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The Incel Subculture

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User Journeys in Online Extremist Groups

This project by the Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET) looks at the user journeys of individuals who enter and participate in the online spaces of extremist communities. A user journey here refers to the distinct path a user may follow to reach their goals when accessing and using an online space belonging to extremist communities.

User journeys are particularly important in offering insights into the rationale and motivations of users on the one hand, and to the inner workings of extremist online communities on the other. This is vital for understanding their goals and objectives.

In selecting the ideologies for this project, we drew upon extremist communities – rather than extremist and terrorist organisations or groups – including those actors that participate in the extremist milieu and share ideas but do not necessarily operate in concert. These ideologies include those of formal and well-defined extremist organisations of White supremacist and anti-government extremist groups in the United States, supporter networks of Islamic State (IS), and looser communities of extremist actors including accelerationists, incels and chan site members who operate on shared platforms, congregating around common beliefs but without the connection of formal membership.

This project is a response to the growing interest in understanding how individuals enter and participate in online spaces of extremist communities. A core goal of the project was to understand the role of algorithms in leading users to extremist communities, including the changes in algorithmic recommendations that lead users to more extreme content online. However, examining these changes proved impossible due to the precautions taken by the expert contributors to the project, such as the use of separate technology and VPNs throughout their research.

The project also highlights the distinct posting behaviour and operational security protocols of different groups, usually along ideological lines.

Executive Summary

This report is the fifth in a series of short reports that look at the user journeys of individuals in extremist communities. This report focuses on the Incel movement, an online subculture and identity underpinned by a condition of sexlessness. This subculture is also referred to as the “incelosphere”, given its online nature, which is mostly extremist in nature, upheld by an extremist mindset among adherents. It is mostly characterised by the belief in a social hierarchy governed by physical characteristics.

The rationale for focusing on the Incel subculture as an extremist community is its organised nature, which is reflected in its sizeable membership. Besides this, there has been general interest in the incel subculture, which has attracted more visits to incel spaces. There has also been an increase in the number of self-identified incels in recent years, which calls for a deeper understanding of the subject.

The study involves focus groups, mostly comprising individuals who have accessed, observed, and occasionally participated in the private communication channels of incel spaces. The names of all communities mentioned in the focus groups, including those that participants accessed, have been removed. The report highlights platform use, violence, attacks, and gender dynamics.

Key findings on incel subculture are:

- The incelosphere remains relatively accessible to members, potential adherents and external observers. Incel forums are often referenced and linked in other mainstream spaces such as YouTube, Reddit and 4chan.
- An important feature of the incelosphere is its engagement in an interactive process of cementing its world view, and makes use of data and statistics to reinforce its belief system.
- While not all participants condone violence or promote it, it is not unusual to find some members glorifying acts of violence and expressing hatred towards various out-groups through violent fantasies.
- Gender remains central to the incel worldview. Inceldom is therefore mostly marked by a perceived battle between men and women, making it extremist in nature.

Contents

Executive Summary	2
1 Overview	5
The Incel Subculture	5
2 Methodology	6
3 Public Activities of the Incel Subculture	7
The Incel Worldview	7
Incel Demographics and the Online/Offline Breakdown	8
Platform Use	9
Violence and Attacks	12
Gendered Dynamics	15
Gender as Intrinsic to the Incel Worldview	16
The Targeting of Individuals through Gender and Sexuality	16
4 Private Activities of the Incel Subculture	18
5 Conclusion	19

1 Overview

This section considers the incel movement, a primarily online subculture of boys and men who have struggled to form intimate connections with the opposite sex. The term “incel” is a portmanteau of involuntary celibate, capturing the condition of sexlessness and failure to form relationships that underpin the incel identity. Importantly, it is characterised by a virulent misogyny, as the subculture views women as the architects of incel pain and suffering.¹

As this report will demonstrate, incels have established women as their primary out-group, through a belief system that sees women as holding all-encompassing power in the dating marketplace, which has doomed incels to a life alone. Women are therefore strategically dehumanised, cast largely as shallow creatures for sexual fulfilment, and on occasion, as targets for violent acts of retribution. Through this paradigm of the incel ‘in-group’ and the female ‘out-group’, the incel subculture is extremist in nature, fomenting an ‘us versus them’ mentality, which has been essential in fostering an extremist mindset among its adherents.²

The Incel Subculture

The incel subculture, often referred to as the ‘incelosphere’ due to its inherently online nature, entered the public consciousness after the 2014 killing spree in Isla Vista, California by the 22-year-old Elliot Rodger, who, after killing six people died at the hands of his own gun.³ Rodger left behind a sprawling manifesto entitled “My Twisted World”, in which he described his lifelong misery over his inability to lose his virginity or get a girlfriend, and his intention to murder as many women as possible in an act of revenge.⁴ In nearly ten years since Rodger’s attacks, several acts of violence have directly cited him as inspiration, and in many corners of the incelosphere he is lauded as the patron saint of incels.⁵

However, the term incel existed long before Rodger’s attack, and was in fact coined by a queer woman known as “Alana” in 1997 on the internet forum “Alana’s Involuntary Celibacy Project”. Unlike today’s misogynistic incel subculture, this forum was a space intended for people of all genders and sexualities to support one another and share their struggles with dating.⁶ Yet in the years since then, newer forums have emerged which have become increasingly misogynistic (as outlined in the next section), transforming a benevolent idea based around self-help into a hate-filled belief ecosystem, characterised by a hatred of women and feminism – and in some instances translating into real-world violence.

1 Megan Kelly, Alex DiBranco, and Dr. Julia R. DeCook, “Misogynist Incels and Male Supremacism: Overview and Recommendations for Addressing the Threat of Male Supremacist Violence,” *New America*, February 2021.

2 J.M. Berger, *Extremism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2019), 44.

3 “Elliot Rodger Is Isla Vista Drive-by Killer – US Police,” *BBC News*, May 25, 2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-27562917>.

4 Elliot Rodger, ‘My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger,’ 2014. http://schoolshooters.info/sites/default/files/rodger_my_twisted_world.pdf.

5 Taisto Witt, “‘If I Cannot Have It, I Will Do Everything I Can to Destroy It.’ the Canonization of Elliot Rodger: ‘Incel’ Masculinities, Secular Sainthood, and Justifications of Ideological Violence,” *Social Identities* 26, no. 5 (2020): 675–89, doi:10.1080/13504630.2020.1787132.

6 “love not anger,” <https://www.lovenotanger.org/about/>.

2 Methodology

This study used focus groups, mainly involving individuals who have accessed, observed and occasionally participated in the private communication channels of incel spaces.

The names of all communities mentioned during the focus group, including those that participants accessed, have also been removed. Focus groups took place over three hours and concentrated on three core areas: access and onboarding, posting behaviour and content, and exiting communities.

This project received ethics clearance from King's College London.

3 Public Activities of the Incel Subculture

The Incel Worldview

Inceldom is characterised by the belief in a social hierarchy governed by physical characteristics – meaning that those who are unlucky in the genetic lottery will be unable to have sex and form intimate relationships. In this framing, women are never at the bottom of the hierarchy, as they are believed to control the sexual marketplace, and are therefore held responsible for the sexual failures of incel men. This so-called hierarchy has three distinct tiers:

- “Alphas” of society, who possess the best physical characteristics. Male alphas are known as “Chads” and female alphas are known as “Stacys”.
- “Betas” or “normies” of society, who, with their average looks, form the vast majority of the population.
- ‘Incels’, who are an exclusively male tier of society, seeing themselves as condemned to the bottom of the social order due to their perceived poor genes and looks.⁷

Incels subscribe to the theory of female hypergamy, which describes a system in which women are seen to partner with men to accrue greater resources.⁸ Consequently, men are perceived to have fewer mating options, as the majority of women are competing for a smaller number of allegedly “high-tier” men. This is often referred to as the 80/20 rule, in which 80% of women are purported to compete for only 20% of men.⁹ This foments a social hierarchy which leaves incels at the bottom. As such, inceldom perpetuates a victimhood mentality, in which lack of romantic fulfilment is seen as a result of genetic factors beyond an incel’s control. Indeed, the “Incels Wiki”, which is maintained by incels, describes involuntary celibacy as akin to a “life circumstance”, rather than an ideology.¹⁰ Whether the incel subculture should be classified as an ideology, a movement or a violent extremist group continues to be debated, as this report will elaborate. What is inarguable, however, is that the incel world view is characterised by the strategic dehumanisation of women, who are discussed online in misogynistic and derogatory terms, often through the language of sexual abuse and fantasies of violence.

It should be noted that incel beliefs are no longer parochial, but reflective of relatively mainstream attitudes regarding the dating and sexual marketplace. In particular, so-called female hypergamy has

⁷ Stephane J. Baele, Lewys Brace, and Travis G. Coan, “From ‘Incel’ to ‘Saint’: Analyzing the Violent Worldview behind the 2018 Toronto Attack,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33, no. 8 (2021).

⁸ Incels Wiki, “Hypergamy.”

⁹ In which 20% of men are fought over by 80% of women.

¹⁰ Incels Wiki, “Main Page.”

been discussed by individuals such as Jordan Peterson, Andrew Tate and Bill O'Reilly, who have extremely large audiences that are not necessarily incel in identity yet conform to the notion of women holding greater power and choice than men when it comes to sex and relationships. As the Institute for Research on Male Supremacism has argued, misogynist incels operate in the broader frameworks of male supremacy, which cannot therefore be neatly separated from the structural misogyny embedded across society.¹¹

Incel Demographics and the Online/Offline Breakdown

In light of its largely online, pseudonymous nature, obtaining accurate demographics of the incel subculture is challenging. Predominately, incels are believed to be young men, as evidenced in a poll conducted in 2020 on Incels.is (the most popular incel site), which found that 82% of respondents were men between the ages of 18 and 30.¹² Additionally, while 55% percent of respondents identified as White, the remaining 45% were divided among ethnic and racial groups including Black, Indian, Middle Eastern, Latino and Asian.¹³ The incelsphere is therefore not *overtly* racist in terms of who it allows to participate, as evidenced by the diversity of ethnicities on the forums. Nevertheless, White supremacist narratives around the superiority of white skin are present across the subculture, and racist language remains common.¹⁴

It is believed that the highest number of incels are in the United States. This was confirmed by recent statistics and data analysis compiled by the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCHD) in 2022, which revealed that nearly half of the traffic to Incels.is came from the US. The next highest traffic came from the UK at 7.5%, and then Poland at 4.3%.¹⁵ The Incels Wiki notes that incels are located around the world, and that this points to a global rise in young, male sexlessness.¹⁶ Fundamentally, therefore, the main prerequisite to inceldom is being a male virgin. Notably, women and gay men are explicitly barred from entering incel spaces, as noted in the Rules and FAQ section of forums such as Incels.is and Blackpill.club.¹⁷

Regarding membership, as of April 2023, Incels.is had over 20,000 registered members – giving us an insight into the size of the most active incel forum.¹⁸ However, you do not need to register on Incels.is to access its key content, so this does not definitively reveal how many self-identified incels spend time on the platform. In 2022, the CCHD estimated that the wider incelsphere had more than 55,000 active members.¹⁹ However, this reflects the fact that single users operate on multiple incel sites – making such estimates somewhat inaccurate. What is clear is that membership and website traffic to incel sites is generally on the rise. This is probably due an

11 Kelly et al., "Misogynist Incels and Male Supremacism."

12 Anti-Defamation League, "Online Poll Results Provide New Insights into Incel Community," October 9, 2020, <https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/online-poll-results-provide-new-insights-incel-community>.

13 Anti-Defamation League, "Online Poll Results."

14 Anti-Defamation League, "When Women are the Enemy: The Intersection of Misogyny and White Supremacy," July 20, 2018, <https://www.adl.org/resources/report/when-women-are-enemy-intersection-misogyny-and-white-supremacy>.

15 CCHD, "The Incelsphere: Exposing pathways into incel communities and the harms they pose to women and children," 2022. <http://counterhate.com/research/incelsphere/>

16 Incels Wiki, "Demographics of Inceldom."

17 Rules and FAQ pages, Incels.is, <https://incels.is/>; and Blackpill.club, <https://incels.in/index.php>

18 Incels.is, April 2023. <https://incels.is/>

19 CCHD, "The Incelsphere", 2022.

increase in general interest in the incel subculture – meaning that journalists, academics, law enforcement and curious observers are visiting incel spaces – as well as an actual rise in self-identified incels over recent years.

Crucially, the incelsphere cannot be separated from its online ecosystem, and the subculture would arguably would not have existed without the technological advances of the 20th century, which allowed aggrieved young men to congregate in online spaces and amplify one another's grievances. There is no one "key leader", core doctrine or text. Nor is there a specific agenda or utopia that incels unite behind. This makes it a largely amorphous, online phenomenon – with little evidence that incels are meeting in the real world and coordinating to advance an overarching objective. The only offline incel activities that have occurred are the handful of real-world violent attacks committed in the name of inceldom by lone actors.

Platform Use

After Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Forum was established in 1997, several incel sites emerged, such as Love-shy.com, Puaahate.com (which was notably visited by Elliot Rodger ahead of the Isla Vista attacks) and Sluthate.com. Across such sites, online discourse relating to involuntary celibacy became increasingly extreme, misogynistic and violent – in marked contrast to the initial concept behind Alana's involuntary celibate forum. From 2010 onwards, Reddit – including subreddits such as *r/foreveralone*, *r/incels*, and *r/braincels* – became an important space for incels to frequent. Yet Reddit acted to deplatform *r/incels* in 2017, and *r/braincels* in 2019, for violating its rules regarding violent content.²⁰ While Reddit still hosts some incel content, these stricter policies which prevent more extreme content have led to a shift in the centre of gravity of the incelsphere.

Subsequently, the incelsphere found its home on the independent forum "Incels.co" (now known as Incels.is), which was created by the prominent incel known as "SergeantIncel", who also founded Looksmax.org – an incel-adjacent site where men discuss looks.²¹ As previously noted, Incels.is is now the most used incel platform worldwide. Furthermore, the incelsphere includes online blogs, YouTube channels, and other social media platforms where incels congregate, including TikTok, Telegram, 4chan and Discord. The incelsphere is thus sprawling and nebulous – in a constant state of adaption in response to external factors such as site takedowns and deplatforming actions. The deplatforming of mainstream incel spaces, while understandable, has ultimately pushed the community to spaces that are more independent and harder to regulate. Targeting the belief system behind inceldom is thus more complicated than simply removing or limiting particular sites.

²⁰ Chris Bell, "Reddit bans 'involuntary celibate' community," *BBC News*, November 9, 2017; Matt Binder, "Reddit changes its harassment policy and bans major incel community," *Mashable*, September 30, 2020.

²¹ Incels Wiki, "Incelsphere Timeline."

The incelosphere also exists within the broader online network known as the “manosphere”, which is a decentralised milieu of male actors who believe that masculinity is being eroded, particularly as a consequence of feminism and “woke” culture, which put traditional Western values at risk.²² While incels are ultimately distinct in their belief systems, it is important to situate them within this wider online landscape which operates in the interests of male power, and which includes Men’s Rights Activists, Pick Up Artists, TradCons, and Men Going Their Own Way. Underlying these online groups is a feeling of injustice and loss regarding what they feel they were “owed” as men.²³ Inceldom is thus a manifestation of male anxiety and grievance at its most extreme, as incels rage against a lack of sex, companionship and love, which they believe are “rightfully” theirs.

Accessibility of Platforms

The incelosphere is relatively accessible to members, potential adherents and external observers, as the prominent incel spaces exist on the clear web. Most of its core content can be observed without specifically registering on any of the key forums, enabling anyone to “lurk” on the ecosystem. Incel forums are often referenced and linked to on more mainstream spaces, such as YouTube, Reddit and 4chan, making them easy to find. Incel content on YouTube is particularly retrievable. A brief keyword search of incel language will lead you to a plethora of channels pumping out incel narratives. Time spent on algorithm-based sites, in particular YouTube and TikTok, leads users to similar content – as there is an increasing number of “manosphere” influencers across mainstream social media who amplify incel messages. Inevitably, more closed and secretive incel spaces will exist that researchers and potential adherents may find less accessible. There will always be “known unknowns”. Overall though, the most prominent incel platforms are easy to locate.

Types of Material on Platforms

Incel forums are largely modelled on chan culture, specifically on sites like 4chan, which produce rapid amounts of content each day on topics of interest. These forums predominately encompass incel discussions relating to the subculture’s key grievances around dating, women, looks-based hierarchies and personal anecdotes of individual inceldom. Real-world events and current affairs relating to or adjacent to inceldom are also widely discussed, for example, acts of violence or violent actors. Notably, the incelosphere is engaged in an iterative process of cementing its worldview, and makes use of data and statistics to reinforce its belief system. As a 2023 report by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue describes, incels use academia, numerical data and literature on evolutionary psychology to strengthen the legitimacy of their beliefs. Such data is used to bolster the “blackpill” philosophy, which asserts that dating success

22 Debbie Ging, “Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere,” *Men and Masculinities* 22, no. 4, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X1770640>.

23 Ashley Mattheis, quoted in Helen Lewis, “To Learn About the Far Right, Start With the ‘Manosphere,’” *The Atlantic*, August 7, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/08/anti-feminism-gateway-far-right/595642>.

is determined by factors – such as looks and physicality²⁴ – that are beyond their control. The equation of incel beliefs to a science is thus a powerful device that draws potential adherents into the worldview.

It is important to recognise that the incelsphere is not homogenous, and therefore incel content differs across platforms.²⁵ Depending on the platform model, there will be different levels of moderation and regulation – meaning that some incel spaces host more extreme content than others. For example, in more mainstream incel spaces such as YouTube and Reddit, harmful content that triggers company policies is likely to be removed. This means that independent platforms such as Incels.is, Blackpill.club and Looksmax.org, which are moderated by incels themselves, contain more extreme language, including misogyny, racism, homophobia and the glorification of violence.²⁶ In addition, much of the incelsphere is devoted to advice related to dating, looks and self-improvement, particularly on some of the more famous incel YouTube channels, which seek to intellectualise the phenomenon and support other incels in the same position.

Language and visual imagery are particularly important in the incelsphere, as incels communicate with each other in idiosyncratic and ironic ways. This makes the incelsphere largely impenetrable to outsiders, as incels have formed a lexicon of words to describe aspects of their identity and wider society.²⁷ Incel language is constantly evolving, and keeping up with its lore requires spending long periods of time in the incelsphere itself. The use of humour, with memes in particular, is another prominent feature of the incelsphere, mirroring the style of chans such as 4chan and 8kun, which are permeated with a specific tone and pop culture aesthetic that appeal to young men in particular.²⁸ Due to the masking of potentially more extreme messaging using visuals and irony, it is often difficult to determine the veracity of incel content, which makes our overall assessment of the risks posed by the group challenging. Fundamentally, the use of coded incel-speak is utilitarian, deployed as a way of enhancing exclusivity and fomenting a sense of belonging within the community.

Evidence of Operational Security (OPSEC)

Incels are acutely aware of individuals and organisations engaged in the observation of their platforms, and are therefore cautious about disclosing information. Incels using the main forums, for example, use pseudonyms and avatars as identifiers, and are generally advised by fellow incels to use a virtual private network (VPN) or The Onion Router (TOR) to prevent detection. Furthermore, forum moderators are tasked with policing any potential infiltrators, in particular law

24 Meg Roser, Charlotte Chalker, and Tim Squirrel, "Spitting out the Blackpill: Evaluating How Incels Present Themselves in their own Words on the Incel Wiki," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2023.

25 Florence Keen, "Unpacking the Incelsphere: In-group Categorisation, Incel Purity and Competition," Global Network on Extremism & Technology, 2023.

26 Stephan Baele, Lewys Brace and Debbie Ging, "A Diachronic Cross-Platforms Analysis of Violent Extremist Language in the Incel Online Ecosystem," Terrorism and Political Violence, 2023.

27 For a more comprehensive list see: Moonshot, "Incels: A Guide to Symbols and Terminology," 2020.

28 Blyth Crawford, Florence Keen and Cuillermo Suarez de-Tangil, "Memetic Irony and the Promotion of Violence within Chan Cultures," 2020. Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats. <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/download/3519/20-026-01.pdf>

enforcement agencies, who are colloquially referred to as “glowies” as they are said to act so conspicuously that they “glow in the dark”.

Another method some incels deploy to enhance their operational security is the use of coded language when discussing violent fantasies. For example, they might describe violently killing a family member or girl at school, and then write “in GTA”, which stands for the game Grand Theft Auto. By articulating violence with the caveat of it only being in “game form”, incels feel they are protected from accusations that they may be planning real-world violence. The CCHD notes that this presentation of illegal content as “ironic” shows that incel communities are conscious of the line between legality and illegality.²⁹ This makes it difficult to detect genuine intentions to commit violence.

Violence and Attacks

The incelsphere is at times a space in which members glorify acts of violence and express hatred towards its various out-groups through violent fantasies. Thus, while not all participants of the incelsphere condone or promote violence, it is not unusual to find incels encouraging others to “go ER”, referring to Elliot Rodger, the incel who committed the first recognised incel attack. Women and girls are, unsurprisingly, the main targets of such discourse. For example, users often post links to news articles in which a woman or girl has died or been killed, praising the content and implying that she “deserved” violence. Sexual violence against women is met with glee, revealing how female bodies are treated as disposable and ultimately deserving of abuse, due to the harms they have allegedly committed against incels. This notion of violent retribution, while not intrinsic to the incel identity, is thus relatively commonplace.

Less frequent, but notable, is the presence of gore and graphic imagery depicting violence against women. For example, on International Women’s Day 2023 there were several threads on two major incel forums that contained explicit images of women who had suffered extreme acts of violence. While such imagery is rare, it provides an insight into the mindset of the more extreme members of the incel community. The promotion of violence is not *always* directed against incel out-groups, but also against themselves, as the community is known to discuss and sometimes encourage acts of self-harm and suicide.³⁰

The *genuine* planning of violence online is not commonplace on the incelsphere although, as previously noted, there may well be closed spaces where incels are more tactical. Furthermore, due to the use of ironic language, the genuine intention to commit violence may also be obscured – as noted in the previous section – as users express violent intentions only as “video games”. There is no tangible evidence to suggest that incels are engaging in strategic or tactical attack planning. The discussion, promotion and glorification of violence is therefore arguably a mechanism of in-group bonding and performance, a feature that is probably

29 CCHD, “The Incelsphere”, 2022.

30 Sarah E. Daly, “Goodbye my Friendcels’: An Analysis of Incel Suicide Posts,” CrimRxiv, June 2021.

enhanced by the anonymity of its members. This means that what they say online is likely to differ greatly from what they might say or do in real life.

Incel Violence

There have been several instances of real-world attacks connected to the incel movement. However, there is no consensus around the precise number – as some instances of gender-based violence have been retroactively described as “incel”, such as the 1989 attacks in Montreal, Canada, which left 14 women dead.³¹ Furthermore, it is common for the media to label an attack as incel before details of the attack motivations are thoroughly understood. Due to the nascency of the phenomenon, charging an attack as incel terrorism is further complicated by variations in terrorism definitions and legislation between jurisdictions. Since Rodger’s attack in 2014, there has been a string of violent attacks with clear connections to inceldom – as the following table outlines – in which the attackers have held specific incel grievances, and in some cases, referenced previous attackers.

Table 1. Attacks perpetrated by incels since 2014

Year	Location	Perpetrator	Deaths	Injured
2014	California, US	Elliot Rodger ³²	7	13
2015	Oregon, US	Christopher Harper Mercer ³³	10	7
2017	New Mexico, US	William Atchison ³⁴	2	0
2018	Florida, US	Nikolas Cruz ³⁵	17	17
2018	Toronto, Canada	Alek Minassian ³⁶	10	16
2018	Florida, US	Scott Beierle ³⁷	3	5
2019	Ontario, US	Alexander Stavropoulos ³⁸	0	2
2020	Toronto, Canada	Unnamed ³⁹	1	2
2021	Plymouth, UK	Jake Davison ⁴⁰	6	2

31 Michael Haplin et al., “A soldier and a victim: Masculinity, violence, and incels celebration of Marc Lépine,” 2024. *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue Canadienne de sociologie*, 61,1:7–24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cars.12460>

32 BBC, “Elliot Rodger Is Isla Vista Drive-by Killer.”

33 “Oregon college shooting: Gunman kills nine in Roseburg attack,” *BBC News*, October 2, 2015.

34 START, Incident Summary for GTDID: 201712070037, University of Maryland <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/IncidentSummary.aspx?gtidid=201712070037>

35 Gregory Ritzer and Ariana Ritzer, “The Incel Killer and the Threat to the Campus Community,” *Security Magazine*, March 12, 2019.

36 “Toronto Van Attack: Minassian Guilty of Killing 10 People,” *BBC News*, March 3, 2021.

37 Department of Homeland Security, “Hot Yoga Tallahassee: A Case Study of Misogynistic Extremism,” 2022.

38 Mary Katherine Keown, “I’m Angry at White Women,” Incel Told Sudbury Police”, *The Sudbury Star*, September 2, 2021.

39 “Teenage Boy Charged in Canada’s First ‘Incel’ Terror Case,” *BBC News*, May 20, 2020.

40 Florence Keen and Blyth Crawford, “Incel Culture: What We’ve Learned from Investigating Plymouth Attacker’s Digital Footprint,” *The Conversation*, 2021.

As well as successful incel attacks, there has been a growing number of disrupted attacks in which incel connections have been found – for example, Gabrielle Friel, who in 2020 was found guilty of terrorism offences in the UK,⁴¹ and Anwar Driouich, who in 2020 was jailed for possessing an explosive substance in the UK.⁴² Both men had expressed a fascination with the incel subculture – although inceldom was not found in the final conviction. While overall incel violence remains in relatively low numbers, the growing trend since Rodger’s attack in 2014 is concerning – as this aggrieved and retributive worldview may inspire incels to commit further acts of retributive violence in future.

How are Attacks Shared and Discussed Online?

In the wake of potential acts of incel violence—particularly when it has yet to be determined whether an attack was motivated by inceldom – incels tend to discuss the events extensively online. Discussions often centre on debates on to whether an individual was an incel, based on his looks and characteristics. Attackers are sometimes praised and compared to Elliot Rodger, as occurred in the incelsphere after a school shooting in November 2021. The attacker, Ethan Crumbley, was immediately proclaimed as a “saint” by incels online, particularly as his victims were targets of incel hate, including a so-called Chad and an Asian teenage girl.⁴³ While there is no evidence to suggest that this shooting was motivated by inceldom, these reactions are notable in revealing a fascination with lone male violence across the incel community and incel adherents who wish to claim violence as “incel” without proof.

The 2021 mass shooting in Plymouth, UK further evidences this, as members of the incelsphere praised the attacker Jake Davidson for his actions, which left six people dead.⁴⁴ Disturbingly, some incels celebrated the fact that one of his victims was a three-year-old girl, referring to her as a “foid” (a derogatory term for women online), and noting that “everyone who died was a participant in the Bluepill matrix which is what hurt incels”.⁴⁵ Yet reactions to incel violence are not always positive, as this incident also revealed, with some incels condemning the violence and noting that the killing of a child was unacceptable.⁴⁶ It is therefore important to acknowledge that the community is heterogenous, with the use of violence contested among members. While some members of the community openly praise violence, others seek to proactively distance incels from acts of violence, as seen on the Incels Wiki, which notes, “No mass-shooters or other criminals identified by the media as ‘incel’s’ or that self-described as such, are known to have been primarily motivated to commit their crimes by online communities devoted to involuntary celibacy.”⁴⁷

41 “Gabrielle Friel: Man guilty of weapons haul terrorism charge,” *BBC News*, December 15, 2020.

42 “Middlesbrough fantasist Anwar Driouich jailed for explosive substance,” *BBC News*, March 17, 2020.

43 Incels.is, “Recent school shooter was of course incel who was bullied”, 2 December 2021.

<https://incels.is/threads/recent-school-shooter-was-of-course-incel-who-was-bullied.337292/>

44 Emilia Lounela, “Discourses of Violence in Incel Online Discussions After the Plymouth Shooting,” *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, 2023.

45 News, “Shooting Spree in England” *Blackpill.Club*, 13 August 2021.

46 Lounela, “Discourses of Violence.”

47 Incels Wiki, “Main Page.”

The Debate around Incel Terrorism and Violent Extremism

As general understanding of the incel subculture has increased, so too have calls for the community to be treated as an emergent security threat. For example, Tompkinson et al. have argued that due to the number of global deaths attributed to the phenomenon, the incel subculture meets the threshold for violent extremism, and should therefore be “securitized” and tackled with appropriate resources, alongside efforts to deradicalise members.⁴⁸ Furthermore, Hoffman *et al.* explicitly state that the most violent tenets of incel ideology pose a “new terrorist threat”, which requires greater focus from the counter violent extremism (CVE) community, improved monitoring and managing of incel communities online, and continued focus on strategies to tackle lone-actor terrorism, with incel attacks treated as a subset of this phenomenon.⁴⁹

Yet proving that a specific act is motivated by inceldom remains difficult. The attack in Plymouth, UK, which was ultimately not classified by authorities as incel terrorism, highlights this challenge. The UK’s Crown Prosecution Service defines terrorism as the threat of action “for the purpose of advancing a political, religious, racial or ideological cause”.⁵⁰ Therefore, inceldom *could* be classified as terrorism in the UK if an attack can be connected to the incel worldview. Moreover, Jonathan Hall Q.C., the UK’s Independent Reviewer for Terrorism Legislation, stated that incel violence should be considered a non-traditional cause of terrorism. Hall notes that incel-inspired attacks are invariably carried out by lone actors, meaning that identifying the role played by the incel subculture is difficult.⁵¹ While there is little doubt that Davison maintained an interest in the incel subculture, his personal grievances extended far beyond his failure to form sexual relationships, and therefore his ultimate motivation for the attacks remains unclear.

It has also been argued that charging incels with terrorism offences may have unintended consequences, as overemphasising the movement as an ideology may overlook the more complicated motivations behind why an individual commits an act of violence.⁵² Overstating the incel threat may also be ill-advised, as the vast majority of incels will not go on to commit acts of real-world violence. It is therefore pertinent to recognise gender-based violence and incel terrorism when it occurs, while balancing the need to understand the non-violent aspects of the incel phenomenon that lead individuals to identify with the incel worldview.

Gendered Dynamics

Being involuntarily celibate – namely, remaining a virgin but wishing to have a sexual relationship – can be a lifelong circumstance of both men and women. Late or adult virgins have always existed, and are therefore distinct from the incel subculture that we see

48 Sian Tomkinson, Tael Harper, and Katie Attwell, “Confronting Incel: Exploring Possible Policy Responses to Misogynistic Violent Extremism,” *Australian Journal of Political Science* 55 no. 4: 1–18.

49 Bruce Hoffman, Jacob Ware, and Ezra Shapiro, “Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, April 19, 2020.

50 The Crown Prosecution Service, “Terrorism”. <https://www.cps.gov.uk/crime-info/terrorism>.

51 Jonathan Hall Q.C. “The Terrorism Acts in 2019: Report of the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation,” March 2021. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6059ea0ad3bf7f2f0cd61d00/THE_TERRORISM_ACTS_IN_2019_REPORT_Accessible.pdf

52 Reem Bahdi and Fahad Ahmad, “Why Charging Incels with Terrorism May Make Matters Worse,” *The Conversation*, June 16, 2020.

today. As the Institute for Research on Male Supremacism notes, men, women and non-binary people may struggle with sexual companionship without allying themselves with male supremacism. In light of this, they recommend the use of the term “misogynist incel” to differentiate incels who operate within the male supremacist movement from those who have personally struggled to lose their virginity.⁵³ Furthermore, some women identify as “femcel” (female celibate), and have congregated in their own online spaces, which are comparable to the incelosphere.⁵⁴ Messaging on femcel sites is notably less externally hate-focused than on male counterparts, with a greater emphasis on self-loathing and defeatism. Incels, however, do not recognise the presence of femcels, because intrinsic to their worldview is the idea that women hold power over the sexual marketplace, thus it is *impossible* for them to be involuntary celibate.⁵⁵

Gender as Intrinsic to the Incel Worldview

Gender is central to the incel worldview, as notions around the looks-based hierarchy, female hypergamy, the evils of feminism and the loss of traditional masculinity form the foundational blocks of the incel identity. Incels believe that whereas men were once powerful, the scales have tipped too far the other way, leaving women as the architects of incel pain. In this regard, incels position themselves as victims, in what has been described as “aggrieved entitlement”, a gendered emotion which fuses the shame of losing masculinity with a defined objective and entitlement in order to reclaim it.⁵⁶ Inceldom is therefore marked by a perceived battle between men and women, making it extremist in nature.

The Targeting of Individuals through Gender and Sexuality

Women form the primary incel “out-group”, and are therefore subject to rampant abuse in the incelosphere. However, in the violent attacks that have been connected to inceldom, it is notable that both men and women have been injured and killed. Elliot Rodger, for example, first killed his Asian roommates before attempting to attack a sorority house full of women.

Abuse along racial lines is also commonplace within the incelosphere, despite the fact that incels are demographically diverse. This is largely due to White supremacist influences on the subculture, which still upholds white skin as genetically superior. As such, non-White ethnicities are all subject to hateful rhetoric online. Finally, anyone expressing behaviours that fall outside of the hetero or cisgender norm, including gay and transgender people, are generally loathed by incels, and are explicitly banned from incel spaces. The use of homophobic and transphobic language is therefore relatively common within the incelosphere, particularly the use of offensive language in order to insult other incels in the community.

53 Kelly et al., “Misogynist Incels and Male Supremacism,” 1.

54 Sarah Do Couto, “Femcels: Inside the Enigmatic Subculture of Involuntary Celibate Women,” *Global News*, February 2, 2023.

55 Lizzie Cernik, “‘I Feel Hurt that My Life Has Ended up Here’: The Women Who Are Involuntary Celibates,” *The Guardian*, October 18, 2021.

56 Alison J. Marganski, “Making a Murderer: The Importance of Gender and Violence against Women in Mass Murder Events,” *Sociology Compass* 13, no. 9 (2019): e12730, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12730>.

Finally, so-called “normie” men are also subject to online abuse, as they are believed to be complicit in upholding society in its current state. These men are seen as emasculated and bending to female power – leaving incel men firmly at the bottom. Therefore, while inceldom is primarily a misogynistic subculture, secondary out-groups including non-White ethnicities, queer and trans identities, and wider male society are also loathed and targeted by incels in their online discourse. These all coalesce to create a perception of incels as an isolated group that is battling injustice and evil on several fronts.

4 Private Activities of the Incel Subculture

Incels operating the “incelosphere” are usually not required to register on Incels.is to access its key content. It is therefore relatively accessible to members, potential adherent and external observers, as the prominent incel spaces exist on the clear web. However, they use pseudonyms and avatars as identifiers, and are generally advised by fellow incels to use a virtual private network (VPN) or The Onion Router (TOR) to prevent detection. They also use coded language when discussing violent fantasies.

5 Conclusion

The incelworld, is characterised by the belief in a social hierarchy governed by physical characteristics. While incels subscribe to a theory of female hypergamy, which reflects a system in which women are seen to partner with men to accrue greater resources, their world view is characterised by the strategic dehumanisation of women, who are discussed online using misogynistic and derogatory terms. This is mostly reflected through the language of sexual abuse and fantasies of violence. It is however important to recognise that the incelosphere is not homogenous, and therefore incel content may differ across platforms in this regard.

Given that the incelosphere remains relatively accessible to members, potential adherents and external observers on the clear web, it is pertinent to note that incel forums are often referenced and linked to in other more mainstream spaces, such as YouTube, Reddit and 4chan, making them easy to find. The use of imagery and language such as humour are particularly important to the incelosphere, making it possible for incels to communicate with each other in idiosyncratic and ironic ways. These forums are largely modelled on chan culture. While not all participants of the incelosphere condone or promote violence, the activities of incels remain a threat to society and therefore a source of concern to law enforcement.



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