbolic interpretations. When the private symbolic worlds of multiple individuals share similarities, these individuals create the basis for a potential community, as the homogeneity of their symbolic interpretations establishes a foundation for collective understanding and group cohesion (Bormann, 1982). SCT provides four main concepts that aid one’s comprehension of the unification of individuals: (a) Fantasy theme; (b) Symbolic cue; (c) Fantasy type; (d) Rhetorical vision.

- a) Fantasy themes are dramatised messages. A group’s members establish a foundation for group cohesion when the individuals readily embrace a shared dramatised interpretation of reality. These fantasies are shared as narratives which feature a defined setting and cast of characters. Fantasies function as a medium for individuals to inform the group’s common social reality and shared group identity (Zanin, Hoelscher and Kramer, 2016). As fantasies foster companionship among individuals, symbolic cues form.

- b) Symbolic cues are signs encoded with the emotions stirred by an already established fantasy theme. These signs often take the form of a word, slogan, phrase or non-verbal gesture (Cragan and Shields, 1992). This cryptic nature of symbolic cues leads to 'inside joke' syndrome, in which, a group's symbols will perplex and confuse individuals outside of the given community (Bormann, 1982). This symbolic infusion creates the conditions necessary for fantasy types.
- c) Fantasy types are general scripts replicated within a given community. These fantasy types bond members, as these replicated scripts often highlight the individual's similarities and perceived homogeneity. Subsequently, individuals interpret future experiences through the lens of the prewritten narratives of their communities (Bormann, 1982). The combination of fantasy types and the aforementioned SCT concepts generate a group's rhetorical vision.
- d) A rhetorical vision is a community's shared 'coherent interpretation of reality' (Hossain et al., 2018, p. 10). This rhetorical vision is founded upon members' emotional reality and, is therefore, not bound by objective facts, but rather, by the group's own personal satisfaction (Bormann, 1972). This shared outlook on the world transforms people from isolated individuals into collective unified communities (Bormann, 1982).

Ernest Bormann's framework remains relevant in the 21st century. Web 2.0 introduced a new form of communication which both accelerated the speed of and extended the reach of a group's fantasy themes, symbolic cues and fantasy types. Modern communication mediums like blogs, online message boards, podcasts, wikis and social networks expand the reach of fantasy themes and allow communities to form regardless of geographical location (Charles and Dickens, 2012). This article aims to determine the black pill community's fantasy themes, symbolic cues and fantasy types that construct their rhetorical vision that incelism is genetically predetermined and therefore, one's future is hopeless. This is achieved through an analysis of the group's views on feminism, biological determinism, ostracism and hopelessness.

Feminism

Anti-feminism is a prominent underlying theme within the black pill rhetorical vision. In fact, feminism acted as a catalyst for this hate group's coalescence. The black pill community originated on a conservative manosphere blog titled Dalrock. This anti-feminist blog primarily featured discourse regarding the concept of the 'traditional family unit'. In these discussions, users displayed anti-feminist views, in which, they reduced women to their reproductive capacities and diminished them to subservient domestic roles (Coulling, 2019). On this blog, a Dalrock user under the account name of 'Paragon' submitted the internet's first 'black pill' content. Paragon posted a comment, encouraging people to raise awareness about "taking the 'black pill'". He defined this term as accepting that "there are no personal solutions to systemic problems". The 'systemic problem' Paragon refers to in this comment is feminism (Know Your Meme, 2021a).

Paragon's comment constructs the fantasy theme that incelism is the product of a broken social system that no single individual can alter on their own. This fantasy is set in a world in which incels are the victims of a rigid world order. This corrupt world order denies them companionship and sex. Therefore, it is impossible to achieve fulfilment in one's life, as this societal structure is unchangeable. In this fantasy, the two main character groups are: (a) Feminists; (b) Incels.

- a) In this fantasy theme, feminism acts as a trojan horse. On the outside, its goal appeared to be a fight for equal rights. However, in actuality, it sought the opposite result. In incels' worldview, feminism has allowed women to set unrealistically high standards for sexual partners and thus, women now deny sex to 'unattractive' men. In this fantasy theme,

feminism is demonised as an intangible entity that aims to disempower men and rig society in women's favour. Therefore, incelism is socially predetermined (Wynn, 2018).

- b) In this fantasy theme, incels are helpless and innocent men who are now the victims of a new corrupt feminist world order. Their attempts to combat this all-powerful entity are futile. These characters are powerless and pitiful (Wynn, 2018).

This fantasy theme spread across various online spaces, including incel.me and 4chan. However, this fantasy theme particularly resonated with users on Omega Virgin Revolt (Squirrell and Sonnad, 2017). This blog popularised this black pill fantasy theme and exposed it to wider incel audiences. In the mid 2010s, the 'black pill' term garnered major attention on subreddits like r/incels, r/4chan4trump and r/altright (Squirrell and Sonnad, 2017).

The mass dissemination of the term, 'black pill', generated a symbolic cue within incel forums. The phrase 'black pill' became synonymous with the aforementioned black pill fantasy theme on the r/incel subreddit and on the anonymous imageboard, 4chan (Incel Wiki, 2021a). Members of these websites infused this symbolic cue into incel memes which functioned as 'inside jokes' among the community. These memes often feature imagery of alt-right meme figure, Pepe the Frog, simply holding or even ingesting the black pill symbol (Pelletier-Gagnon and Pérez Trujillo Diniz, 2018; Incel Wiki, 2021a).

The popularisation of the aforementioned symbolic cue generated the conditions for a fantasy type to form. In this fantasy type, incels created a dramatised stock scenario in which feminism has disenfranchised and disempowered men, reducing them to inferior societal roles. This narrative is repeated among the community and allows incels to bond over their shared bitterness towards women and their dissatisfaction with gender equality (Pelzer, Kaati, Cohen and Fernquist, 2021).

The combination of this fantasy theme, symbolic cue and fantasy type regarding feminism instils the black pill rhetorical vision with the message that feminism has disenfranchised 'unattractive' men by denying them sex and that incels are powerless to change this fact. Blackpilled incels further developed upon this rhetorical vision through introducing themes of biological determinism.

Biological Determinism

Biological determinism is a prominent theme of the black pill community's rhetorical vision. Blackpilled incels' biological determinist worldview originated on forums devoted to lookism. Lookism refers to the prejudice held against people based upon their lack of conventional physical attractiveness (Lee, Son, Yoon and Kim, 2017). This form of prejudice became a common talking point among the black pill community on digital spaces. The involuntary celibate community has founded three main lookism forums, commonly referred to as PSL: PUAHate.com, Sluthate.com and Lookism.net (Young, 2019). These forums are characterised by sexual marketplace value (SMV) ratings. In layman's terms, PSL acts as a digital space for incels to rate each other's physical appearances on a 1-10 decile scale (Young, 2019) Though these spaces provide a potential safe space for incels to uplift each other, incels utilise these platforms to damage each other's self-esteem.

When an incel uploads an image of themselves on PSL, they expect people to make negative and cruel comments about them, as for incels, lookism forums function as a way of reaffirming their own negative beliefs about their own physical appearances (Contil, 2018). While other incel groups believe these lookism forums teach members how to eradicate their flaws, whether through bodybuilding, dieting or plastic surgery, the black pill community adopts a biological determinist view on this issue.

Biological determinism refers to the idea that one's genetic makeup is inherently linked to one's position in society (Graves, 2015). In this sense, blackpilled incels attribute their failure in romance to genetically unalterable aspects of the human body, such as the shape of one's skull, the width of one's wrists and the height of one's stature (Preston, Halpin and Maguire, 2021).

The black pill community's biological determinist worldview constructs the fantasy theme that incelhood is ingrained into one's genetics and is, therefore, an unchangeable part of one's being (Wynn, 2018). This fantasy theme is set in a world in which incelhood is a genetic trait that unfortunate individuals are born with, similar to a disease or a chronic illness. In this fantasy, there are two main character groups: (a) Individuals without the incel gene; (b) Individuals with the incel gene.

- a) Individuals without the incel gene represent most of society. These individuals are born with moderately to highly attractive bone structure. Therefore, these individuals are able to attract sexual relations (Young, 2019).
- b) Individuals with the incel gene represent individuals who are born with poor bone structure. This makes them inherently unattractive and unlovable. Therefore, they will never attract a sexual partner (Wynn, 2018).

This black pill fantasy theme constructed the symbolic cue, 'a few milometers of bone'. This symbolic cue originated on Twitter, on August 21st 2016, when user @alexlayko tweeted the phrase along with the image of an incel's side profile compared with a non-incel's side profile. This symbolic cue reminds members that it's a simple 'few milometers of bone' that has caused their incelhood and as a result, their life-long suffering (Know Your Meme, 2021b). Subsequently, this phrase became a highly recognisable 'inside joke' within incel spaces. Moreover, this symbolic cue created the foundation for the second black pill fantasy type. In this fantasy type, incels created a dramatised stock scenario in which their bone structures, an unalterable part of their being, is at fault for their ostracisation from normal society. This repeated narrative strengthens members' relationships and allows them to bond over their shared feelings of victimhood and self-pity.

The combination of this fantasy theme, symbolic cue and fantasy type regarding biological determinism instils the black pill rhetorical vision with the message that incelhood is predetermined and is, therefore, inescapable. Blackpilled incels further developed upon this rhetorical vision through introducing themes of ostracism.

Ostracism

Ostracism is a major theme of the black pill rhetorical vision. Ostracism refers to the exclusion of an individual or group from a particular community (Williams, Forgas and Hippel, 2005). This social exclusion often evokes a primitive and tribal emotional pain within its victims. When individuals feel rejection, it drastically affects their psychological health (e.g. depression, suicide ideation, alienation) and their behaviour (e.g. excessive hatred towards those who partake in the alienation of the individual, drug abuse, mass killings) (Williams, Forgas and Hippel, 2005). Incel message boards, such as incel subreddits and 4chan threads, often feature posts with incels lamenting their perceived ostracisation from ordinary society.

As incels shared their own experiences with feeling ostracised from society, a fantasy theme emerged. This fantasy theme constructs the narrative that normal society has actively ostracised incels as a result of their inferior looks. Incels interpret this fantasy theme through the lens of a cliché American high school hierarchy. In this high school setting, there are two character groups: (a) The popular kids; (b) The outcasts.

- a) In coming of age films, popular kids are characterised as jocks and cheerleaders. These archetypes are at the top of the school hierarchy, as these groups hold the largest amount of social power on campus (Pascoe, 2003). Films portray these groups as attractive and highly sexual, however, in addition to this, they are also shallow and vain (Solem, 2018). In this fantasy theme, the popular kid archetypes represent the individuals who are fully integrated into society. These characters are complicit in the incel community's ostracisation, similar to how in film, the popular kids are often responsible for the ostracisation of the outcasts.
- b) In coming of age films, outcasts are characterised as socially inept and lacking in sexual experience (Solem, 2018). These characters are often bullied, ridiculed and excluded by the popular kids. In this fantasy theme, the outcasts represent incels. These characters represent the lowest tier of the school hierarchy, similar to how incels represent the lowest tier of the societal hierarchy. This fantasy theme spread on popular incel forums on 4chan (Squirrell and Sonnad, 2017).

This resulted in blackpilled incels designing symbolic cues that represented the aforementioned hierarchy fantasy theme. These symbolic cues remind incels that they have the lowest status in the social hierarchy. There are three main symbolic cues associated with this fantasy theme: (a) The Chad; (b) Normies; (c) The Stacy.

- a) The Chad archetype is the incel version of the jock trope. This archetype is sexually active, athletic and stereotypically attractive. Incels worship this archetype, as he is the embodiment of what incels desire to be. However, incels also resent him as he represents what has been denied to them by their inferior genetics (Leguichard, 2021). According to the black pill, attempting to integrate into this group is futile, as movement between social groups is impossible (Cook, 2018).
- b) The 'normie' archetype represents the average individual. Normies differ from Chads, as normies do not possess the Chad's superior genetics or promiscuous nature. However, this archetype still differs from incels, as normies remain sexually active. Incels resent this archetype, as normies are complicit in the ostracisation of incel communities (Leguichard, 2021).
- c) The Stacy archetype is the incel version of the cheerleader trope. This archetype is sexually active, blonde and desirable. Incels portray this group as vain and unintelligent. This archetype's life success is attributed to her physical attractiveness rather than her personal drive (Young, 2019).

The aforementioned symbolic cues categorise incels' perceived oppressors into archetypal and reductive stereotypes in order to fulfil the emotional needs of members within the community. These symbolic cues allow incels to comprehend society in a simplistic manner that reinforces their own views about themselves, as this symbolic cue reminds incels that they are on the bottom of the social hierarchy.

This 'inside joke' among the black pill community set the foundations for a fantasy type to emerge. In this fantasy type, incels created a dramatised stock scenario in which society can be divided into reductive archetypes that are responsible for the alienation of the incel communities. Therefore, in this repeated script, everyone is responsible for incels' unhappiness, except for the incels themselves.

The combination of this fantasy theme, symbolic cue and fantasy type regarding ostracism instils the black pill rhetorical vision with the message that members of normal society are responsible for incels' unhappiness. In this sense, incels blame Chads, normies and Stacys for their perceived isolation and ostracisation from society. This belief facilitates further radicalisation of the black pill community's rhetorical vision (Rüter Genannt Holthoff, 2020). Blackpilled incels further developed upon this rhetorical vision through introducing themes of hopelessness.

Hopelessness

Hopelessness is a prominent theme of the black pill community's rhetorical vision. The term, 'hopelessness', refers to a lack of optimism or investment in one's own future. Hopelessness is a common symptom of mental disorders, such as depression. It is regarded as the main cause of suicide ideation and suicidal behaviour in mentally ill individuals (MacLeod, Rose and Williams, 1993). Incel message boards, like 4chan and r/incels, often feature posts about suicide ideation. These digital spaces provide incels with a space for members to bond over their shared feelings of hopelessness. However, these posts rarely provide mental support for others. Instead, these posts encourage other incels to share these same feelings of depression, anger and hopelessness about their own futures (Speckhard, Ellenberg, Morton and Ash, 2021).

Incel suicide ideation posts construct the fantasy theme that one's only escape from incelhood is death. In this setting, incelhood is ingrained into one's DNA and, therefore, one's search for life fulfilment is futile. In this fantasy theme, incels view death as a more desirable fate than a life without sex. This black pill fantasy theme features one character group: incels. This group is portrayed as pathetic and pitiable. Their defining behaviours include isolating themselves in their bedrooms, laying in bed all day long and watching an excessive amount of pornography (Incel Wiki, 2021b). These individuals are a waste of life, not contributing to society in any meaningful way. In order to escape their meaningless existences, these characters must take their own lives (Kelly, DiBranco and DeCook, 2021).

This black pill fantasy theme constructed three symbolic cues within the community. These three symbolic cues are: (a) Rope; (b) LDAR; (c) Suifuel.

- a) On incel reddit threads, the term 'rope' refers to suicide (Daly and Laskovtsov, 2021). Though this term implies death by hanging, the term is often used under threads which detail non-hanging methods of suicide. This term's purpose is to remind others that suicide is the only escape from their unhappiness (Daly and Laskovtsov, 2021).
- b) The term 'LDAR' is an acronym for 'lay down and rot'. This term, commonly associated with NEET and hikikomori forums, uses 'rot' as an operative verb (Incel Wiki, 2021b). Therefore, the term implies that one's only option is to take a passive role in their own life and rot away (Price and Pratten, 2021). In addition to this, the use of 'rot' conveys imagery of death and decomposition, further associating the acronym with suicide.
- c) The term 'suifuel' refers to user-generated content that aims to invoke suicidal thoughts within other community members (Incel Wiki, 2021c). The term, commonly seen on r/incels, is a portmanteau for 'suicide' and 'fuel', as it aims to fuel suicidal thoughts. Suifuel content varies, however, its goal remains the same. It seeks to remind incels of the aforementioned hopeless fantasy theme and push members to their breaking point, inspiring them to end their own lives (Kelly, DiBranco and DeCook, 2021).

The aforementioned 'inside jokes' set the foundation for a fantasy type to emerge. In this fantasy type, community members created a dramatised stock scenario in which an incel's life is meaningless and

suicide is inevitable. This repeated script decreases members' self-esteem and damages the mental health of individuals within the community.

The combination of this fantasy theme, symbolic cue and fantasy type regarding hopelessness instils the black pill rhetorical vision with the message that an incel's future is hopeless and that suicide is their best option. This hopelessness of the black pill rhetorical vision has led members of this community to commit heinous crimes as a last act of defiance against a society that, in their view, has wronged them (Kelly, DiBranco and DeCook, 2021). As of March 2021, black pill ideology-driven mass murders have claimed over fifty innocent lives in the US and Canada (Beckett, 2021). Often, these attackers partook in incel discourse on Reddit and 4chan (Branson-Potts and Winton, 2018). The hopelessness of this rhetorical vision poses a threat not only to incels, but also to the members of wider society.

Conclusion

The black pill community's rhetorical vision states that incelism is genetically predetermined and therefore, one's future is hopeless. This rhetorical vision consists of fantasies, symbolic cues and fantasy types regarding feminism, biological determinism, ostracism and hopelessness. The black pill community's dangerous ideologies spread across various digital platforms, like Reddit and 4chan.

However, this group's presence on digital spaces is slowly dwindling. Though this group remains highly prevalent on message boards like Incel.me and Lookism.net, its numerous online spaces are slowly diminishing. Reddit banned r/incels and r/braincells for violating their content policy regarding violence against women in November 2017 and September 2019 respectively. This reduction in black pill communities reduces users' chances of stumbling upon harmful black pill fantasies, preventing them from unknowingly adopting the dangerous black pill rhetorical vision.

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