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### Library Award for Undergraduate Research

My essay “Strength in Contradiction: The Radicalization of Incel Rhetoric” emphasized several fields of interconnected research in my investigation of the linguistic and psychological roots of radicalization among self-described “incels” or “involuntary celibates”. Through a close analysis of academic writings and primary sources, I relate my findings on the radicalization of incels to the processes of radicalization seen in established terrorist groups worldwide. What differentiates this essay from other research papers that I have written is its interdisciplinary approach. Furthermore, because of the rapidly shifting landscape and user makeup of online communities as well as the contemporariness of the issue that I analyze, I was very selective with the sources that I included in my work. To verify that the claims and findings from my sources were up to date, I personally reviewed chatrooms and message boards on incel forums and compared them to scholarly research on the topic, even if this research was only two to three years old. By incorporating a broad range of research and analysis and directly monitoring the rhetoric of the groups investigated in my paper, my essay sheds light on how online communities are uniquely capable of radicalizing individuals and pushing them towards acts of terror. My paper’s findings are relevant to present-day discussions over online speech, which have been motivated by the continued power of online groups and individuals to perpetuate violent attacks inspired by white supremacy, misogyny, and conspiracy theories.

My essay’s topic was inspired by killing in recent years committed by individuals who align themselves with the incel community. While gender violence is unfortunately an all-too-common crime, the incel movement seemed unique to me for several reasons. First, after

the 2014 Isla Vista murders, major media outlets quickly published many articles on the characteristics of the incel movement, the movement's motivations, and detailed accounts of the racism and misogyny expressed in incel forums. However, incel murderers such as Elliot Rodger were usually portrayed as mentally disturbed individuals participating in lone-wolf attacks. I wanted to investigate whether the derogatory, and oftentimes violent, language on incel forums had a greater role and responsibility in motivating these terrorist attacks. Islamic extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS have increasingly used social media to recruit individuals into participating in terrorism, so I was curious whether incel communities used online rhetoric in a similar, albeit more decentralized, fashion.

After doing background research on incel forums and users from websites such as Reddit, 4Chan, and 8Chan and after learning how terrorists employ social media and virtual tools, I reviewed popular and trending posts and comments on incel forums to identify a focal point for my analysis. As I write in my essay, I found a glaring dissonance between these online users' expressions of hate and disgust towards women and their desire for sexual and romantic intimacy. Finally, I was shocked but also intrigued at how communities involving people connected solely by the internet could motivate individuals towards acts as heinous and destructive as mass killings. Recent events, such as the violent ideologies encouraged by the emergence of online conspiracy theories like QAnon, further demonstrate the exigence of this topic.

I accompanied my analysis on the language and belief systems of incels with linguistic and statistical studies that examine the demographics of self-identified incels and the vocabulary that they uniquely employ. Using findings from machine learning systems employed by researchers such as Sylvia Jaki, I was able to learn the terminologies most used by incels. This

knowledge then helped me to better identify and focus on the terminologies and beliefs expressed in incel forums that were most relevant to my research question. The types of words analyzed in these statistical studies ranged from online usernames to slurs to terms that express the incel worldview, such as “redpill” and “bluepill”. Furthermore, I used other academic studies to guide me to notable portions of the primary sources that I viewed and analyzed as part of my research, which included videos and the manifesto released by Elliot Rodger shortly before his death.

To explain the process through which online misogynistic rhetoric developed into violent hate speech on incel forums, I also had to research the history of the manosphere and the overlaps between language found on the manosphere and in mainstream media. These connections allowed me to relate incel rhetoric to issues of gender and sexual violence and to political speech and power as well. Because ideological acts of terror are usually motivated by political issues and group power dynamics, my research on the belief systems, language, and history of the incel movement allowed me to conclude my analysis by applying Andrea Kohn Maikovich’s study on the psychological causes of radicalization to the specific case of the incel movement.

Throughout my research and writing process, my professor, Dr. Linda Coleman, consistently provided support and guidance for my selection of sources and new directions that I could take my research as well as how I could apply the course material to my analysis. Databases and digital libraries, such as *JSTOR*, that UMD library services provides were also invaluable to me for gathering sources and reviewing the academic literature available on my topic. Though the prevalence and function of online hate speech was a sobering topic to study, encouragement and assistance from my professor and access to a large selection of journals kept

my research focused and coherent. The internet underground of forums and chatrooms dedicated to hate and conspiracy thinking is often difficult to study and research because of its decentralized and shifting nature, but I hope that my essay sheds some light on how such forums create many of the real-world threats that we face today.