

# (Im)politeness as a Strategy in the Discursive Construction of In-Group Solidarity in Discussions about Love, Sex and Relationships on Incels.is

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## Abstract

*As a discourse community that is formed and maintained mostly online, involuntary celibates (who are typically heterosexual men) have been known to be one of the most obvious groups presenting misogynistic attitudes (Bates 2020). There are various forums where such online users meet to discuss subjects of relevance to them, including Reddit and subreddit threads (r/incels) and websites specifically targeted at the community (such as Incels.is). Although the subject of incel discourses has been addressed from several linguistic perspectives, including the representation of social actors (Heritage & Koller 2020), toxic language in the community (Pelzer et al. 2021), metaphor (Heritage et al. 2023) and the extreme language of misogyny (Bogetić 2022), still relatively little has been written specifically about how the community of practice is formed on the basis of the discursive expression of solidarity. The present paper is an analysis of discussions on the forum Incels.is on the subject of sex and relationships, specifically investigating how both manifestations of misogynist attitudes and discursive strategies of politeness are used to form solidarity between users. The analysis considers that through the employment of positive and negative politeness strategies in an online community, group bonds are made stronger and in-group solidarity is expressed both directly and indirectly. The analysis of politeness strategies showed that positive politeness and negative politeness were both present as face-saving acts and to construct solidarity through the use of sarcasm, kinship claiming, informal language and the negative evaluation of female actors.*

*Keywords: discourse analysis, online communication, linguistic politeness, solidarity-building, masculinity*

## Streszczenie

Grzeczność jako strategia dyskursywna do konstruowania solidarności wewnątrzgrupowej w dyskusjach na temat miłości, seksu oraz związków na forum Incels.is

*Incele (z ang. involuntary celibates, "osoby żyjące w mimowolnej celibacie") to oparta przeważnie na sferze internetowej wspólnota, której członkami są najczęściej heteroseksualni mężczyźni. Społeczność ta znana jest jako jedna z najbardziej oczywistych grup prezentujących*

*mizoginiczne postawy (Bates 2020). Znane są różnorodne incelskie fora, których użytkownicy, określane również jako tzw. redpillowcy, spotykają się online, by dyskutować na istotne dla nich tematy. Do miejsc tego rodzaju należą m.in. fora dla członków ruch incelskich, popularne społeczności i wątki na portalu Reddit (r/incels) oraz wyspecjalizowane witryny internetowe (m.in. Incels.is). Mimo, że temat dyskursów inceli był już podejmowany z różnych perspektyw językoznawczych, w tym reprezentacji aktorów społecznych (Heritage i Koller 2020), toksycznego języka w społeczności (Pelzer i in. 2021) oraz języka skrajnej mizoginii (Bogetić 2022), nieliczne badania poświęcono temu, jak omawiana wspólnota kształtuje się na podstawie dyskursywnego wyrażania solidarności. Referat przedstawia analizę dyskusji użytkowników forum Incels.is na temat seksualności i związków, skupiając się na strategiach dyskursywnych wykorzystujących manifestowanie mizoginicznych postaw do tworzenia solidarności między rozmówcami incelami. Przeprowadzona analiza wskazuje, jak w tego typu społeczności internetowej stosowanie pozytywnych i negatywnych strategii grzecznościowych wzmacnia więzi grupowe i jest wyrazem wewnątrzgrupowej solidarności (zarówno bezpośrednio, jak i pośrednio). Analizowane strategie językowe obejmują wykorzystanie sarkazmu, deklarowanie braterstwa (kinship claiming), nieformalny dyskurs oraz negatywną ocenę kobiet.*

*Słowa kluczowe: analiza dyskursu, komunikacja zapośredniczona komputerowo, grzeczność, konstrukcja solidarności, męskość*

## **1. Introduction**

‘Incels’ have been described as an anti-feminist, anti-women community based on members’ mutual experience of not having sexual or romantic relationships with women, even though they wish they would (Bogetić et al. 2023). The term itself is an abbreviation of the phrase “involuntary celibate”, and an incel is usually a man who identifies as heterosexual, but who is unable to obtain a romantic or sexual relationship. The incel community is considered to make up only a part of the larger “radicalized male” community known as *the manosphere*. Other similar groups include the MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way) movement, pick-up artists (PUAs), and the Men’s Right’s movement online (Krendel 2020). The incel community, however, is known for being the most insidious of the communities, with its own lexicon and violent rhetoric to characterize it (Bates 2020; Menzie 2022). This paper considers the discursive strategies of members of the online community Incels.is and the role that positive and negative politeness strategies play as they intertwine with the use of ingroup linguistic markers to construct both a specific gendered identity and solidarity amongst members of the group.

Besides the body of knowledge on incels coming from sociological and psychological studies, linguistic and discursive works on incel communities are varied, ranging from the analysis of the representations of gendered social actors in red-pill communities, to glossaries of the language used by incels, to the metaphors used to discuss sexuality (Heritage and Koller 2020; Pelzer et al. 2021; Bogetić et al. 2023; Heritage 2023; Krendel 2023). Other investigations

of the communication strategies of incels include Maxwell and colleagues' (2020) thematic analysis of incels on Reddit and Halpin's (2022) analysis of the way that incels discredit themselves as a way of degrading women. The recent uptick in research conducted on the incel community and others like it can be interpreted as a response to interest in alt-right movements across the globe (Krendel 2023; McGlashan and Mercer 2023).

The present work focuses on the solidarity-building strategies of anonymous members of the incel community on the platform Incels.is. Such strategies aid in constructing the discourse community of incels, specifically in discussions about sex and relationships. Because the topic is seen as one that binds the members of the community (as those who do not engage in relationships or sexual intercourse), but also as one that is sensitive. Since the nature of the subject engenders a plethora of reactions from online users of Incels.is, I have chosen to analyze threads specifically on this topic, as it marks the users as fully adhering to the definition of what it means to be an incel. Additionally, since the notion of *face* is important in the communication between members of the incel – and indeed any – community, I follow Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness model, accounting for strategies undertaken by the users of Incels.is, including markers of indirect politeness for criticism, and Culpeper's (2011) model of impoliteness, which is found in the data to be manifested through strategies of directives, expletives and capitalization. Although, for some scholars, Brown and Levinson's (1987) model is outdated, because it is adaptable to Charmaz's (2008) grounded theory and, therefore, can also easily be accommodated in the CAQDAS software chosen, I have chosen to apply it to the analysis. As the site Incels.is is one on which users interact not only with one another but with a third-party moderator as well, users use politeness strategies and face enhancing acts to communicate their solidarity with group members who share the same ideology.

## **2. Incels.is as a discussion forum**

Incels.is is a moderated Internet site with rules and regulations put in place to monitor what users can and cannot post about, and to filter out what users belong or do not belong to the group. Hinds (2022: 4–5) notes that there are nearly 17,000 users of the Incels.is site and that there are over 300,000 threads posted on subjects ranging from discussions about incel identity, off-topic discussions not related to incel ideology, to spaces where members can ask for feedback on their points of view. The space allows users to remain anonymous while expressing their opinions on the various threads related to the topics named above.

The rules page (Incels.is 2017) outlines that membership may be given to incels, but not to women and LGBT individuals, non-incels, and anyone under the age of 18. The exhaustive set of regulations also bars users from discussing or requesting stories of romantic sexual experiences, as they are seen as topics that might draw a trauma response.

### **2.1. Communities of practice, communities of interest, and discourse communities**

It is important to note that the incel community is an anonymous online community which is, for the most part, closed to the public. Those who aspire to become full-fledged members of Incels.is must undergo a monitoring process, in which they are subjected to various levels of the hierarchical incel chain (i.e., from *Graycel* to *Truecel*) (Andersen 2023).

The fact that the members of the online incel community have similar interests and beliefs contributes to their belonging to an extremist ideology that is based both on feelings of self-hatred, as well as hatred for women and those heterosexual men who are seemingly more privileged than them (i.e., *Chads*). I consider incels to constitute something between a community of practice and a community of interest, because of the nature of the group and lack of face-to-face interaction between members.

By definition, communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or passion for something that they do and, thus, learn how to do the said activity better through regular interaction with people with similar goals (Wenger 2000; Eckert 2006). Communities of interest, on the other hand, are defined by their collective concern with the resolution of a given problem, gaining knowledge from other community members, and sharing information (Fischer 2001). Because incels are online users who create a collective narrative of aggrieved entitlement and reversed victimhood by sharing in their experiences of being deprecated by women and men who they see as being at the top of the social hierarchy, they are a group which exists between a community of practice and a community of interest.

Finally, Incels.is is a site that helps the discourse community to form, as it is the in-group discourse that allows participants a place in a community, which otherwise presents itself as rather guarded and closed off from other viewers. The discourse community of incels adheres to a lexicon, grammar, and socio-semantic web that mirrors grievances that incels have had to face in their lives as a result of their perceived low status and low rank on the social ladder.

## 2.2. Defining the discourse community of incels

The collective narrative of “aggrieved entitlement” and “reversed victimhood” is a leading theme in the discourse community of incels (Kimmel 2017). To illustrate this, users on Incels.is discursively perform a masculine *persona* in which they are the “underdog”, the “victims” of women and society, and also “oppressed”, therefore legitimating their degradation of women and violent rhetoric (Bogetić 2022; Halpin 2022).

There are several noteworthy aspects that separate the incel community from other online communities belonging to the manosphere, including their tendency to remain anonymous, the violent rhetoric they partake in, and, perhaps most notably, the elaborate nature of incel vocabulary (Price 2023: 41). Johanssen (2023: 27) has also designated the term *heteropessimism* to discuss the way that lookism, which is the “superficial preoccupation with beauty standards and looks,” is seen by incels as disadvantaging them in the “sexual marketplace”. This pessimism is ever present in the discourse of those partaking in discussions on love, sex, and relationships on Incels.is, next to a more direct, aggressive discourse that can be seen as emotionally charged, or affective.

## 3. Politeness theory and online communication

As Yus (2011: 255) has stated, “politeness is a typical human strategy that aims to foster human relations and mitigate the imposition of certain actions on other people,” and therefore requires certain linguistic markers and strategies in order to be carried out. However, it has also been suggested that what constitutes politeness is rather evasive (Yus 2011: 255). The politeness model that will be used for this analysis is mainly that of Brown and Levinson (1987), with impoliteness also considered when looking at aggressive or highly affective discourse as a means of expressing solidarity (Kasper 1990; Culpeper and Hardaker 2017).

Brown and Levinson (1987) have defined politeness as intrinsically tied to an interlocutor’s face, which is a notion taken from Goffman’s (1991 [1983]) terminology regarding the public image that each person has. *Face* has been defined as “the positive social value each person effectively claims for him or herself in the public arena” and as “the very reflection of [a person’s] self-worth” (Ocker and Morand 2002: 87). *Face-threatening acts* are those speech acts which threaten a speaker’s and/or hearer’s positive or negative face and thus politeness strategies are used to mitigate the severity or strength of such acts.

Positive politeness is the desire to be accepted by others, to have one’s ideas be agreed on and one’s opinions accepted (Brown and Levinson 1987: 317). Negative politeness has been

defined by Brown and Levinson (*ibid.*) as a desire for a speaker's intentions not to be impeded by their interlocutors. Both positive and negative politeness have been described in online interaction, where positive politeness strategies might include using in-group identity markers, attending to or noticing the addressee, avoiding disagreement, seeking agreement, focusing on cooperation, or making jokes (Yus 2011; Trávníková 2012). Negative politeness strategies might include minimizing a face threat (i.e., by showing deference), minimizing imposition, and giving freedom of action (Brown & Levinson 1987: 317) where requests are concerned.

Brown and Levinson (1987: 320–322) also suggested three variables that influence the choice of a politeness strategy, including (a) Relative power (P) of the addressee towards the speaker, (b) social distance (D), which includes intimacy and familiarity between the interlocutors, and (c) ranking of imposition (R) that a speaker makes on a hearer.

Politeness online has been viewed as a way to build solidarity among members of disclosed and anonymous communities alike (Maricic 2000; Harrison and Barlow 2009; Yus 2011; Trávníková 2012; Pérez-Sabater 2021). Yus (2011: 259) makes the following observation regarding politeness in online fora:

On the Internet the estimation of the suitability of a certain politeness strategy no longer applies only to interactions between a sender and a recipient, but also to the participation of a third person, such as an external moderator of the virtual interaction who may, in turn, assess positively or negatively the sender's strategy of (im)politeness positively or negatively (extending to the extreme case in which the user might even be expelled from the list or newsgroup if he/she is too impolite, rude, abusive or insulting).

Politeness can be expressed in a variety of ways, as well as directly and indirectly. Incel discussions about love, sex, and relationships are sites at which politeness strategies are presented, as any member who does not adhere to the rules (including not traumatizing other members with recollections of relationship or sexual experience) may be banned.

### **3.1. Face in an incel community**

As with any situation in which politeness is seen as a necessary communication strategy, Incels.is users have been observed as engaging in acts that reflect their preoccupation with their "face." As mentioned earlier, the rules of membership and use of Incels.is seem to condition the adherence to politeness strategies, especially in relation to the sensitivity of the topics chosen for this analysis. This could mean that one of the main deciding factors for strategies of

communication is the threat of being banned from the community. By using positive and negative politeness, the Incels.is users simultaneously protect their face and incel identity, and create solidarity with other members. Face-threatening acts, however, may occur in the community, as its users are known for not shying away from violent, direct rhetoric (Heritage 2023). Yus (2011: 275) has also highlighted that “the politeness model which is most often applied to Internet-mediated interactions” is Brown and Levinson’s (1987), and that “it is based on mitigating the inherent threat that the different communicative strategies exert on the positive or negative face of the interlocutor.” This model has been supported by other works looking at (im)politeness online (Trávníková 2017; Kim and Herring 2018; Dąbrowska 2019; Keça-Figura 2021). In building rapport with their interlocutors who have similar beliefs on the forum, incels can be seen as engaging in positive politeness practices. They do so by, for example, mitigating utterances that could be perceived as threatening, as well as by expressing themselves in a way that could be seen as conventionally impolite, where emotions and a sense of entitled grievance are expressed, but in a way that marks solidarity with other incels (Culpeper 2011; Kimmel 2017).

### 3.2. Context

Studies in which politeness phenomena are explained must take into account any extralinguistic factors that influence the language strategies that are used in interacting. One such factor is context, including what Yus (2011: 270) has called *the specific context of speech* (in the case of this analysis, written computer-mediated communication). This refers to the specific context in which a communicative exchange takes place. Here, we will also consider the subjects of discussion to be related to the contextual aspects, as love, sex, and relationships are some of the subjects that define the incel ideology and commit the group members to shared interests and goals.

Generally speaking, *ideologies* are systems of belief, and therefore held by groups rather than individuals (Van Dijk 2013). As mentioned above, the incel community is characterized by a strong sense of entitlement to what they believe they rightfully deserve (i.e., sexual and/or romantic relationships with women), but do not have access to as a result of discrimination on the basis of their perceived inferior appearance, as well as on the basis of their perceived lower place in the social hierarchy as compared with other men (Sparks et al. 2022).

#### 4. Materials and methods

Because of the relative unavailability of textual data from sites like Reddit, from which incel discussion threads were banned in 2017, all textual data has been retrieved from the popular incel website Incels.is. The presented study has been constructed upon the following research questions in order to uncover the strategies by which solidarity expression is achieved by the members of the forum.

1. Are positive and negative politeness strategies used to gain acceptance and build solidarity within the online community?
2. How do positive and negative politeness manifest in the anonymous online interactions of Incels.is users?
3. Are politeness strategies related to the topic of the thread (i.e., sex and relationships)?
4. Is impoliteness present in the discourse of Incels.is members?

The paper presents an analysis of a small corpus that was compiled of 21 publicly available threads from *Incels.is* on the subject of sex and relationships.<sup>1</sup> 447 comments were found to accompany the threads, making for 15,408 words in the corpus in total. It is also important to note that all of the threads analyzed were posted in the first half of 2024. For ethical reasons, the names and exact dates of threads have been omitted from the paper.

The qualitative analysis is based on grounded theory, in which linguistic strategies are coded for their value in the CAQDAS software MaxQDA and subsequently analyzed from the instances in which they occur (Charmaz 2008). Briefly put, *grounded theory* is “a systematic method of conducting research that shapes collecting data and provides explicit strategies for analyzing them” and “the defining purpose of this method is to construct a theory that offers an abstract understanding of one or more core concerns in the studied world” (Charmaz and Thornberg 2021: 305). The present analysis aims to provide insight into the communicative norms of the group as well as understanding what politeness and impoliteness strategies contribute to building group solidarity in the incel community.

A table of the codes that were used in categorizing the discourse strategies has been provided below.

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<sup>1</sup> Although partaking in discussions and most threads on Incels.is requires membership to the website, all threads under the page called “The Lounge” are publicly available to read. This made the threads easily accessible and the ethnographic approach of the project possible.



Table 1. Simplified version of the codebook used to categorize the data into strategies identified in the corpus (MaxQDA)

1 Face Threatening Acts
1.1 off record
1.2 with redress, with negative politeness
1.3 with redress, with positive politeness
1.4 bald on record without redress
2 (Im)politeness
2.1 flaming
2.2 being direct
2.3 profanity
2.4 sarcasm
3 Negative politeness strategies
3.1 question (indirect)
3.2 hypotheticals
3.2.1 would
3.2.2 conditional
3.3 minimizing imposition
3.4 hedging
3.5 minimizing threat
3.6 giving freedom of action
4 Positive politeness strategies
4.1 avoiding disagreement
4.2 asserting common ground
4.2.1 us-vs-them construction
4.2.2 inclusive <i>we</i>
4.2.3 personal reference
4.3 seeking agreement
4.4 in-group markers
4.5 attending to the reader
4.6 expressing sympathy
4.7 complimenting and praising
4.8 agreeing

The aim of the codebook is to help locate discourse strategies that represent solidarity-building among Incels.is community members in the data. These categories represent politeness and impoliteness strategies and are delineated in the sections which follow.

## 5. Analysis and discussion

### 5.1. Qualitative analysis of (im)politeness on Incels.is

Grounded theory was applied in the analysis of the threads and comments about relationships and sex on Incels.is to properly categorize (or code) the strategies by which incels.is users communicate with each other in a way that helps them become accepted and viewed as belonging to the community. This is carried out through strategies of positive and negative politeness. In addition to such strategies that do not harm the face of the hearer, face-threatening acts (FTAs) may be used in cases where members feel highly threatened or wish to express feelings of entitlement, oppression, anger or outrage towards outside actors. Positive politeness strategies have been attributed mainly to female online communication as a way of bonding (Trávníková 2012; Kim and Herring 2018).

### 5.2. Positive politeness as building solidarity on Incels.is

Positive politeness has been identified in the Incels.is community as a means of expressing solidarity, in situations where a member laments his fate of staying single or not having sex, or when another user asks a question that negatively evaluates women.

As has already been mentioned, there are various ways in which positive politeness may be expressed. Table 2 shows the positive politeness strategies located on Incels.is, with some examples to illustrate them.

Table 2. Positive politeness strategies on Incels.is

Positive politeness strategy	Linguistic realizations	Examples
Noticing/attending to the addressee	Expressing sympathy, expressing agreement, complimenting, praising	<i>I feel you</i> <i>Oh yeah true</i> <i>Based</i>
In-group identity markers	In-group language, friendly address forms, inclusive <i>we</i>	<i>Brocel</i> <i>My friend</i> <i>We/us</i>
Seeking agreement	Common opinions or views, tag questions	<i>...right?</i>
Avoiding disagreement	Hedges	<i>I think</i> <i>In my opinion</i> <i>Kind of</i> <i>Not really</i>

The following sections provide examples of the instances in which positive politeness strategies were retrieved from Incels.is.

### 5.2.1. *Noticing the addressee*

Noticing an addressee may be realized through several linguistic strategies, including complimenting or praising. The politeness strategies that belong to this group all consist of “paying attention to the positive face of other group members” (Trávníková 2012: 73). On Incels.is, users reply to the lamentations about their fellow users’ life situations by expressing solidarity with them, referring to similar experiences, among others.

Expressions of agreement and sympathy, such as *I know* and *I feel you* are found to introduce more sympathetic fragments, in which personal experiences that present similar circumstances are expressed. Examples (1), (2) and (3) are replies to a thread in which one user discusses his experiences of being rejected by women and/or family. I would like to note that the original spelling and punctuation from posts has been retained in all of the examples.

- (1) ***I know how you feel, man.*** *I don't know how much longer I can last either. Everything about this world, and living, it is all so tragic. It is so much more than just, 'not having sex'. It is everything. I am so desperate to hear that one thing, that is going to make all the suffering bearable, that is going to restore some grain of faith in humanity, and life, in me. The times when all I can focus on is the fact that thing is never coming, are the worst.*
- (2) ***I feel you.*** *I would be so fucking hard on myself on my PUA days, the frustration is unbearable when you're ugly and is bluepilled about looks.*
- (3) ***I know.*** *I have absolutely no hope to ever know love, or anything of that nature. All I want, at this point, is something other than total misery. The smallest thing that gave some semblance of meaning to this suffering, would be enough for me.*

These examples illustrating positive politeness were some of the most salient, as they are examples of an overt search for acceptance from other group members, as well as reflect on the user’s feeling of helplessness in terms of relationship status. Not only do such examples ring true with the basic traits of members of Incels.is, namely those of being sexless, loveless, and unhappy about it, but also demonstrate group bonding in emphasizing empathy for one another.

Other positive politeness strategies of noticing the addressee, poster or hearer were present in the Incels.is discussions about love, sex, and relationships, including agreement and complimenting or praising, such as in the next examples. Users acknowledged the content provided by other members of the community or complimented their choices as to what to discuss, marking that they had shared values. This itself reinforces the notion that such discourse strategies are used to orient towards the positive face of the hearer and create a positive bond with him.

(4) **Good thread.** *I pretty much **agree** with everything you said. I also think it's funny how they just expect us to just suffer in silence. They go out of their way to censor and ban us. That seems horrifically entitled to me. We're not owed sex, but we don't have to pretend that our situation is fair.*

(5) **Oh yeah true** *i remember hearing foids say out loud that they hate most/all men or some shit like that.*

Other such markers of agreement include the prevalence of the slang term *based*, which is used as a curt way of expressing one's agreement with another comment that has been made by a user. The fact that ingroup slang is used in a tone of agreement is another way to solidify a sense of community among the participants of such discussions.

(6) a) *i wish a horrible day to all couples and sexhavers may their bones be crushed*

b) **Based**

(7) a) *That means all the STD statistics are amplified because now they only apply to %70 of people. Cant wait until all normies die of HPV cancer and SUPER AIDS.*

b) **Based. Absolutely based.**

Noticing the addressee is a positive politeness strategy which not only acknowledges what another person has said, but also plays a crucial role in community-building as it acknowledges someone's belonging. In the discussions on Incels.is, this agreement takes place in instances where interactants speak in derogatory ways about women and attractive heterosexual men.

### 5.2.2 In-group terminology

As mentioned earlier, one of the most well-known linguistic strategies of incel groups is the use of ingroup language, which aside from the use of kinship terms, has its own lexicon. This includes dehumanizing and derogatory or negative references to women (both those perceived as attractive and those perceived as unattractive), name-calling towards men who are not incels and do not aim to be in the community, heterosexual couples, members of the LGBTQ+ community and more. By using in-group markers and showing familiarity with the lexicon, the members of the site acknowledge their belonging to the group and demonstrate that they have knowledge of the community and its ideologies.

Terms that are associated with incel identity include metonymic references to women, as well as dehumanizing metaphors to describe women, as well as metonymic references to men and other terms for men that encode a hierarchy of heterosexuality and masculinity (Heritage and Koller 2020; Heritage 2023). The examples below show how mutuality is supported through the use of language that is specific to the incel community.

- (8) a) *Do they [women/foids] get angry at **chad** or just themselves? I think they get angry but they take out there anger on us incels and bully us due to being frustrated that chad rejected them when the foid approached them and asked them out.*
- b) *Go complain online saying all men are the same.*
- c) *cry. sob, shit their pants, etc*  
*some of them console themselves with **dogcock***
- (9) *How does any of this matter when females prefer being alone to being in a relationship with **non-chads**? Which they can do because of the reasons I mentioned-- that society/the state provides everything they need from those men without the need to trade their sexuality for it. women don't mind being in **harems**, that's the natural state and how they lived for most of history.*

Additionally, such markers denote adherence to the ideology. The examples below reference the *blackpill* ideology that the incel community is known for. *Blackpill* philosophy presents a stance in which members of the manosphere have completely resigned to the unequal society that oppresses them and reject the idea that they can change the system in their favor.

- (10) *It's finally been proven. The **Ultimate Blackpill**, proven by a STUDY!!!!*
- (11) *One of the most **blackpilled** scenes in movie history*

One other strategy of expressing in-group solidarity is the use of acronyms that relate to misogynist ideologies and the sense of aggrieved entitlement noted by Kimmel (2017). Acronyms that denote knowledge of, or belonging to, the incel community are also presented as linguistic ingroup markers and may be perceived as a strategy of positive politeness. The following two examples use the popular incel acronym *ER*, for Elliot Rodger<sup>2</sup>, a figure that is revered in the incel community as a hero (Bates 2020).

(12) *Men don't owe women safety eith**ER**.*

(13) *Women aren't entitled to not being raped and/or viciously murdered. Aft**ER** all, entitlement doesn't exist, right? Isn't that what normies tell us constantly? Sick of the level of entitlement women have these days*

It is not surprising that Elliot Rodger's initials (*ER*) are capitalized in discussions on women's safety, as incel rhetoric is widely known for drawing on violence and perpetuating its normalization as a form of retribution for perceived unfair treatment at the hands of women.

The in-group terminology used by participants in the discourse, including derogatory terms for women and negative reference to men who have more sexual prowess represents both positive politeness and the adherence to incel ideology. This can also be seen in the case of kinship terms.

### 5.2.3 Kinship terms

The use of kinship terms can be viewed as a subcategory of positive politeness markers which fall under in-group language or in-group markers of solidarity. In the corpus, kinship terms such as *friend* and *brocel* were present, denoting a bond between members of Incels.is. The enactment of positive politeness through the use of kinship terms also indirectly acknowledges the fact that the group members are in a similar situation. The reference in example (14) illustrates this in *us brocels*, in which the reference to the community with the suffix *-cels* defines the likeness of the members of the discussion. Other examples include referring to other incels as *friend* (cf. example 16).

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<sup>2</sup> Elliot Rodger, who is also referred to as Saint Elliot in the incel community, is infamous for committing six brutal murders and injuring fourteen others in a 2014 killing spree that was fueled by his felt grievances for society and the sense of injustice he felt at his status in society. Rodger was known to be a member of websites that propagated blackpill ideology (Witt 2020; Srinivasan 2021).

- (14) *Love is a choice, unfortunately for **us brocels** ever since social media and even television foids' standards have skyrocketed to Pluto. No longer will they be content with a average-looking or even ugly looking man who can provide because they are all chad only from what they see on IG and shittok.*
- (15) *Brutal **brocel**. I'm sorry to hear that.*
- (16) *It's over, **my friend**. If you don't have looks you're worthless. Women will attempt to "fix" a good looking child rapist before even thinking about giving some incel a chance.*
- (17) *You seem to be a struggling soul, **fellow grey**. You're just starting out at 21. It's about to get much tougher. I hope you won't ask for a ban.*

The above examples (examples (14)–(17)) show that, at the same time as using violent and misogynistic rhetoric, members of Incels.is use kinship terms to create a sense of belonging and community with other members of the site. By referring to other members of the community in an endearing manner, a metaphorical safe space is created in which it is possible that other incels might reveal their thoughts. Example (17) demonstrates the use of ingroup language coupled with kinship expression, with *grey* referring to the beginner status of the incel member (i.e., that the member has fewer than 500 posts on the forum (Schlaerth et al. 2024)). Similarly to kinship terms, inclusive *we* creates a narrative of shared experience in the discourse of incels.

#### 5.2.4 Inclusive *we*

On the site, inclusive *we* is used to assert common ground among the members of the community. Where the subject of relationships is concerned, the sense of aggrieved entitlement is supported by the use of inclusive *we* to denote a sense of community based on the experience of not having a romantic or sexual relationship. The following examples taken from the threads about Valentine's Day demonstrate the collective feeling of inferiority and subordination.

- (18) *It is a day of bragging - 14th February "Valentines day". Now why have one day to celebrate love when you should be doing that all year round? Simple, to show off to incels that you have a gf and **we don't**, that you will be having sex all evening...*
- (19) ***We incels** will be left out on Valentine's day, and **we** have the right to harbor anger towards women for rejecting us. Valentines day is for couples, not for family. Thats how society views Valentines day.*

(20) *You hit the nail on the head here. And they are very vocal about what little inconveniences they have in life. Why shouldn't we be, too?*

As shown in the examples above, the use of *we* coupled with *incels* presents the aggrieved entitlement discussed by Kimmel (2017). Similarly to the use of kinship terms, by using such markers, participants in discussions on love, sex and relationships express that they are in the same situation, creating a stronger community bond and a safe space for members to express themselves.

### 5.2.5 Seeking agreement and agreeing

The strategy of seeking agreement was also present in the corpus. As an indicator of politeness, looking for confirmation that a speaker is correct in their thinking has been perceived as protecting the face of the speaker (Kuo 1994).

(21) *Nobody owes them anything, so fuck them, **right?***

(22) *Women aren't entitled to not being raped and/or viciously murdered. After all, entitlement doesn't exist, **right?***

Agreeing with other users in discussions about what constitutes erotic activity and what does not function *is* another positive politeness strategy in the Incels.is discourse, as shown in examples (23) and (24). These comments were made in answer to a post asking about the difference between erotic acts and sexual acts.

(23) a) *If it stimulates your genitals but there's not penetration with a hole it still goes under "erotic" stuff instead of sexual stuff imo*

b) ***I guess you're right***

(24) a) *Idk if it stimulates the genital I think its still sexual, you don't dry hump out of love its for a sexual feeling*

b) ***true***

Other examples of agreement are related to situations in which community members deplore being single and without prospects of a relationship.



- (25) a) *Feeling loved. Just knowing that someone desires me. A pathetic wish, like a beaten puppy wanting its abuser to pet it.*  
 b) **I get it, I really do.** *I'd like to feel as if I'm worth something to someone.*

Where agreement is concerned, incels.is members both seek and express agreement with interlocutors on subjects related to difficulties in hypothetical relationships, the desire to be in a relationship and what constitutes sex.

### 5.2.6 Avoiding disagreement

Another positive politeness strategy used by the users from the data is the avoidance of disagreement. Because the topics discussed are ones that are viewed (as stated in the rules) as sensitive, users are careful in addressing the subjects of love, sex, and relationships from a more personal perspective. The presence of hedges and indirectness in incel discourse also indicate that a user is protecting his own face. This can be seen in the form of conditional structures and the use of lexical verbs encoding epistemic modality.

- (26) *the post says the foid **would max out** so if thats the case i would say yes*  
 (27) *You **seem to be** a struggling soul, fellow grey. **You're just starting out at 21.** It's about to get much tougher. **I hope** you won't ask for a ban.*

The above examples ((26) and (27)) show the use of conditional structures and verbs encoding epistemic modality to soften the expression of one's opinion or point of view. Indirect criticism can also be viewed as both a negative and positive politeness strategy, where hedging markers (such as "seem") mitigate the strength behind one user's remark to another, while also acknowledging the hearer's place in the forum.

Such markers provide the interlocutor with options as to how to respond so that they can disagree without losing face. The same may be said of the next example, in which a user is being criticized for his online behavior by another user.

- (28) *no attitude here brocel, **you just seem** to start discussions everywhere you go and people really notice*

Strategies of negative politeness on Incels.is are explained in the section that follows.

### 5.2.7 Aggression as bonding on Incels.is

Aside from politeness strategies, the qualitative investigation also showed tendencies for users to engage in apparently impolite strategies (Kasper 1990; Culpeper 2011). Sarcasm was found in the data set in relation to subjects dealing with sex and relationships (cf. examples (29)–(30)). This can be viewed as a strategy for members to indirectly mark their group membership and adherence to the tenets of the incel community.

#### 5.2.7.1 Sarcasm

In other cases of impoliteness on Incels.is, members engage in acts that are conventionally impolite (i.e., in contexts that might be more formal), in order to show their support of other members or a stance of agreement on a subject or, as in the case of examples, a shared perceived injustice. As Culpeper (2011: 207) notes, there are contexts in which expressions that are conventionally impolite take on a different, reversed meaning, including that of expression of solidarity. As he states (ibid), “the recontextualization of impoliteness in socially opposite contexts reinforces socially opposite effects, namely, affectionate, intimate bonds amongst individuals and the identity of the group.” Allan and Burridge (2006) have called this phenomenon “social swearing”. Although incels present a group of aggressive-presenting anonymous participants in discourse, the practical need to be accepted by other members in order to thrive on Incels.is perhaps leads them to engage in mock impoliteness, banter, sarcasm or linguistic aggression, which are thus strategies used to promote group solidarity. This specifically takes place with the aim of appearing integrated in the community.

In the following examples, we can see that indirectness (see example (30)) is representative of sarcasm (Culpeper 2011), and because the case of incels aggression being specifically directed towards the perceived injustice of others having relationships that they cannot, the structural indirectness and use of aggressive language in the criticism of the third party “normies” is indicative of expressing solidarity with other incels.

- (29) *With this logic you could discuss "Would you like shit if it tasted good?". The whole point of **shit** is that it tastes bad, so if it started to taste good - it wouldn't be **shit**, so this question makes no sense.*

- (30) *It is a day of bragging - 14th February "Valentines day". Now why have one day to celebrate love when you should be doing that all year round?*

#### 5.2.7.2 Aggressive language

As Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2010: 541) affirms, “impoliteness is multifunctional: it is used against the out-group to create a sense of ‘us versus them’ by making their attributes undesirable, and to heighten a sense of membership in the in-group.” Because the discussions on Incels.is often revolve around personal, but shared, experiences of the site’s users, conventionally aggressive and direct communication, including the use of profanity, sexual references, and imperatives, can be directed at a hearer or inserted in conversation when discussing a third party to denote shared stances.

- (31) ***Fuck society. Stop giving a shit about society. Fucking order pizza and jerk off of the balcony on a girl walking by.***

- (32) *Lol, **stop caring** about valentine day even it's valentine day, i played video games, **jerking off** eating to cope.*

Direct utterances and expletives, such as in the examples illustrated above (examples (31), (32)) are used in situations of high affective response, as well as to show direct solidarity with hearers (Allan and BurrIDGE 2006; Dynel 2023). When set against examples of positive and negative politeness strategies, the functions of aggressive language seem to be concerned both with rapport in the community, as well as with expressing feelings of being wronged by society or negative affect as an identity marker of the individual user.

### 5.3. Negative politeness on Incels.is

Negative politeness is also used within the community, with strategies including mitigation of imposition through the use of hedging, conditionals, and question forms to indirectly present opinions. Previous studies on politeness online have cited indirect speech acts as commonplace negative politeness markers (Bjorge 2007). Haverkate (1988: 63) stresses that although indirect utterances take more time and effort to interpret, it is assumed that a speaker wishes to be perceived as polite when choosing an indirect utterance. The data has shown that, of negative politeness strategies, indirectness is used by participants in the Incels.is forum especially in

relation to subjects of sexuality. This has been attributed to the taboo nature of the subject and to the strict rules regarding how it is discussed on the forum.

The following categories represent the most salient instances of negative politeness through indirectness on Incels.is, including the use of conditional structures when discussing difficult or precarious subjects, and rhetorical questions when expressing feelings of injustice or criticism of a hearer's assertion.

### 5.3.1 Conditionals as mitigators

Because the rules of Incels.is bar a member from discussing personal experience, users might draw on other strategies to present personal stances that suggest present or future involvement in a given situation. Next to this, users strategically mitigate the offensiveness of comments regarding an incel's appearance in a similar way, which is particularly interesting because in indirectly negatively referencing a user's – or even all users' – traits, they are acknowledging belonging to the group and at the same time sympathizing with the hearer. What is important to note is that the users who resort to such strategies are in dialogue with other members of the group and that their choice of indirect responses to the subject reflect a stance of the highest mitigation of criticism of other members.

(33) *It's over, my friend. **If you don't have looks you're worthless.***

(34) *No I am not an escortcel but **I would be in a heartbeat if I could.** Whether a foid likes it or doesn't does not matter whatsoever.*

(35) *Social benefits and a best friend to do fun things with. **If I just wanted sex there are hookers for that.***

Although these examples might not look like obvious politeness strategies on the surface, the very fact that they indirectly orient towards a subject that is difficult for the community in the very least, if not taboo, suggests that users resort to other strategies to discuss sexuality and sexual desire.

For example, when discussing hypothetical situations of sexual intercourse or romantic relationships in which they would hypothetically take part, the incels on the discussion forums use modal expressions, in this case representing a hypothetical scenario. This linguistic choice does not only signify the possibility rather than probability of engaging in such an act, but also distances the user from being accused of not being a true incel. As Culpeper (2011: 198–199)

states, more recent research on politeness and impoliteness phenomena have pointed to the cruciality of the context in interpreting discursive phenomena.

(36) *If sex was all ascension was sure, I could just go to a prostitute and get it over and done with... I want cuddles and other such expressions of affection!*

The above example is located in a thread on having real sexual relationships (i.e., with women who might wish to have a reciprocal emotional and physical bond with them). Whereas there are suggestions made in the group that paying for sex is one possible solution to their problem finding a sexual partner, the conditional is used to express disagreement with the hearer's input. Rather than directly criticizing or outwardly disagreeing with the original poster, the user indirectly rebuts the suggestion that all sex is of similar value by indirectly negatively evaluating sex with prostitutes.

### 5.3.2 (Rhetorical) Questions

Another indirect strategy that has been noted in the data set is that of questions used as an affective response to a subject that seems to touch a critical point. When confronted with the idea that an incel should be open to dating women who are overweight, the question form of the response presents both a criticism of himself and an even more indirect criticism of the women whom an incel might be suggested to date. Rather than directly suggesting that the idea is unappealing, the author rebuffs the point made using a question form. This strategy can be seen when questions are directed at members who seem offended by other members correcting them, such as in example (38).

(37) *And why should i get a landwhale at first im skinny myself*

(38) *No just correcting you man. **What's up with that attitude?** Discussion and arguments are good, that's how humans progress and help each other.*

Example (39) is another response to a comment on the thread, in which men are portrayed as being unable to love unconditionally, an accusation that had earlier been made about women. The perceived threat of men being placed on the same level in the incel hierarchy as women elicits an indirect critical response in the form of a question. The indirectness of the question is here seen as hedging disagreement.

(39) *What do you mean, that men can't love unconditionally either?*

Other such forms of indirectness occur when criticizing social norms and social perception, as in example (40).

(40) *That guy is fat and ugly, so this is the result of pure brainwashing ! **How can anyone else not see this?***

By using a rhetorical question to express emotional responses, the members of the incel community are adhering to politeness strategies. Because these responses do not directly criticize other members, they can be interpreted as hedged disagreement (Kravchenko and Pasternak 2016: 63).

#### **5.4. Functions of solidarity-building in incel discourses**

Two main functions of building solidarity in incel communities have been identified from the analysis, namely that of *attacking the outgroup or other* and *boosting in-group morale*. Attacking the outgroup is done by justifying the sexist and misogynist discourses, threatening perceived oppressive groups directly or indirectly, and engaging in name-calling (including the derogatory terms referring to outgroup members that belong to the incel lexicon). The discourse creates a sense of togetherness in being wronged by existing social norms, such as that of lookism (which refers to mainstream attractiveness ideals) and not getting what is rightfully theirs (access to sex with a woman).

(41) *The thing is **we are the right people while they are wrong**, I did these things too but it got me nowhere, we're just the unluckiest persons on earth, I'm sure I'll not make it to 21 tho, I always had a sixth sense, and I can sense it, I'm gunna kill myself like Cassidy did from preacher s very final scene*

Boosting morale, which is also highly visible in the strategies analyzed, is carried out through shared experiences and telling stories about them, knowledge of the lexicon and reference to it in discourse, as well as through the reproduction of visions of revenge, and gaining status and

respect. This phenomenon can also be observed in the conventional impoliteness formulae used to cement the group or express bonds, especially as concerns directives and swearing in the data.

## **6. Conclusion**

The present paper continues the discussion on the complexity of discourses that exist in the anonymous community of incels online, pointing to the role of politeness strategies as a mechanism for building solidarity with other incel users. Noticing the addressee or hearer, using in-group markers, hedging when discussing opinions about sex and relationships, seeking agreement and avoiding disagreement are the most prevalent positive politeness strategies in the data. Strategies of indirectness that communicate negative politeness are seen here as protecting the face of the Incels.is user, as rhetorical questions can be viewed as generalizing experiences rather than pinpointing them on a single user.

Politeness strategies, including positive politeness and negative politeness strategies, act to enhance the writer's/speaker's face by softening the language targeted at an interlocutor, acknowledging his membership in the community, at the same time building a bond through shared experience of perceived oppression. Interestingly, positive politeness, as a phenomenon online that is largely associated with communication between women, also takes place in male to strictly male communication. The results have shown that the strategies of positive politeness on Incels.is overlap with those used by women in online forums (Trávníková 2012).

The analysis of aggressive language, on the other hand, demonstrated that solidarity can be expressed in the group through sarcasm and conventional impoliteness formulae that in certain contexts take on a reversed meaning on the Incels.is forum. This is largely tied to the need for community members to adhere to the group's rules, as well as vie for acceptance from other members. The phenomenon tends towards a complexity reflected in the nature of the discussion and the anticipation that Incels.is members need to partake in so as to maintain their place in the forum. The data has shown that there is a need to reflect a strong affective stance on subjects related to perceived inferiority and injustice but maintain a boundary when discussing possible relationships with women.

As regards the limitations of the study, the phenomenon of politeness on incel forums could be investigated further, with more attention given to the directness and indirectness of discourse strategies of Incels.is users. A larger corpus could be explored, and the variety of indirect strategies further delineated for the role they play in incel community building. Additionally, subjects such as racism in the threads and comments was not discussed, as it was beyond the

scope of the presented work. Future investigations into the subject could, however, look at the possible connection between racist discourse and solidarity-building in the community.

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