



UPPSALA  
UNIVERSITET

INSTITUTIONEN FÖR KULTURANTROPOLOGI OCH ETNOLOGI  
DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND  
ETHNOLOGY

---

# The Lack of Love

The Sacred and the Suffering Experiences of Female  
Involuntary Celibates

By  
Maria Brix Rasmussen

Supervisor: Carina Johansson

2023

**MASTERUPPSATSER I ETNOLOGI OCH FOLKLORISTIK**  
**Nr 7**

## *Abstract*

This ethnographic study investigates the reality of female involuntary celibates. To understand how the identification of being a female involuntary celibate has developed online in a shared online environment, I explore the experiences from women who identify as femcels and women who identify as forever alone women. Through the study, I found that a distinction between the two categories femcel and forever alone women needed to be made, since the two groups have different characteristics and different ways to cope with and understand their status as involuntary celibates. Moreover, I investigate how and why the lack of romantic love is such an important factor in these women's sense of self. From a phenomenological approach, I apply several theoretical concepts; *orientation*, *direction*, *habitus*, *initiation*, and *respair*, which are all helpful in order to understand how the suffering connected to the lack of love results in a strong orientation towards the sacred, which is how I understand the femcel-based online environments. Several themes are highlighted in the study, where a complicated family history, mental health issues, and a focus on looks, are the most prominent themes. The thesis discusses how the women's orientation towards the online environments has created a shared identity of being involuntary celibate, and how membership within an online context can create a sense of individual and collective autonomy which otherwise often are found in a romantic relationship. Furthermore, the thesis analyses and discusses the risk of individual constrain when collectively sharing an identity within the online, and finally how the identification of being a femcel or a forever alone woman differs from the interlocutors understanding. Finally, this thesis argues that the suffering both femcels and forever alone women experience has become a shared collective identity online, which in turn has given them an autonomy that they otherwise would have found in a romantic relationship.

**Key words:** femcel, Forever Alone Women, FAW, incel, involuntary celibacy, love, online environment, online community, lookism, objectively ugliness, Reddit, Discord, phenomenology, orientation, ethnology, ethnography

# Table of content

<i>Wordlist</i> .....	5
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<i>1.1. Motivation and aim of the study</i> .....	6
<i>1.2. Thesis outline</i> .....	7
<i>1.3. The context of femcels</i> .....	8
1.3.1. Traditional femcels .....	9
1.3.2. Modern femcels .....	11
<i>1.4. Previous research on female involuntary celibates</i> .....	12
<i>1.2. Theoretical framework</i> .....	16
1.2.1. How can we understand female involuntary celibates' experiences? .....	17
1.2.2. Orientation and direction .....	19
1.2.3. Habitus and initiation .....	21
1.2.4. Between hope and despair .....	23
1.2.5. Method .....	24
<i>1.3. Methodological considerations and data material</i> .....	25
1.3.1. Data material .....	25
1.3.2. Data collection .....	26
1.3.3. Ethical considerations .....	28
<b>2. Where to go? Finding a direction</b> .....	<b>30</b>
<i>2.1. An orientation towards love</i> .....	30
<i>2.2. A collective orientation</i> .....	33
<i>2.3. The moderating role and inclusion</i> .....	38
<i>2.4. Concluding remarks</i> .....	40
<b>3. Categorizing an identity</b> .....	<b>41</b>
<i>3.1. The attitude of the online environment</i> .....	41

3.2. <i>Women hating women</i> .....	44
3.3. <i>Femcels and incels</i> .....	48
3.4. <i>Concluding remarks</i> .....	51
<b>4. The reality of female involuntary celibates.....</b>	<b>51</b>
4.1. <i>A focus on looks</i> .....	52
4.2. <i>A discrimination based on looks</i> .....	54
4.3. <i>Dating experiences</i> .....	58
4.4. <i>Imaginative love</i> .....	60
4.5. <i>Shame and hatred</i> .....	62
4.6. <i>Concluding remarks</i> .....	65
<b>5. Life-challenges.....</b>	<b>66</b>
5.1. <i>Physical disabilities</i> .....	66
5.2. <i>Mental health issues and self-hatred</i> .....	69
5.3. <i>A constraining habitus</i> .....	71
5.4. <i>Concluding remarks</i> .....	73
<b>6. The online spheres .....</b>	<b>73</b>
6.1 <i>Different online environments?</i> .....	73
6.2. <i>A constraining habitus within the online spheres</i> .....	78
6.3. <i>Concluding remarks</i> .....	79
<b>7. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>83</b>
<i>Online Articles</i> .....	84
<i>Interviews</i> .....	86

## *Wordlist*

### **Categories of identification**

*Incel*: A man who lives in involuntary celibacy and who, due to looks, personality and other unfavourable traits are unable to find sex and/or a romantic partner.

*Femcel*: The female counterpart to incels.

*Forever Alone Woman (FAW)*: A woman who share many of the same traits as femcels. They have no or very little dating experience. They do not identify as femcel despite the many similarities they share.

*FDS*: An abbreviation for Female Dating Strategy, which is a group exclusively for women who wants to empower themselves through specific dating strategies in order to become a high-value-woman and to find a high-value male partner who treats them like a queen.

Just like incel and femcel forums, they too have invented a language to describe different female and male types.

### **The Pill philosophy**

*Red Pill*: Inspired by a Matrix framework where you can ‘swallow’ one of these imaginary pills which means that you surrender to a certain reality. If you have chosen the red pill, you unwillingly accept the brutal reality of never being able to find sex or romantic love.

*Blue Pill*: If you take the Blue pill or are ‘blue-pilled’, it means that you live in delusion of the reality of being an incel/femcel.

*Black Pill*: The black pill is the most extreme, where if someone is black-pilled, it means that they see the harsh fact of being an incel, and that there is nothing to do to improve the situation.

*Pink Pill*: The pink pill philosophy is the female version of the black pill.

### **Terms within the femcel- and incelosphere**

*Looksmaxing*: When improving looks, personality, and social skills, to try to escape femcel- or incel-ness.

*Ascending*: Term used within the incelosphere and the femcelosphere. Used to describe when ‘escaping’ incel-ness or femcel-ness by finding a romantic partner.

*Doxing*: A form of cyberbullying, where personal and private information is revealed and made public.

*Hugboxing*: A term for how members of an online forum share the same affirmative opinions.

### **Archetypes within the femcel- and incelosphere**

*Normie*: Term to describe a normal-looking person.

*Stacy*: Term to describe the most attractive women.

*Chad*: Term to describe the most attractive men.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Motivation and aim of the study

I became motivated to write about female involuntary celibates whilst discussing incels and the incel milieu with fellow study colleagues at lunch break one day. I was immediately intrigued when a colleague mentioned the existence of female incels, and the thought: ‘Why had I never heard of that?’, quickly emerged. It soon became clear, that I was not the only one who had never heard of female involuntary celibates as well as there exists almost no previous research on women who unwillingly lives in celibacy. While almost no attention has been given to femcels and overall, to women living in involuntary celibacy, the academic literature on incels (internet term for involuntary celibate, chiefly among men) has grown over the last few years. According to male incels, women cannot claim an involuntary celibacy position. Within the incel milieu, women are mainly seen as volcels (voluntary celibate), since incels believe that women can always get access to sex if they want to (Engholm 2021: 10).

Not only within academia and the incel milieu, but also within most people’s consciousness, are female involuntary celibates invisible. Whenever I have been in a social context and I have explained the aim of my study, the most common way of explaining femcels, is to take incels as a starting point, since incels have succeeded in making themselves visible through media connected to horrible events made in the name of ‘incelism’. The identity of the ‘femcel woman’ has an illegitimate position and whereas the problems of incels has been made visible, “[...] women’s psychic suffering, exclusions and humiliations are not countenanced as political problems” (Kay 2022: 29f).

In 2018, the Swedish writer and dramatist Malin Lindroth wrote the book *Nuckan*, based on her own experiences as a ‘nucka’ which would translate into the old English word *spinster*. Lindroth wrote the book to stamp out the silence and the shame connected to the experiences as a spinster. She explains that ”There are no narratives about it, it is like a black hole. It is frightening with an experience that is not verbalised” (Translated from Swedish) (Schüldt, 2022). Although Lindroth’s book gained a lot of attention in Sweden, the female involuntary celibates still lack visibility, and their realities and experiences as such have suffered from a lack of public recognition. This study is thus a necessary opening within the research field of involuntary celibacy and internet culture linked to that. My aim and hope is, that my research will pave the way for further dialogue and understanding of the suffering connected to women’s experiences regarding a lack of love and sex. Thus, the study of female involuntary celibates calls for an ethnographic inquiry.

In my initial online research on female involuntary celibates, completely inexperienced about what the internet could offer in this regard, I slowly but curiously made my way through the jungle of

websites, and I stumbled across interesting, yet what I found to be disturbing aspects of female involuntary celibacy online environments. I asked myself many questions as I was browsing through scheming paths of virtual forums, bulletin boards and Facebook groups. For an outsider like me, a whole new world arose; a world full of internet language that I had never been introduced to and unfortunately also a world where many people suffer from traumas, loneliness, and isolation, and where they are venting their inner thoughts and desires in a shared environment.

During my time in the online field, I learned that not all women who live in involuntary celibacy identify as femcels since this term for many holds some of the same negative connotations which are also connected to incels. My thesis thus concentrates on women who live in involuntary celibacy, but who identify with two different categories: femcels and forever alone women (FAW). I found that the two groups reside in different online domains, and that they are distinguishable in many areas. However, common for them all is a lack of romantic love, and the reality of being involuntary celibates. Although they identify differently and have different online domains they are still related due to their shared experiences and realities. To finally make female involuntary celibates and their reality visible, my aim is therefore to broaden the understanding of femcels and forever alone women; to understand the experiences of the women who are a part of female involuntary celibates' environments from the inside and to gain a perspective of how female incels feel and experience their lives.

In this thesis, I want to examine and understand *the experiences of being a female involuntary celibate and how the identification as a femcel or forever alone woman has been developed as a reality – both individually and collectively in an online milieu. Furthermore, my aim is to understand why the identification as a forever alone woman or femcel differs while examining why the lack of love has become so prominent for these women's sense of self.*

## 1.2. Thesis outline

The introductory first chapter of the thesis will provide the reader with a background of the historicity of female involuntary celibates online as well as contextualizing the study within these frames. The first chapter also covers the theoretical framework as well as it is outlining relevant theories which will be applied to the empirical material. The chapter then proceeds to outline the ethnographical methods employed in the thesis.

In the following empirical chapters, chapter two to six, I present my material and analytical findings based on online observations together with the experiences of the interlocutors. Each analytical chapter concentrates on specific themes connected to the femcel and FAW experience regarding the suffering connected to the lack of love.

Chapter two investigates, based on phenomenological concepts such as *orientation, direction,*

*habitus* and *initiation*, how the lack of love has become ‘the familiar’ for the female involuntary celibates and how feeling lost has perhaps led them to seek the sacred online collective. Because of the often strict rules of the online environments, I argue that there might exist an element of constrain within the frames of the online collective as well as a risk of losing hope to go towards a state of respair: a fresh start towards hope.

Chapter three concentrates on the different categorical identifications; femcel and forever alone woman (FAW). Here, I investigate the differences between the two categorifications and how the identification and behaviour of femcels is, in some ways, comparable with the behaviour of incels. The question about whether an element of ‘wound fetichism’ is present in the online environments of female involuntary celibates will also be addressed.

Chapter four addresses the experiences and realities of femcels and FAW when it comes to the absence of romantic love. In relation to dating experiences and a focus on ‘ugly looks’, the chapter also investigates how and whether the lack of love has made the women orient towards the sacred online collective which in turn has given them an autonomy and identity.

Chapter five concerns about different life-challenges that every interlocutor has experienced; both in their childhoods but also as adults regarding dating and the encounters with potential partners. Lastly, the concluding chapter six discusses some of the most emerging themes of the thesis. Here, I discuss how the categorization as a femcel or FAW has developed collectively online and how the sometimes constraining attitude of the online spheres has a potential to sustain the orientation towards the lack of love and thus hinder the orientation towards love.

### 1.3. The context of femcels

In the past years much attention has been given to male incels, both in popular media and academia. The term ‘incel’ refers to a man who lives in involuntary celibacy and believes that he, due to a lack of looks, a bad personality and other unfavoured traits, is unable to find a partner and therefore is unable to have sex. The incel milieu is often connected to misogyny, self-hatred and societal hatred. They believe that unfair beauty standards have led to their failure to find sex and love, which Hugo Engholm writes about in his thesis *The lack of looks* from 2021 (Engholm 2021: 1,6). The term ‘incel’ was first coined in 1997 by the female Canadian student Alana, who at the time experienced difficulties dating. Alana, therefore, started the website: ‘Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project’ for people like her who were also struggling to find romantic love (Taylor 2018). In an interview from 2018, over 20 years after the launch of the website, Alana explains that the forum was meant for both men and women who felt lonely, and that the website was supposed to be a supportive space to vent about different

situations connected to dating and love (Ibid.). Since Alana's project, the gap between female incels and male incels has become prevalent over the years and hatred, and mockery between the two groups is common.

To understand the context of female involuntary celibates, it is necessary to begin with an explanation of femcels; from where the term derives and examine what has since been developed as both similar and opposites to the term femcel. As already described, there are more than just one term and identification for women who lives in involuntary celibacy. Therefore, in the next chapter, I will contextualise the historicity of femcels and their online upsurging. It has not been possible to include previous research on forever alone women (FAW) since they and their online environment have not previously studied. In the following, specific words and expressions that exist within the online environment of female involuntary celibates are used, and I therefore refer to the wordlist on page 5.

### 1.3.1. Traditional femcels

Despite the untold story and lack of narrative, femcels do exist – until the beginning of 2021, a subgroup called r/Trufemcels on the internet forum Reddit used to be a safe space for women who considered themselves femcels. Since Reddit introduced a new policy to prevent hate speech, many subreddits got banned, including the Trufemcel subreddit. The ban happened because other users reported that the group was spreading hate, conspiracies, and self-harm encouragement. Many members felt saddened after the subreddit ban, including a user called Giga, who took matters into her own hands. After the ban of r/Trufemcels, she created a new website called ThePinkPill.co (Schofield 2021), which during my research, had over 500 members. Unfortunately, due to maintenance of the website, it is now temporarily closed. Giga expresses that the femcel position has been hard to legitimise since many incels claim that women are responsible for their loneliness and lack of sex. She also underpins that this partly explains the lack of research and understanding of femcels (ibid). The online forum Reddit has become essential for my research on female involuntary celibates. The subreddit r/ForeverAloneWomen is one of the regular domains for the women who identity as FAW but also for femcels who were forced to find a different online environment after the ban of r/Trufemcels. The group is still active and has almost 15.000 members.

Femcels describe themselves – just like incels – as unable to find sex and romantic love. However, where incels often blame women for their lack of romantic relationships, femcels tend to blame their ugly looks, lack of social skills, and *lookism* for their romantic suffering: a term frequently used in femcel communities that describes how society discriminates against people based on looks. The social impact of lookism affects different aspects of human life, such as job opportunities, social relations, and partner selection. Another problem about lookism is that when body improvement has become so

common it could lead to extreme forms of elitism and segregation of people based on looks (Takáč 2020: 60). If people strive towards and have the possibility to change their appearance to meet the prevalent beauty standards, is it then possible to normalise and accept the human body as it is? Takáč asks (Ibid: 60f). A user on the ThePinkPill forum writes that femcels *are* objectively ugly and that is has nothing to do with how people and society perceive beauty. She also expresses that pretending that femcels are normal or pretty is cruel when the reality is different:

[...] femcels are women who are objectively ugly. “Ugly” is often used as an insult towards women, but here we use it as an objective truth [...]. Trying to gaslight an ugly woman into believing she’s normal or even beautiful is cruel when so much of a woman’s life depends on how attractive she is (ThePinkPill.co).

Many women on the femcel online forums consider themselves ugly, and many strive for ‘looksmaxxing’. This means that the users believe that improving their looks by having plastic surgery, putting on make-up or working out and losing weight will eventually lead to ‘ascending’, i.e., escaping involuntary celibacy. Others see themselves as unable to improve their looks and have unwillingly accepted ‘ugliness’ as their destiny. The femcel-based environment ThePinkPill has among other online femcel-based environments, adopted the incel terminology for describing and categorising people. According to both incels and femcels, these terms characterise certain archetypes of people with descriptions of their looks and behaviour: It is a belief system of how to perceive people in a hierarchical order, where the so-called Stacies, the attractive women and Chads, the attractive men, range highest in the order. The Stacies and the Chads are both the most hated and the most wanted since many incels aspire to become a Chad and many femcels aspire to become Stacies where they, at the same time, despise them for being beautiful and able to find romantic love (Kay 2022: 36f).

As we saw from Alana’s description, the term incel was not supposed to be gendered, but today, the term is almost exclusively used for men living in involuntary celibacy. Incels believe there exists a hierarchical social order where incels range lowest due to their looks and where the Chads range highest. Incels do, however believe they range higher than women according to gender and intelligence and that they are superior due to this. Furthermore, they believe that society has shifted into an unwanted matriarchy since women can now choose their partners freely, leaving the lonely and sex-deprived men behind. Incels are in general hyper-focused on gender (Engholm 2021: 9,34, 43), which perhaps is why the female incels have chosen to ‘gender’ the term by adding the word fem, derived from the word female, to underline how they are different from male incels.

### 1.3.2. Modern femcels

As I discovered, the term femcel now also covers a form of internet aesthetics, which I-D Magazine has written about in their article *Are you a femcel from 2022*. According to the article, the term femcel now covers a whole new designator for ‘the sad depressed girl’ which often is a part of the identification of being a femcel. Moreover, the new social media generation of femcels is claiming toxic female traits as desirable and aspirational. This ‘new wave’ of femcelism is thus more about aesthetics than an actual ideology. According to the article: *Enter the Fleabagera: What does it mean to be a ‘dissociative feminist’?* published by British culture and style magazine *Dazed* (2002), women on social media, especially on TikTok, have started a new trend showing how they are embracing self-destruction and “[...] performs her pain as if it were a form of art” (Garland, 2022). In the name of feminism, these women are describing the female experience and ‘the feminine urge’ to do something that they are aware is self-destructive (Ibid.). They idolise female sad, destructive protagonists in movies like the character Amy Dunne in the 2014 film *Gone Girl*, singers like Lana del Rey (Lanigan 2022), and dwell on and romanticise their own sad and depressing lives: “It’s a romanticisation of heterosexual female despair and an excuse to let pain consume you”, (Peysler 2022) Sophia Peysler writes in the similar article *The Fleabag Era of Dissociative Feminism Must End* published by the American youth magazine *Lithium* in 2022.

One might even call the relatively new internet phenomenon of ‘flea bag aesthetics’ (which is a term adopted from a British series), for ‘modern femcels’ as the Youtuber Mina Le describes them and this new tendency. In her YouTube video *“toxic” femininity: what’s up with girlbloggers, female manipulators and femcels?* (Mina Le 2022), she also refers to the article from I-D Magazine. In her video, she distinguishes between the more traditional femcels, as described in the earlier chapter and the ‘modern’ femcels who publish videos of their own misery and depression and idolise toxic and manipulative women, often from fiction.

Thus, today’s ‘modern femcels’ “[...]use the term less as an indicator of how much sex they’re unable to have, and more as a way to express their personality traits that are perceived as pathetic or manipulative or toxic in some way” (Lanigan 2022), which seems like the original meaning of the word has shifted into more of an “ugly-girl” aesthetics and how they are tragically yet artfully showing their self-destruction. When women in involuntary celibacy initially were claiming the femcel-position, they gave a name to how they were feeling lonely and alienated as a part of being a femcel (Tiffany 2022), and it is precisely “[...] this loneliness and alienation that defines the current femcel upsurge we’re seeing online, and that explains why it’s moved to a new home on the internet” (Lanigan 2022).

This type of ‘new wave femcelism’ or modern femcelism, is still within the feminist movement but

with exhaustion and apathy connected to it where the women dissociate completely from how they are feeling by embracing their tragedies and traumas and making it a part of their character. Following the recent years of a #girlboss/ #WhoRunTheWorldGirls era where many women were striving to be the hyper-optimistic structured girl, the journalist Emma Garland connects the term ‘dissociative feminism’ to this new modern femcel tendency and concludes in her paper by stating that “The logical end point of dissociation isn’t revolution, it’s the void – and that’s a very dangerous thing to sleepwalk into, politically speaking” (Garland 2022). In Emmeline Cleins’ article *The Smartest Women I Know Are All Dissociating* (2019) published by BuzzFeed News, whose article is also the starting point for Garland’s article, Clein brings forward how different broken female protagonists in films have become the ideal of the ‘cool girl’ who in spite of all her scars inflicted by others turns it all inwards and jokes about it (Clein 2019). The definition of a femcel and the understanding of what makes a femcel is thus complex and perhaps depends on which social platform they are expressing themselves. Nevertheless, a particular culture exists around the term femcel, whether we look at the traditional femcels or modern femcels.

Although the modern femcel wave will not be the main topic in this paper, it is important to note why and how femceldom as an unwanted lifestyle, has developed into this kind of dissociative feminism where women proudly claim to be toxic or manipulative. As ethnographers, we should follow our informants everywhere they go and engage in their online activities also if it moves to another space (Boellstorff et al. 2012: 118f) as we see with the femcel communities. In the following thesis, I will not examine modern femcels further since that would require a more extensive scope of focus than what is attainable within the frames of this thesis. However, I will keep in mind the traits that these modern femcels seem to display and see whether these are noticeable in the femcel-based online forum and the FAW subreddit.

#### 1.4. Previous research on female involuntary celibates

Even though the aim of this study is not about male incel experiences, we must briefly turn our attention to them in order to understand the upsurge of femcels and why the study of female involuntary celibates is relevant and in need of a closer academic inquiry. As mentioned earlier, there exist almost no previous research on femcels and female involuntary celibates, which is why I will include examples from popular culture such as fiction and journalistic articles in the following.

In the article, *Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorising the Masculinities of the Manosphere* (2019), Professor of Digital Media and Gender studies at Dublin University, Debbie Ging, seeks to understand how men today position themselves within the so-called ‘manosphere’ online, where strong antifeminist ideas flows. As a defence towards the increased and high visibility of feminism we see

today, a new ‘mens-right-movement’ has been nurtured online (Ging 2019: 639,643). Common for all manosphere online communities is ‘The-pill concept’. Inspired by the *Matrix* movies you can take either the imaginary blue or red pill, which means you surrender to a certain reality. If choosing The Blue Pill, you will stay completely oblivious to the truth, whereas “The Red Pill philosophy purports to awaken men to feminism’s misandry and brainwashing” (Ibid: 640). Furthermore, men within the online manosphere often target women through personal attacks where examples of threats of rape, stalking or doxing are prominent. Hatred is thus a shared drive among men within the manosphere, including incels, which Ging argues is not linked to a specific political movement but rather to a form of psychological suffering (Ibid: 646ff).

According to a study on online incel subculture behaviour, O’Malley, Holt & Holt 2020 found, in line with Ging 2019, that incel subculture online shares many of the same values as other groups within the manosphere, and that the incel subculture is organised around five norms: the sexual market, women as naturally evil, legitimising masculinity, male oppression, and violence (O’Malley, Holt & Holt 2020: 19). Moreover, incels also tend to support each other during hateful and sometimes potential rages towards women, who are often called degrading names such as, ‘cumdumpsters’, ‘feminazis’, ‘femtards’, and ‘cunts’ (Ging 2019: 646). Incels are often occupied with describing the very nature of women as being: “[...] inherently manipulative, dishonest, narcissistic, and villainous” (O’Malley, Holt & Holt 2020: 13).

An online community might bring together people to practice their individual beliefs. However, they also have a transformational power on the members (Kozinets 2010: 39). It can become extremist to such a degree that the members will support or encourage each other in criminal activities for a higher purpose which in this case could be the five norms, found by O’Malley, Holt & Holt 2020, listed above.

When gathering about specific beliefs, where the common focus is feeling unfairly treated by others, in this case incels feeling unfairly treated by attractive women, this might turn into a form of collective victimhood, as Ging (2019) and Engholm (2021) argue. The trope of collective victimhood can become a destructive legitimisation of harming others, where incels are no exception. In a publication from the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), author Renske van der Veer, former director of ICCT, describes how especially two terrorist attacks based on an incel ideology gained much attention: The Elliot Roger Isla Vista attack in California in 2014 and the Toronto Van attack by Alek Minassian in 2018. Men within the incel community committed both attacks and wrote a manifesto before the attack. Although these perpetrators did not solely have a misogynist motivation, van der Veer argues. They also target men – the so-called ‘Chads’ or ‘Alpha-males’, who are attractive, social, and sexually active men whom the incels envy (van der Veer 2020). The collective victimhood thus “[...] gives its

adherents the ability to go after whomever as they can never strike downwards, only upwards against their oppressors” (Engholm 2021: 44).

As mentioned, it is a common belief within the incel milieu that women are unable to claim an involuntary celibacy position since women, just because of their gender, are always capable of getting sex if they want to (Kay, 2022: 30). As feminist scholar Jilly Boyce Kay notes, “[...] the femcel woman is ignored – she is of no interest politically nor academically” (Ibid. 40). Kay argues, that femcel anger is much more self-directed than outwards, and that they, therefore, are not eligible for any political concern since there is no *real* problem.

Just as feminist thinkers have argued that love is an emotional resource for men but dangerous and depleting for women, we can see the insidious ways in which anger becomes a political resource for men, but, by being bent inwards, becomes a source of self-negation for women (Ibid. 39).

In general, we lack narratives about women’s romantic suffering, Kay states, which has contributed to our lack of understanding of female sexual power and desires. She argues that many tend to focus more on the “left behind” white male’s suffering in contemporary time and that incels have gained more attention simply because of their violent actions (Kay 2022: 39ff). Based on the quote above, it seems that femcels turn their hatred inwards, whereas incels often turn their hate outwards. However, as van der Veer argues, we must not forget that femcels also have the potential to become violent in such a radicalising culture as the incel/femcelosphere. In a time where gender roles are changing, the “[...] traditional female roles are no longer all-defining for women’s potential”, and although this sounds positive, it can also create an inner conflict within the self (van der Veer 2020). Perhaps especially for the male incels, when they live in a time where previous privileges and stereotypical roles are becoming dissolved (ibid.) This is exactly what Jilly Boyce Kay argues is the reason why femcels do not get the same political attention since “[...] There is no comparable public discussion of a crisis of femininity; there is no sense that women and other minoritized people are also being “left behind” [...]” (Kay 2022: 39).

Oskar Andreasson mentions, in his bachelor thesis ‘Romantisk utbrändhet’ (2021) (Romantic burnout, eng.red.), how the female incel often only has been mentioned in relation to male incels, merely to emphasise the relation between the two groups. In his thesis, Andreasson investigates both incels and femcels related to how they as involuntary celibates have been affected by social structures, norms, and the anticipation towards love which has created an environment where they feel invisible (Andreasson 2021: 2,6). Andreasson argues that feelings of jealousy have grown in modern society and shows through his research on the incel-based online forum *incel.co* and the now banned femcel

subreddit *r/Trufemcels*, that both groups in their lack of romantic desires, are experiencing anger and grief which are expressed through jealousy; a feeling that sociologist Francesco Alberoni describes as a defend strategy where the person who feels jealous is constantly looking for allies (Ibid: 19). By applying Alberoni's theory about jealousy together with the social psychologist Johan Asplund's term *social responsivitet* (Social response, eng.red.), Andreasson illustrates how the lack of desire and romantic love has resulted in jealousy and experiences of an antisocial response from their surroundings. The antisocial response has occurred due to the lack of visibility, attention, and recognition from society which in turn has made them suffer in their loneliness even more. The jealousy and the lack of social response thus induce a hopelessness instead of hope (Ibid: 9,33), he argues.

Because of the little amount of previous research on female involuntary celibates, Andreasson also includes sociologist Roona Simpson's research on unmarried single-women's self-identities, which I have also found useful to understand some aspects of female involuntary celibates' experiences. Simpson argues that a discursive shift from the spinster-figure to more contemporary singleton-figure has given potential to a new and more positive subjectivity (Simpson 2016). However, through her interviews with British single women "[...] the narratives of participants indicated negative stereotypes of singleness remained prevalent" (Ibid.), where they felt othered and stigmatized due to their position as single. Another prominent narrative was also, that the status of being single were not considered a voluntary choice, and from another study on single Irish women (Byrne 2000), some women even described themselves as involuntary singles, which Byrne understood as a coping strategy to distance themselves from social stigma that often comes with being single. Despite the negative narratives, Simpson found, that representations of singleness as positive also emerged, where living alone and feelings of empowerment were prevalent in the positive narratives of being single (Ibid.).

Whereas Simpson argued that the 'spinster-narrative' has shifted into the narrative of the 'singleton', Malin Lindroth, the writer of the previous mentioned book *Nuckan* (Spinster, eng.red) wishes to reclaim the word 'nucka' as not necessarily negative but simply the truth of what she and many other women who live in involuntary celibacy and loneliness experience. Although Lindroth rejects to juxtapose nuckan to incels, she acknowledges the parallels between the two. However, for Lindroth, it is not so much about being sex deprived, since she believes that nuckan can have many sexual partners and still experience loneliness of not being chosen as a romantic long-term partner. It is rather the involuntary element that defines the nucka, she explains (Schüldt 2022).

In her book, Lindroth writes that "Nuckan is not a dissident and someone who turns her back on the patriarchy. Rather she is the one who pays the highest price for trying to live within the frames of a system that has deemed her useless" (Translated from Swedish) (Lindroth 2018: 66). Furthermore,

Lindroth emphasises that there is no male-gendered word for a spinster and that women often suffers from the ascribed roles such as a lonely ‘cat-lady’ opposite to single men who are often described with cultural or physical potent roles. The only thing the man is not supposed to be is sex deprived (Ibid: 31f). Thus, there is a contrast between Lindroth’s experiences and understanding of a spinster and the claim from incels that women can never identify as involuntary celibates. This certainly shows a clear example of the incongruence between the involuntary celibate men and women and who should be able to claim the position of being undesirable and as Jill Boyce Kay expresses, ‘unfuckable’.

In an article from Elle, the author Nona Willis Aronowitz suggests a “femcel revolution” to describe how femcels are ‘reclaiming’ an identity as involuntary celibates instead of feeling forced into it. By including examples from users of the female-bases online forum ThePinkPill, the author argues that many femcels seem aware of their own self-worth, and that “many operate on the premise that they are entitled to respect” (Aronowitz 2021). However, the American novelist Mary Gaitskill contests this view since she believes that all femcels want is to face reality. Although coming to this painful reality giving up hope, “[...] “owning” a negative identity is a kind of power” (Gaitskill 2022). Just like Lindroth, who as we saw also believes that the reclaiming of the word spinster, which is somewhat translatable to the term ‘femcel’, can be liberating and powerful.

## 1.2. Theoretical framework

When I first began to dive into the virtual world of female involuntary celibates, I discovered that much of the literature consisted of writing about these women rather than writing from their perspective and reality. It paved the way for my approach since I knew that I was interested in knowing more about the female experience as a woman in involuntary celibacy. With a phenomenological approach and in line with the ethnologists Jonas Frykman and Nils Gilje, I wish to understand the meaning created by the people whom it is about. With this approach the researcher should also, “[...] try to put this in relation to the environment in which those concerned live” (Frykman and Gilje 2003: 39), which is also the main focus of the study: To understand how female involuntary celibates experience their lived lives in complex virtual and real-life surroundings.

In the following section, I will include relevant theories to understand the experiences of femcels or forever alone women (FAW), and what has led to identifying as such. With the phenomenological framework I will present in this section connected to my analytical findings, I believe that the study will reveal and provide valuable and important insights about the online and real world of female involuntary celibates. As a concluding remark, based on the theoretical framework, I will present how a combination of all the theories serves as a method to understand the experiences of female

involuntary celibates.

### 1.2.1. How can we understand female involuntary celibates' experiences?

How identity is 'imagined' and 'constructed' rather than 'lived' and 'experienced' has often been the theme of interest within ethnology for the last decades, although as Frykman and Gilje note, "After post-modernism, the deconstructions in post-structuralism [...] there is an understandable curiosity in people as *experiencers* [...], as *creators of meaning* rather than *interpreters* and as *actors* [...]" (Frykman and Gilje 2003: 14). The creation of meaning is both individual and collective, and by approaching, not only how the cultural identity which is shaped by the collective but also how it is experienced and interpreted by the individual, I argue, that we will reach a deeper understanding of how human beings shape and understand their reality within and from the environment which they are a part of (ibid. 10,15).

With a phenomenological approach, we examine the mode of thinking in the world from the perspective of human beings. That does not exclude an understanding of how society is shaped and how that can be an important factor in understanding people's mode of being in the world since the individual inevitably is a part of the social world from which they make their own experiences and realities. However, written language in this regard is a significant factor – especially in the virtual world – since this is how the experiencers communicate and vent about their life and struggles. I will therefore, not rule out the discourses, since this can be a very useful approach to understand and discover how identities are shaped and imagined at the same time as having the 'experiencer' as a starting point for understanding "[...] how, in the moment of interpretation, people do not just lend their inspiration to the surroundings but rather *bring them to life* and let them *happen*" (Ibid. 15). Thus, I believe, that a combination between a phenomenological approach and an analysis and interpretation of the discourses serves as the best methodological framework since: "The cognitive approach reflected in 'believing' and 'imagining' communities has to be combined with the phenomenological approach of bodily 'feeling' bridging the gap between discourse and body" (Frykman and Gilje 2003: 18). Instead of using language as the primary determinant, I will treat language as a way of understanding how it creates meaning and examples of discourses that exists within the online environments. With that being said, I am not explicitly using discourse analysis since the study's main aim is to understand the experiences of the participants, which I believe profits from an overall phenomenological approach. The language will always construct, create, and transform meaning in a social world, and the discourses will, therefore, always be present. My purpose is thus to focus on the femcels and FAW's experiences as involuntary celibates in context to their cohesion with the online environment, which they are all a part of.

The online and offline worlds are strongly intertwined in the modern world we live in today. In his article *Sacred Suffering: A Phenomenological Anthropological Perspective* (2015), anthropologist C. Jason Throop refers to Émile Durkheim who dualistically distinguishes between the sacred and the profane which are two different ‘modes of existence’. The sacred often refers to painful rituals or moral guidelines in religion (Ibid: 69), and the concept of ‘the sacred’ is often connected to elements of suffering. I will argue, that the sacred and the suffering can be applied to the femcel and FAW belief system, where the sacred can be compared to the female-based online environment and reality, and the profane can be compared with the lived reality outside of the online world, offline-life. According to Clifford Geertz’ reinterpretation of Durkheim’s description of the sacred and profane, the sacred can be seen as a ‘religious perspective’ which potentially arises as a coping strategy whenever humans try to make sense of their suffering experiences (Ibid: 70). By calling it ‘perspective’, Geertz defines it as a specific ‘mode of seeing’ from where individuals make sense and understand the world. However, it does not necessarily have to be a religious perspective; It can be “[...] aesthetic, commonsense, historical, and scientific perspectives” (Ibid.), and the individual can shift between the different ‘modes’ of “being-in-the-world”.

Some would argue that this causes an even larger gap between the sacred and profane life experience, but by emphasising the sacred perspective we may become aware of how it works in relation to the profane, the everyday life in the offline world. Just like Throop, I do not wish to limit the sacred experiences to just one perspective, and I thus agree with Throop when he argues in line with Geertz that: “[...] there are various intensities of sacred experience that may manifest within the bounds of various perspectives, religious, aesthetic, scientific, commonsense, or otherwise” (Ibid. 72).

In this context, it is important to emphasize, that these perspectives of ‘sacred’ and ‘suffering’ should not be perceived from a religious chain of reasoning, but rather as concepts to describe the belief-system of femcels and FAW where orienting towards something sacred for instance the online environments perhaps has been caused by some sort of suffering, that they have all experienced in relation to love. Although the sacred perspective is linked to religious elements according to Geertz, I will argue, that sacred elements also occur within the online environments where these women reside, which is how the concepts will be applied in the following thesis.

The distinction between the two concepts cannot be directly transferred to the online and the offline world since the relation between the two concepts is fluid. I will therefore primarily focus on the sacred perspective and on the suffering that often comes along: both in the online and the offline world that today has become one. I will focus on how the sacredness is connected to suffering, and how the sacred and the suffering may interplay in the everyday life of the femcel and FAW experiences. To do this, I will include Sara Ahmed’s queer and feminist phenomenological approach to how individuals orient

themselves towards different objects. This will be explained further in the theoretical framework below.

### 1.2.2. Orientation and direction

To understand the reality and perspective of female involuntary celibates, we need to understand how their bodily orientation has led them toward the object of love, or in this case, the lack of love. All people in this world orient towards something that gives life meaning, and we therefore need to look further into how the orientation towards love as an object has shaped the experiences of femcels or FAW. According to scholar Sara Ahmed, and in line with the phenomenological approach, the human mode of 'being' in the world, depends on where we orient and direct our bodies in life. Orientation is central to phenomenology since "[...] it emphasises the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready-to-hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds" (Ahmed 2006: 2). Although Ahmed mainly concentrates on queer sexuality and experiences, I believe that Ahmed's perspective is helpful to understand the femcel and FAW experiences since they are also focused on sexuality. Perhaps from an absence of sexual experiences, but nevertheless from an orientation directed towards love, sex and desire.

Our orientation towards objects depends on a specific object's possible nearness or proximity. People often turn to objects that make an impression on them and as something 'perceivable', but only when our orientation allows it. The object must be near enough, which in the case of romantic love is something that has perhaps been made available because of what has been presented to us in our childhood (Ahmed 2006: 3, 21, 25, 27). Perception of an object involves orientation. If a person orients towards love as an object, that must also include a perception and an understanding of what love is and means: "I might like them, admire them, hate them, and so on. In perceiving them in this way or that, I also take a position upon them, which in turns gives me a position" (Ibid: 27f). What the experiencing body encounters in life, will thus affect how the person orients itself towards or from different objects.

How we orient ourselves can be influenced from the surroundings if we 'turn' towards the lines made by others, which here can be compared with the female-based involuntary celibacy forums. It can seem easier and more reachable to follow lines made by others since "[...] we do not have to consciously exclude those things that are not "in line". The direction we take excludes things for us before we even get there" (Ahmed 2006: 15). If these lines are organised, it is not just a matter of our own direction, but a collective direction, just as we see with some 'imagined communities' (Ibid.).

Sara Ahmed concentrates on how emotions in politics tend to shape and influence our collective 'body'. In the chapter 'The Politics of Pain' in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014), she

poses the question: “Isn’t there a danger of flattening out the differences in pain experience, or turning the sociality of pain into a new form of universalism?” (Ahmed 2014: 31). Ahmed discusses how collective pain and injury often only gain political attention whenever the subjects have access to the right resources to become politically interesting and create a narrative of suffering, which she exemplifies with white male suffering just as Jilly Boyce Kay does. When it comes to the stories being told, Ahmed notes that “The differentiation between forms of pain and suffering in stories that are told, and between those that are told and those that are not, is a crucial mechanism for the distribution of power” (Ibid. 32). Thus, research on incels and incel behaviour cannot be read as equal to the same female experiences, since, drawing on Ahmed, male suffering in general has gained more attention. In line with Kay, we thus see that stories from the female perspective of involuntary celibacy are missing; there is no stories told of the “left-behind” women, when it comes to experiences of involuntary celibacy. However, making injury or pain into a shared collective identity, in a political context, is problematic Ahmed argues. The danger in ‘wound fetishism’ as she calls this collective suffering, is the risk that the wound becomes part of an identity as something that is just ‘there’ as a static which has been the case within subaltern politics, where “subaltern subjects become too invested in the wound” (Ibid. 32).

Although this is a politically addressed theory, I will argue, from the preliminary reading of my material, that femcels and FAW share experiences of ‘injury’ and ‘wound’ that has led them into a shared collective orientation towards the lack of love. When the women have failed in their search for romantic love, they might orient towards the lack of love instead, which has led them to follow the ‘lines’ made by others which in this case is the online female-based environments. Following these pre-made lines, that focus on the absence of love, I argue that a wound fetishism can potentially occur. The orientation ‘lines’ are created and simultaneously dependent on the individuals who follow them: they are created by repetition but are also sustained by this repetition (Ahmed 2006: 16).

People tend to orient themselves from a familiar world, but when the familiar world, here love, is out of reach, it can result in disorientation. As Ahmed argues, norms and conventions revolve around the heterosexual couple, and when an individual resides outside of that norm, e.g. as a lesbian does, one could get lost due to this disorientation (Ibid.: 7, 25). But even when we feel disoriented “[...], we might find our way, given our familiarity with social form, with how the social is arranged” (Ahmed 2006: 7). Just like the example about feeling lost when having a different sexuality than the normative heterosexuality, the involuntary celibate line can somehow be difficult to follow since the world is organised around romantic love. Although, being lost still directs people somewhere and “[...] being lost is a way of inhabiting space by registering what is not familiar: being lost can in its turn become

a familiar feeling” (Ibid.).

### 1.2.3. Habitus and initiation

In connection to Ahmed’s theory on the bodily orientation and direction that an individual experiences and go towards, anthropologist Michael Jackson also concentrates on the bodily movements that make the individual orient towards different objects in life. In his article *Knowledge of the Body* (2014), Michael Jackson explains how the bodily movement of the individual within their social environment takes form. Drawing on Bourdieu, he refers to the human habitus, which is connected to the environments and interactions with which individuals are familiar. However, Jackson is more occupied with the ‘broken habitus’: when the individual encounters new experiences and the habitus gets disrupted. This disruption makes it possible for the individual to open up to new experiences and reorient their bodies towards a new direction which they are already able to but which the habitus has made invisible: It is by such ‘initiations’ “[...] that people control and recreate their world, their habitus” (Jackson 2014: 251). Mental and emotional stress can lead to a broken habitus, possibly triggering the individual to find new paths and initiate outside of the habitus. What sustains the habitus, according to Jackson, is the “Stereotypical ideas and bodily habits [that] tend to reinforce each other [...] so long as the environment in which these attitudes are grounded itself remain stable” (Ibid.) Initiation towards something outside of the familiar habitus thus makes the individual reorient its body and initiate new directions. If an initiation towards a transition of the habitus is to occur, the creativity of this initiation will be constrained within the social order of which the individual is a part of (Ibid. 252). When Jackson concentrates on the ‘disrupted habitus’, he suggests that the habitus breaks whenever people turn towards another direction than the familiar. As Ahmed (2006) noted, getting lost can also become a familiar orientation that will nevertheless lead people somewhere. It is, therefore, interesting to consider what the familiar and what the habitus actually is for these women. I would argue that habitus, or the familiar, in this case, can be understood and interpreted in two different ways:

- 1) The familiar can either be the overall surrounding world where these women reside. In this world, romantic love is what most people orient towards, which is the familiar. When the women are ‘feeling lost’ in the familiar surrounding world, for not being able to find love, they might turn towards the collective of femcel communities which is based on being outside of the standard norm. Orienting towards the involuntary celibacy environments is, thus, in this case, about being disoriented or having a ‘broken habitus’.

- 2) The familiar or the habitus can also be interpreted as the femcel or FAW environment, where the habitus gets disrupted when deriving from the overall social ‘rules’ or requirements for being a

part of the collective. For example, the initiation towards finding a partner can then be interpreted as 'being lost', since this action speaks against the very principle of being a femcel or FAW.

#### 1.2.4. Love and desire in a modern world

To understand how love and desire are connected to pain and suffering in the age of modernity, we need to reflect on *why love hurts*. This is also the title of sociologist Eva Illouz's book from 2012, in which she argues that "[...] Western cultural form of modernity has brought about its own forms of emotional misery [...]" (Illouz 2012: 13) when it comes to identity and desire. In her book, Illouz provides sociological theories on how and why love hurts in modern society, and that love, and desire is shaped and produced through social relations.

The self and the definition of the individual self are central to modernity which is closely related to how we perceive love and blame ourselves when we fail to find it. There is a strong demand for recognition of the self in a romantic relationship which means that the individual's self-worth and autonomy are at stake (Ibid. 130), and when the romantic love fails "[...] the defection of the object of love undermines the self" (Ibid). When engaging in a romantic relationship, we negotiate and try to balance our autonomy with our need for recognition, where women tend to doubt and blame themselves for their romantic failures more than men. Illouz argues that "Men dominate the rules of recognition and commitment" (Ibid. 137), which often results in women's insecurity, self-blame, self-doubt, and suffering especially if they 'threaten' their own autonomy by loving 'too much' (Ibid: 139,153).

In his thesis on incel ideology, Hugo Engholm includes Illouz's theory to understand how the psychological suffering among incels can be explained with theories about love and sex in the modern society, and how the vulnerable self, in connection to love, needs recognition (Engholm 2020: 34ff). In the modern world, we have what Illouz calls a 'regime of emotional authenticity' with which we make choices and decisions about our perception and interpretation of love. This is closely tied to our sense of self and self-worth that risks being challenged by the gaze of others and ourselves. Today, our emotions are turned inwards and not as much towards rituals and roles as in the pre-modern era, where a person's character was much more seen as something derived from the values of the group it existed within (Illouz 2012: 26f, 31). A man's gaze did not necessarily challenge a woman's self-view and the woman's character was not about displaying "[...] uniqueness and originality of the self but rather about the capacity to display publicly recognisable and tested virtues" (Ibid.: 26). Furthermore, Illouz suggests, opposite to what we understood from Ahmed in the previous chapter *Orientation and direction*, that the issues connected to love and desire is not related to our upbringing or lack of self-reflection but instead formed by and through social relations (Illouz 2012: 13-18).

Modern romantic experiences are often inspired and stimulated by media. In general, the internet

has become a big part of how we socialise, and fiction has therefore also been contributory to how we imagine romantic love today. Romantic love, as we see in fictional stories, has become a part of the idea of the self, and it has shaped our perspective on love and desire and led us to think that love is the ultimate form of happiness. Illouz argues that this form of imagination is culturally created and organised through collective fantasies, which create an anticipation towards achieving that same love (Illouz 2012: 209, 211). However, this comes with a flipside since “[...] such culturally induced desires, in turn, create ordinary forms of suffering, such as chronic dissatisfaction, disappointment, and perpetual longing” (Ibid. 207). These collective fantasies thus burden the individual experience of love since our imagination is not built upon our own bodily experiences but rather on our awareness that love, as something, is out there waiting for us. It is thus no longer through our bodies that we evaluate potential partners; instead, it is through information-thick descriptions of each other online, which ironically gives us minimal experiences (Ibid. 199, 228, 230). I believe that Illouz’s theory is helpful to understand why love hurts in the modern world and why many of the women who participated in the study seem to turn the blame for not being able to find love towards themselves. In such a situation, the self-worth can be at stake, and I will argue that the autonomy that the self is missing might be found elsewhere through the collective.

#### 1.2.4. Between hope and despair

When the word femcel, as a term and identification, has occurred as a response to incels, where the latter has gained much more attention, it is necessary to understand how the female involuntary celibate self might respond to the incel misogyny and hatred towards them. As noted, there must be a balance between recognition and autonomy in a romantic relationship, and as Illouz argues emotions have become an economy with which it becomes dangerous to squander in a romantic relationship (Illouz 2012: 140). The femcel woman is left behind due to the lack of a legitimate definition of herself, whereas the incel white male has claimed the public recognition and autonomy of suffering (Kay 2021: 30). But what about the silence and lack of public visibility the femcel women must endure? When they neither get recognition nor autonomy, how do they balance? In the article *Feminist anger and feminist despair* (2019), the two scholars Jilly Boyce Kay and Sarah Banet-Weiser wonders: “While white masculine anger becomes institutionalised, empowered and weaponised, might this female rage - like popular feminism - fail to move beyond the realm of visibility?” (Kay and Banet-Weiser 2019: 604). The article raises the problem of how anger has become an outcome of modernity and how that anger becomes visible through racism, discrimination, and misogyny. However, justice of women’s anger has been neglected, the two authors argue. For too long, women’s anger has been viewed as hysterical and unreliable, and examples from #MeToo is no exception. Men tend to receive more

sympathy for their public rage, to get so-called ‘himpathy’ which at the same time “[...] disallows the justified anger of victims and survivors” (Ibid. 606). As Soraya Chemaly notes, female anger has often been linked to ‘madness’, and that women’s use of anger in public is often ignored and silenced (Chemaly 2018: 10f). When women display anger, they are perceived outside the norm of what a woman is supposed to be. Despite the despair and hopelessness this injustice might prompt for women and others who have been controlled by patriarchy, Kay and Banet-Weiser suggest that feminist rage can be a helpful tool to gain awareness and to make political change. Introducing the word *respair*, which means fresh hope after a period of despair, the authors hope for women and others who have been suppressed by patriarchy to gather collectively and acknowledge the vulnerability of their position to go towards a fresh start. Respair might offer hope for a more positive future even when all odds are against women “[...] because it is only by seeing those odds and just how big they are that we will have any chance of beating them” (Ibid. 608). Respair is thus something in between hope and despair.

#### 1.2.5. Method

I believe that a combination of the theories above serves as useful approach to understand the reality of femcels and forever alone women. Through this combination, I want to understand how the process of first being directed towards romantic love as something desirable has turned into a collective direction towards the lack of love. To grasp the complexity of how and why individual suffering has made women orientate towards the sacred online collective of femcel or FAW environments, I believe that previous experiences connected to love is necessary to include. I thus believe that incorporating theories about how a previous habitus, and how that has been developed for example within a family, perhaps has been constraining in their orientation towards love and whether that habitus has made them orient towards the collective identification as femcels or FAW. As Oskar Andreasson argued in his thesis on incels and femcels, feelings of jealousy and experiences of an antisocial response from others, due to their own feelings of invisibility have resulted in the suffering they experience. However, Andreasson does not approach the reason why this suffering and the orientation towards the online spaces has occurred in the first place. Nor do the theory about jealousy serve as a sufficient explanation to why so many female involuntary celibates gather online around a specific shared identification. Therefore, to understand why the women have become a part of the collective online spaces with a shared orientation towards the lack of love as their focus, I believe that Illouz’ and Kay and Banet-Weiser’s theories can help with an understanding of why orienting towards the lack of love, and a collective identity may reinforce and give autonomy to the otherwise vulnerable sense of self. As Gaitskill argued, owning a negative identity might also give power and recognition (Gaitskill 2022),

which is part of what I want to examine with my theoretical framework. Moreover, by including Eva Illouz's sociological theories on modern love and desire, I believe we can gain a better understanding of how the lack of love has been prominent and consequential for the women's sense of self.

### 1.3. Methodological considerations and data material

#### 1.3.1. Data material

In total, eleven women participated in my study. I have had six chat interviews and five audio interviews that has ranged between 30 minutes to 2 hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full length. In the following analysis, I have included the page numbers from my transcriptions of the interviews both for my own overview but also as an information to the reader. My interviews were all semi-structured, and I concentrated on asking about the women's lives, hobbies, and their identification with being involuntary celibates.

Five of the women describe themselves as femcels or somewhat as femcels and the other six described themselves as forever alone women (FAW). The women share many of the same experiences, although the categorical identification is different. Most of the FAW do not want to be described as femcels, since they believe that this description holds negative connotations to an extreme form of belief-system where you must see yourself as ugly as well as hating pretty women and hating men. In my research, I have mainly concentrated on and compared the femcel-based forum ThePinkPill.co with the subreddit r/ForeverAloneWomen together with the experiences of the interlocutors.

My interviews consist of text and audio conversations mainly on the communication server Discord, with women who reached out to me after seeing my post on different online communities. One interview was conducted on Messenger with an administrator from a femcel support group. I have had five audio interviews with users from the subreddit r/ForeverAloneWomen, where one of the moderators was participating as well. All the interviews have varied in length and depth, depending on the style of the interview. Not surprisingly, the audio interviews have been deeper and richer, since talking creates a more dynamic conversation whereas the chat interviews have been more fragmented. I asked all my informants if they wanted to speak to me via video or audio, but many rejected mostly because they wanted to make sure that they would remain anonymous.

The virtual world is a fast world; something might pique your interest for a short time, and then you are on the run again. With that reflection in mind, and a fear that the bureaucratic steps with obtaining an official and signed consent would make the potential interlocutors lose interest or that they would be afraid of revealing their names and signatures, I chose a different method. Instead, in a creative,

more informal way, I asked and received informed consent from everyone I have had private conversations with both types of consent on e-mail, Discord or Messenger. In addition, all of them was made aware of their right to be anonymous and their right to be able to withdraw any statement at any time.

I have been in contact with several administrators of different image- and bulletin boards to have their permission to post about my research interest and for requesting interviews, which is an important step in the researcher's entrée. I obtained consent from the administrators to post my request for a possible interview, and each time I gave full disclosure of myself and my research. As Mieke Schrooten notes, moderators can be "influential gatekeepers" (Schrooten: 2016: 88) when it comes to accessing an online field, since these can serve as important key figures to assure the rest of the users of the researcher's intentions when doing research among them, which is also what I discovered when I got in contact with a moderator from the subreddit r/ForeverAloneWomen who afterwards shared my request on a private Discord server for FAW.

### 1.3.2. Data collection

We cannot escape the fact that internet culture has become inevitably intertwined with the offline. To capture the complex world of female involuntary celibate environments and to understand the individual and collective experiences within these, requires a more holistic approach which is the very core of doing ethnography. It is not about finding specific fixed answers to the research question but rather to "[...] trace and interpret the complex currents of everyday life [...]" (Boellstorff et al. 2012: 3). Doing fieldwork online thus requires a broad palette of methods. Robert Kozinets notes in his book *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online* (2010) that the ethnographer must conduct three different kinds of data collection when doing fieldwork in the virtual world; 1) *elicited data*, which is the data where the researcher is directly involved in the interaction with the members online e.g. through chat conversations, interviews, e-mails 2) *archival data*, which is data from already produced computer-mediated discussion, conversations, or posts that the researcher is observing and not directly involved in 3) *fieldnote data*, which is the data the researcher creates herself through a fieldwork diary where the researcher writes her own observations. (Kozinets 2010: 98). I have found it fruitful to combine all three since each have allowed me a deep insight in the femcel and FAW environments and the individuals engaging in these which could not have been fulfilled by leaving out one of them.

The elicited data is important and central in ethnographic research and should be conducted to understand how people experience their own role and commitment in a context. This data is thus important to include to grasp the social worlds of the people within an environment. Although this

type of data cannot stand alone since there will often exist a discrepancy between what people say they do and what they actually do (Boellstorff et al. 2012: 92), which is why it is important to use different methods to capture the complexity of a culture.

Therefore, I have also collected archival data such as snapshots of posts to understand the different actions of people who identify as either femcels or forever alone women (FAW). This kind of data should be treated with caution and awareness since these are often only a representation of a culture and cannot necessarily be taken as a clear “[...] indicative of larger patterns within a culture” (Boellstorff et al. 2012: 115). Therefore, the researcher has to be circumspect when it comes to archival data which is why I have had to constantly keep a dialogue with myself as a researcher to understand the broader pattern and not generalise based on every conversation and discussion on the forums (Ibid.: 119). This is where my fieldwork diary has worked as a mediator between my own thoughts and observations.

Fieldwork data is also necessary for the ethnographer since this data can offer valuable observations and findings both in the field and about the ethnographer’s reflexivity during her own process. Moving into the field and moving away from the field can result in interesting new findings and the “[...] contrast between initial and later understanding is often striking when working in a totally unfamiliar culture and language” (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 2011 :174). However, I have chosen to not directly include examples from my fieldnote diary in my thesis, since these has served as my own guidelines and observations which would not have contributed to the aim of the study which is to understand the experiences of the female involuntary celibates.

In my example, both the archival and the elicited data collection have happened with weekly and monthly interruptions and delays from the interlocutors, whereas my fieldwork diary has remained consistent throughout the whole process which has allowed me to keep an overview of my actions, findings, and observations over time. I have kept a journal from my first day of entering the field; from my very first encounter and understanding of the word and definition of *the femcel* to my reflections of my own role and reactions when reaching out to online members in a femcel-based environment. During my time in the field, I encountered how many members reacted with hostility whenever I was disclosing my purpose on the different community forums. In situations like that, the fieldwork diary has also helped me keep an overview of what I wrote, the responses I got, and my own interpretations and thoughts on how I could progress better.

At first, I wanted to provide full disclosure of myself, also for all the online members. I quickly realized that I had to take a few safety measures not to get recognized since one of the reactions to my first post was “I don’t think putting your e-mail here is safe”. With the best of faith, I tried to argue that I was interested in full transparency for the users to be able to trust me. However, soon after I

edited my post, so it only showed my first name with a new anonymous e-mail address made for the purpose. Some of my friends, and especially my partner even advised me to install a VPN (Abbreviation for a virtual private network service which secures all data traffic and hides the IP-address) so that I would be untraceable in case some people would feel anger towards me and my research and therefore try to look up my location. This became even more relevant when I discovered the recent case of the Canadian Twitch-streamer and transgender activist Clara Sorrenti who, in September 2022, became a victim of doxing from the extreme far-right and transphobic Kiwi-farm forum. After Sorrenti made a video where she talked negatively about Kiwi Farms, she has been stalked, attacked, and harassed and now hides someplace in Europe (Gilbert 2022). As mentioned in the chapter *Previous research on femcels*, this behaviour derived from hatred towards women, is not uncommon (Ging 2019). Although I did not witness any extreme potential violent behaviour during my research on and among femcels, the initial hostile reactions together with the Sorrenti case did spark a little anxiety. But since I believed that those who wanted to talk to me about femceldom would not have an interest in potentially threatening or harming me, I therefore never installed a VPN.

### 1.3.3. Ethical considerations

In a complex virtual environment, the archival data must be treated with ethical respect and care. It can be hard to know whether an online environment should be perceived as public or private, not only from the researcher's perspective but also from the participants' perspective. As Boellstorff et al. (2012) note, the ethnographer must first and foremost make sure not to harm anyone, which can be ensured by providing full disclosure of the aim of the study and asking for informed consent when needed. Informed consent is central when it comes to ethical research guidelines, although it is not always necessary to obtain informed consent when the virtual world is considered public (Ibid: 133ff). According to Boellstorff et al., informed consent is not always needed in for example subscription-based virtual worlds, where there are also public areas just like [...] there is nothing inherently unethical about taking a picture of a tourist in an open, general area at an amusement park which is a public place although an admission fee is charged" (Ibid. 135). I have found it quite challenging to judge whether a public forum with anonymous users should be seen as private when an account is not required to see the conversations and posts from others. In his study on incels, Hugo Engholm (2021) employs only archival data where he practices 'lurking' as a method on the anonymous incel-based website Incels.co. Engholm does not use the statements, posts, or conversations from users as if they were [...] actors and individuals, but as authors and creators of texts and media products, as co-producers of Incelism" (Engholm 2022: 29). Thus, leaning on the opinion from Boellstorff et al. (2012) and Engholm (2022), that some virtual worlds can be perceived as public and as a text produced by

people, I have therefore chosen not to ask for informed consent from those who has been engaging in public conversations on forums and image board websites where no membership is required and where everyone can participate anonymously or under a bodyless self-made username.

To see the archival data as a text has been debated. Robert Kozinets argues that researchers need to be flexible in their understanding of archival data and not necessarily delineate between what is private and public and what is a place and a text. The members of involuntary celibacy online platforms, debate and write about sexual absence, loneliness, and rejection, and although this is mediated through a platform, it is still real feelings that they have experienced. I will argue, that just because we see the archival data as a text, it does not mean that we should completely forget that online communities can be perceived as real places for those who interact there. We cannot always apply human-based ethics on the internet and I have therefore chosen to "[...] acknowledge both the spatial and textual understandings of computer-mediated communications" (Kozinets 2010: 141) in the online environments. As Engholm addresses, it would be unethical to try to 'blend in' as an incel, in my case as a femcel, which is why participant observation has not been an option either. Although "[...] total participation is not a requirement of an ethnographic approach" (Boellstorff et al. 2012: 80), it would not have been justifiable in my case to lurk in a conversation, and then try to involve myself. Many female involuntary celibacy online environments have specific demands for memberships, although everyone in principle can become a member. I would then have had to announce my presence as a researcher every time I was engaging in a conversation, potentially causing distress, or harming the person venting about her problems.

From the beginning, I was aware that I would never feel right about pretending to be 'one of them' – I would feel like I dishonoured their community and safe place, and I did not want to come out as insensitive to the members and commit what Nakamura (2002), Boellstorff et al. (2012) calls "identity tourism" which would violate [...] the principle of avoiding deception" (Boellstorff et al. 2012: 90). In the Swedish psychiatrist and writer Stefan Krakowski's popular scientific book, *Incel: om ofrivilligt celibat och en mansroll i kris* (Incel: about involuntary celibacy and a male role in crisis, eng.red) (2021), he takes a rather experimental approach to investigate incels online where he pretends to be an incel. Despite good intentions and a wish to shed a light on the inside world of incels, I would argue, in line with Nakamura 2002 and Boellstorff et al. 2012, that it is ethically wrong to enter an online environment disguising yourself while having personal conversations entailing private information for the purpose of doing research.

## 2. Where to go? Finding a direction

In the following analysis, I will include conversations with women who either consider themselves femcels or forever alone women (FAW). My examples involve both quotes from my interlocutors as well as archival data which I have collected from ThePinkPill forum and from the subreddit r/ForeverAlonewomen. All women have been anonymized under a name I have chosen for them or under a self-chosen nickname and they have all been given the right to share as much or as little as they wished. Worth mentioning is also that I have left out some specific information or details, that could potentially reveal the identity of the informants. All women have contributed with valuable information to the study, and without their voice and sincerity, this study would not have existed. I owe them great gratitude. In the following chapter, I will concentrate on how the women who participated in the study are oriented towards love, and especially the lack of it, and how this direction has turned into a collective and shared reality of either being a FAW or a femcel.

### 2.1. An orientation towards love

In the online environment of femcels and forever alone women, the orientation towards love is the most important theme. As Ahmed noted, we tend to turn towards objects, that has been presented to us, and something that is near-at-hand (Ahmed 2006: 2). We can have a certain perception of love which in turn gives us a position towards the object of love, which can both be positive or negative. From my interview with Rachel, a 29-year-old American woman who identify as a FAW, we see that her understanding, and perception of love is something she has carried with her throughout her childhood:

I always thought that once I would get married, I would move out. Once I would get a boyfriend I would move out because then at least I would have someone to be there with me. I mean, that's what my mom did, so that's how I always saw my life being (Rachel: 12f).

Rachel is a member of the subgroup r/ForeverAloneWomen on Reddit, and she reached out to me on Discord after my conversation with the moderator of the group, Elizabeth. As we see in the quote above, Rachel still lives at home, and even though she would like to move out one day, she has a clear idea, mostly based on her mother's experience, that moving out also entails having a partner to do that with. Rachel explains that she had a boyfriend eight years ago, and that they met on the website Omegle, which is a video chat site where you can meet strangers and talk. They kept in contact for a

couple of years and eventually they met in person and Rachel moved to the state where he lived. However, it was not a healthy relationship since he was emotionally manipulative and kept blaming her for missing her parents: “The reason why I stayed with him was because I felt like there was no one else out there for me and so because of that, even to this day, I’m still single” (Rachel: 6).

Following Eva Illouz, it seems that Rachel’s self was threatened in the relationship because of his behaviour, and due to her orientation and direction towards love as something she desired, she stayed with him but at the same time experienced emotional misery (Illouz 2012: 130). Rachel perceives and desires love the way it has been presented to her in her childhood through her parents, but at the same time, she has always feared that she would never be able to get married, which is why she used to “obsess” about talking to strange men online when she was 17, as she describes it herself. “I guess it was a self-fulfilling prophecy” (Rachel: 7), she says, indirectly blaming herself for the lack of romantic love, which is, as Illouz argues, quite typical for the modern perception of romantic love, where you constantly must balance between autonomy and recognition to keep the self intact (Ibid).

Lily is, just like Rachel, an American woman who is also a member of the subreddit r/ForeverAloneWomen and she also describes herself as such. During our interview, Lily explained brutally honest but with an ironic inclination, that she does not imagine finding anyone who would like to date her, especially because of her physical disorder which makes it hard for her to move around. I will return to more specific details about Lily’s physical health situation later. Despite her quite cynical view on life, as she expresses it herself, she used to orient towards love and still does even though she does not seem to have any hope succeeding to find it:

I am actually a very romantic person at heart, and I would like to have somebody in my life to make memories share time with and stuff. I believe that happiness is only real when shared. In a perfect world I would like to find a partner (Lily: 27).

As Ahmed notes, feeling lost can become a familiar feeling and still lead people towards something, which in this case towards love as something unattainable. In Lily’s perception of love as something impossible to reach, it seems that she has become oriented towards the lack of love and a state of emotional despair. When the common denominator for female involuntary celibates is the lack of love, the familiar world for Lily might be exactly about being oriented towards the lack of love, which then becomes hard to initiate from.

Lily explains that she has had a boyfriend before, and that the experience made her change her perception of men: “I never believed that evil existed until I met this guy” (Lily: 40), and she explains how he was psychologically manipulative, how he was unfaithful, and how he once threatened her

with a knife. Lily also explains how she during her upbringing had to endure physically and emotionally violent parents, who together with the horrible experience with her now ex-boyfriend, has resulted in CPTSD (Complex post-traumatic stress disorder).

It was a horrible experience, and I did see the red flags in the relationship but when I brought them up, he'd talk me out of it. It did force me to reckon with the fact that my entire life I've been trained to talk myself out of and just missed my own feelings for the sake of other people's happiness and peace (Lily: 45).

Another FAW woman, who is also a part of the subreddit and the Discord, shares similar experiences. Hanka is 23 years old and lives in The Czech Republic. She explains that she has had a couple of brief encounters with men, but that is has been years since she went on a date with someone. When she was younger, she dated older men, who unfortunately manipulated her and treated her badly, which has caused anxiety and mental health issues. She is still longing for love, although she seems to be consumed with despair about her situation.

One of the things I would like is having a family and a baby but I'm forever alone [...] I would like a relationship. I don't like being alone. I feel really bad about being like this. And I would really like a future where I could start a family with someone, but I can't even get to date. I can't talk to men so that's a problem for me (Hanka: 3,12).

Lily and Hanka, both describe themselves as either “unapproachable” and “ugly” (Hanka: 8) or “awkward” and “dumb-looking” (Lily: 7f) which they both connect to why men have not been interested in them. By having experienced bullying and romantic rejection, the autonomy of the self has been challenged and resulted in self-blame which is more common for women than for men in the modern world (Illouz 2012: 137). Common for Lily, Rachel and Hanka is that they all had a clear orientation towards love, and all three found what seemed to be a romantic relationship. However, that romantic love has turned out to affect the bodily orientation towards a void: a disorientation that has left them with bad experiences and a damaged self-esteem. The position towards love as something unattainable in turn has given them a position as unable to find love: as femcels, forever alone or involuntary celibates.

When the direction gets blurry, you might turn to direction lines made by others (Ahmed 2006: 15), which in this case means that the lost feeling or not being able to find love, can make people orient towards the collective. In the case of Lily and Rachel, their romantic encounters were not reciprocated the way they expected, and the failure of love seems to have turned into an even stronger orientation

towards the collective, where the lack of love is the norm and where the despair about that disorientation is the very basis of the creation of the community. The suffering of romantic experiences thus directs the women towards the sacred: the femcel community. The women have thus experienced a lack of visibility and according to Andreasson, they have also experienced the consequences of antisocial response when their search for romantic love has not been reciprocated. Although I agree with Andreasson here, I believe that the theory of antisocial response does not explain why they align so strongly with the collective. The theory might explain their suffering, but not the meaning of being a member of the collective. Building on Andreasson's theory, I will argue, that due to this hopelessness, or antisocial response they have experienced, they have oriented towards the sacred of the femcel-based environments where they, by identifying as involuntary celibates have felt that they have regained an autonomy.

## 2.2. A collective orientation

As described above, it seems that when the orientation towards love results in failure, people tend to turn their direction towards the 'lines' made by others. In the following chapter, I seek to understand how and why some women have turned to a collective body when experiencing the failure of love, and how a collective orientation towards the lack of love may have an element of constraint in the 'reorientation' and hope towards love.

As mentioned in the chapter *Habitus and initiation*, I exemplified a possible constraining habitus of being a part of femcel and FAW community, since these, reading from this following quote from the subreddit r/ForeverAloneWomen, does not allow or welcome: "[...] promiscuous women, SW, single mums, 3rd time divorcees, etc. [...]" (r/ForeverAloneWomen, Reddit).

There is thus a ban for women who have had experiences dating, although as we will examine further later, these rules are negotiable for becoming a member.

From my conversation with the 23-year-old Sunny from The Philippines, she explains that she has found comfort in the FAW community and that she has felt heard in her feelings of loneliness. She has never dated or been in a relationship, and she also finds it difficult to find friends in real life outside of the online space of the FAW community:

The lack of romantic love is the common denominator among all of us [...] When I joined FAW, my insecurity became less. I am still insecure, but I never cry anymore because of my appearance. It's just seldom that I wish I can find someone. Most of the time I feel like I'll be fine to be single forever, but I'd really want friends like the women I've met in FAW. I share my struggles with them, help me see myself in a better light, and I also find happiness when I see or hear them achieving in life (Sunny, Discord).

Sunny's individual experience of her membership of the group is very positive, which Lily, Rachel, and Hanka support. They all explain how they share their frustrations and struggles and support and comfort each other in the group when everything seems hopeless. Hanka explains how she in the beginning was insecure whether the subreddit of r/ForeverAloneWomen was the right one for her to join, since she was not completely inexperienced when it came to dating: "I talked about this on the Discord with some of the moderators, and I found out that they're accepting of this" (Hanka: 2). Hanka is not the only one who has dating experiences. In fact, most of the women I have talked to have been on a few dates although this does not mean that they will get excluded from the subreddit or from the Discord server since they do not date on a regular basis.

Astrid, a 39-year-old Scandinavian woman who is also a member of the FAW subreddit and Discord server, says that she considers herself FAW because of all the problematic criteria that is often a part femcel groups:

Only this person can be a femcel and all types of things like this and 'we all hate men because men are only interested in our looks'. There's a difference in the mentality because I feel like the people who identify as forever alone women have usually been on a couple of dates and has more life experience basically (Astrid: 1).

Astrid suffers from a chronic physical disease, which limits her daily life. She is in a wheelchair and her energy level varies every day. She often struggles to go out and meet friends, and she too has found comfort in the FAW community. From Astrid's quote, we see that there is a divide between the FAW communities and femcel communities which I will analyse further in the following chapter.

Although all women are very positive towards the FAW community, it is interesting to consider whether being a part of the environment might indulge despair instead of hope, making the state of 'respair' hard to reach.

As we see from the criteria of becoming a member of FAW, the collective lines, as Ahmed (2006) would call it, are very much organized about previous romantic experiences. The initiation, as Jackson (2014) calls it, towards love in case, can then also have a consequence of being excluded by the community. If you begin to date or have sex on a regular basis, you might get excluded since you no longer meet the general criteria of membership. But as Lindroth emphasised with her definition of 'nuckan' (spinster, eng.red), the spinster can still have many sexual experiences while at the same time being romantically deprived and miserable. Lindroth's definition is therefore not consistent with the FAW's definition, since the description box on the subreddit states that: "If you date/fuck around and can't find the right person, /r/dating. If you can find relationships but feel alone, /r/lonely"

(r/ForeverAloneWomen, Reddit), which means that you should move to other subreddits for example r/dating or r/lonely instead of the FAW. From the screenshot below, we see a clear example of how members are trying to uphold the criteria of the group by challenging and claiming that other people's experiences does not fit with the collective.



Figure 1: r/ForeverAloneWomen, Reddit

Although the behaviour on the subreddit might differ from the Discord server, where fewer women are subscribing, the example does not yield much proof of an inclusive space. The boundaries between what is considered appropriate for being a member seem hazy, and a post like this could easily make possible members insecure about whether their previous experiences would give them access to the group. As we also saw from the quote from Hanka (page 33), she was insecure whether she, because of her dating history, would be able to become a member. The rules of the subreddit thus limit both the possible entrance and the possible exit, since finding sex and love would be considered a definite exit from the group. Instead, if they considered themselves spinsters, in accordance with Lindroth's definition, orienting towards love and not the lack of it, would perhaps be more commendable since there would not exist a fear of being excluded consequently for dating and having sex. It therefore seems that the groups have some constraining elements based on their criteria.

Rachel explains, how she rarely interacts directly with the group, since she once had a bad experience during a common voice call on the Discord server which made her feel uncomfortable:

I was talking about this Twitch streamer that I really liked. There's some controversy around him because even though he's a socialist he lives in this expensive house. And people were like 'oh how can you be a socialist if you have all these expensive things'. So, they were arguing about it and saying, 'oh well he's

not even that hot anyways, I don't know why girls are always into him' and how he used to have sex with prostitutes [...] I mean, it's not like you have to agree with everything a person does just to watch them. It's just a little piece of him (Rachel: 17f).

From this example, it seems that Rachel's initiation is somewhat constrained, since she, by her topic during the voice call, is deriving from the common group dynamics. The habitus of the group might be concentrated about certain topics, which does not allow for its members to initiate other, perhaps sensitive topics that potentially could jeopardize the cohesion of the group.

I would argue, that even though this example is not about initiating towards love, but instead initiating towards something different than what the group usually orients towards, the group dynamic has a potential constraining behaviour towards initiations that are not 'in line' with what they stand for. Rachel's initiation towards mentioning a male Twitch streamer, who perhaps due to his debatable morals about politics and women, would endanger the habitus of the group and contrast with how they are actively trying to avoid talking about powerful high-profile men.

Although the other women, whom I've mentioned, do not express feelings about exclusion, Rachel's experience tells something about the dynamics of the group, which maybe limits questions and in turn controls which discussions are made available. When the orientation of the collective is shared towards love as an unreachable object, the experience Rachel had, would perhaps make her insecure about what lines to follow in the future if she wants to be a part of the group.

Hanka explains how she identifies as a FAW since it gives a sense of belonging somewhere, but that there also is a risk of losing hope when being a part of such an environment.

I understood [the risk] when I was joining the community, but still I wanted someone to share my struggles with. In a way the rules of the FAW reddit: 'don't tell posters they are pretty, they know it's not true', would make the poster losing hope. But then at least it's public and the poster would know that it's not a place where she would be told that it will get better (Hanka, Discord).

The question is whether the lack of hope will result in despair and limit going towards the state of 'respair', which Kay and Banet-Weiser has proposed as a term for how feminist rage can turn into a helpful tool in gaining awareness. Although I will not concentrate specifically on feminist rage, the term still applies to 'doing some action' against or orient away from what you collectively and/or individually have experienced which in this case is shared feelings and experiences of romantic rejection, loneliness etc.

Collective hopelessness and suffering or what Ahmed (2014) calls 'wound fetishism' can turn into a form of shared collective identity. As mentioned, Ahmed is using this term to describe especially

subaltern collective suffering within politics, but within the femcel communities, this suffering might curb the orientation towards the state of despair. When love is not reciprocated, it might create a more intense feeling and orientation towards the failure which in turn can become the very being of the individual. This line of orientation is dependent on people to uphold it but are also created by repetition (Ahmed 2006), which potentially could sustain the wound. When suffering, people tend to turn towards the sacred, which in this case is the femcel or forever alone community.

As we saw with the development of modern femcels on TikTok, who idolises their sad and depressing lives, the wound that traditional femcels has experienced, is now what defines this new wave 'femcelism'. I would argue that the modern femcels have oriented towards an extreme form of despair which seems to be a general risk when engaging in femcel-based communities and environments.

The two examples below are from the subreddit r/ForeverAloneWomen. The context here is from a post where the author of the post is feeling down because of how ugly she is and how being aware of that weighs her down in her everyday life. The answers are varied, but it seems like two different mindsets about this kind of struggling are showing:

Yes, all the time. I don't want to get carried away with my fantasies and begin to believe they're actually possible, so I regularly remind myself I am unlovable, that if I ever were in a relationship it would basically be me abusing someone because I'm so awful. I don't mean or want to be awful, I try hard not to be, but there isn't much you can do when you're born a monster.

It's important that I regularly remind myself that I'm harmful and that it's best I stay away from people.

*Figure 2: r/ForeverAloneWomen, Reddit*

No, I don't do that anymore. I've accepted it, some people are just prettier and more interesting than others. Reminding myself only caused me serious mental problems. Now I'm trying to enjoy life as much as I can and not to drown in self pity for being the way I am. I did what I could for me, lost weight, started therapy, made new friends. And I try to become a better person than I used to be, it's difficult but taking small steps is better than nothing.

*Figure 3: r/ForeverAloneWomen, Reddit*

The first answer is from a member who agrees, and that she destructively wants to stay in the state of despair, because she is 'unlovable' and 'born a monster'. The second is from a woman, who seems to be trying to orient towards a state of hope since focusing on other people's beauty and fortune only made her feel bad. Although there might be a dominant tone of despair overall, the latter quote shows, that she is not afraid of initiating a different orientation than many others, which suggests that the members of the subreddit can be open about their getting-better-stories and encourage others to follow

them. The women might find alignment in the shared orientation of love as an unreachable object, but at the same time, they seem to encourage each other to do good things for themselves, which the moderator Elizabeth, whom I will include in the following chapter, agrees to.

Returning to Hanka's experiences of a possible sense of hopelessness by being a member of the group, she admits that there is a risk of that happening:

I would like to think that being a part of the group doesn't discourage me from trying to get better and dreaming about getting into a long term relationship, but it's hard to tell this to yourself (...)I do however see signs of isolation when it comes to options about my relationship status/virginity, since I joined the community I somehow consciously avoid "outside of the bubble" takes on my situation. But it doesn't mean that the FA women just tell me that nothing can help me and that I should stay home. They encourage me to get better [...] I think Elizabeth and other FAW mods are actively trying to avoid the situation when the community would turn into a despair factory. Ex-FAW women can for example share their it-gets-better stories and going on dates as a FAW is encouraged (Hanka: Discord).

It seems that whether sharing feelings of hope or despair, the community is open to listen and to give advice. Most of the women I have spoken to explain that they enjoy being a part of the community, and that they have almost only gained positive experiences. Lily explains that they often watch movies or play games together online, where they just "chill and hang out. Like a slumber party" (Lily: 19f). It therefore seems that the women actively try to focus on other things than just their shared suffering connected to the lack of romantic love.

### 2.3. The moderating role and inclusion

During my fieldwork, I met Elizabeth who is one of the moderators of FAW subreddit. Elizabeth is 35 years old and from France. She has both been moderating the r/ForeverAlone subreddit, which is for both men and women, and now the female-based subreddit r/ForeverAloneWomen. Elizabeth has had a double role in my study since she has contributed with experiences about her own life as a FAW and with experiences as a moderator from where she has provided a more general overview and understanding of the online environment. Elizabeth was the first woman from the subreddit I interviewed, and after our conversation, I felt uplifted that I could finally share all my questions and considerations I had have for a long time. During our conversation, Elizabeth was trustful and open, and she told me that people in the Discord server often calls her 'the big sister' because she provides them with firm commiseration and due to her age understands what it is like to grow up with the internet which maybe the parents of the younger members do not. Her open spirit also contributed to me asking deep questions and she made the conversation relaxed and comfortable.

As a moderator, Elizabeth is aware that she sometimes needs to decide what is appropriate for the members to talk about: “I’m a bit ‘gatekeepy’ because I refuse.. there is a fine line between allowing people to vent and enabling people to ruminate” (Elizabeth: 37). When or if some of the women feel lonely, Elizabeth explains that she always encourages them to go out among people and come back to the online group and vent about it afterwards. The group even has monthly goals for the members to orient towards something else than their ‘forever loneliness’. If ‘the collective lines’ towards love as an unreachable object opens new possibilities outside the norm of being involuntary celibate and forever alone, the women might have a chance of becoming reoriented towards something else than the orientation towards the absence of love.

When you’re 30 something and you have an 18-year-old something joining the server, my goal is for them to leave that place. Not because they don’t like it but because their situation should improve and to get dates and such (Elizabeth: 39f).

However, the community is still primarily founded on being involuntary celibate and forever alone, and when the collective orientation is based upon this specific requirement, advice regarding focusing on something else might not be as visible as an option. As Ahmed (2006) mentions, being lost, or disoriented still leads people somewhere, and the position as FAW, or involuntary celibate might prompt a familiar feeling that can be hard to exit. If the feeling of being lost has become the familiar habitus, the orientation or initiation towards something unfamiliar outside of the group norm; going on dates or trying to make new friends could perhaps be constrained. If the individual body no longer sees these options, despite the wish to follow these, the lost feeling can perhaps become too comfortable.

As mentioned previously, the criterion for becoming a member is firm but somehow also negotiable. As Hanka mentioned, she was not sure whether she would fit in the group due to her previous dating experiences. From the description of the subreddit group r/ForeverAloneWomen as we saw in the chapter *A collective orientation* (Page 32) and the screenshot from a conversation between members on the subreddit (page 34) the membership requirements are firm and does not accept women simply because they are feeling lonely.

For some of them it’s very easy to gatekeep. Like the woman who joins and tells us that she’s married but she feels alone then you’re like ‘okay girl let me find you a definition in a dictionary about what it means to be alone’. It’s not about being lonely it’s about being alone (Elizabeth: 38).

There is thus a ban for women who do not meet the requirements of being forever alone. The identification of the requirements can be intensified the more you find familiarity in the social that surrounds you which is also what Hanka indirectly expresses: “If it was my choice, I wouldn’t like to identify with it, but the more I talk to the women, the more I will identify as that” (Hanka: 6). As Ahmed (2006) notes, the direction an individual orients towards, will become the very being of the individual which it will be very difficult to change. As we see from Hanka’s quote, being a part of the subreddit and the Discord makes her connect more and more with the term ‘forever alone’, although she wishes that she could identify as something else. The word ‘choice’ suggests that her own identification is out of her hands since she started talking to the other members, which seems constraining in her general orientation. She has surrendered to a collective orientation towards the lack of love. However, the identification as a FAW or a femcel might also give an individual and collective autonomy. I will return to this point later on in the chapter *Categorizing an identity*.

#### 2.4. Concluding remarks

In the three chapters above, I have analysed how the orientation towards love, or rather the orientation towards the lack of love has become ‘the familiar’ from where the women within the FAW community seem to orient themselves from. As we saw in the first chapter, the failure of finding romantic love, has led the women towards a void, where the position towards love as something unreachable in turn gives them a position as unable to find love: as femcels, forever alone or involuntary celibates. The individual bodily felt despair thus becomes the very starting point for seeking the collective, and in turn becomes the basis of the shared collective experiences. As Andreasson argued, the lack of social response has made femcels and incels suffer, which has induced a hopelessness. To develop Andreasson argument, I have found that it is exactly this antisocial response, or as I have chosen to call it, lack of recognition, that has made the women orientate towards the collective where they have found and regained an autonomy of their selves.

As we saw in the second chapter *A collective orientation*, I explained from Rachel’s experiences of being in the FAW online environment and how the rules and criteria of the group, could potentially be constraining for the members’ initiation towards anything outside of the common criteria. We also saw from the overall requirements of becoming a member of the FAW subreddit, that having regular sex cannot coexist with the status of being forever alone, which contrasts Malin Lindroth’s definition of the spinster.

Even though there is a dominant opinion of the online community as tolerant and understanding, Hanka’s statements show, that there might be a risk of losing hope when engaging in a community where all share the same experiences of being forever alone and where voices and opinions from

outside of the group are seldom. However, the quote from subreddit r/ForeverAloneWomen showed, that the community cherish and support women who tries to focus on other things than their involuntary celibacy and their despair, and that the moderator Elizabeth is actively trying to get the member to focus on getting better and to have hope about the future. Although Elizabeth creates monthly goals and initiations for the women to follow, I argued that these initiations might be too unfamiliar to follow, since feeling lost in the first place led them to the FAW community. If the individual body has become too stuck in the familiar habitus, they might not initiate outside of the online environment despite the wish to follow these. The lost feeling has perhaps become too familiar.

### 3. Categorizing an identity

During my conversations with the six women from the subreddit r/ForeverAloneWomen, it became evident that all of them see a big distinction between identifying as a FAW or a femcel. In general, there seems to be an increased focus on how to identify oneself in online environments, where very specific rules to that identification becomes prominent in the distinction from others.

#### 3.1. The attitude of the online environment

In the description-section on the r/ForeverAloneWomen subreddit, there are clear rules on how to behave in the group. Rule number 3 states that there should be: ‘No incel/femcel/FDS lingo’ (r/ForeverAloneWomen). Elizabeth explains that she hates labels in general and that if she had to define herself as something, it would not be forever alone since she prefers something else:

[...] I think forever alone it's a bit of a, sorry, retarded label. Because forever suggests that can predict what's going to happen and no one can. If I could go back in time and change the name, it would be permanently single (Elizabeth: 7).

According to Elizabeth, the intention behind the subreddit has been to create something else than femcel forums. In femcel forums, the language often gets extreme and sometimes misandrist and hateful, which most of the forever alone women does not support.

Astrid agrees that she does not like the femcel lingo, where terms like ‘normie’, ‘Stacy’, and ‘Becky’ are frequently used to describe people’s looks in a hierarchical order. As mentioned in the previous chapter, *Traditional femcels*, this type of language is often used within incel and femcel spaces. Astrid believes that there is an excluding consequence if you do not meet the standards of what it means to be a femcel. She believes that the mentality of femcels is quite young, and she explains that she has experienced exclusion just because she was too pretty. Even though Elizabeth argues that

she does not like the labels and therefore made a ban using it on the Reddit, Astrid believes that the motivation behind the ban lies somewhere else:

The moderators don't want to get banned. If you use that kind of incel or femcel language, the sub would probably get banned like the femcels subs were. The people who run Reddit are some misogynist fucking assholes. They banned all the feminist subs and the most feminine subs are now run by men. So, I'm sure the moderators are being very cautious. And since many of them came to ForeverAloneWomen after they got banned, the moderators are trying to tone it down and be more mature (Astrid: 24).

It is clear, that all the women who perceive themselves as forever alone, are very opinionated when it comes to femcels and their communities. They are very concerned about distinguishing themselves and their community from the femcels' and they perceive the hatred towards both men and women that exists there, as toxic and as something they do not want to be a part of.

From Astrid's quote, it is interesting to consider whether this distinction is derived from a need to orient away from femcels because of a possible threat to get banned. However, in line with Astrid's argument, Elizabeth do agree that she has prohibited incel and femcel lingo due to a general ban of femcel subreddits, since she did not want her subreddit to get banned as well. She also mentions that when she joined the forever alone community, the term femcel did not exist at the time. Even though she is part of an online community herself, she "hates community lingo", since "Every time the lingo takes on, it becomes an echo chamber. Language facilitates. It's like a cold sore or multi-level marketing. They use all these words that mean nothing" (Elizabeth: 2). There may be two reasons for banning the femcel and incel language in the forever alone community, but from what we saw from the quote, Elizabeth's main intention has been to limit the dangerous echo-chamber tone that can happen in an online environment, where people risk losing their perspective, she adds.

Just like Astrid, Rachel, Sunny, and Hanka explain how they do not align themselves with the term femcel. Hanka admits that she probably: "[...] fit the label 'academically' as in that I am female living in involuntary celibacy, but I do not identify with the women who publicly use that label because of how they present themselves and what they say about other women" (Hanka, Discord). It is thus the connotations with the term 'femcel' and the behaviour of the women who align with the category, that have made the forever alone women orient towards the FAW term and the associated online environment. Despite the differences between FAW and femcels, their orientation towards love, or the absence of love is similar, as Hanka also points out. From my research of both femcels and FAW, the women who perceive themselves as femcels seem to have a more extreme view on themselves and others. As previously mentioned, the femcel community also has a very specific vocabulary to describe

themselves, others, and their looks.

Laura, a 21-year-old woman from Spain, describes how to fit into the femcel-category: “To become a femcel you have to be either fat, very ugly, have a serious mental illness or have some kind of behavioural disorder. Simply having something that displeases men and women to be with you” (Laura, Discord). Laura reached out to me after seeing my post on ThePinkPill.co, which is a forum for women who identify as femcels and she explains how she needed some guidance to understand her own situation as involuntary celibate. Through the now closed subreddit r/Trufemcels, she learned that she was not alone with her problems, and how she found a solution to get out of her status as a femcel:

Right now, I am in a process of looksmaxxing to be able to ascend. But I’ve been thinking about it, and I don’t know if I’ll be able to, when I’ve lost the weight, spent all those hours of therapy to improve my personality and my way of being, not to hold a grudge against a potential romantic partner in the future (Laura, Discord).

In the quote, terms that exist within the incel and femcel sphere are used to describe what Laura and many other femcels are oriented towards. I would argue, that femcels are not only oriented towards love, but also towards good looks which should potentially be a tool in fulfilling the wish for love. The subject of looks is a prominent within the femcel communities which I will examine further in the next chapter, *The reality of female involuntary celibates*.

Although Laura is open for women who have a partner to join the femcel community, she explains that it would be problematic for many other members to accept. She addresses the risk of hate and exclusion and that many do not feel excitement and joy for those women who has ascended, which she believes is problematic. From a few discussions I have observed on the ThePinkPill, the exclusion which Laura describes, is quite evident.

In the following example, some of the members discuss how ‘normies’, ‘Beckies’, and ‘Stacies’ occasionally are looking for comfort and commiseration in the femcel community. In the thread, it is obvious that normal and good-looking women asking for help, is not accepted. Most members even think it is offensive for non-femcels to be there asking for advice, since a femcel by default must be ugly:

I don't even understand how someone that's supposedly attractive could have such low self esteem. I just had a bit of a browse on this discord and there's a supposed Stacy in there

*Figure 5: ThePinkPill.co*

Oh and I agree that she definitely was not joking when she said she wanted to further improve her looks and leave us in the dust. People rub shoulders with those they think of as “less than” them to quiet their discomfort until they finally find the means to assimilate with those they always thought of as

*Figure 4: ThePinkPill.co*

Whereas the members of the FAW environment accept and support each other in their lack of love despite some of them have had dating experiences, femcels seem to have more absolute criteria for being able to identify as a femcel. Kristen, a 38-year-old American woman, whom I met on a Facebook group for femcels, supports Laura's observation about the internal hate within the femcel spheres. At first, Kristen understood the term femcel simply as a woman who is involuntary celibate, but when looking further into the femcel environment, she quickly realized that there also existed another prominent criterion:

I found ThePinkPill to focus more on objective ugliness than anything else. I guess I don't agree [...] When I saw certain threads go down the route of 'how ugly do you really have to be?', it seemed like this was missing the original definition of femcel. I really think it should be as simple as being involuntary celibate (Kristen: Discord).

Both Laura and Kristen have been or are a part of ThePinkPill community, and they agree that the tone can be very excluding. In line with the examples from ThePinkPill.co included above, Laura has a quite clear definition of the requirements for being a femcel (page 41f). You must meet a certain standard for being able to call yourself a femcel. Although she does not align with the excluding tone, she still orients towards the same direction and therefore seem to share the same habitus of believing that people should be divided into a hierarchy of either beautiful or ugly, bad, or good: "[...] thanks to the term femcel, I have known the wisdom of women better than me" (Laura, Discord). The attitude of the femcel environment thus leaves little room for initiation outside the norms, which in this case is the understanding of women who perceive themselves as femcels, but perhaps do not objectively fit into the category 'ugly'. From the statement above, we see how Kristen do not resonate with the 'ugly-criteria', and she adds that "A lot of emotional trauma and pain was found in some posters. I guess I didn't resonate with this and found it off-putting" (Kristen: Discord).

### 3.2. Women hating women

When it comes to internal hate, the women who are or have been a part of ThePinkPill community, emphasises how the tone can get toxic – especially towards women, who do not meet the criteria of being for example objectively ugly. The FAW community seem to be more embracing when it comes to supporting other women in their journey towards feeling better about themselves, whereas the members of ThePinkPill environment "[...] seemed jealous of other women which seemed unfortunate" (Kristen, Discord). Although the FAW online group also has strict rules for the members, Elizabeth emphasises that it should be a place for women to feel safe without experiencing hatred from

others on the server.

I get it if you're really pretty and every day of the of the week you get hit on. It must be freaking annoying. I do not deny that. But it's insulting to come to for example my server or my subreddit and be like 'oh my God I would kill to be like you guys'. No, you won't. Most of us we're here because we're traumatized, and many have PTSD. I think that says a lot (Elizabeth: 25).

Even though Elizabeth mentions a pretty-privilege as a reason for why some women should not be joining the server, being pretty is not a main issue, since she also mentions that many of the members of FAW are very beautiful women. It is more about the shared traumas, that some women, who has not experienced that, neglects just to be able to feel better about themselves in a supporting atmosphere. Hanka explains how she, on the femcel communities have experienced an unwelcoming atmosphere:

I looked at the femcel forums. What I have seen was just angry girls that called other women names, and I don't like that. That's how I feel. I don't feel that prostitutes take all the good men away from me. So, I really didn't like the misogyny and internalized sexism there (Hanka: 10).

It seems that the habitus within the ThePinkPill is more absolute and fixed than the FAW environment, as we saw from the example from ThePinkPill on page 43. In the example from the FAW subreddit on page 36, where two women expressed different opinions on how to cope with feelings of being alone and their status of involuntary celibacy it showed, opposite to ThePinkPill example, that different opinions and coping strategies are accepted.

The social habitus is sustained through what Jackson calls stereotypical ideas and bodily habits, that tend to strengthen each other, and whenever the surrounding environment is stable, so will these stereotypical ideas. In this case, believing in objectively ugliness, the lack of love, a hierarchical classification of people and so forth. It therefore seems harder to initiate towards love, and not the lack of love, within the ThePinkPill environment than the FAW, since the FAW environment encourages its members to talk about possible dates or orienting towards love and social contact outside of the online group. In the femcel community, the habitus seem more absolute and constrained which in turn makes it harder for the individual to initiate a transition of the habitus. I would therefore argue that it is more likely for a member of a femcel-based community to stay within the sacred community of femcels when suffering, with a less probability to go towards hope.

In the example below, a member of ThePinkPill is talking about how her personality and the way she acts might make people think that she is promiscuous despite her still being a virgin.

Femceldom is hell and like hell there are levels (at least, as per the supposition of Dante). I feel like I have achieved a lower, more hilarious level of hell than the average r/ForeverAloneWomen. Because while some of them are paranoid people suspect they are virgin and.....no one thinks I am. EVEN THOUGH I AM FAT AND UGLY. Probably uglier than 80% of FAW. I would love for people to assume I am a virgin (cuz I am). So what's the deal, world? What did I do to you, bitch?

Figure 6: *ThePinkPill.co*

What is interesting here, is that she compares herself with FAW as people who are above her when it comes to looks, and that she cannot be a FAW but must be a femcel based on her bad looks. She is positioning FAW as a different category, where “the average forever alone woman” must be someone who at least are looking prettier than her and other femcels. When the femcel community is mainly built upon how looks and lookism are affecting the individuals’ lives, it might seem easier to stay within the habitus and reinforce the overall rules and requirements by comparing with others, here the forever alone women, to dwell on the suffering.

As Ahmed notes, when people make suffering into a shared identity, there is a risk and a danger that the collective wound will become the very being of the individual, and the wound will become static and unfixable. The wound then becomes the collective identity, and it becomes even harder to escape the sense of hopelessness when the foundation of the community is built upon despair. As we see it in the femcel communities, the pain about being ‘objectively ugly’, as many believe they are, has become the very collective body of a shared universalism. In the chapter *Previous research on female involuntary celibates*, we saw how a collective victimhood operates within the incelsphere online as Engholm (2021) and Ging (2019) argued. Whereas the collective victimhood within the incel environments seem to be a prominent trope legitimising harming others, the collective victimhood, or wound fetishism, which also exist within the femcelosphere, on the contrary seem to legitimise a hatred towards oneself. We see from this quote, how the user criticises herself where the words ‘ugly’ and ‘fat’ are written in capital letters to emphasise how she fits under the category ‘femcel’. Her degrading description of herself thus speaks into how Jilly Boyce Kay describes how female anger is more self-directed than male anger, as we see for example see with incels (Kay 2022: 39). Lily explains how she does not align with the collective victimization that she has discovered is quite prominent within the femcel communities:

I don’t like the term femcel because the word has so many bad connotations are associated with things like aggressiveness and kind of rolling over and being a victim. A lot of the women I found on forever alone are very compassionate and understanding people. They just struggle (Lily: 19f).

During my chat conversation with the 20-year-old American woman, Emma, the possible constraining

attitude of femcel communities also came up as a topic:

Sometimes hugboxing is an issue. The supportive atmosphere can be suffocating at times because sometimes I want someone to mirror off and give their own opinion on it since it helps me figure stuff out. The replies can get predictable but there are interesting comments occasionally (Emma: Discord).

Emma contacted me privately on Discord after I made a post on the female-based bulletin board Crystal Café asking for women who wanted to talk to me about their femcel status. The website is not an official femcel forum, but a forum for females only, where it is common for the users to talk about romantic and social rejection, involuntary celibacy, and feeling ugly. Emma emphasises the so-called hugboxing as an issue within the femcel communities, which is a slang phrase for how an online environment tend to reinforce a limited set of rules and opinions.

The hatred towards oneself thus seems to be a part of the habitus within many femcel-based online communities. However, a hatred towards other women is also eminent. Sunny supports this view by stating that:

Some of them (although these kinds of posts are often deleted by the mods) are also hateful towards women who are doing better than them. As an example, I saw a post before from a femcel who wished that pretty women would age in a harsh way. There was also another femcel who said that pretty women deserve bad things. Never once have I heard of that from the women who are just FA (Sunny, Discord).

There is thus a shared opinion between both femcels and FAW, that femcel-based forums tend to be toxic, and destructive with hatred both towards themselves but also towards other women. As we saw, incels often fall into the trap of collective victimhood where they use this position to justify harming others, especially women. However, from the quotes from the interlocutors and the screenshots from ThePinkPill forum, it seems that the culture of this femcel-based website is falling into the same trap, where normal-looking and pretty-looking women, the so-called Normies and Stacies, have become the enemy. Here, Andreasson's theory about jealousy serves as a useful explanation to understand why jealousy potentially can lead to anger when women are experiencing a conflict between not being able to find love, at the same times as they are perhaps experiencing stigma due to their femcel or singleton position as Simpson noted (Simpson 2016). Although I would argue that the theory of jealousy does not apply to all femcels and especially not to FAW, I agree that jealousy potentially can be seen as a defend strategy within the general femcel sphere, where looking for allies can contribute to a stronger sense of individual and collective autonomy.

### 3.3. Femcels and incels

As mentioned in the introduction, the term femcel is a gendered version of the term incel, which originally was a description coined by the Canadian student Alana in 1997. At the time, it was a term meant for all people who struggled to find romantic love, whereas today, the term incel are only used for male involuntary celibates. Many of my interlocutors have a quite firm opinion on incels, and it is obvious, perhaps for good reasons, that they are not well-liked. Some also express compassion towards them and some do not mention them at all. However, in general, there seems to be a dislike between the two groups, where femcels emphasise how they do not like incels and vice versa.

Amy expresses how she hates incels, and that she sees them as men who treat women poorly while they at the same time feels entitled to sex. “Hate has taken over their minds”, she explains. At the same time, she does not see the potential of femcels and incels dating each other, since incels have a very narrowminded and hateful view on women. She also mentions, how women of colour are perceived as subhumans to incels, and that they want “people like us to be sterilized or die” (Amy, Discord).

Astrid, who is a part of the FAW subreddit and Discord server, describes how she used to explore other femcel-based forums including ThePinkPill, where she thought that the tone from the rest of the members became too toxic because they only focussed on looks and how to improve themselves. She also found that many men were members, and she explains that “ThePinkPill was mostly just piping with male incels who kept interfering ’oh how dare you have a feminist community?’”. She explains that “[...] they brought up the example of Lorena Bobbitt who chopped the dick off her rapist. They questioned why U.S feminists would worship her? I and was like she chopped the dick off her rapist. Maybe if he wanted to keep his dick, he should not have raped her” (Astrid: 23).

Astrid describes herself as a feminist, and from the quote above we see how she tries to explain the fairness of a woman cutting off the penis of her rapist and that worshipping that action, can be perceived as feminism. Although Astrid’s sentiment can be understood as a respond towards the perhaps quite angry tone that incels started the conversation with, I would however argue that this case example reflects revenge and approval of violence much more than it reflects feminism. If Astrid has argued for that in a discussion with male incels, the dislike, disagreements, and anger between incels and femcels would potentially grow bigger when or if they are both tilting towards extreme views instead of creating an open dialogue.

When I ask Laura, if she ever thinks that a truce between the two groups of femcels and incels will ever happen or that the term incel could go back to its original meaning, so that both men and women could unite under the same term as before, she declines:

Among the groups, no, each one is very involved in their own thing... which in turn is the same but different. I don't think the hate between us is going to stop, but I do think a small percentage of cels can get along. I would like to get along with an incel, I would have no problem with that (Laura: Discord).

Both incels and femcels are lacking the same thing: love and sex, and yet the hatred and mockery between them are prominent. Interestingly, the femcel online environment seem to display elements of the same behaviour as incels do on their primary forum Incel.co as also mentioned in the previous chapter. From Hugo Engholm's study of Incels, he brings forward the prominent theme of misogyny that exist on the forum, where violent opinions on women thrives. In fact, 50 percent of all threads on the incel forum contain misogynistic language and portray women as the enemy to their suffering (Engholm: 2021:50), where, as O'Malley, Holt & Holt 2020 explained also often portray women as manipulative and villainous.

Despite the effort to make a strong distinction between male and female incels from the members of the two environments, I have observed a similar behaviour in the femcel-based online sphere, just like Andreasson also argues in his thesis (Andreasson 2021). They utilize the same language, they show verbal aggressive behaviour, and they portray a hatred both towards men and women, as we also saw in the previous chapter. Even though both men and women are demeaned in both environments, they are elevated as something both groups aspire for in succeeding finding romance or sex. In the incel environment, females are both seen as subhumans to males and are, at the same time, seen as powerful because they, according to incels, control the sexual market (Engholm 2021: 51). The same occurs in the femcel-based online environments, where men are also seen as the enemy but at the same time hold the autonomy for being the ones that eventually can fulfil the women's wish and desires for finding love. The main difference, as I perceive it, is however, how femcels tend to turn the blame on themselves and other women. It is thus not only men who get blamed, but also the women themselves.

The quote below is an excerpt from a discussion in ThePinkPill forum where a user is questioning why women would ever want to perform oral sex on a male partner.

They only like it because they're being used—a man is literally using their throat and mouth to jerk themselves off—and women have been brainwashed into thinking being used is sexy and a sign of desirability.

*Figure 7: ThePinkPill.co*

The answers to the question are quite similar. All seem to agree that women who are performing oral sex on men have been 'brainwashed' into it. To state that opinion unfortunately also indicates that women cannot have a sexuality without it being subconsciously coerced by men. While the point about 'being used is sexy' could potentially hold an interesting discussion about power relations between

men and women, the thread unfortunately displays a degrading view of women, which they ironically are trying to avoid. By criticising those, who chooses to pleasure men sexually are degrading women's opinions in general. Also, they are elevating themselves as someone who knows better and who never would perform oral sex for men's pleasure. By this quite narrowminded opinion, they are blaming other women for their sexual preferences with the result of creating an atmosphere of dos and don'ts on how to be a woman with autonomy, which certainly does not entail pleasuring men.

Moreover, it seems like many women who identify as femcels, are trying to distance themselves from incels and their behaviour but at the same time, they are mimicking and reproducing the same kind of behaviour. Reaching the state of respair seems out of reach when the anger is turned into despair. Even though Kay and Banet-Weiser have suggested that women's anger can be collectively utilized to gain awareness of themselves and their vulnerable position, the hatred towards other women instead leaves a void. The femcel environment does not seem to support women, rather they are hating each other as much as incels express their hatred towards women, which do not seem empowering but on the other hand, even more hopeless. Andreasson argues that "The jealousy is simply no insight and no inspiration to change" (Andreasson 2021: 9), where I, in line with Andreasson would add that the jealousy which becomes reinforced by having allies, becomes rooted in a hatred and search for shared recognition of an identification with destructive traits that strengthens the identity even more.

Through her browsing on both incel and femcel forums, Emma believes, that incels and femcels share many similarities, but that they approach their situation differently. Where incels tend to focus more on external factors and solutions, femcels emphasize supportive measures more, she explains. Despite the toxic tone in both femcel and incel online environments, Emma states that she has never encountered a serious hatred between the two groups:

The thing is, I have never met a single incel who truly hates females. It's always some kind of coping for their own insecurities and the same thing goes the other way around too. Therefore, I think the best way of addressing the hatred is by addressing the insecurities (Emma: Discord).

When asking Laura for her opinion on why many of the members of ThePinkPill reacted with strong resistance towards my study and interview request, she supports Emma's opinion and believes that people within the online environments in general behave from feeling insecure of letting others be a part of the forum. It thus seems that the tone and attitude of both the ThePinkPill and Incel.co environments, are displaying a toxic and excluding, yet including for those of the same opinions, behaviour to sustain a form of autonomy from the vulnerability of the self, when they are lacking the feeling of recognition.

### 3.4. Concluding remarks

From the two chapters above, it is obvious that the FAW do not wish to identify as femcel, since it for them connotate aggressive women who express their anger in an inexpedient way where anger towards other women is prominent. Elizabeth explained how she has made a ban for incel and femcel lingo on the subreddit, since she does not want to encourage potential toxic echo-chambers which she believes has happened with many femcel-based forums. From the examples from ThePinkPill forum, we saw how this exclusion is prominent, and that there, at the same time, seems to exist an element of wound fetichism where stereotypical ideas such as believing in objectively ugliness, the lack of love, a hierarchical classification of people seem to uphold the rather strict habitus of the femcel environment. Although there also exists a degree of wound fetichism in the FAW environment, Elizabeth is actively trying to avoid it by making initiations towards hope instead of despair. However, both groups seem to have made pain and suffering into a shared identity, where the wound of experiences of isolation, rejection and objective ugliness becomes static and unchangeable – especially within the femcel community, where this is more explicitly expressed. This can be problematic as Ahmed (2014) argues since this can turn into a static narrative which will turn into the very identity of the group and the individual.

We also saw how the incel and femcel communities are quite similar in their attitude and approach to the problem of the lack of love. Both seem to have the opposite sex as the enemy as the same time as they are perceived as the key to find sex and romantic love. Lastly, I would argue that the femcel environment, despite their resistance towards incels, is mimicking the same destructive and toxic behaviour as incels, since they also display hatred towards women. The behaviour expressed in the femcel online environment thus seem to happen to uphold an autonomy that they otherwise are lacking.

## 4. The reality of female involuntary celibates

In the following chapter, I will present some of the most emerging themes connected to the experience of involuntary celibacy, which almost every interlocutor has mentioned during our conversations. As mentioned in the chapter, *Traditional femcels* and in the previous chapter, ugliness and lookism are prominent for many femcels' understanding of why they are unable to find romantic love. A common denominator for many of the interlocutors is also that they each struggle with either a physical disability, psychological issues, or in some cases both. This is often, but not always connected to a difficult upbringing which many of the women describe as a reason for their difficulties finding love and creating relations with other people in general.

#### 4.1. A focus on looks

In the previous chapter, we found that many FAW have experienced an excluding tone in the femcel communities mostly due to a hateful attitude towards other women. As we saw, Emma, Laura and Kristen who have been or are members of femcel communities also see the negative side of being a part of the environment and mentions how they do not resonate with the hatred displayed there.

Elizabeth mentioned how she does not allow for pretty women with bad intentions, to join the sub and the Discord server. Being pretty is not the problem, but if the intention is only to exploit the members by asking for validation of their looks, Elizabeth does not welcome them in the community. Elizabeth's moderating role allows her to direct the collective tone towards something more positive and less self-harmful, and she explains how she sometimes must be quite stern when the posts get too focussed on looks:

I've met some women who clearly have a BDD, body dysmorphia, and they obsess about their looks. We had few of them, they're all femcels I think. They obsess about each other's looks and their own looks and every day it was like 'oh my God I wish I could have blue eyes I don't understand why I have shitty poo-coloured eyes' and at some point, I told her: many of us have brown eyes and that's fine. It's easy to spread it to other people like these pro communities that was created because anorexic women started bonding which is great but then unfortunately also started encouraging each other and I don't want that (Elizabeth: 38).

Elizabeth compares this toxic self-hatred to the so-called 'pro communities' that thrived on online social platforms in the late 2000s, where women gathered around eating disorders as a lifestyle (Whitehead 2010: 605). In relation to the femcel online environments, Lily also mentions how these pro-anorexia communities display a toxic behaviour, and that she was a part of them herself when she was younger:

I had an eating disorder when I was a teenager. Part of why my eating disorder got so bad was actually internet usage and social media. Around that time like the Pro Ana and Pro Mia communities were really big on Tumblr and which was essentially a group of mostly young teenage girls collectively normalizing their eating disorder like rationalizing it as a lifestyle choice. We would make WhatsApp groups where we would congratulate each other on starving and purging and say like 'okay guys I'm only gonna let myself eat one apple today (Lily: 22).

Although much of the pro-anorexia content has been banned or removed, the movement is still present and has now migrated to TikTok where the algorithms potentially can lead people to this harmful and

toxic content even without the intention to go there (Wilson 2020). Just like the new ‘ugly-aesthetics’ within the modern femcel wave, that now also exists on TikTok. In online groups like these, there is a possibility for the members to let the eating disorders become the very essence of the self which can easily transmit or has been transmitted by the community. The members are dependent on the disorder to sustain their personhood even though they are aware that it is destructive and dangerous. Their personhood as someone with an eating disorder gives them access to the community who will give endless support and encouragement (Whitehead 2010: 605ff).

Just like Lily and Elizabeth explain, the femcel communities seem to display the same kind of attitude and behaviour. Like the members of the Pro-Ana communities, I would argue the members of the femcel communities try to take control over the self by building autonomy related to their orientation towards the lack of love and their status as femcels. As Illouz noted, when the self is at stake, people search for recognition to strengthen their autonomy, which in this case, can be found in the collective. As Ahmed has noted, even a lost feeling can become familiar, and when the orientation towards love fails, one must orient towards something that helps defining the identity and personhood.

I was teased for my looks as a young girl because I looked like a boy, not a girl. Even today I look androgynous. When other girls on the school yard would bully me for my looks my parents, and sometimes a teacher, would tell me that I was pretty just the way I am. This led me to believe that I was at least normal looking and the girls who bullied me were extreme sociopaths instead of little bored Beckys with eyes. How fucked up is it that my guardians told me comforting lies to the point it warped my worldview for years to come?

Honestly fuck body positive activists lol, my heart goes out to all these women who were deluded to think they were "pretty just the way they are" and confidently pursued handsome men, only to be met by rejection, or even worse, mockery and ridicule in return, if people were honest from the start or just kept unnecessary comments to themselves they wouldn't have gotten hurt in the first place.

*Figure 8: ThePinkPill.co*

From the two quotes above, we see that objective ugliness is a prominent, if not the most prominent theme of the femcel communities. Two members are talking about how the lies from others telling them they were ‘pretty just the way they are’ have made them resentful and angry, since they are now aware of the ugly truth: that they are in fact objectively ugly women who can never find love due to their looks. They go as far as calling this form of lying for ‘societal gaslighting’, since they feel betrayed for growing up believing that they were somewhat decent looking. As Kay and Banet-Weiser argue feminist anger can be a helpful tool in gaining recognition for how women have been structurally oppressed by e.g., patriarchy. Seeing the lying about looks as societal gaslighting will perhaps create anger and create a form of community sense, but it will not help them reach a state of hope or respair. I would on the contrary argue, that this collective anger results in the femcel women being stuck within this static sense of hopelessness, where the lack of looks and beauty is withholding a collective sense towards the state of respair: to go towards a fresh start by recognizing a common vulnerability. By

residing in the hopeless state of feeling too ugly to ever find love, and thinking society is a big part of your misery, the orientation towards hope becomes blurry.

For femcel women, anger is often displayed not only towards men but towards other women, as many of the interlocutors have mentioned in the previous chapter *Femcels vs. forever alone*. As Sunny explains: “Some of them (femcels) can also get violent (at least in words). Femcel users also attack women. I am sure the mods of FAW can attest to this” (Sunny: Discord). Elizabeth explains that many of the women from the r/Trufemcel subreddit migrated to her subreddit r/ForeverAloneWomen after the ban in 2021, and because of their hyperfocus on looks, she does not want the femcels to feel too welcome in the community:

They tend to share pictures of filtered non-natural women every day and will say 'oh my God I will never look like that. Once, I got downvoted when I said 'yeah you won't so what now?' I sound like an old fart but it's true. You won't look like that so what now? Are you gonna kill yourself because you don't look like that? (Elizabeth: 33f).

Even though most of the members of FAW say that they do not resonate with this kind of toxic behaviour regarding looks and hatred towards women who are prettier than them, which is often displayed within the femcel communities, many have nevertheless experienced discrimination based on their looks.

#### 4.2. A discrimination based on looks

Even though both femcels and forever alone women share the same experiences when it comes to discrimination based on looks, there seems to be a difference in their narratives about themselves, looks, and beauty which also reflects in the tone of the communities.

I think we all have our own reasons for being here in this sub. What I've noticed is that I can't actually imagine anyone loving me.

It happens on Tinder all the time. I always swipe left the guys who are „too much“, too good for me - even though I don't at all believe that anyone was better than others. I just have this thought, they probably have plenty of other girls talking to them, so I avoid them.

I think we as women are said to have that intuition - because we actually need it. How do I know a man just wants me for that hole down there? How do I know he wants me for me, and not just my body? When a guy shows interest, it always feels like they just want my body and not really me. Like I can't actually using they would like that as well.

Anygirl else?

*Figure 9: r/ForeverAloneWomen*

I don't even understand how someone that's supposedly attractive could have such low self esteem. I just had a bit of a browse on this discord and there's a supposed Stacy in there

Why are you coming into a community of ugly women to solely use us as emotional labor? You can't afford \$40 or whatever to see an online therapist for 30-45 minutes, no? You can't find a journal to write in? You don't have *any* friends you could speak to?

*Figure 10: ThePinkPill.co*

The first quote is from the FAW community, where there seems to be a more open atmosphere, where every reason to be there is accepted. The second quote from the femcel-based forum, ThePinkPill shows a more aggressive tone and reflects a much more restricted community where the demand for objective ugliness is prevalent. Moreover, the quote from the user in ThePinkPill-community also reflects an excluding tone for those who perhaps have low self-esteem but is not considered ugly. People like Rachel and Hanka, would then perhaps not be accepted within the community since they do not consider themselves ugly but nevertheless have low self-esteem:

Someone once told me that I looked like I had Downs Syndrome and they've used ableist language towards me, but no one has ever treated me different. People have given me compliments and stuff sometimes even when I go to the dentist. So, I don't feel like I'm really that bad, but I still have low self-esteem (Rachel: 24).

I think I've experienced it, or at least with men my age. I have noticed it when the boys wanted to talk more to my pretty friends than with me. I don't think I have the same problem as women who identify as ugly. I don't think I'm pretty, but I don't think it's so bad I would be discriminated on some huge level. I have mostly mental problems (Hanka: 5f).

As mentioned in the chapter *Femcel vs. forever alone*, Elizabeth does not have a problem with pretty women joining the server, since the community is and should be based more on venting about personal and social problems related to dating which does not necessarily has something to do with looks but rather mental issues. When orienting towards the lack of love, which both FAW and femcels do, the argument about looks as the most dominating factor for why finding love has failed, may leave the habitus stagnated without any room for an initiation towards hope. Femcels, especially, thus seem to have a more constricted environment where objective ugliness should be the primary common characteristic. Common between the interlocutors, is that they all express how they have been discriminated based on their looks, which especially the women who are or have been a part of ThePinkPill and other femcel communities often blame on lookism, which is a term used to describe how society discriminates on people based on their looks (Takáč 2020).

In my interview with the 20-year-old Amy from America, who is a member of ThePinkPill, she explains that she believes that “Women’s worth starts and ends with their beauty. Beauty is a woman’s first most value. That’s how it has been decided” (Amy: Discord). Amy believes that beauty is subjective but that it does not matter due to society’s conditioned beauty standards. The 30-year-old American woman Diane, whom I met through a Facebook group for femcels, agree that beauty is subjective but that it feels objective. Diane used to be the admin of the Facebook group, but she deleted it due to inactivity from the members. She explains that she made the group for women who are considered ugly to feel less alone. Diane has also experienced being discriminated based on her looks where “being African American, texturism, colorism, and misogyny plays against me” (Diane: Messenger). Diane explains that it is more about discrimination than about involuntary celibacy, but that involuntary celibacy is a possible outcome of feeling invisible and discriminated due to looks and lookism. We also see from the quote below, that women in ThePinkPill have discussed Diane’s argument about it being more about looks than actual involuntary celibacy:

it's not about being "involuntarily celibate", as men will pretty much fuck anything, even without talking about the quality of the relationship getting a boyfriend doesn't fix ugliness and lookism, the only way out of "femceldom" is becoming at least a normie, probably through surgery because stuff like skincare and haircare don't do anything when you got an ugly face.

*Figure 11: ThePinkPill.co*

It therefore seems that femcels are not only oriented towards love, but also towards looks which should potentially be a tool in fulfilling the wish for love.

For Laura, lookism is real since she has experienced it with “(...) Chads, Stacies and even my own family has laughed at me in my face and left me out of photos for being fat” (Laura: Discord). Kristen explains how she too has experienced lookism:

It definitely was a huge factor when going into job interviews in the business field. It was clear that those hiring wanted women who looked attractive physically to represent the company. I definitely think women face more difficulties with regard to lookism; ugly men aren’t mocked or excluded or rejected this same way (Kristen: Discord).

All women who have been included above, are all members or have been members of femcel online environments, and they all agree that lookism have affected them negatively in their everyday life but also regarding dating and love. As Ahmed notes, if a person orients towards love as an object, that must also include an understanding and perception of what love is and entails which also gives a certain stance towards that object (Ahmed 2006). Here the orientation towards love also entails expectations

of beauty. If the women do not believe that they possess beauty, the stance towards love would then also give a position as unable to find love, and as unlovable due to the lack of looks you might possess. Therefore, this position, as described regarding the Pro-Ana communities, gives back the autonomy to the self of the individual which will also define the personhood. When ThePinkPill community calls the affirmation they have gotten from others for “societal gaslighting”, they make sure for others not to threaten their sense of autonomy, even if it is a destructive one.

It thus seems that there exists a strong narrative among the femcels as ugly, where even when they experience social response, as Andreasson (2021) would describe the recognition and affirmation from others, it can be hard to believe when they already have a negative view on themselves. Thus, they uphold the negative narrative to gain autonomy. As Illouz mentions, today our emotions are turned inwards, and they are much more dependent on other’s attitudes and affirmations than before. The femcel women do not have to be dependent or fear other’s gaze or judgement of them, as long as they safely but hopelessly reside in their position as ugly and unlovable.

Although the FAW does not explicitly use the term lookism, all of them have experienced discrimination due to their looks or appearance. Elizabeth explains how she as a young woman watched the movie *Elephant Man* by David Lynch, and it painfully reminded her of herself:

I’m 34 now, I was 20 at the time and now I’m thinking: What was I thinking? I had such an idea of me.. I was working for a company and every time there were pictures taken I was always the one being like ‘yes sorry I don’t want that (Elizabeth: 15).

Elizabeth explains that she has struggled with overweight since her childhood which has contributed to her low self-esteem. When she lost 30 kg, she suddenly saw how the surroundings suddenly noticed her, smiled at her, and in general treated her differently: “Basically I had a taste of what it would be if I were at least decent looking. Something all my friends took for granted” (Elizabeth: 18). Lily expresses how she still struggles to accept her looks, and that she used to be bullied for her brown eyes and dark skin. She has been told she looks fine, but her self-esteem has and still suffers a lot, she explains.

From all of the included quotes, we see a resemblance to what Takáč (2020) mentions can be possible dangerous societal outcomes of lookism, where job opportunities as we saw with Kristen’s experience, has been limited due to her looks. Many femcels take extreme measures to ‘ascend from femceldom’, and Laura describes how she is in the process of improving her looks and personality. But if unattainable beauty standard becomes the norm, is it then possible to normalise the human body

as it is, Takáč asks? (Ibid: 60f). Elizabeth mentions how there once was a dispute in the FAW Discord server about a Spanish model, whom everybody thought was naturally beautiful:

They were like 'I want to look like her'. Her nose is apparently supposed to be like surgery goals which already says a lot about our culture that women actually share that. That picture is shared everywhere, and they were sharing it on my Discord. After digging for a while, I found that she's an influencer and that she actually said that she had her nose redone and her lips. I was thinking 'of course you grew up surrounded by pictures like that and you believe that you should attain that?' (Elizabeth: 33).

Ironically, Laura and many other women who want to improve their looks, are contributing to a distorted image of what a normal person and body looks like in their pursuit of the perfect. As mentioned, Elizabeth does not want the subreddit to become a place where the women are hyper focused on looks, since she fears that it would turn into a toxic femcel-like place. By having these positivity-directed rules and conditions, it therefore allows for the women to openly initiate discussions about their feel-better-stories and aim for goals other than improving their looks.

### 4.3. Dating experiences

As already described in the chapter *An orientation towards love*, it appeared that some of the interlocutors have had dating experiences. This was surprising, since I believed the femcel-based environment was founded upon being involuntary celibate with women who had no experience when it came to dating. From what already discussed in the chapter *Where to go? Finding a direction*, we saw that most have been on a few dates and Lily and Rachel even had a boyfriend. Common to them all, however, is that these experiences have mostly been negative and have not fulfilled their desires for the right romantic love.

Astrid explains that due to her physical disease, she has struggled with dating: "I've never really been in a relationship. I mean, I was 32 when I got my first kiss" (Astrid: 2). Astrid started to date a guy who did not mind her disease and physical limitations, and although she describes it as a good experience, it did not end positive. She fell in love with him, but he did not want a serious relationship. Therefore, Astrid ended the relationship which resulted in him insulting her:

The first time when I finally ended it, he commented negatively on my body and said, 'You've gotten fat'. Ok, so telling that to a woman in a wheelchair who can't work out? Like fuck off dude. I'm already struggling with being in love with you, and now you're nagging me like this (Astrid: 15f).

Today, Astrid is 39 years old, and she has no hope in finding a partner in the future. She would like to find a partner, but she does not believe it is realistic. Lily, who also struggles with a physical disease shares the same opinion. She too never believes that she will be able to find someone who would want to be in a relationship with her.

Just like Rachel and Lily, Hanka also tried to date when she was younger, especially older men, who unfortunately took advantage of her by manipulating her and making her feel inadequate. She believes that she developed anxiety for men after those experiences, and even though she tried to date a younger man around her age a few years back, it did not work out: “I think it took us a year to kiss and I’m still a virgin so that says a lot. It really didn’t get to be more than touch” (Hanka: 8).

Like Hanka, Elizabeth has never been in a relationship although she tried to date many years ago. In 2015, something happened that gave her a sudden epiphany towards pursuing love. Elizabeth had a few friends who were going to a concert in the Bataclan theatre in Paris on the fatal night of the terror attack in 2015. Her friends luckily decided to cancel last minute but she explains that: “I had a horrible night and when I woke up the next day I thought: It could have been me at that concert. I could have died, and I would have died a virgin without having any kind of experience, a kiss, nothing” (Elizabeth: 19). After the terror attack, she “went from zero dates in 27 years to two dates a week”, (Ibid.) and eventually, she lost her virginity where she planned every single detail to how and where it would take place: “I planned it like a freaking dentist appointment” (Ibid.), and she explains how she had to drink alcohol just to stop shaking out of nervousness. She describes the experience as ‘okay’, but that she was completely disconnected during the act and that she lived half of the experience outside of her own body. Her therapist later told her, that this could be a sign of dissociation which means that a person can detach from its own body, whenever something feels too traumatic.

As mentioned in the chapter *Modern femcels*, there is a new trend online, especially on TikTok, where women under the hashtag ‘femcel’, are almost proudly embracing their traumas and tragedies by dissociating and ignoring the problems behind their well-being. As Garland noted in the same chapter, dissociation does not lead to a feminist revolution, on the contrary, it leaves a void (Garland 2022). Making the pain and suffering the centre of both an individual and collective identity, could thus lead to an even bigger commitment and addiction of the internet based female involuntary celibacy communities and I would argue that this is a way to embrace the disorientation by making it familiar. Elizabeth, however, does the opposite than turning the pain she has suffered into her identity just like she does not want the FAW server to become a place, where the members should feel stuck in their own misery. As we saw with the femcel forum ThePinkPill, there seems to be a more prominent focus on the individual and collective suffering about the lack of love which makes the commitment to the sacred, the femcel-forum, if we apply Throop’s terms, stronger and more static.

In relation to dating, worth noting is also, that none of women express any positive aspects of being involuntary celibates. “I’m kind of ashamed that I have this problem with relationships [...] I have also experienced being looked down upon before when admitting I am a virgin” (Hanka 6, Hanka Discord). As Roona Simpson showed through her study of British single women, some women expressed a feeling of empowerment through their single status, although as most of Simpson’s participants, my interlocutors do also feel othered and alienated from others through their status as involuntary celibates. As Byrne 2000 argued, the label involuntary single, or in my case, involuntary celibacy might be a coping strategy to distancing oneself from the societal stigma that often comes along with the position (Simpson 2016).

#### 4.4. Imaginative love

Illouz notes, the self and the definition of the self has become much more vulnerable in the age of modernity, which is why we tend to blame ourselves when we fail in finding romantic love. Modern romantic experiences are also very influenced and stimulated by media and fictional stories which sometimes creates unrealistic expectations of what romantic is and should be (Illouz 2012).

Elizabeth echoes Illouz when expressing how she tries to avoid possible triggers in her everyday life as to not feel too bad about her situation:

You try to avoid triggers in the real psychological sense of the world. For example, there are things I won’t watch because I know it’s going to make me too sad. Also, because I don’t like shows about very beautiful teenagers played by adults having sex like in Euphoria. I prefer wholesome things. I love media that doesn’t make me think suicidal thoughts (laughs). No no, I’m not suicidal. But you sort of have to build your life avoiding that kind of hole in the middle (Elizabeth: 10).

It is also these fictional stories that could potentially burden the actual individual and bodily experience of love, since it is these fictional stories that builds our imagination about love, rather than our own lived experiences. There is a risk that the direction towards love is sustained through the failure, as Ahmed notes, which can be even more intensified by becoming too invested in fictional and imaginative stories about love (Ahmed 2014). When Elizabeth is referring to the ‘hole in the middle’, it sounds like she almost has everything else in her life sorted out, except from romantic love which she has failed to find. From the hole, a vast suffering emanates, especially when she is watching romantic movies that ruthlessly reminds her of what she is missing. Romantic love in fictional stories has shaped our perception of love and led us to believe that finding that kind of love is the ultimate form of happiness (Illouz 2012) and when failing, the self suffers. Whereas Elizabeth copes by

avoiding the fictional kind of suffering, Hanka instead approaches these romantic stories by reading fanfiction and erotica:

I'm usually awake for a long time mostly because I'm reading FanFictions. The romantic ones, the cheesy ones. Even erotica. I have a collection of printed erotica books too. Sometimes I read it and I'm thinking 'okay I wish that was me' but mostly I just really enjoy the cheekiness (Hanka: 6f).

I would argue, that although Hanka is trying to sustain her orientation towards love in a way that could potentially give her hope, the fanfiction and erotica novels still create a fantasy and an anticipation to finding the same kind of love as we read or see in fiction. Illouz notes that these fantasies are culturally and socially created in modernity, and that they unfortunately can result in suffering and disappointment, especially if love has not been bodily felt (Illouz 2012). Lily too finds comfort in fiction, where especially older romantic German poetry speaks to her:

I find it really pretty. The romantic poetry appeals to the way I feel alienated from myself, other people, nature, things like that. It gives me a new way to understand myself and put my feelings in context. I'm not very hip with the kids and I can't keep up with all the lingo and stuff like that so finding something that's kind of old and static is comforting (Lily: 33).

As we see, Lily finds comfort in what is maybe inspired from a pre-modern understanding of love, where the self was not as dependent and challenged on other's gaze and expectation, as Illouz (2012) noted. In line with Illouz, Lily believes that creating fantasies based on fiction potentially can be harmful:

[...] romanticised ideals and stuff that we get from rom-coms and whatever manifests frustration and resentment [...] There is an expectation that your romantic partner will fulfil all your emotional needs even in movies. In the end of a movie, the male and female lead get together. That's your reward for having suffered and gone through all this stuff (Lily: 24, 26).

Although Lily would like to find a romantic partner, she also emphasizes that if society valued platonic relationships more, there might be fewer incels and femcels which again adds to Illouz's theory about why romantic love has become so central in modernity, since romantic love has become dominating to our sense of self-worth.

As mentioned on the previous page, there is a risk that the orientation towards love is upheld by failure, which can result in people being too invested in the imaginative stories about love (Ahmed

2014). Where the femcels of the modern wave seem to uphold the failure and despair by romanticising toxic fictional characters, the FAW, who has more similarities with the ‘traditional femcels’, seem, on the contrary to leave a little room for hope. Although both the positive and the negative imaginations might leave the individual suffer even more when it cannot live up to its own anticipation about love. Perhaps that is why the femcels within the modern wave, try to uphold an autonomy they create themselves, instead of depending on a partner to fulfil the expectation from fictional love.

#### 4.5. Shame and hatred

Connected to the lack of romantic love is also an element of shame and self-resentment. Hatred towards men is not a prevalent theme within the FAW online environment, and although some of the women have had bad experiences with men in the past, they are aware that those experiences should not colour their perception of all men as bad.

I get frustrated, but I never thought all men are bad kind of banter. There were times where I have been like ‘men suck’ but it’s just more something that you say when you’re frustrated. But at the same time, it’s hard to think otherwise once you’ve gone through endless amounts of rejection. I don’t treat men badly by default because of it (Rachel: 22).

Like Rachel explains, it is not so much about having a deep hate for all men in general but more about a frustration that is closely tied to the autonomy of the self. By using the word rejection, it is by her own experiences of rejection from men that makes her frustrated, whereas Lily suggests a more societal problem to why she has an ambivalent view on men where: “Women get more backlash for the same thing than men do. Sometimes it’s hard not to resent them for that. I have to remind myself that men aren’t inherently violent and dangerous” (Lily: 24f). Astrid supports this view, since she does not have a problem with men due to her own dating history but that she has experienced anger towards men more because she has always been a feminist, she explains: “When I was a child, men were just more valued in society. Being a boy was just cooler than being a girl. Anything boys liked was cool, and rational, and fun” (Astrid: 17f).

Laura explains that she would like not to feel any anger towards men, but that she is afraid that “after all the anger, loneliness, anxiety that I have gone through because of the issue of being involuntary celibate, I don’t know if I cannot hold a grudge against a potential partner in the future” (Laura: Discord). Both Lily’s, Astrid’s and Laura’s view speak into how Kay and Banet-Weiser present the injustice that women often must endure for the benefit of white masculine anger and power. As Lily mentions, the unfairness and invisibility that women go through could potentially prompt for

an anger towards men to emerge, which is exactly this anger that Kay and Banet-Weiser suggest should be collectively utilized for reaching the state of respair.

Although Kay and Banet-Weiser speak about reaching the state of respair to make political changes through feminist rage, it is not the political aspect that mainly concerns the women. I would argue, that because of their threatened self, the women are mostly focussed on their own suffering, stuck between reaching a collective and individual state of respair. The collective online environments of FAW and femcels are orientating towards the lack of love as a common denominator, where neither the individual forever alone women, nor the femcel women seem to share hatred towards men.

As opposite to what we saw from the previous research on the incel milieu, where a strong hatred towards women thrives, the FAW do not display the same behaviour. The quotes above indicate that there do not exist the same kind of negative tropes connected to men, as within the incel environment, where women are often seen as manipulative and evil (O'Malley, Holt & Holt 2020). Nor have I encountered extreme statements within the FAW subreddit. However, my observations in the femcel-based online forum ThePinkPill community suggests otherwise:

Heterosexual women need to start beating up their bfs

The majority of men are not empathetic or caring. They run away at the thought of taking care of someone who needs assistance.

I'm not sure what would limit a woman's sexual options other than her attractiveness though? Men proudly disdain ugly women online. We are "boner-killers".

*Figure 12: ThePinkPill.co*

As we see from these quotes, there is a strong distrust in men which is quite prominent within ThePinkPill environment. Many take a distance towards men and blame them for their misery and suffering, which make the hope for orientation towards love, and not the lack of love, even less attainable. Blaming men and pretty women is normal within the femcel environment, where an aggressive tone is part of the lingo. Even though the three quotes above hold an angry tone towards men, the sentence “we are boner-killers” reinforces the women’s own insecurities, which according to themselves, have been created because of lookism, picky men, and pretty women. They blame men at the same time as they are excusing them by degrading themselves. The angry and aggressive tone which is visible in sentence three where a user encourages women to beat up their boyfriends, can be a way to collectively uphold the autonomy, and to cope, when the self is threatened. Or to find allies, when feeling jealous, as Andreasson notes (Andreasson 2021). But by residing in the feelings of anger might result in dissociating from the real problem.

As Garland 2022 noted, this dissociation does not create a feminist change, but on the contrary creates a void. As opposite to the FAW and in line with how incels perceive women as inherently evil and villainous, (O'Malley, Holt & Holt 2020), these quotes indicate, that femcels tend to display the same aggressive behaviour as incels. The FAW environment seem to have a different tone and strategy when it comes to coping with the situation of being in involuntary celibacy. Overall, there is not an aggressive tone or expressed hatred towards men or pretty women, and they mostly focus on giving each other support both when life seems hard but also when hope springs.

Because of my initial reflections on femcels and from already shown with previous research on incel behaviour, I felt a need to ask some of the interlocutors whether they believed that women could react to involuntary celibacy just like some incels have done – by becoming violent.

I just think us women do not have the heart to be violent. There are women who do violent things, some also commit physical abuse, but going on a rampage? Attacking a mall or any public place and randomly shoot someone? It's just too rare as far as I know (Sunny: Discord).

The quote above is from Sunny, who does not believe that women who experience involuntary celibacy would ever become violent. Both Sunny and Rachel argue that women in involuntary celibacy usually do not wish to hurt anyone except from themselves by turning the blame towards themselves. Sunny mentions that the women within the FAW environment sometimes express hatred towards men, “but only towards very particular abusive men, perverts/creeps” (Ibid.). The FAW women thus acknowledge and are aware that even though they might hate the people who hurt them, they either blame themselves or “[...] talk about how much they want to rise for themselves” (Ibid.). When I spoke to Emma about the hatred and banter that is often expressed between femcels and incels, she explains that: “It's always some kind of cope for their own insecurities and the same thing goes the other way around too. Therefore, I think the best way of addressing the hatred is by addressing the insecurities” (Emma, Discord).

Despite the aggressive behaviour from femcels, the interlocutors do not believe that women could ever become violent like incels. Even though I have argued, that the FAW environment does not show the same signs of aggressiveness and violent language as in *ThePinkPill*, Elizabeth has experienced how people sometimes accuses her of creating a potential violent environment:

[...] people sometimes annoy me when they say to me ‘you're breathing serial killers’. I'm like men still commits 90% of violent crimes, at least in the US, and serial killers are all men. Don't worry, women tend to internalize their hatred so much they poison themselves (Elizabeth: 5).

In the chapter on previous research on femcels, Renske van der Veer argued, that femcels do have the potential to become violent perpetrators in such potentially radicalizing online environments as the incelosphere and the femcelosphere. Even though they are less likely to commit violent crimes we should nevertheless understand how the changing gender-roles has opened for a freer female agency, which potentially could lead to violent actions (van der Veer 2020). I agree with van der Veer, that we should not rule out the violent agency that femcels perhaps can develop in such hateful online milieus. Since I have argued that femcels often mimic and uphold the same kind of behaviour as incels, I also believe that it potentially could turn into actions of violence. We saw how the hatred towards women as inherently evil and manipulative often legitimises aggressive behaviour towards women within the incel environments. When the femcel environment display the same behaviour as incels, the potential of that leading to violent behaviour, do not seem far away. Although, when taking the interlocutors opinions in account, they all recognize that especially femcel-based online environments are toxic and destructive, and that femcel women can get violent in words (page 53), but that they do not believe that they will ever commit violent actions such as incels have done. Women internalize the hatred instead of turning it outwards, which also follows what Jilly Boyce Kay has argued.

#### 4.6. Concluding remarks

From what we have seen in the chapters above, the lack of looks has a prevalent role in many of the women's own self-understanding to why they are not able to find romantic love. Especially for the women who are or has been a part of a femcel community, where objective ugliness is prominent in how they perceive themselves as unable to find love. Elizabeth and Lily who are part of the FAW community, mention how the femcel environments remind them of the pro-anorexia groups where a sense of hopelessness is hidden under a self-declared individual and collective autonomy where the eating disorder is elevated to a lifestyle. Based on Lily's and Elizabeth's statements, and examples from ThePinkPink forum, I argued, that the femcel communities hold some of the same elements as the pro-ana communities. Many of the femcel women are stuck within this static sense of hopelessness that has become the very identity of the self.

In the chapter, *A discrimination based on looks*, we saw that femcels seem to have a more constricted environment where objective ugliness is the primary common characteristic. Within the femcel environment ThePinkPill, we also saw how the understanding of love is connected to the expectation of possessing beauty, where the criterion of possessing objective ugliness becomes a way to regain the autonomy of the self. Some of the interlocutors explained, that it is not only about involuntary celibacy but more about ugliness, that has contributed to the femcel or FAW status. Related to the women's dating experiences, we saw how they unfortunately have not been positive. As

Elizabeth explained, she dissociated completely from her own body during her first sexual encounter, due to traumas and insecurities about herself. I argued that the new tendency we see on TikTok, is perhaps a way to embrace and ‘own’ the traumas inflicted by others, making it an identity, which is something we see more within the femcel online environments where making the pain and suffering becomes the familiar.

Related to the dating experiences comes the idea of romantic love in modernity which, according to Illouz is closely tied to the influence of media and fiction. I have argued that the imagination of the female members of the femcel-based online environments perhaps has led to unrealistic expectations of love. When believing that love is the ultimate form of happiness, the women feel like a failure and as a result, the self suffers. Our sense of self-worth is thus connected to romantic love in modernity, and as Lily explains, these romanticised ideas might create frustration and resentment – both towards ourselves but also towards men.

The hatred towards men is not a common theme among the FAW, although there seems to be a different opinion regarding men when looking at ThePinkPill online community, where the tone towards men is angry and resentful. I have argued, in line with Renske van der Veer, that femcels too have the potential of becoming violent, since they are already displaying elements of incel behaviour.

## 5. Life-challenges

A common denominator for all the women I have been speaking to, is that they all suffer or have suffered from traumas through their lives. Some are experiencing physical diseases and difficulties, some are experiencing psychological issues while others are experiencing both. Traumas and mental challenges have been some of the most emerging themes in all my interviews with the women, and some of them have also experienced suicidal thoughts which for one of them developed into a suicide attempt. Moreover, some have also experienced a difficult or different upbringing that has made an impact on how their life has evolved, which is also something I will examine closer in the following. In the following I will bring forward the stories and experiences of the women, who bravely and trustfully shared their stories with me.

### 5.1. Physical disabilities

Kristen, Lily, and Astrid all suffer from somewhat severe physical diseases, which have made them face different challenges when it comes to dating and other social activities. Lily and Astrid explain how they are physically limited in their everyday life and that their diseases control most of their lives.

Astrid lives at home with her parents since she is dependent on their help. Her daily activities depend on her energy level, and because she is often too weak to go out, she stays at home most days:

On a typical day I wake up, I go to the bathroom and then I go back to my bed to rest. I have one of those beds you can raise so now I can rest with the laptop on my lap so that I can get some mental stimuli. So basically, I spend all day online (Astrid: 9f).

The online environment has become a very important component in Astrid's life since she has found solidarity in the same issues as she is experiencing. As mentioned, Lily also struggles with a physical disease which often keeps her indoors due to a low energy level. She explains that she joined the FAW server because she felt she was "pushed out of society" due the isolation that came with her diagnosis: "The server was a way for me to connect with women who also struggled socially and be able to have commiseration and camaraderie with them. The internet was the only place I had left" (Lily: 6).

Lily suffers from a disease called Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, which affects the connective tissues and where the joints of the body become very fragile. Every day, her stamina gets challenged, and sometimes she must choose between doing the dishes or taking a shower which makes her life "tedious and miserable" as she describes it herself. To cope with the disease, she tries to balance between responsibilities to clean and maintain her apartment and engage in hobbies, which counts many creative initiatives such as knitting, sewing, and playing instruments.

Kristen, who suffers from osteogenesis imperfecta, also tries to cope with her disease by focusing on her hobbies, friendships, and to do the activities she enjoys. Kristen mentions that her disease "[...] became influential because it portrayed the dating scene as a very unequal place [...] We all know that there is a biological element to attraction" (Kristen: Discord). Here, Kristen mentions how looks is a decisive component for why she has not found mutual attraction yet, which she still hopes to find. In the past, Kristen fell in love with a couple of male friends, but "It never went anywhere, painfully" (Kristen: Discord), she explains. Kristen does not explicitly blame her involuntary celibacy on her looks, since she does not describe herself as objectively ugly but, when looking at the quote above, it seems that she has experienced discrimination since she focusses on her disease when describing the dating scene as an unequal place. When I asked Kristen, if there could be a better name than femcel for her reality as involuntary celibate, she explains that there perhaps could be a better name for women in her position:

I'd prefer 'bachelorette' since this is a more upbeat, valid choice. We apply 'bachelor' to men who either like to be on their own or simply are on their own for whatever reason. 'Incelism' has an association with violence which is unfortunate (Kristen: Discord).

Kristen mentions two interesting things here: First, that men have been given more autonomy when it comes to how they are labelled such as the more positive loaded term ‘bachelor’. Second, she mentions that ‘incelism’ holds unfortunate connotations due to the violent behaviour some male incels has displayed both online and offline, which makes the term femcel less appealing.

As mentioned in the chapter *Previous research on femcels* and in line with what Kristen explains, Malin Lindroth emphasises that only women have gotten ascribed roles when it comes to living alone without a partner. Men are often described with cultural and physical potent roles such as ‘bachelor’ (Lindroth 2018), which Kristen exemplifies her reason for suggesting the word ‘bachelorette’ instead of spinster, since she believes that the term is outdated and gives associations to being an ‘old maid’. Although Lindroth suggests for women who lives in involuntary celibacy and loneliness to reclaim the word ‘spinster’, Kristen prefers a term that holds just as much autonomy as men who are single and living alone. Roona Simpson argued that there has been a shift in the discourse of the single identity, where the term spinster has been replaced with the singleton-figure (Simpson 2016). As we see from Kristen, she believes that naming her position as ‘bachelorette’, would give power and autonomy to the experience of being in her position, instead of applying the old word spinster, that has an ascribed and negative sound.

To return to how Kristen somewhat relates the negative experiences she has had on the dating market to her physical disability, Astrid also mentions how she has faced difficulties dating and how she has found comfort in the FAW server in connection to this: “It’s hard when we get all these matches on like Tinder but if I show I’m in a wheelchair the men disappear. If we have the wheelchair in the pictures, we don’t get any matches” (Astrid: 25).

In the modern world, where the online environments have become a vital part of our lives, experiences, and socializing, dating has become an online market where we no longer evaluate a partner through our bodies but rather through information-thick information and descriptions of each other which limits our bodily experiences (Illouz 2012). It has then become even harder for women who suffer from visible disabilities to date online because it comes with a responsibility and an anxiety to eventually disclose information about the disability which would not have been the case when meeting for the first time outside of the online. The anxiety that accompanies a physical disability when it comes to potential partners, is something Lily recognizes:

I don’t know if I’d be able to have penetrative sex because my pelvis keeps slipping like my hips don’t want to stay in place and sometimes even using a tampon is painful because muscle is being stretched. That’s something that terrifies me because even though there is physical therapy, I can’t imagine expecting

somebody to be patient with me while I deal with that. That thought terrifies me. Explaining that to a partner like 'hey, sex hurts' (Lily: 10).

These anxious thoughts connected to having a physical disability related to dating experiences, seem to hold back the initiation towards love, since the physical disease becomes an obstacle, yet something familiar from where it becomes easier and safer to orient towards the lack of love instead. Even though the disease is quite new for Lily, and even though the women actively try to focus on other things than the lack of love, the habitus has, for all these women, become a familiar space where the emotional and mental turmoil has led them towards the comforting and sacred FAW collective.

## 5.2. Mental health issues and self-hatred

In the previous chapter, we saw how anxiety was strongly connected to the insecurities the women with psychical disabilities were experiencing when thinking about dating situations. Hanka has and still experiences anxiety when it comes to the thought of dating, and as previously mentioned, she has had bad experiences with men in the past. She mostly blames her status as involuntary celibate on her mental problems, and that having anxiety for men “is kind of problematic when looking for a man” (Hanka: 7). Elizabeth has also experienced anxiety when being in dating situations, although she does not think of it as something derived from bad experiences with men in the past. Despite her good friendships with men, Elizabeth never believed that the men she was dating or chatting with online, could see her as attractive or someone worth dating.

I started online dating on my first year or second year abroad and I remember being completely frozen. Like paralyzed, a deer in the headlights. [...] sitting in front of a man having him looking at me as a potential date made me completely sick (Elizabeth: 14,20).

As mentioned in the chapter, *A discrimination based on looks* (page 57), Elizabeth explains how she has always struggled with overweight, and that she was overfed by her mother as a child. She grew up in a verbally violent household, where she was not allowed to talk about her feelings regarding the bullying she experienced in school. As she explains it, she eventually associated food with comfort, safety, and love since she did not experience much other love at home. Hanka, Lily, Emma and Sunny have also experienced bullying in school, and Sunny explains that if she perhaps had grown up in a different, healthier household, “I’d be more confident, I’d take care of myself more, I’d be friendlier as a kid. Those are things that could have made my growing-up years better and make it less likely to

be here in FAW” (Sunny: Discord). Both Sunny and Lily believe that if only they had a better and less traumatic upbringing, they would have developed differently.

Along with Lily’s physical disability, she also suffers from CPTSD, which as previously mentioned, has been developed from those traumas she suffered from as a child at home together with the unhealthy and toxic relationship she had with her ex-boyfriend. Lily explains, how her parents never affirmed or validated her feelings, and how they were always emotionally distant. During high school, she developed an eating disorder and started to cut herself while at the same time she began to have suicidal ideations. Even though she tried to talk to her parents about it, they did not understand the severity of the situation: “I tried to tell a guidance counsellor at school like ‘hey, I’m thinking of killing myself’, and she called my mom and my mom yelled at me for making the family look bad” (Lily: 16).

From my conversation with Lily, it became obvious that life has not been easy for her, and with an ironic distance to her own emotions, she tells me with a laugh how she is still “horribly suicidal”. From Lily’s, Sunny’s, and many of the other women’s stories, it seems that the lack of love they have experienced in their childhood, has been a companion in their adult life. Although the women orient towards love, they have difficulties finding it, which may be because of the disorientation towards love they already felt as a child. What have been presented to them, has been an unclear, complicated, and ambivalent love, which seem to be repeated in the disorientation they are experiencing as adults. As we see, several of the interlocutors has found meaning in their existence as involuntary celibates, or their lack of love, through their difficult childhoods. In the presentation of the theoretical framework, we saw how Ahmed (2006) noted, that we orient towards something that has been visible to us through our childhood, which can both be negative or positive, whereas Illouz argued that the issues related to love and desire in modernity is an outcome of and formed by our social surroundings (Illouz: 2012). Judging from the experiences of the women, I would argue that a combination of these two perspectives serves as the best way to understand the issues connected to love and desire. Many women have experienced a troubled childhood, where the love they were presented to, have been unstable and ambivalent, which I believe has been a companion in their adult lives and unfortunately has been a factor in their orientation towards love when often has been dysfunctional.

Astrid does not explicitly mention any mental health issues, however her struggles with her physical disease unfortunately turned into a suicide attempt when she was younger. Talking about it still makes Astrid very emotional, and she explains how the disease made her depressed, made her hate herself and lose all hope for the future:

I had a lot of self-hatred when I was younger, especially before the suicide attempt that got me hospitalized. Like why can't my body work? Why can't I do what everyone else can? [...] the self-hatred has not been related too much to dating because I've always known it's the disease's fault (Astrid: 26).

Although Astrid has somewhat learned to cope with her situation, she often still feels depressed. After dating a guy, she met on a dating-app, she explains how she started to feel better emotionally: "I could almost feel positivity pour into my veins sometimes when he just held my hand" (Astrid: Discord). Astrid does not explicitly mention that she has suicidal thoughts today but speaking about how her experience with dating a man had a positive outcome, she almost casually mentions that the experience was mentally inspiring "[...] just for the sake of googling other things than 'how long are you conscious after chopping your head off' and other suicidal ideations" (Ibid.).

As frightening as this sounds, it is nevertheless Astrid's reality as a forever alone woman, and even though she tries to cope every day, she still feels that that life can be extremely tough living.

### 5.3. A constraining habitus

Both Rachel, Sunny, Lily, Emma, and Amy have explained how they in their childhood were kept from socializing with other children and that they have had troubles finding friends as adults. Despite their different identifications as either femcels or FAW, they all share experiences of having difficulties socializing. Lily has always thought of her mother as a "complete misanthrope", since she was never allowed to bring any friends to her house and that she never had a birthday party. Because Lily never felt she has had a community with someone while growing up, she enjoys spending time with the other women on the FAW server. They play online games, watch movies together, and they also try to make challenges for each other for example to walk 5000 steps every day. Whereas Lily seems quite aware of why she has experienced trouble finding friends, Rachel seems more insecure to the reason why she has struggled to find friends. However, she wonders whether it could have been because her parents since:

My parents couldn't really take me anywhere because of their business. They always had to go out with deliveries, and they had to take me because I was too young to be home by myself. They didn't really know any of the other parents, so they didn't really trust anyone to bring me anywhere. My mom also didn't have any friends when she grew up, so I don't know if that has anything to do with my thing (Rachel: 11).

Rachel still lives at home and even though she enjoys the company of her parents, she still dreams about moving out but at the same time she fears to live alone. From Rachel's story, it seems like her

parents, has been a constraining element in her childhood to find friends. She explains how she wanted to meet other children when she was younger, but that her mother often feared that something bad would happen to her. Despite good intentions, it seems that the behaviour from Rachel's parents has constrained her habitus and limited her initiation to orient towards something else than domestic life at home with them, and it seems that the mother's distrust in other people has been somewhat contagious to Rachel:

I never wanted to live with a roommate or anything because I don't really know if I can trust anybody that lives around here. A lot of people around here aren't really that trustworthy. I've heard things about people with roommates. They steal their laptops; they party too much, and I don't really want to deal with a stranger in my house (Ibid: 13).

Rachel does not explicitly describe her childhood as good or bad, but that it was different due to her not being able to find any friends. When Rachel went to a therapist because of anxiety connected to a guy who ghosted her after they were on a few dates, the therapist tried to trace some of her social issues back to her parents, which Rachel did not reckon with: "I get it why you want to talk about your mothers or your dad's upbringing, but for me it feels like it's just a societal issue. Maybe it's where I live" (Ibid: 34). Just like Rachel, Sunny lives at home with her parents, and although it is traditionally more acceptable to live with your parents as an adult in the Philippines, she still has other dreams for the future:

For me, I am longing to have more freedom (which I honestly don't think my parents want to hear). I wish to have my own home, a career, and to earn and save money, and buy my own stuff, and learn how to manage my own finances. I also dream to volunteer for those organizations that do community work (Sunny: Discord).

The reason for why Sunny's parents do not want her to speak about those things, is probably because they would like her to take care of them once they get old, she explains. Thus, Sunny has also experienced a constraining behaviour from her parents, which seems to have curbed her initiation towards something else than domestic life at home with her parents. She explains how she has shared her frustrations about her parents with the other women in FAW, and that she despite of everything still loves her parents. As Jackson notes, it can be difficult to initiate towards something outside of the habitus, which is what we see from Rachel's and Sunny's example. When domestic life at home is the reality and social world you live in, it can be hard to break the habitus and orient towards something outside of that.

#### 5.4. Concluding remarks

In this chapter, focus has been given to the different life-challenges all women who participated in the study have encountered: both physically and mentally throughout their lives. We saw how Astrid and Lily, due to their physical disabilities are trying to balance between feelings of despair and feelings of hope in their everyday lives. Both have experienced difficulties, because of the anxiety that unfortunately has accompanied them; either because of a nervousness connected to how much their physical bodies would be able to endure, or because of the threatened self-worth that comes with having a physical disability. I argued that this anxiety could potentially hold back the initiation towards love, since the familiarity may have shifted to being sick and disabled, from where it becomes easier and safer to orient towards the lack of love.

In the second chapter, we saw how many of the women suffers from different mental health issues, which has affected their lives to such a degree, that it has made dating extremely anxiety-provoking. Most of the women agree, that these issues come from a troubled childhood, which for many, has had elements of constraint that has limited possible initiations outside of the habitus of not feeling loved. For many, the love that has been presented to them in their childhood has been unclear and complicated, which seems to be repeated in their orientation towards the lack of love they are following in adulthood. Despite their different ways to identify themselves, both femcels and FAW seem to share same experiences from their early life.

## 6. The online spheres

The interlocutors have provided the study with insightful and valuable information, which I have paired with my theoretical framework based on phenomenological theories consisting of terms as, *orientation, direction, habitus and initiation, and respair*. In this final chapter, I will gather and discuss the most prominent analytical findings from the previous chapters.

### 6.1 Different online environments?

As we have seen from the analytical findings, there seems to be rather different attitudes and coping strategies to the female involuntary celibate status. The online sphere of femcels seems to uphold a much more aggressive tone where men, and pretty-looking women are not welcome. They gain their collective autonomy by declaring themselves objective ugly, and thus exclude anyone else, who do not meet those standards. Elizabeth, the moderator of the subreddit r/ForeverAloneWomen do not want her subreddit to become a toxic echo-chamber, and she believes that the femcel lingo contributes to a destructive environment where people lose perspective. But is there really a difference between

ThePinkPill and the r/ForeverAloneWomen environment when they both share the lack of love and when they both display and uphold criteria for becoming a member?

Both online environments have certain rules for membership; Also, within the FAW community, which as mentioned, only allows for women who has no or very limited dating experiences, to join. Elizabeth explains how she has nothing against beautiful women joining the server, only if they are exploiting the other members' kind and compassionate words to feel better about themselves. But how does a moderator value who really needs help? Whose experiences are 'genuine enough' to be accepted in the community? Whereas the members in the femcel-based community ThePinkPill, are very explicit about the requirements for joining, these requirements seem more subtle and negotiable within the FAW community. Nevertheless, the requirements are still there as the first thing you see when entering the subreddit:

We do not welcome promiscuous women, SW, single mums, 3rd time divorcees, etc. If you fuck around and can't find the right person, /r/TwoXChromosomes. If you can find relationships but feel alone, /r/lonely (r/ForeverAloneWomen)

As we saw, both Lily and Rachel have had boyfriends in the past, and although it has been a long time ago since they have been dating, they have not always identified as forever alone. Elizabeth is aware of her gatekeeping role in deciding who and why the members should get accepted. However, her views are quite open-minded, and although she uses an example of why some pretty girls should not join the server, it does not have anything to do with looks, she claims. She explains that: "[...] many [of the members] look fine and some are really pretty but have abusive fathers. That's a common thing, abusive families. A couple of them are from like really hardcore religious families" (Elizabeth: 26). Elizabeth's opinion shines through in the conversations I had with the other women from the server, and there seems to be an overall acceptance of everyone who joins – no matter how little or how much dating experiences they have had. Although from the screenshot on page 34, which I have also included below, we see how members of the subreddit try to uphold and find new unofficial criteria for being able to call yourself a FAW, where 'having a loving family' would not qualify for calling oneself a forever alone woman.

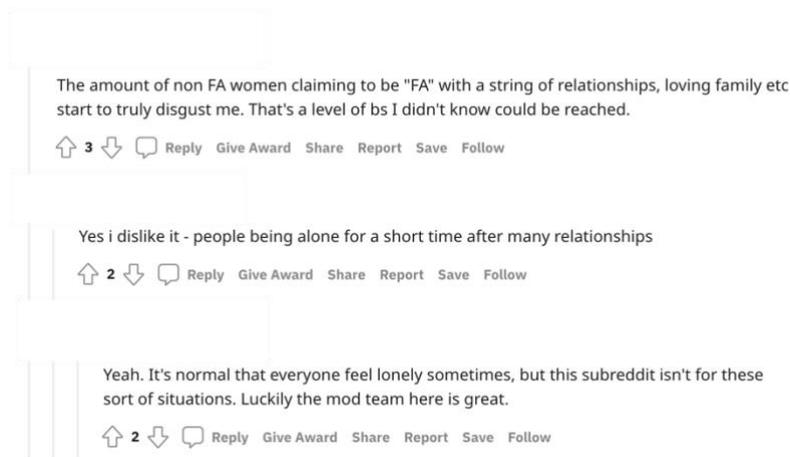


Figure 13: r/ForeverAloneWomen

The conversation in the screenshot goes against the overall opinion from the interlocutors. This is interesting since being forever alone should per definition be about the individual feeling of being alone, and not exterior rules about how you are supposed to feel alone. The boundaries for becoming a member, thus seems more about showing feelings of misery, similar to what others in collective do, and not necessarily about not having any dating experiences in the past. Elizabeth explains how she has many friends outside the online environment, and how she is not entirely alone, only when it comes to romantic relationships, which she believes should be the main common characteristics:

For some of them it's very easy to gatekeep you know. Like the woman who joins and tell us that she's married but she feels alone and you're like 'okay girl let me find you a definition in a dictionary about what it means to be alone it's not about being lonely it's being alone (Elizabeth: 38).

This statement from Elizabeth is consistent with the overall rules of the subreddit, although as we saw from the screenshot on the previous page, some of the members have created their own unofficial requirements; for example, having a bad relationship with the family, so that it perhaps fits to what many of the FAW have experienced.

As we saw with the example on how the women within the FAW community coped with their feelings of being ugly in the chapter, *A collective orientation* (page 36), the screenshot excerpt showed how they were open to share their own initiation towards something else than the despair that often tends to dominate the tone. One could thus argue that the FAW online environment seems healthier than perhaps ThePinkPill in the way that they do not always have to share the same opinion on a topic

to get accepted. As Emma described, (page 46) hugboxing can be an issue in the femcel-based online environments where the attitude and tone often is predictable.

Despite Elizabeth's attempt to avoid a too negative and destructive tone, a collective 'wound fetishism' nevertheless occurs from time to time:

We have for example one girl in the in the server and she's clearly not doing well. She's been raped. The thing is every time she talks, it's only about that and I cannot tell her listen, stop talking. I told her, listen I would like you to see someone. We cannot help you. She's at the level of trauma where anything you say she's going to bring it back to her sexual assault (Elizabeth: 37).

The moderating role allows for Elizabeth to direct the tone towards a more positive orientation, despite their common denominator: the lack of love. Naturally, Elizabeth cannot control everyone who joins the subreddit, and it therefore happens that women with many traumas, vent in the group.

Feeling ashamed because everything was in my hands and I ruined it. Whenever I think about future, relationships and other stuff I am constantly reminded how shit I am. No redeemable qualities. Not good at anything. Life is a groundhog day, wake up, hate yourself, be shit, go to bed. I know that I should be doing something to change my situation instead of writing this post, but I'm just in a trance.

*Figure 14: r/ForeverAloneWomen*

The quote above is not from the specific case Elizabeth mentions but is nevertheless an example which reflects how the tone easily can get directed towards despair instead of hope. Here, a few users are discussing shame and self-hatred related to the lack of love, and in this example, it is obvious that despite the user's wish to get better, she is "just in a trance" of misery and despair.

From my observations, it seems that Elizabeth and the other moderators attempt to direct the members towards a state of respair, where it is ok to feel and express moderate anger and vulnerability, as long as they are trying to actively utilize it to trying to be social, to go out and in general are trying to move from the online to the offline, which is comparable to Kay and Banet-Weiser's argument for how to reach the state of respair for women who feels anger.

To return to the question about how Elizabeth decides who should be eligible to become members, it seems that there is no absolute answer. From what we have seen, it seems that it is considered all right to have had a few dating experiences to become a member, but that there is a limitation to what is considered appropriate to discuss in the subreddit where both too positive stories could be suspected of exploitation, and too sad stories are considered inappropriate since it, according to Elizabeth can make the users lose all hope and eventually turn into a toxic echo-chamber.

I would argue that this is the biggest distinction between the femcel and the FAW environment, since I have not seen any initiation towards reaching a state of respair within ThePinkPill forum regardless of them being the ones showing most anger about their situation. Although as mentioned, there are elements of ‘wound fetichism’ in both online environments, Elizabeth and the moderators of the FAW subreddit seem to encourage their members in a more positive direction towards initiation and reorienting towards love, instead of residing in a static habitus where the lack of love is dominant and where hatred towards other women thrives.

From a thread on ThePinkPill, we see how a user is trying to sustain an orientation towards something else than despair and the lack of love, that nevertheless seems so prevalent within ThePinkPill forum:

ThePinkPill has a permanent home for femcels and makes room for non femcels in part bc femcels bring the heart of the truth about the female experience, it's painful, and nothing to aspire to. By integrating the space with everyone else, it becomes clear to anyone who wants to be here that they are every bit as woman and every bit as valid and worth listening to. It is my hope to normalize this over the years.

It also makes pathways out of femceldom more accessible by making sure we "let some sun in" the space since rumination and depression feeding itself is highly probable when there is no room for more to discuss. Some people will never be able to find their way out of femcel life due to limitations but a site full of women living and doing and that doesn't ostracize femcels may be a way for them to see other possibilities for a good life as is. Or to be a part of a larger community without losing the femcel home. Who knows maybe onsite networking can open doors offline for jobs, small business, friendships, hobbies whatever. Men look out for each other all the time. If we create solid networks, we can have that too

*Figure 15: ThePinkPill.co*

She expresses that the ThePinkPill should be a forum for every woman who feels that she has difficulties dating, but the attitude of the environment shows a different reality. As argued in the chapter *Femcels and incels*, we saw how many members of ThePinkPill gained their individual and collective autonomy by declaring themselves objective ugly, and exclude anyone else, who did not meet those standards. This user wishes to “let some sun in” in the forum, which seems to be out of reach when the environment destructively seems to uphold the suffering and misery. Just like Elizabeth, it seems like the user of the quote above, wants to direct the attitude towards hope to reach a collective state of respair, but the attitude of the collective has become self-destructive. The examples which I have included in the study suggest, that there is very limited room for discussions outside of the usual themes like objective ugliness, depression, and hatred towards men and other women.

On the subreddit r/ForeverAloneWomen, it seems like they have found a better and healthier balance between destructively idolising the ‘wound’ of their vulnerable selves, and between the hope for a better future. It thus seems more probable for them to reach the state of respair, where the collective vulnerability is recognized and used to orient towards different things than solely the lack of love.

## 6.2. A constraining habitus within the online spheres

The collective habitus of the online spaces are interesting and important to discuss, since it perhaps tends to curb the enthusiasm and hope towards finding love and familiarity outside of the online environment. As argued in previously in the thesis, I found that the femcel-based online environments contain elements of constraint, since the members uphold specific criteria for becoming a member: Objective ugliness, limited dating experiences or aligning and agreeing with the hatred towards men, but especially towards women. But what can then be perceived as the familiar and what is the unfamiliar?

As Jackson describes, the habitus can get disrupted if an individual initiates towards something outside of the familiar. An initiation can happen if the individual has experienced mental stress and turmoil (Jackson 2014: 251), and as we have seen, almost all women have turned to the online spaces after having experienced exactly this. If we apply Jackson's theory it would mean, that the habitus has been life before joining the online communities, and where the initiation towards the lack of love has happened due to mental turmoil connected to life in the offline world. The initiation towards the online spaces, where the lack of love is the prominent theme, has perhaps become the familiar, where the individuals reside. As Throop noted, people tend to turn towards the sacred when experiencing suffering, which I argued could be applied to the online involuntary celibacy environments. As we have seen from the examples through the study, the women joined the involuntary celibacy environments, when they were looking for camaraderie and commiseration when they suffered and struggled to find romantic love. Many of the women have thus turned to the online environments, which has become the familiar to them from which they continuously orient from. Common for them all is that they do not believe that they will ever find romantic love, which reinforces the argument of how the membership of the online sphere has become the familiar, the habitus, the identity. Before turning towards the online and the lack of love, they had a different habitus, where they were oriented towards love, since almost all have been on a date or more. The question is, will it be possible for the women to reorientate towards love again after the online environment has become the familiar from where they have found the recognition they perhaps otherwise would have found in a romantic relationship? In a post on ThePinkPill, a member is explaining how becoming a member of the forum has made her wonder whether she can ever go back to a previous mentality when it comes to men:

Sometimes I wonder if it would have been better have I not come here and learned about the pink pill and blackpill? I can't look at anything about men the same I can't bear to be around male relatives even when I have to be. I'll never know.

*Figure 16: ThePinkPill.co*

From this quote, we see how following ThePinkPill attitude and ideology, has made her fear if she can ever return to life before. The online environment has thus made a big impact on her mindset and her way of resonating especially about men as an enemy. This would suggest that her habitus has become constrained, and that the morals and attitudes of the online environment has locked any potential initiation towards love. The lack of love has become the familiar along with the hopelessness, where, as we saw previously, the autonomy that normally should be balanced with recognition a romantic relationship, has been transferred into the frames of the online environment.

The autonomy consists of a shared identity, where hatred towards men and other women who are doing better, and the recognition from other members, have become a survival strategy.

In the FAW online environment, we saw how the moderator Elizabeth actively tries to uphold an orientation towards something else than merely the lack of love. Opposite to ThePinkPill forum, I have argued based on the conversations with the interlocutors and my observations on r/ForeverAloneWomen, that the women who identify as FAW and the culture in the FAW environment has a more open atmosphere, where different opinions are welcome.

### 6.3. Concluding remarks

In the chapter above, I have discussed how the identification as a femcel and FAW has developed collectively in an online milieu. Both ThePinkPill forum and the subreddit r/ForeverAloneWomen have specific criteria for joining where the rule of objective ugliness seems more prominent within the ThePinkPill forum. The members of ThePinkPill also seem to show a more excluding behaviour than the FAW subreddit does, since they are more open to new initiations towards something more positive than focussing on the lack of looks and the lack of romantic love. Although, as we saw from the quote from the FAW subreddit, the FAW members are still trying to uphold some criteria, where having a loving family is outside the norm of what they expect from a woman who calls herself forever alone. The examples which I have included in the study suggest, that there is very limited room for discussions outside of the usual themes like objective ugliness, depression, and hatred towards men and other women. We also saw, how there is a degree of wound fetichism in both groups, where the members seem to find comfort and understanding in each other's experiences of misery, which in turn can limit their orientation towards a change in their situation.

## 7. Conclusion

This ethnographic study has explored the phenomenon of female involuntary celibacy together with women's experiences in both the online world and the offline. During my fieldwork, I have spoken to eleven women, where six of them identify as forever alone women (FAW) and the rest identify as or somewhat identify as femcels. My research shows that a distinction between the two categorical identifications FAW and femcels is necessary, since I discovered not only from the interlocutors, but also from my observations in the online field, that these two groups have different attitudes and language. Both groups' reality and experiences as being involuntary celibates, have been the focus of my study, and the interlocutors have all bravely provided an immense help to understand the female experience of being in involuntary celibacy. While male incels, whose violent actions and radical beliefs have attracted attention both within academia but also in popular media, I wanted to investigate the lives and realities of female experiences related to romantic suffering from a phenomenological approach.

This study contributes with important, new knowledge about female romantic suffering, and it provides the research field with an understanding the struggles that many female involuntary celibates are undergoing while pursuing love. The study thus opens for a hitherto neglected side of female suffering connected to the lack of love, as the feminist scholar Jilly Boyce Kay advertises for.

Despite both groups sharing experiences of romantic and social rejection, a difficult upbringing, physical and mental health issues, they vent, discuss, and understand their situations differently. Whereas the femcel-based online environment, ThePinkPill, shares similarities with incel-based environments, where verbal aggressive behaviour and blaming others for their situation, the FAW environment seems more open to share different and contradicting opinions. The women who identify as FAW do not wish to be associated with femcels, since the term for them connotes aggressive women who turn their anger towards men but especially towards other women doing better than them. Moreover, the femcel environment has proved to be more restricted since not only involuntary celibacy is a requirement for joining the group, but also what they hold to be objective ugliness becomes the primary criteria for identifying as a femcel. The potential exclusion is therefore also more prominent within the femcel environment where the requirements of stereotypical ideas such as believing in objectively ugliness, the lack of love, a hierarchical classification of people seem to uphold the rather strict habitus of the femcel environment. Reflecting on previous research on male incels, I have argued that the members of ThePinkPill forum, despite their wish to distance themselves from incels, display elements of the same aggressive and angry behaviour, where misogyny is being repeated. In turn, this also strengthens the group cohesion. Although none of the women who identify as femcels or

somewhat identify as femcels display the same behaviour, they have amplified my observations in ThePinkPill, while at the same time taken a distance to the internal hatred and misogyny.

In line with Renske van der Veer, the former director of the International Centre for Counterterrorism, I have argued that femcels too have the potential to commit violent actions, just like incels. However, this argument does not cover all of the female involuntary celibacy groups online, since no violent or aggressive behaviour have been observed in the FAW online environment.

Many of the femcel women agree that the tone can be quite excluding in for example ThePinkPill forum but that it has nevertheless helped them to understand their own suffering regarding the lack of love. Connected to these strict membership rules, I have argued that it might give the women their autonomy back that they otherwise have been robbed in their lack of recognition from a romantic partner. The position towards love as something unreachable in turn has given them a position as unable to find love: both as femcels but also as forever alone women. I have thus concluded, in line with Illouz's sociological theory on why love hurts in contemporary society, that the self-worth of both femcels and forever alone women, is at stake when they have failed in finding romantic love (Illouz 2012: 130). Their sense of self has been restored when becoming a part of an online environment, which has recognized them in their experiences, but which has also reinforced their despair and low self-esteem connected to not being able to find love. I argued that both groups are displaying elements of wound fetishism, where the pain and suffering of the female involuntary celibates have become a shared collective identity online. Whereas the FAW environment and the moderator Elizabeth seem to actively focus on helping each other to aspire towards a direction towards hope, the femcel-based community, ThePinkPill, reside more in a state of despair.

Despite these good intentions from Elizabeth, I have questioned whether the online environment and the identity as forever alone has become too familiar to ever orient towards love again. The constraint that many of the interlocutors have felt within their family and in their childhood has perhaps constrained them in their orientation towards romantic love, and when they failed in finding that, they have oriented towards the online environment of femcels or forever alone women, where they again experience constrain. It thus seems as if the lack of love, or at least orienting towards a complicated, ambivalent, and unreachable love has continued as a companion in their adult life. The suffering connected to not finding romantic love has led them towards a sacred collective online space, which ironically has turned the online identification as femcel or forever alone woman as the familiar habitus, from where despair and hopelessness rule.

Andreasson (2021) argues that the lack of social response from others has created a hopelessness among the involuntary celibates to which I agree. However, I would add to Andreasson's thesis, that it is the membership of the collective that prolong and sustain this exact hopelessness, since it gives

power and autonomy. Common for all the interlocutors is that they have very little hope to find romantic love, which reinforces my argument of how membership of the online sphere has become the familiar, the habitus, the identity. I have found that this is typically evident within the femcel online environment, in contrast to the FAW women who after all, often with the other member's and moderator's encouragement are seeking the state of respair: towards hope. Although I have distinguished between FAW and femcels, it is my hope with this thesis to create awareness of how involuntary celibates differ and meet different places despite their shared experiences and shared orientation.

## References

- Ahmed, Sara. (2006). *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, Sara. (2014). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Second edition. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Andreasson, Oskar. (2022). Romantisk Utbrändhet: ofrivilligt celibata män och kvinnor. Bachelor thesis. Lund University.
- Boellstorff, Tom, Nardi, Bonnie, Pearce, Celia and Taylor, L.,T. (2012). *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Chemaly, Soraya. (2018). *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger*. New York: Atria Books.
- Emerson, M., Robert. and Fretz, I., Rachel. and Shaw, L., Linda. (2011). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Second edition. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Engholm, Hugo. (2021) *The lack of looks*. Master Thesis. Uppsala University.
- Frykman, Jonas and Gilje, Nils. (2003). 'Being There: An Introduction'. In Jonas Frykman and Nils Gilje (eds), *Being There: New Perspectives on Phenomenology and the Analysis of Culture*, 7-53. Lund: Nordic Academic Press.
- Ging, Debbie. (2019) "Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere", *Men and Masculinities*, 22 (4).
- Illouz, Eva. (2012). *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Jackson, Michael. (2014). "Knowledge of the Body". In Henrietta, L. Moore and Todd Sander (eds), *Anthropology in Theory: Issues in epistemology* (Second edition), 246-259. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Kay, Boyce, Jilly.: "Abject desires in the age of Anger: Incels, femcels and the gender politics of unfuckability". In: Mary Harrod, Suzanne Leonard, and Diane Negra (eds), *Imagining 'We' in the Age of I: Romance and Social Bonding in Contemporary Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Kay Boyce, Jilly and Banet-Weiser, Sarah. (2019). "Feminist anger and feminist repair." *Feminist Media Studies*, 19(4): 603-609. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1609231>
- Kozinets, V, Robert. (2010). *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Krakowski, Stefan. (2021). *Incels: om ofrivilligt celibat och en mansroll i kris*. Bazar Förlag.
- Lindroth, Malin. (2018). *Nuckan*. Förlag Norstedts.
- Nakamura, Lisa. (2002). *Cybertypes: race, ethnicity and identity on the Internet*. New York: Routledge.
- Nardi, A, Bonnie. (2016). 'When Fieldnotes seem to Write Themselves: Ethnography Online'. In Roger Sanjek and Susan W. Tratner (eds). *eFieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology in the Digital World*.

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press: 192-210.

O'Malley, Roberta Liggett, Holt, Karen & Holt, Thomas J., (2020). An Exploration of the Involuntary Celibate (Incel) Subculture Online. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37 (7-8): pp. 1–28.

Simpson, Roona. (2016). Singleness and self-identity: The significance of partnership status in the narratives of never-married women. *Journal of Social & Personal Relationships*, 33(3), pp. 385–400.

Schrooten, Mieke. (2016). “Writing eFieldnotes: Some Ethical Considerations” in Roger Sanjek and Susan W. Tratner, (eds). *eFieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology in the Digital World*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press: 78-94.

Takáč, Peter. (2020). Current issues in aesthetics and beyond: Revisiting lookism, *Ethics & bioethics (in Central Europe)*. 10(1): pp. 59–68.

Throop, Jason, C. (2015). “Sacred Suffering: A Phenomenological Anthropological Perspective”. In Kalpana Ram and Christopher Houston (eds). *Phenomenology in Anthropology: A Sense of Perspective*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Whitehead, K. (2010). Hunger hurts but starving works: A case study of gendered practices in the online pro-eating disorder community. *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 35(4), pp. 595- 626.

## Online Articles

Aronowitz, Willis, Nona. (2021). “The Femcel Revolution: How an underground group of women is reclaiming involuntary celibacy”. *Elle*, September 1, 2021. Available at: <https://www.elle.com/life-love/sex-relationships/a37288143/0168-0169-the-femcel-revolution-september-2021/> (Accessed December 6, 2022.)

Clein, Emmeline. (2019). “The Smartest Women I Know Are All Dissociating”. *Buzzfeed*, November 20, 2019. Available at: <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/emmelineclein/dissociation-feminism-women-fleabag-twitter> (Accessed December 1, 2022).

Gaitskill, Mary. (2022). “The Year of the femcel: Why are women struggling to find sex and love?”. *Unherd*, October 31, 2022. Available at: <https://unherd.com/2022/10/the-year-of-the-femcel/> (Accessed December 6, 2022).

Garland, Emma. (2022). “Enter the Fleabagera: What does it mean to be a ‘dissociative feminist’?”. *Dazed Media*, February 3, 2022. Available at: <https://www.dazeddigital.com/life-culture/article/55375/1/fleabag-era-what-does-it-mean-to-be-a-dissociative-feminist> (Accessed December 1, 2022).

Gilbert, David. (2022). “Inside Keffals’ Battle to Bring Down Kiwi Farm”. *VICE News*, 7 September, 2022. Available at: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/xgyagd/keffals-kiwi-farms> (Accessed December 1, 2022)

Lanigan, Roisin. (2022). “Are you a femcel?”, *I-D Magazine*, June 16, 2020. Available at: [https://i-d.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/3adzn9/femcel](https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/3adzn9/femcel). Accessed December 1, 2022.

Mina Le. (2022). “toxic femininity”: what’s up with girlbloggers, female manipulators and femcels? [Online video]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6aDNutZoB0&t=647s>

Peyser, Sophia. (2022). “The Fleabag Era of Dissociative Feminism Must End”. *Lithium Magazine* January 19, 2022. Available at: <https://lithiummagazine.com/2022/01/19/the-fleabag-era-of-dissociative-feminism-must-end/> (Accessed December 1, 2022).

Schofield, Daisy (2021). "Inside the online 'safe space' for female incels: Enter the pink pill". *Huck Magazine*, March 23, 2021. Available at: <https://www.huckmag.com/art-and-culture/tech/inside-the-online-safe-space-for-femcels/> (Accessed December 1, 2022).

Schüldt, Greta. (2022). "Malin Lindroth: Nuckan är ingen incel". *Dagens Nyheter*, January 28, 2022. Available at: <https://www.dn.se/kultur/malin-lindroth-nuckan-ar-ingen-ince/> (Accessed December 7, 2022)

Taylor, Jim. (2018). "The woman who founded the incel movement". *BBC*, August 30, 2018. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-45284455> (Accessed December 1, 2022)

Tiffany, Kaitlyn. (2022). "What Do Female Incels Really Want? Online, groups of women have started using the rhetoric of the incel movement. But to what end?", *The Atlantic*, May 22, 2022. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2022/05/femcel-meaning-female-incel-reddit/629836/> (Accessed December 1, 2022)

Van der Veer, Renske. (2020) "Analysing personal accounts of perpetrators of incel violence: what do they want and who do they target?" *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT)*, 4 June 2020. Available at: <https://icct.nl/publication/analysing-personalaccounts-of-perpetrators-of-ince-violencewhat-do-they-want-and-who-do-they-target/> (Accessed 1 December 2022)

Wilson, Cameron. (2020). "TikTok Is Filled with Pro-Eating Disorder Content, Despite Its Own Rules". *BuzzFeed News*, February 17, 2020. Available at: <https://www.buzzfeed.com/cameronwilson/tiktok-eating-disorder-videos-algorithm-for-you-page> (Accessed December 1, 2022).

## Interviews

### 1. Diane (Pseudonym)

Interview conducted: 13/03/2022  
Interview format: Questionnaire on Messenger  
Conducted by the author

Description of informant:  
30-year-old American woman. Created a femcel group on Facebook which is now closed due to inactivity.

### 2. Laura (Pseudonym)

Interview conducted: 31/03/2022  
Interview format: Chat interview on Discord  
Conducted by the author

Description of informant:  
A 21-year-old Spanish woman. Reached out to me after seeing my interview request on ThePinkPill-forum which she is also a member of.

### 3. Kristen (Pseudonym)

Interview conducted: 07/04/22-14/05/2022  
Interview format: Chat conversation on Discord  
Interview length: Over several days  
Conducted by the author

Description of informant:  
37-year-old American woman who used to be a member of the Facebook group which Diane was moderating.

### 4. Amy (Pseudonym)

Interview conducted: 13/03/2022  
Interview format: Questionnaire on Discord  
Conducted by the author

Description of the informant:  
21-year-old American woman. Reached out to me after seeing my interview request on ThePinkPill-forum which she is also a member of.

### 5. Emma (Pseudonym)

Interview conducted: 02/05/2022  
Interview format: Chat interview on Discord  
Interview length: 2 hours  
Conducted by the author

Description of informant:  
20-year-old American woman who reached out to me after seeing my post on the female-based forum Crystal Café.

### 6. Elizabeth (Pseudonym)

Interview conducted: 17/09/2022  
Interview format: Audio interview on Discord  
Interview length: 2 hours  
Conducted by the author

Description of informant:  
35-year-old woman from France. Moderator of r/ForeverAloneWomen on Reddit.

### 7. Astrid (Pseudonym)

Interview conducted: 18/09/2022  
Interview format: Audio interview on Discord  
Interview length: 1 hour  
Conducted by the author

Description of informant:  
39-year-old Scandinavian woman. She is a member of the r/ForeverAloneWoman reddit sub and a member of the associated Discord server.

### 8. Sunny (Pseudonym)

Interview conducted: 18/09/2022  
Interview format: Chat interview on Discord  
Interview length: 3 hours  
Conducted by the author

Description of informant:  
23-year-old woman from the Philippines. She is a member of the r/ForeverAloneWoman reddit sub and a member of the associated Discord server.

## **9. Hanka (Pseudonym)**

Interview conducted: 19/09/2022  
Interview format: Audio interview on Discord  
Interview length: 40 min  
Conducted by the author

Description of informant:  
23-year-old woman from The Czech Republic.  
She is a member of the r/ForeverAloneWoman  
reddit sub and a member of the associated  
Discord server.

## **10. Rachel (Pseudonym)**

Interview conducted: 26/09/2022  
Interview format: Audio interview on Discord  
Interview length: 1 hour and 20 min.  
Conducted by the author

Description of informant:  
29-year-old American woman who is a member  
of the r/ForeverAloneWoman reddit sub and a  
member of the associated Discord server.

## **11. Lily (Pseudonym)**

Interview conducted: 27/09/2022  
Interview format: Audio interview on Discord  
Interview length: 1 hour and 30 min  
Conducted by the author

Description of informant:  
26-year-old American woman who is a member  
of the r/ForeverAloneWoman reddit sub and a  
member of the associated Discord server

## **Masteruppsatser i Etnologi och Folkloristik, Uppsala Universitet 2021-**

1. Sofia Wik. Uppladdning: En etnologisk studie om Northvolts batterifabrik, Sara Kulturhus och framtidsutsikter i Skellefteå. Juni 2021.
2. Moa Broqvist. Den andre spelaren. En etnologisk studie av kvinnliga gamers i en manlig spelkultur. Oktober 2021.
3. Jeanna Hylén Ullman. Historier får liv. En etnologisk studie av performans och kulturhistoriska kläder på friluftsmuseet Skansen. Juni 2022.
4. Hannah Lovisa Wennerström. Dockor är för tjejer, figurer för barn. En etnologisk studie om vuxna och barns konsumtion av leksaker i Sverige. Juni 2022.
5. Maria Engström. Män mot destruktiv maskulinitet. Politiska ställningstaganden och praktiker för ökad jämställdhet. September 2022
6. Caroline Reinhammar. The promise of a green revolution. Conceptions of climate change and sustainability in local movements objecting to mining establishment. Januari 2023.
7. Maria Brix Rasmussen. The lack of love. The sacred and the suffering experiences of female involuntary celibates. Januari 2023.

maria\_brix@hotmail.com  
Institutionen för kulturanthropologi och etnologi  
Uppsala Universitet  
Box 631  
SE-751 26  
Tel. +46 (0) 18 471 22 85  
Fax +46 (0) 18 471 70 29  
Available for download from DiVA Online Database: <http://uu.diva-portal.org>