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## Introduction

The incel (involuntary celibate) label has been adopted as an identity by individuals who are unsuccessful in obtaining sexual contact or romantic relationships. Incels view themselves as unappealing “zeta males” (i.e., occupying the lowest rank in the social hierarchy) and blame women and feminist social values for their lack of romantic success. This group of men seek support from like-minded others on online forums, where they can bond as a virtual community through discussions about the incel’s existence and how the world is unfairly biased towards women and good-looking men, thereby validating one another in a negative feedback loop (Sugiura, 2021). An online survey conducted by the moderator of the Incels.co forum highlighted that the vast majority of incels never experienced a sexual encounter and/or never had a sexual relationship (SergeantIncel, 2019). This perceived exclusion is believed to be the catalyst for expressed vitriol towards women, which has the potential to escalate to physical violence. Some who self-identify as incels or who were claimed as such by the incel community have taken their anger and frustration out in physical acts of violence. Speckhard et al. (2021) observed a higher incidence of violent ideation in incels as compared to non-incel men, along with a meaningful amount of admiration toward others who have carried out violence against women in the name of incelism. The majority of research on the incel community to date has focused on the content of online posts and estimating the potential for physical violence, with the prevailing perception that the anger directed at women stems from unsuccessful attempts at intimate pair bonding (Sugiura, 2021; Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2022). However, little attention has been devoted to gaining an understanding of incels as a group. This is an important endeavor because violence committed by self-identified male incels or in sympathy with incel ideology has claimed the lives of nearly 50 victims thus far (Hoffman, 2020), and the Secret Service has demonstrated that many such offenders had contact with mental health clinicians prior to committing acts of violence (National Threat Assessment Center, 2021).

## Methods

### Participants

- Participants were recruited using Amazon Mturk to participate in a larger study examining mental health and dating experiences.
- Participants were provided a link to a Qualtrics survey and were compensated \$3.50 for completing the survey.

### Measure

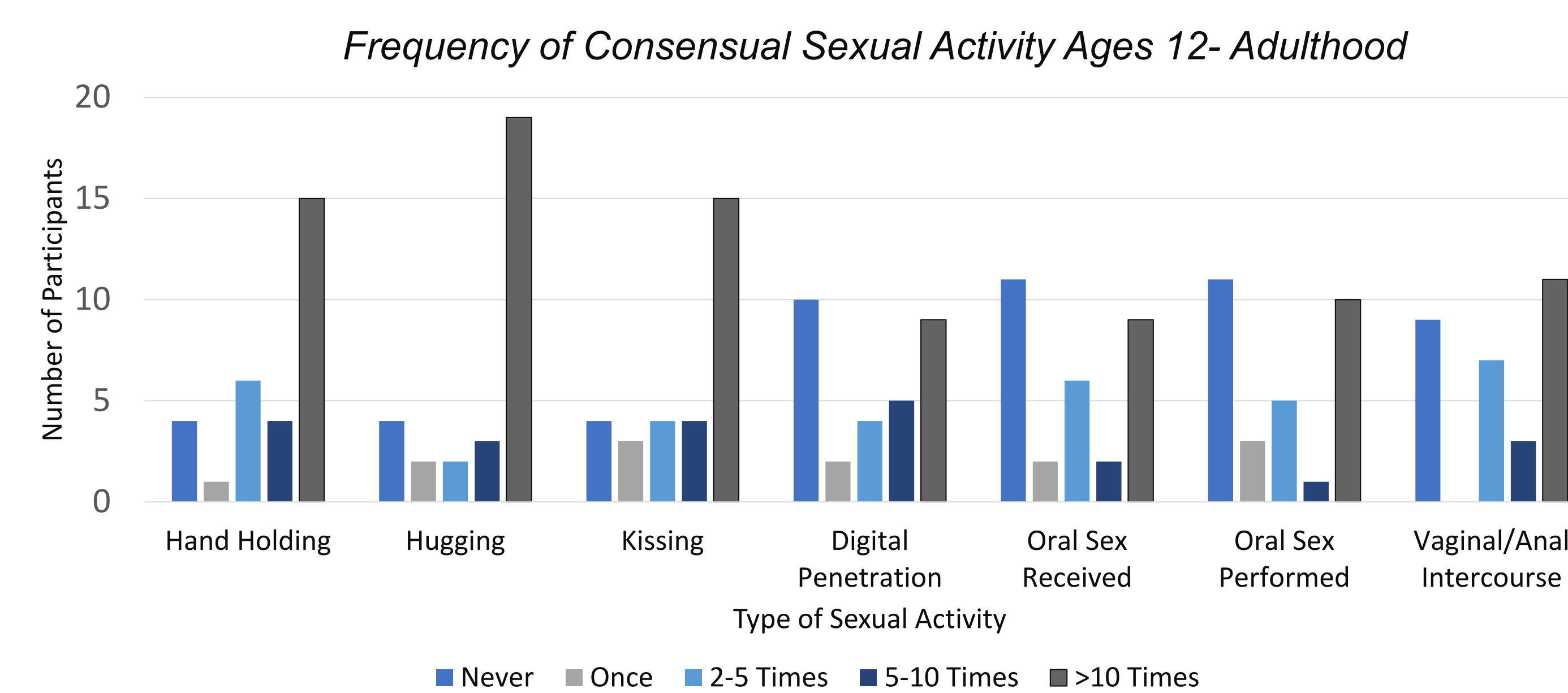
- Participants completed a self-report survey inquiring about:
  - Demographic information:** age, race, education, employment status
  - Dating history:** presence and length of any consensual, committed relationships; quality of the relationship including the manner in which the relationship ended
  - Self-identity as an incel**
  - Sexual activity history:** frequency and type of consensual sexual activity experienced
  - Mental health and treatment history:** if ever received a psychiatric diagnosis from a mental health clinician; if ever participated in psychotherapy; and if currently in psychotherapy

### Procedure

- Survey responses of participants who self-identified as an incel were aggregated and analyzed.

## Results

- All participants were male with a mean age of 34. Ethnicity is predominately white (n=25, 83%), all participants graduated high school with 50% (n=15) reporting an undergraduate degree. The majority are employed full time (n=22, 73.3%), with 13.3% (n=4) reporting part time employment and 13.3% (n=4) reporting unemployment.
- The majority of participants (n=26, 86.7%) reported previous dating behavior that included sexual activity, with 70% (n=21) reporting some type of sexual activity occurring between ages 12-17. Most (n=19, 73.1%) of those participants reported having dated two to six different women. Half of participants (n=15, 50%) reported an average of two committed relationships with women. The majority of these relationships were reported to last less than one year (n=5, 33.3%), with 26.7% (n=4) reporting a duration of one to two years, 26.7% (n=4) between two to four years, and 13.3% (n=2) reporting relationships longer than five years. Further, 93% (n=28) reported they had never paid a prostitute for sexual contact.
- All participants denied being in a therapeutic relationship at the time of the survey. Eight participants (26.7%) reported seeking help from a mental health professional in the past, with 75% (n=6) of treatments lasting less than one year, and the remaining two reporting they attended psychotherapy for 12 to 18 months.



### Reasons Why Dating Relationships Ended

Reason	Example quote	n (%)
Partner Infidelity	“All of my relationships end the same way, with the woman cheating and having sex with another man.”	4 (26.7)
Geographic Move	“We both graduated from high school and moved to different towns so the relationship just kind of ended itself.”	2 (13.3)
Grew Apart	“It ended in a completely non-dramatic way, just bored of one another basically.”	5 (33.3)
Mental Health/Addiction	“She moved out when I caught her with drugs.” “I stopped wanting to hang out with her due to depression.”	2 (13.3)
Other/Unknown	“I hung up on her and never called her again.”	2 (13.3)

### History of Self-Reported Psychiatric Disorders

Diagnosis	n*	%
Depression	9	24.32
Anxiety	10	27.03
Social Anxiety Disorder	4	10.81
Posttraumatic Stress Disorder	4	10.81
Conduct Disorder	1	2.70
Oppositional Defiant Disorder	1	2.70
Learning Disorder	2	5.41
Bipolar Disorder	2	5.41
Sexual Addiction	1	2.70
Unknown Mental Illness	3	8.11

\*Reflects participants reporting more than one diagnosis

## Discussion

- Contrary to public perception and earlier studies suggesting that members of the incel community never had a sexual experience or began later than socially expected, this study found a high self-reported frequency of consensual sexual involvement starting at age 12 and continuing through adulthood, including committing to an “official” relationship.
- The high proportion of participants who never paid a prostitute for sexual contact seems to indicate both a desire for intimacy beyond sexual activity alone and an entitled belief that they shouldn’t have to pay to meet their needs. Unmet needs for intimacy maintain the incel’s hate-filled rhetoric directed at women which can take a tone of entitlement, and at times ignite violent behavior. Before committing his “Day of Retribution,” where he killed seven people and injured 14 more, Elliot Rodger (n.d.) wrote in his manifesto “I was desperate to have the life I deserve [emphasis added];... a life of sex and love” (p.81).
- In support of the existing literature, the majority of participants in this study reported having received a formal psychiatric diagnosis, yet only a small number maintained a relationship with a mental health professional for psychotherapy.
- Results suggest that those ascribing to the incel ideology are not necessarily individuals who have never been able to experience sexual/romantic connection with a woman in their life due to a skills deficit or even physical appearance, but more so are individuals who may struggle with sustaining relationships with women, perhaps due to some yet unknown emotional process.
- The connection between an outward expression of aggression and an internal experience of shame is well established (see Gilligan, 1996; Tangney & Dearing, 2003), and therefore it is not inconceivable to hypothesize that the root of the incel “problem” lies in an overwhelming experience of shame. As McWilliams (1994) observed, “shame has connotations of helplessness, ugliness, and impotence” (p. 172) which seems to characterize the incel population, even if only in their own self-perceptions. Understanding the background of self-identified incels helps to expand our comprehension of this hard-to-reach population. This may in turn provide valuable insights into conceptualization to maximize outcomes during critical points of clinical intervention, prior to actualized violence.
- Some limitations of the present study include that the survey was created based on studying the websites most frequented by incels, that the sample size is small, and that data is limited to a self-report survey.
- Future research directions include case analyses of incels to elucidate emotional processes, and data collection using non-self-report measures aimed at identifying internal emotional experiences.

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