UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

https://helda.helsinki.fi

Incel Violence and Victimhood : Negotiating Inceldom in Online Discussions of the Plymouth Shooting

Lounela, Emilia; Murphy, Shane

2023-01-30
Routledge
http://hdl.handle.net/10138/579267
Lounela, E & Murphy, S 2023, 'Incel Violence and Victimhood : Negotiating Inceldom in Online Discussions of the Plymouth Shooting', Terrorism and Political Violence. https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2022.2157267

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository. https://helda.helsinki.fi
This is an electronic reprint of the original article.
This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.
Please cite the original version.

Author's accepted manuscript. To cite this article:
Emilia Lounela & Shane Murphy (2023) Incel Violence and Victimhood: Negotiating Inceldom in Online Discussions of the Plymouth Shooting, Terrorism and Political Violence.
https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2022.2157267

Incel Violence and Victimhood: Negotiating Inceldom in Online Discussions of the Plymouth Shooting

Emilia Lounela & Shane Murphy

Incels ("involuntary celibates") are online communities of young men, broadly aligned by anti-feminism, concern over an inability to form sexual relationships with women, and a strong negative focus on their own appearance. Incels have been linked to violent misogyny and several mass killings. Using critical discourse analysis on data from nine different incel online forums, this article explores how incels discussed the Plymouth shooting in August 2021, often reported as an incel attack, looking at the discourses which are invoked to justify or delegitimize violence. As well as violent rhetoric, our research also pays attention to anti-violent rhetoric in incel communities, an area not yet discussed in the literature regarding incels, but which may be invaluable to those hoping to address the issue of incel violence. Our findings identify significant differences in the way the shooting is discussed across different incel forums, and reveal that both pro and anti-violence discourses frequently invoke lookism and mental health to justify victimhood.

KEYWORDS: Incel, Political violence, Lookism, Mental health, Victimhood

Introduction

Incels ("involuntary celibates") refer to online communities predominantly comprising young men who have constructed an identity around an inability to form sexual relationships with women.[1] Both survey and text data from the popular incels.is forum suggests that the makeup of incel communities is demographically diverse.[2] Baele et al. suggest the incel worldview can be understood as a three-tiered social hierarchy dictated by physical appearance in which attractive men and women ("Chads" and "Stacys") represent a small percentage at the top, while the average-looking majority (normies) find themselves in the centre.[3] The bottom of this hierarchy comprises a minority of physically unattractive men—incels. Beliefs about the exact cause of

“inceldom” differ from community to community, and in many cases, person to person, although they are broadly aligned by an opposition to feminism, concern over the issue of *lookism* (the idea that less attractive people are discriminated against), and a belief in a rigidly defined “sexual marketplace,” which is understood to favour women over men.[4] These ideas are often used to justify misogyny that is prevalent in incel communities.[5] Still, many view their inceldom as a life situation rather than a chosen identity or ideology.[6] The phrase “taking the blackpill” refers to the process of accepting one’s situation to be hopeless, usually due to one’s genetics or certain immutable features.[7] The Blackpill can also refer to a loosely defined ideology shared throughout incel communities, which draw from contested theories regarding sex, gender, biological determinism and evolutionary psychology to emphasise men’s structural subordinance to women in modern societies.[8]

On August 12, 2021 in Plymouth, U.K., a violent attack left five dead. The shooting was widely reported as an incel attack, although the perpetrator’s motivation remains unclear. In the days following the attack, this uncertainty led to many incels trying to make sense of the attack in online forum discussions. Discussions of whether the attacker was an incel became negotiations of what inceldom is and what role, if any, violence should play in it. We collected these discussions in the immediate aftermath of the shooting, which allowed us to see how incels on different online forums reacted to this attack, framed as incel violence, without messages or threads being removed.

In this research, we analyse discussions of the Plymouth shooting from nine prominent incel forums in the days immediately following the shooting. Critical discourse analysis is used to unpack the discourses most often evoked when justifying, condemning, or explaining the attack. These findings are then divided into three themes: lookism, violence, and mental health. Our analysis reveals how the shooting itself, and the ensuing media coverage, became a symbol of the perceived injustices and grievances incels face more broadly. Despite popular conversations circulating in the mainstream media which treat incels as a violent terrorist threat, incels themselves predominantly define inceldom from a viewpoint of marginalisation, victimhood, and unfortunate life situations.[9] Our study builds on previous work on incel victimhood[10] and unpacks how victimhood is constructed through references to lookism and mental health, and invoked in both pro and anti-violent rhetoric in incel communities.[11]

Incel violence

Incel communities have been linked to several mass killings in recent years, including the Isla Vista shooting in the U.S. in 2014,[12] and the Toronto van attack in 2018.[13] Research has found widespread support for violence in incel communities,[14] as well as veneration of the perpetrators of incel violence.[15] While violent attackers holding misogynistic beliefs is certainly not a new phenomenon, it has not always

been recognised or acknowledged.[16] The intensity of the misogyny observed throughout incel forums, and the central role misogyny plays in these communities, has made it a focal point for those attempting to understand incels. It is important to note that incel ideas and discourses, too, are linked to pre-existing systems of misogyny.[17] Researchers attempting to explain incel violence have discussed gender role strain and attempts to reclaim or compensate for masculinity,[18] or the dynamics of incel communities, which legitimise violence against women as an acceptable response to incel violence, and celebrate perpetrators.[19] However, it is also well documented that not all incels condone violence.[20] It is not uncommon to find articles from mainstream news sources which discuss incel violence, or refer to incels as terrorists, being shared on incel forums. In such cases, incels often take issue with the framing of the article for unfairly characterising all incels as being supportive of mass violence. Some incels also criticise the media for making mass killers into celebrities.[21]

As previously mentioned, much of the mainstream coverage in the immediate aftermath characterized the Plymouth shooting as a terrorist attack. Given the lack of information regarding the perpetrators motivations at the time, this designation was likely based on the perpetrators proximity to incel communities. There is an ongoing debate in the academic literature on incels as to whether incel violence should be understood as acts of terrorism. In their assessment of the threat of incel violence Hoffman et al.[22] propose that the attacks perpetrated by Elliot Rodger, Alek Minassian, and Scott Beierle represent “clear incel-motivated terrorist attacks,” and conclude that the “extremist fringe” of incel communities is constantly evolving, and poses a terrorist threat “which should not be dismissed or ignored by domestic law enforcement agencies.” Similarly, a policy brief by Zimmerman et al. published in the aftermath of the Toronto van attack argues that “the nature of Incel violence meets the requirement of the U.S. State Department’s description, which defines the term “terrorism” as “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents.”[23] Cottee, however, argues against categorizing incels as terrorists, positing that there is nothing inherent to the blackpill ideology that justifies or affirms committing acts of violence against women.[24] It has also been argued that current terrorism responses are insufficient for addressing threats of incel violence. In reference to the Plymouth shooter, Leidig argues that “Identifying and tracking groups is inadequate when the threat can no longer be neatly classified into groups, or when individuals choose whether to self-identify with labels at any given moment.”[25] Terrorism designations, she suggests, should be dependent on the content of the specific networks and subcultures in which the individual is engaged, as opposed to group affiliation.

Lookism

Lookism—the idea that unattractive people are, often unconsciously, discriminated against in society—is commonly invoked by incels to explain their lack of success in

romantic and sexual relationships. The phenomenon is recognised in academic research, although the focus has mostly been on discrimination based on appearance experienced in the workplace and the everyday practices reinforcing beauty norms,[26] creating and renewing structures which can lead to feelings of oppression and loss of autonomy from those deemed to be unattractive.[27] Although incels occasionally discuss how physical attractiveness correlates with career success or life expectancy, lookism among incels is primarily discussed in terms of its effects on finding a romantic partner.[28] Along with their own abundant anecdotal evidence, incels frequently draw from social sciences research to support their beliefs—research by Walster et al.,[29] Jonason et al.,[30] and Fugère et al.[31] are all cited on the "Incel Wiki" page for lookism. However, while the research referenced generally finds physical attraction to be a factor, and indeed, often an important factor, there is a tendency among incels to remove much of the nuance, by taking the most catastrophic interpretation of such research and assuming it applies universally. This has contributed to a distinction between truecels ("true incels") and fakecels ("fake incels"), wherein truecels are those whose inceldom, hopelessly inescapable,[32] is a result of unalterable features (e.g. height), while those who are assumed to be simply not putting in the effort, and could "ascend" from inceldom through exercise or grooming, are considered to be fakecels.[33]

Although it is unclear how many have received official diagnoses, incels self-report high prevalence of depression and anxiety,[34] disorders which have been found to correlate with body dysmorphia,[35] a condition which is increasingly common, if understudied, among men.[36] Negative body image and body dysmorphia in men may also be connected to distress related to perceived discrepancy in masculinity and dysfunctional emotional regulation.[37] It is therefore possible that the fixation on appearance among incels may be related more to body image pressure and anxiety rather than individual's physical appearance.

Victimhood

A number of researchers have observed victimhood to play an important function in incel communities.[38] Debbie Ging[39] discusses new emergent hybrid masculinities which can account for this victimhood in ways our traditional understanding of hegemonic masculinity[40] does not. Whereas traditionally, hegemonic masculinity is concerned with ideals such as strength, confidence and emotional restraint, hybrid masculinities, which include incel masculinity, can accommodate traits such as failure, virginity and victimhood. Brzuszkiewicz[41] notes a tendency among incels to portray themselves as victims of women and feminism, and suggests that incels' hostility towards women is not motivated by a feeling of superiority, but rather of inferiority, as women are understood to have significantly more autonomy than men, particularly with regards to dating.[42] Regardless of these perceptions, incels can rightly be categorised as upholding and renewing male supremacism.[43] The incel performance

of masculinity has been referred to as “masculine victimhood,” and has certain rhetorical advantages which can serve a practical function.[44] It enables incels to position themselves as righteous underdogs, and conceptualise themselves as activists or self-help communities, while framing their critics as cruel and uncaring. It also allows them to portray acts of incel violence as being understandable or even justifiable, and creates a space for those who perpetrate them to be celebrated as martyrs.[45]

Methodology & data

Our research questions are as follows:

1. How is the Plymouth attack discussed on different incel online forums?
2. How is inceldom constructed in the context of violence?

To gain a holistic picture of how the Plymouth shooting was discussed in different incel communities, we collected all discussion threads addressing the Plymouth shooting from nine public online forums (incels.is, incels.net, lookism.net, blackpill.club, love-shy.net, ncu.su, lookstheory.org, forum.looksmaxxing.com, and looksmax.org), between August 12 and August 16, 2021. We decided to analyse multiple forums to ensure our findings are representative of incel communities more broadly. These nine communities were chosen, as they represent the nine public, English language incel forums (not subreddits, Facebook groups, etc.) listed on the Incel Wiki[46] at the time.[47] There is very little that thematically distinguishes these forums from one another, although some gesture towards being more concerned with appearance (lookism.net., forum.looksmaxxing.com, looksmax.org, lookstheory.org), or discussion of the blackpill (blackpill.club, ncu.su), while others have no discernible niche, presenting themselves as places for general inceldom discussions (incels.is, incels.net, love-shy.net).

In total ninety-six threads were saved as PDFs, amounting to 1702 posts overall. Some individual posts are as short as a single word, others are several paragraphs in length. The longest thread contains 242 posts, while the shortest contains just two—the original post and one reply. To identify central themes in the data and to determine coding, at first, we uploaded the three longest threads from incels.is, lookism.net, and blackpill.club (nine threads altogether) to the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti, and coded them using an inductive approach. We selected these three forums for developing the coding, as they represented the most active examples of the three varieties of incel community mentioned above. Incels.is, a space for general inceldom discussions, was chosen as it is the largest incel forum on the internet with almost 18,000 members as of September 2022, and is by far the most frequently researched incel forum.[48] Lookism.net, which had close to 18,000 members before shutting down

in December 2021, was selected as it distinguished itself as a place to discuss lookism and looksmaxxing (improving one's appearance), but was also known for its laissez-faire attitude towards trolling. Blackpill.club is a smaller incel forum with just over 1000 users in September 2022, and was selected as it positions itself as a forum for incels more interested in serious discussion of the blackpill and related concepts.

The first author read through the threads multiple times, adding codes to mark interesting topics and dynamics in the discussion. After this, the second author read through the coded data and further developed the coding. Authors discussed and modified the coding throughout the process until intercoder agreement was reached. Then, the first author coded the remaining eighty-seven threads with broader themes, informed by the coding of the nine longest threads. In total 182 codes were assigned ranging from codes describing the content of the post (e.g. "Outsiders do not understand incels"), to codes describing dynamics of the discussion (e.g. "Post not about Plymouth"). Most posts were coded with several, sometimes overlapping codes (e.g. "Lookism" and "Attacker's appearance").

The posts are analysed using critical discourse analysis (CDA). We chose CDA as our methodology for its ability to reveal how important ideas and terms are negotiated, how contingencies and contradictions are approached, and how social reality and inceldom are constructed in the discussions. Our analysis is not focused on the Plymouth shooting itself, but rather, the discourses which emerged around it on incel forums in its aftermath. CDA starts from the premise that all texts contain political and ideological underpinnings that the analysis aims to uncover. As our data contain a considerable amount of discussions regarding power structures, victimhood, and constructions of "right" and "wrong" behaviour, we consider CDA to be well-suited. We chose Norman Fairclough's three dimensional CDA framework as our main methodological approach.[49] This approach involves analysing data in the context of three distinct levels: On a textual level, we analyse how ideational and interpersonal functions are constructed, focusing specifically on representations, identity categories and construction of knowledge systems in the discussions.[50] Looking at discursive practice, we pay attention to the ways in which texts are produced and interpreted, the discourses which are drawn on, and how they are used. Analysing socio-cultural practice, we look at ideological effects and hegemonic processes, the way these discussions connect to wider structures.[51] Here, we see incels communicating in the aftermath of what has been deemed an "incel attack" in a world where incels are often judged to be violent and terrorists—a characterization with which many incels disagree.[52]

A note on irony

One area necessary to address prior to analysis is whether the extreme rhetoric online mirrors a sincere will to act violently, or whether it should be understood as an

exaggerated performance of “incelness” online.[53] “Poe’s Law,” a well-known adage of internet culture, tells us that without clear indicators of the author’s intent, it is impossible to distinguish satire from sincerely held beliefs online.[54] Cottee[55] cautions that “While it would be naïve and unwise to doubt the sincerity of what incels say, it would be no less naïve and unwise to simply take it at face value, since much of what incels say is deliberately tinged with irony, exaggeration and provocation.” Maxwell et al similarly recognize that “online personas are performative, and as such, comments made within online forums may not fully represent the complexity and full personality of the person making a comment.”[56] This phenomenon gives rise to a “Quantum Paradox” whereby these posts exist as both serious and non-serious content.[57] The meaning of the post is dependent on audience interpretation, allowing extreme rhetoric to masquerade as satirical content.[58] The opposite is equally true—content that was intended to be shared in jest risks being misinterpreted by researchers, and indeed other incels, as sincere endorsements of violence. We propose that successful contextualisation of discussions of violence on incel forums depends not on understanding the intent of the poster, but recognizing that the context in which these posts are shared means that endorsements of acts of violence, whether intended ironically or not, always have the potential to be understood as sincere by other users and to contribute to the normalisation of such rhetoric.

Ethical considerations

Privacy and anonymity are important to members of incel online forums. Pseudonyms and non-representative avatars are the norm, and the majority of users refrain from ever sharing their real names or posting images of themselves. Usernames and any other identifying information has been omitted from this research,[59] although quoted posts are shown in their original form (with some minor formatting where required). The forums from which we have collected data from are all publicly accessible without the need for a profile, or approval from administrators or moderators. Members are aware of this, and make references to a presumed influx of outsiders, occasionally addressing them directly.[60] Considering this, and that contacting the discussants to acquire consent could in itself compromise their privacy and thus risk causing harm to them, we decided not to contact discussants to obtain their informed consent to partake in this research.[61]

Analysis

In addition to the way violence is discussed, we set out to examine the way inceldom is constructed in these discussions. An overarching theme throughout the discussions is victimhood. We analyse the ways in which a variety of arguments are invoked to suggest incels are innocent, unfairly persecuted, and deserving of sympathy.

Despite the popular mainstream image of incels as supporters of violence previously discussed, many discussants condemn the attack. It is also notable that incels pay relatively little attention to the Plymouth attack in their discussions: Even in threads specifically started to discuss the attack, attention frequently turns to other topics, such as lookism, politics, and general joking around. Of all codes in the data, *Post not about Plymouth* is the most common, and of all 1691 posts collected, a third (N = 567, 33 percent) are about completely different topics. Other common individual codes include *Violence* (N = 425, 25 percent), *Lookism and discussants' own appearance* (N = 330, 19 percent), *The attacker's appearance* (285, 17 percent), and *Outsiders' representations of incels* (N = 250, 15 percent).

There are notable differences in the way the attack is discussed on different forums. In our data, users of lookism.net and looksmax.org are more concerned with discussing issues related to lookism and the attacker's appearance, whereas on blackpill.club and incels.is, violence is discussed more—although still often in relation to the attacker's appearance. The forums which present themselves as more concerned with lookism and appearance (lookism.net, looksmax.org, forum.lookismaxxing.com) generally have more posts condemning violence than the other forums (lookstheory.org was the one exception—it contained just one posts discussing violence, which we judged to neither endorse nor condemn the act). For exact numbers on differences in discussion themes between different forums, see tables in the Appendix.

Our analysis is divided into three main themes we constructed during the coding: *Lookism, Violence*, and *Mental health*. These topics are most often evoked when the discussants attempt to explain, justify or delegitimise violence. As the concept of lookism frequently overlaps and intertwines with the other themes, we begin our analysis by focusing on how lookism and appearance are invoked in discussions of violence, and how they contribute to the discursive formation of inceldom. This is followed by a longer analysis of discourses of violence, where we examine how discussants legitimise or condemn the Plymouth attack, and how inceldom is negotiated in the context of violence. Finally we look at how mental health—the attacker's mental health, and the relationship between inceldom and mental health more broadly—is discussed in relation to the attack, and how it connects to violence in the discussions. Although mental health is not discussed as frequently as lookism and violence, it is a significant theme in the posters' understanding of the attacker's motivations and connects to wider negotiations of inceldom in the communities, and is therefore included in our analysis.

Lookism

The attacker's appearance, lookism, and the discussants' own appearance are amongst the most frequent themes in the discussions, amounting to over a third of

the codes in the data (together N = 615, 36 percent). However, a significant amount (N = 96, 41 percent) of the posts concerning lookism are not about the Plymouth attack. The attacker's attractiveness divides discussants, but more consider him attractive than not. The attacker's appearance becomes important in negotiating whether the attacker was an incel and whether the violent attack was justified, as these discussions most frequently contain definitions of what an incel is or how inceldom is defined. The concept of lookism is not challenged in the discussions: it can be regarded as taken-for-granted background knowledge in incel communities, and is presented as non-ideological and natural.[62]

> Among those who judge the attacker's appearance negatively, the arguments are relatively uniform—to them, he confirms the incel belief that some people can never leave inceldom behind, no matter how hard they try.[63] These comments often portray the attacker empathetically as "one of us."
>
> Ultimately, he was in the same boat as most of us here - simply not born attractive enough to get foids [women] interested.

The comments portraying the attacker's appearance positively are more varied. In some threads, his appearance is used as evidence of women's unreasonably high standards being a cause of inceldom, reinforcing the idea that incels' situation is outside of their control[64] and will become even worse, highlighting the sense of hopelessness that pervades these communities.[65] While they portray incels as victims, most posts do not explicitly implicate any oppressor or facilitator of this rise in standards, although some connect the popularity of dating apps to it. The supposed change is presented as inevitable and naturally occurring.

> Reminder: This is what a truecel [true incel] looks like in 2021. If you look even worse, JFL [just fucking lol] the standards has increased buddyboyo just tbh [to be honest]

Commenters who do not accept the shooting as an incel attack often argue that the shooter was not an incel because he was too physically attractive to be one. Many state the attack was unjustifiable, primarily because the attacker was a fake incel. Discursively separating the attack from incel communities makes it possible to distance it from the discussants, and the wider incel communities, categorically, a tendency visible throughout our data.

> He was not an incel (in his case especially not one, since he was white, tall and good-looking), but rather a violent cluster B [a grouping of personality disorders] like pretty much all other shooters.
>
> he literally could have just lost weight and gathered enough money to pay for skin surgeries if his skin got messed. [...] he was a degenerate fakecel murderer and nothing less.

Many posters judge the attacker not by his actual appearance, but rather the potential he had to improve his appearance, i.e. “looksmaxx.” He is judged negatively, although this seems to be mostly due to the potential he has squandered instead of the act of violence he committed. While most “blackpilled” incels nihilistically believe their situation to be inescapable,[66] according to these discussants, his was not. This distinction makes it possible for “true” incels to evade culpability, while also demonstrating how their situation is worse than the attackers, presenting themselves as “truecels” with a stronger claim to incel suffering than others. Some discussants claim that a true incel would be justified in committing mass violence on behalf of all others in a similar situation.[67]

> [...] I actually have to say that what he did was wrong, not because people got killed but because he was basically a low-tier Chad [reasonably attractive] in the making. If he was a truecel then I’d understand why he did it even though the way he carried it out seemed impulsive and low IQ. [...]
>
> He was a demoralizedcel, he had the face bones and height to mog [look better than] the majority of men. I enjoy ERs [Elliot Rodger, ie. people who perpetrate mass violence] but I prefer when it’s actually ugly dudes who legitimately have no hope of looksmaxxing in society ... This guy kind of feeds into the enemy narrative. [...]

The final comment vocalizes something which appears to be understood in most comments, although is often left unsaid—that there are opposing narratives and discourses which are going to be in competition in the aftermath of the attack. This awareness of media portrayals of incels is further discussed below in the section Mental health.

In most posts, inceldom is understood as an overarching shared identity that determines the roles, experiences and options the discussants have in the social world. However, some discussants challenge this by introducing a more intersectional perspective. The attacker being white is mentioned often, making either an implicit or explicit comparison to non-white incels whose situation is presented as significantly more difficult.[68] Being white is recognised as a privilege, and because of this, some commenters argue the white attacker was not justified.

> Hope this guy burns in hell for killing a child. He was born white with decent looks and he threw it all away. This guy wouldn’t survive 1 hour as a black guy or ethnic.
>
> he was just really fat. If he leanmaxxed [lost weight] he could become a prettyboy, but noooooo this autistic faggot had to waste his whiteness while people like me are condemned to being shitskins [brown-skinned] for 70+ years

Although there is no consensus about the attacker’s appearance and what it means for incels, there appears to be a desire to discursively construct incels as sympathetic.

His appearance is contradictorily used to demonstrate both why he alone is to blame, and why women or society are to blame. Despite the incel belief that physical attractiveness can be objectively measured, the inherent subjectivity of rating an individual's appearance invariably leads to scenarios where forum users are exposed to the exact same evidence, but come to different conclusions. This is never acknowledged. Even with the contradictory interpretations, lookism as a shared idea is enough to maintain incel communities' imagined unity of victimhood.[69]

Violence

Of the posts concerning violence (n = 425, 25 percent of all posts), violence is discussed positively more (29 percent, N = 123) than negatively (24 percent, N = 103). The remaining posts are more preoccupied with discussing details of the attack, or speculating on the attacker's motives. There are significant differences in the ways violence is discussed on different forums. Violence is portrayed positively more often on incels.is and blackpill.club, and negatively more often on lookism.net, looksmax.org, love-shy.net, incels.net, and forum.looksmaxxing.com. On ncu.su and lookstheory.org, the amount of posts discussing violence is small or nonexistent, and cannot be described as either positive or negative (see Appendix).

There is no clear consensus in the discussions as to whether the Plymouth attack was an incel attack, whether it was justified, or why the attacker decided to use violence. The discussants debate and disagree over how incels should understand the attack and the attacker. For many posters, it is difficult to reconcile support for violence with the concept of the incel as a victim. For others, collective victimhood provides moral justification for violence.[70]

In the posts that portray the shooting as an incel attack, violence is often viewed as a natural reaction or logical consequence resulting from inceldom. Contributing to the same discourse of victimhood as the posts analysed in the Lookism section, they shift blame away from the attacker and incel communities as a whole, and portray them as victims of circumstances, unwillingly driven to violence.[71] This allows discussants to appear neutral and even condemn violence, while at the same time mitigating the attacker's responsibility. This discursively naturalises violence, depoliticises it, and constructs it as more acceptable.[72] Similarly, when violence is portrayed positively in the discussions, it is often framed as something the society at large has earned by ignoring incels' suffering: Incels are again constructed as victims, and violence is justified as retaliation, a neutral, unavoidable reaction to unjust treatment.[73] Several posts predict that incel violence will increase in the future if incels' situation remains the same or, as is seen probable, worsens.[74]

> Ive never planned to go ER and never will but they'd rather label all incels terrorists and bad people than address the issues that drive men to go ER/be blackpilled. Society is ran like shit, plain and simple.

> I'm not a fan of innocent people dying but they have to accept that more and more of those attacks will keep happening the more they ignore, reject, gaslight and abuse average and below men.
>
> they blame it on us because they know we have reasons to go ER, and they fear us because they know they're doing something wrong

Some posters portray violence as a means to affect change by hastening an inevitable societal collapse. They welcome incel violence as a way to hurt society and hope for further violence in the future. While in most posts this is discussed in a serious tone, some present the attack as entertaining and a way to "trigger" outgroups, distancing themselves from others' emotional or moral reactions to violence. Irony, trolling, and "edgy" comments are common in incel communities, as well as image board culture more broadly, and are used to create a boundary between outsiders and members and construct a group bond.[75] This makes it impossible to determine whether the endorsements are serious or a way to perform incelness to others.[76]

> [...] defeatism has always been a fed [state/federal law enforcement] meme. When they say, "Don't blackpill normies, don't write this, don't spread that," they are trying to contain the perfectly justified dissent we're currently witnessing, instead of accelerating it to bring about fundamental change. That is one reason why every future ER must publish a manifesto—we need as many intelligent, reading, curious people to realize what's happening, so that cultural change will be not only possible but in fact inevitable.
>
> I want to see the caos, I like ppl going ER and bitches getting fucked

Most provocatively, in a small amount of posts the child victim of the attack is presented as a deserving target for being a girl, feeding to the idea that all girls and women are inherently responsible for incels' suffering, regardless of their actions. Whether these posts represent sincere beliefs or if they are a way of performing exaggerated incelness online,[77] they nonetheless contribute to violent rhetoric against women being normalised in incel discussions. For some, one of the victims being a child is difficult or impossible to justify, but otherwise they see violence justifiable as either revenge or as a way to make a difference. In these posts, the child victim is seen as innocent, but the adult victims are not.[78] If the attacker had been a true victim of inescapable inceldom and had only chosen deserving targets, the attack would have been acceptable and even lauded. At the level of social practice, this argument supports a scenario whereby incel violence can be justified, provided it's only used as a last resort. More commonly however, the narrative of the attacker's victimhood is challenged, as many posters cannot reconcile the idea of the shooter as a victim with one of the actual victims of the attack being a young child.[79]

> Good good. I read that a 5 year old whore is among the dead which is very pleasing to hear. Anyone else know if any other whores died?

> My only issue with this is that he killed a child and that he was fat. You shouldn't be allowed to shoot anyone if you're over 15 percent bf [body fat], and you shouldn't shoot kids. If he cut [lost weight] and still couldn't slay [find sex partners] then he would've had my blessing to shoot as many women and attractive men as he likes tbh [to be honest]

> this guy wasn't one of us [...] I honestly feel sad that people here are vouching for this man as if he was a modern saint or as if he did something good. He killed five people and one of them a 3 year old child, which no man can seriously claim is capable of real reasoning.

Women are not discussed as often as could be expected, considering incels are often presented primarily as misogynists; 9 percent of the codes in the data are about women, and not all messages portray women negatively. Similarly, O'Donnell and Shor[80] found that in discussions on the Toronto attack in 2018, incels presented "normies" more than women as deserving revenge. Some discussants blame the attack on women, alleging that they treated the attacker badly by not giving him the romantic or sexual attention he wanted. Here, women are described as evil, selfish and withholding. As demonstrated in the Lookism section, the attacker's attractiveness is invoked to discursively construct the impossibility of the situation in which incels have found themselves. They present incel violence as something preventable, if so chosen, by women as a group "taking accountability" and "giving men sex."[81] Violence is thus presented as a result of women's own actions and choices, something for which society as a whole has to pay for. In these posts, victimhood is constructed by shifting blame away from the attacker and incels in general, and onto women collectively. Some discussants go so far as to claim the female victims personally hurt the attacker, and that the attacker had been "dying over and over" before deciding to resort to violence, emphasising the attacker's suffering while ignoring the actual victims of the shooting. Women, "normies," or governments wanting incels to die frequently comes up in the collected posts, reinforcing strict ideas about in- and outgroup hostility[82]—although some posters challenge others for blaming women for the attack and argue that the perpetrator alone is responsible.

> Someone should've given him sex.
> If a woman was doing videos like that on youtube, men would've given her sex and relationship.
> Women need to take accountability for leaving so many men sexless. It can lead to frustration and mass shootings.

> RIP to this guy I know the world treated you wrong and discriminated against you, because it does the same to many of us. The truth is many of those girls he shot would let him die themselves if he was in pain, infact they were letting him die over and over until he reached this point..... Women want autists dead in 2021 and any ugly guy with mental health issues.

> Seriously i don't want to hear nobody defending this guy or saying bullshit on the line of "this is where the 2021 society leads you etc.", imagine if you had that good of an eye area JFL [just fucking lol] guy couldn't run 1 km to save his fucking life but somehow is stacy's [attractive women's] fault

Discussants are very aware of the way incels are presented in the mainstream media, and find the portrayals stigmatising and unfair. Media and social media portrayals of incels are often lamented or made fun of in the discussions (N = 250, 15 percent of the posts in the data), and are used to again frame incels as victims, this time of the media, public discussion, and outsiders demonising them. Of those who criticise the attacker, many argue against mass violence because it makes the already poor reputation of incels even worse. They oppose the attack for practical reasons,[83] rather than moral reasons, arguing that it will further worsen the social stigma of being an incel and make outgroup members connect incels to violence. These notions are not unfounded; after the attack, incels were referred to as for example a "sinister death cult"[84] and a "warped incel cult"[85] in the media.

In several posts, the attack is considered a false flag operation by mostly unspecified police or state actors to tarnish incels' reputation in the eyes of the general public. Many discussants mention being surveilled, being purposefully misrepresented, and being used as scapegoats. Violence is portrayed negatively in these posts, but the true victims of it are incels, blamed for violence they have nothing to do with. Incels are constructed as innocent and non-violent, repressed by state institutions, media, and society at large.

> Of course mainstream media, soyciety, and normies are gonna hate and condemn incels. They're already hate us when we haven't been violent or gone ER, they're just gonna hate us even more if someone goes ER. Stop seeking their approval or begging them by saying "not all of us are like that". It doesn't matter, THEY WILL ALWAYS SEE US AS EVIL. Never back down and never apologize for something you didn't do.

> Reminder that this is how every member here is thought of, as lonely girlfriendless virgins (escorts don't count) you are all ticking timebombs and the mainstream media and normies think 'incel' is an organised cult that hates women and idolises mass shootings started in the USA.

> Brutal shit. Of course, incels will be blamed again. Stupid people in this thread commending this guy for this despicable deed, no wonder we're seen as terrorists.

> [...] this stinks of glow op [undercover government agent] and false flag to try demonise incels in the media. They are already running the idea of him being an incel on UK tv. Incels dont have the energy to shoot up parks, or schools.

It is crucially important to note that we observed a number of discussants who categorically condemn all violence as morally unacceptable and challenge others for

attempting to justify it.[86] These messages often present the victims of the attack as similar to incels, normal people with the same dreams and fears as others, challenging the idea of strict and unbridgeable differences between incels and others.[87] Some commenters also question others' enthusiasm for violence as exaggerated online performance, discussed above.

> Some guys here may hate women collectively, I can understand that from being rejected and treated so shit though, but idolising a couple of lone mass shooters is just dumb.
>
> [...] It's sad that people reach this point of desperation that they just lash out. A lot of it must be perception though because I've struggled in my life too and felt ignored and all that but actions like this ... all you're doing is making the world worse. Civilians on the street are just other people trying to make their lives the best they can, just like you. Our personalities may vary but usually our goals are pretty much the same (a nice life, some wealth, a family, all that).
>
> I'm unconditionally opposed to violence, so I don't like ER or any other mass shooters. I don't even pretend to like them ironically for the memes.

The idea of incel victimhood repeats in different arguments in the discussion. While it is more notable in the posts condoning violence, the posts condemning violence also share the idea of incel suffering, but oppose the discourse of applauding violence as retribution. This contradictory use of the same idea of victimhood highlights the complicated role victimhood plays in the collective construction and negotiation of inceldom in the context of violence.

Mental health

The subject of mental health is not present in as many posts as the other themes analysed above (7 percent, N = 122), but it is often invoked to make sense of the attack and of inceldom more broadly. The attacker's mental health is debated; some state that the attacker was neurotypical, some speculate that he was on the autism spectrum, while others describe him less specifically as a "mentalcel"—an incel whose inceldom derives from some psychological factor.[88] The posts on mental health bring up contestations of inceldom—whereas some incels state that lookism is the main cause of inceldom and that "mentalcels" are "fakecels," others suggest that mental health problems are an even more significant cause of inceldom than appearance. As discussed in the Lookism section in the background, incels self-report high prevalence of depression, anxiety and autism spectrum disorders.[89] [90]

A considerable number (N = 49, 40 percent) of posts concerning mental health also make reference to the attacker's appearance. As previously discussed, many posters who consider the attacker attractive suggest this precludes him from being considered a true incel. However, others argue that his attractiveness, or at least his

potential, are evidence that he must be a “mentalcel,” as only that could explain his failure to capitalise on his physical appearance. Like many of the other factors discussed above, discussions of mental illness contribute to the discursive construction of incel victimhood. Establishing the attacker as a mentalcel is potentially exculpatory for incels, as it can be argued that the violence is a mental health issue, unrelated to inceldom. This idea legitimises claims that incels are not violent, do not pose a threat, and that those who blame incels in the aftermath of the attack are cynically trying to politicise the tragedy.

> Mentalcels are uncurable No amount of gym and getting a decent haircut will fix body dysmorphia They are like birds in a cage while the door is completely open.
>
> He was clearly not all there, and had had bad experiences in his life that had fucked him up. Sadly people are going to lean hard into trying to make it a political thing.

Interestingly, several posts refer to the attacker being radicalised into violence online by misinterpreting incel ideas and media, assessing the attacker to have been either neurotypical, neuroatypical, on the autism spectrum or a psychopath, all of which are presented as the probable driver of his supposed radicalisation. These posts refer to the attacker “falling for” or getting “caught up” with memes, taking “anti-female rhetoric” too seriously, and being driven to violence, portraying him as more vulnerable to violent radicalisation than other incels. Because of this, violence can be viewed as a personal failure, rather than a consequence of the violent and misogynistic discourses which are pervasive throughout incel communities, providing another way to avoid culpability.[91]

There appears to be a common idea that if the attacker was motivated by certain incel ideas or discourses, the vast majority of incels would be able to correctly identify them as satirical, ironic or just venting frustrations online.[92] There is also a suggestion that accepting the truth of the blackpill requires a certain amount of insider knowledge and mental fortitude, and that “normies” who are observing incel forums in the immediate aftermath of the attack may be more susceptible to radicalisation into violence, as they lack the sufficient context to correctly interpret these posts. This all contributes to an idea that it is only those who misunderstand or misinterpret incel ideas who pose a potential threat—not actual incels themselves.

> Another mentalcel with good looks fell for the memes.
>
> [...] spending time on these sites can be very bad everybody is spreading false informations like this and normies belive them
>
> [...] I do think we should remember that anyone can read this forum, and it may be worth toning down the anti-female rhetoric because I am sure nobody wants to provoke another nutter into another event like this

Assumptions of the attacker having mental health problems are used to highlight his suffering, and to suggest that inceldom may be a cause of mental health issues.[93] Others who speculate on his mental health argue that the shooting should not be understood as an incel attack, but rather a consequence of mental health problems. Again, these contradictory interpretations of the attack, many of which are contingent on the commenters own assumptions about the attackers mental health, or their own interpretations of who qualifies as an incel, all contribute to discourses of victimhood and innocence.

Discussion

Although incels are frequently portrayed as supporters of violence, our analysis found the reality to be more complex. We observed competing discourses around incel violence and the justifiability of the Plymouth attack, some condemning all violence, others encouraging it. Our results suggest that there is a substantial cohort of incels who do not support mass violence, whether for moral or pragmatic reasons. Our results differ significantly from earlier research analysing similar incel discussions on the 2018 Toronto attack that found rhetoric against violence to be marginal on the incels.is forum.[94] This may in part be due to forum differences, as we, too, found incels.is to harbour more pro-violence discussions than most other forums we analysed. It is, however, important to consider other possible reasons for these differences in future research; for example the existence or lack of a manifesto, the location of the attack (North America vs. Europe) or the ambiguity regarding the attacker's status as an incel, as, contrary to the Plymouth attack, there is generally a consensus on incel forums that the perpetrator of the Toronto attack was an incel.

We argue that using data from only one incel forum to analyse incel communities risks a skewed view of the phenomenon, and we propose using a wider scope of data from different incel online communities in future research. As demonstrated in the analysis, portrayals of the Plymouth attack differ significantly between the nine forums we analysed: On some, violence is mostly condemned, whereas on others it is predominantly lauded. Considering our results and incels' own disagreements over inceldom and violence, framing the users of any single online forum as representative of incels is problematic. Future researchers may also consider looking at non-public incel communities, such as those found on Discord and the dark web, which may harbour different and more extreme discussions but have not been researched yet.

It is important to note that although incel discussions appear to be predominantly aimed at other incels, there is clearly an awareness among the discussants that these forums are regularly viewed by non-incels, including law enforcement, journalists and academics. This is particularly true in the aftermath of an event like the Plymouth shooting when new audiences, some relatively unfamiliar with incel beliefs, are likely

to be present. The brief increase in attention presents a fleeting opportunity for incels to address these groups directly, promote discourses they believe beneficial to them, and to challenge mainstream narratives. It must also be noted that the prevalence of posts glorifying violence, as well as the posts strongly condemning it, represent an interest in the subject in the first place. It seems that many incels were not aware of the attack, or did not consider it interesting enough to discuss, as even many that did participate ended up steering the discussion to other topics, mainly lookism.

The themes of lookism, violence and mental health all intertwine and contribute to the idea of incels as victims. The violent attack, and the media coverage following it, become symbols of the perceived grievances and injustices against incels. Throughout the discussions, incels present themselves as lacking power, as victims of a feminist hegemony,[95] a discursive strategy to renew and uphold male privilege.[96] Victimhood is presented as inactive and non-political in a way that challenges the mainstream idea of incels as dangerous. However, research suggests that collective identification to victimhood may in itself provide an emotional foundation to political violence[97] by morphing together personal and political grievances.[98]

The ways victimhood is constructed in our data differ depending on whether the attack is accepted by the discussants as an act of incel violence or not. In discourses in which the attacker is considered an incel, the idea of victimhood is often evoked to reduce the agency of the attacker. Here, victimhood positions the violence both beyond political and as demanding political attention and action.[99] The attacker becomes totemic of the idea of the incel as a tragic figure. When the attacker's connection to inceldom is denied, the popular mainstream framing of incels as violent misogynists and even terrorists can be presented as not just unfair, but irresponsible, as it promotes further stigmatization of a group who already view themselves as unfairly discriminated against. Throughout our analysis, we show various ways in which blame for violence is shifted away from the attacker and incels in general. It is, however, important to note that this is not necessarily a conscious, strategic, or cynical construction. Incels' *perceived* experiences of victimhood and injustice may be genuine, regardless of others' perceptions. Either way, victimhood becomes a political identity and a claim to power.[100]

The lack of information about the attack and the attacker creates a scenario in which many of the early attempts to make sense of the violence are grounded in speculation or assumptions based on commenters' own notions of inceldom. The attacker's appearance and lookism are discussed more than the violent attack itself, demonstrating the significance of interest and anxiety concerning looks in incel communities. The importance of appearance and the apparent prevalence of social and mental health problems reported by incels are often overlooked in public debate and research, but are in our view crucial to understanding the incel phenomenon—but it is also important to avoid pathologising violent or misogynist views.[101]

Even if incel discourses can normalise and even endorse violence, a significant share of participants in incel communities do not seem to consider acts of violence meaningful in their experience of inceldom, and many even connect incels to strict non-violence.[102] It is not our intention to minimize the violent threat posed by some incels, or to dismiss the violent misogynistic rhetoric that is pervasive across incel communities. The objective of this research is to further our understanding of the nuances inside and between incel communities and to produce new knowledge on what seems to be a sizable cohort across a number of incel communities who condemn acts of violence connected to incels. These perspectives may be invaluable to those wishing to address the issue of incel violence.

Events like the Plymouth shooting provide an opportunity for members of incel communities to discuss inceldom, and debate the place violence has in the communities, consolidating their own views and participating in the communal meaning-making of inceldom. This negotiation takes place at a time when incels are also being discussed in the mainstream media, often in ways they find stigmatising. Despite incel communities as a whole often being presented as a violent terrorist threat, incels themselves predominantly define inceldom from a viewpoint of marginalisation and unfortunate life situations. Whether this positioning is genuine or strategic, the contradiction feeds into incel narratives of victimhood and further polarises views of in- and outgroup differences and hostility, a vicious cycle that can motivate or justify violence[103] and create further difficulties for those attempting to design interventions and provide support to members of incel communities.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Emilia Palonen, Leena Malkki, and Mikko Meriläinen for their comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this article. The authors would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Additional information

Funding

This work was supported by the Emil Aaltonen foundation [grants #200127 and #210122], and the Dublin City University [School of Communications PhD Scholarship Grant].

Notes on contributors

Emilia Lounela

Emilia Lounela is a doctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki's Faculty of Social Sciences. Her doctoral dissertation examines worldviews, community, and experiences in incel online communities. In her dissertation, she studies the ideals and identities constructed and negotiated in incel online discussions. In addition to this, using interview data, she studies experiences leading to involvement in, and disengagement from, these communities. She is interested in the intersections of misogyny, masculinities, and extremism.

Shane Murphy

Shane Murphy is a PhD candidate from Dublin City University's School of Communications whose research involves interviewing incels to better understand their offline lives. Areas of interest in his research include the manosphere, as well as various movements and online communities which have formed around far right politics, conspiracy theories, and other fringe ideological positions. He has recently begun looking at the online far-right in an Irish context, and is interested in how these communities use more discrete platforms such as Telegram and Discord. He is also interested in the methodological and ethical issues of research that engages directly with extremists, and the opportunities and limits afforded by such an approach.

Notes

1. D. Ging, "Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere," *Men and Masculinities* 22, no. 4 (2019): 638–57, https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X17706401; L. Menzie, "Stacys, Beckys, and Chads: The Construction of Femininity and Hegemonic Masculinity within Incel Rhetoric," *Psychology & Sexuality* 13, no. 1 (2022): 69–85, https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2020.1806915.

2. J. DeCook and M. Kelly, "Interrogating the 'Incel Menace': Assessing the Threat of Male Supremacy in Terrorism Studies," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 15, no. 3 (2022): 706–26, https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2021.2005099; Anti-Defamation League, "Online Poll Results Provide New Insights into Incel Community," September 10, 2020, https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/online-poll-results-provide-new-insights-incel-community; A. Speckhard, M. Ellenberg, J. Morton, and A. Ash, "Involuntary Celibates' Experiences of and Grievance

Over Sexual Exclusion and the Potential Threat of Violence Among Those Active in an Online Incel Forum," *ICSVE Research Reports*, 2021, https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.14.2.1910.

3. S. J. Baele, L. Brace, and T.G. Coan, "From 'Incel' to 'Saint': Analyzing the Violent Worldview Behind the 2018 Toronto Attack," Terrorism and Political Violence 33, no. 8 (2021): 1667–91, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1638256.

4. DeCook and Kelly, "Interrogating the 'Incel Menace.'"

5. S. Cottee, "Incel (E)motives: Resentment, Shame and Revenge," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 44, no. 2 (2021): 93–114, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1822589.

6. E. Hintz and J. Baker, "A Performative Face Theory Analysis of Online Facework by the Formerly Involuntarily Celibate," *International Journal Of Communication* 15 (2021): 3047–66.

7. S. Moskalenko, J. F.-G. González, N. Kates, and J. Morton, "Incel Ideology, Radicalization and Mental Health: A Survey Study," *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare* 4, no. 3 (2022): 1–29, https://doi.org/10.21810/jicw.v4i3.3817.

8. See note 3 above.

9. D. Casciani and D. De Simone, "Incels: A New Terror Threat to the UK?" *BBC*, August 13, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-58207064; M. Weaver and S. Morris, "Plymouth Gunman: A Hate-Filled Misogynist and 'Incel,'" *The Guardian*, August 13, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/aug/13/plymouth-shooting-suspect-what-we-know-jake-davison; Speckhard et al., "Involuntary Celibates' Experiences of and Grievance over Sexual Exclusion and the Potential Threat of Violence Among Those Active in an Online Incel Forum."

10. Jan Blommaert, "Online-Offline Modes of Identity and Community: Elliot Rodger's Twisted World of Masculine Victimhood," *Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies* 200, (2017); Ging, "Alphas, Betas, and Incels"; S. Brzuszkiewicz, "Incel Radical Milieu and External Locus of Control," *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague (ICCT) Evolutions in Counter-Terrorism* 2 (2020): 1–20, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep29445.pdf; Cottee, "Incel (E)motives."

11. Ging, “Alphas, Betas, and Incels”; Brzuszkiewicz, “Incel Radical Milieu and External Locus of DC. Wilson, “Nostalgia, Entitlement and Victimhood: The Synergy of White Genocide and Misogyny,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2020), https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1839428; Cottee, “Incel (E)motives.”

12. Blommaert, Online-Offline Modes of Identity and Community.

13. S. J. Baele, L. Brace, and T. G. Coan, “From ‘Incel’ to ‘Saint’: Analyzing the Violent Worldview Behind the 2018 Toronto Attack,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33, no. 8 (2021): 1667–91, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1638256.

14. B. Hoffman, J. Ware, and E. Shapiro, “Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 43, no. 7 (2020): 565–87, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1751459; A. 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, https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2020.1787132; J. J. Norris, “Idiosyncratic Terrorism: Disaggregating an Undertheorized Concept,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14, no. 3 (2020): 2–18, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26918296; R. L. O’Malley, K. Holt, and T. J. Holt, “An Exploration of the Involuntary Celibate (Incel) Subculture Online,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37, no. 7–8 (2022): 4981–5008, https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520959625; K. Hunter and E. Jouenne, “All Women Belong in the Kitchen, and Other Dangerous Tropes: Online Misogyny as a National Security Threat,” *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 12, no. 1 (2021): 57–85, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/795903; Baele, Brace, and Coan, “From ‘Incel’ to ‘Saint.’”

15. S. Jaki, T. De Smedt, M. Gwóźdź, R. Panchal, A. Rossa, and G. De Pauw, “Online Hatred of Women in the Incels.me Forum: Linguistic Analysis and Automatic Detection,” *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict* 7, no. 2 (2019): 240–68, https://doi.org/10.1075/jlac.00026.jak; K. Regehr, “In(cel)doctrination: How Technologically Facilitated Misogyny Moves Violence Off Screens and on to Streets,” *New Media & Society* 24, no. 1 (2022): 138–55, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820959019; C. O’Donnell and E. Shor, “This is a Political Movement, Friend”: Why ‘incels’ Support Violence,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 73 (2022): 336–51, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12923; Blommaert, Online-Offline Modes of Identity and Community.

16. C. Gentry, “Misogynistic Terrorism: It Has Always Been Here,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 15, no. 1 (2022): 209–24, https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2022.2031131; C. Agius, A. Edney-Browne, L. Nicholas, and K. Cook, “Anti-Feminism, Gender and the Far-Right Gap in C/PVE Measures,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 15, no. 3 (2022): 681–705, https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2021.1967299.

17. e.g. DeCook and Kelly, “Interrogating the ‘incel menace’”; W. Chang, “The Monstrous-Feminine in the incel Imagination: Investigating the Representation of Women as “femoids” on /r/Braincels,” *Feminist Media Studies* (2020), https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1804976; A. Tranchese and L. Sugiura, “I Don’t Hate All Women, Just Those Stuck-Up Bitches”: How Incels and Mainstream Pornography Speak the Same Extreme Language of Misogyny,” *Violence Against Women* 27, no. 14 (2021): 2709–34, https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801221996453.

18. C. Vito, A. Admire, and E. Hughes, “Masculinity, Aggrieved Entitlement, and Violence: Considering the Isla Vista Mass Shooting,” *International Journal for Men and Masculinities* 13, no. 2 (2018): 86–102, https://doi.org/10.1080/18902138.2017.1390658; M. N. Scaptura and K. M. Boyle, “Masculinity Threat, “Incel” Traits, and Violent Fantasies Among Heterosexual Men in the United States,” *Feminist Criminology* 15, no. 3 (2020): 278–98, https://doi.org/10.1177/1557085119896415; J. R. Silva, J. A. Capellan, M. A. Schmuhl, and C. E. Mills, “Gender-Based Mass Shootings: An Examination of Attacks Motivated by Grievances Against Women,” *Violence Against Women* 27, no. 12–13 (2021): 2163–86, https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801220981154.

19. Regehr, “In(cel)doctrination.”

20. Speckhard et al., “Involuntary Celibates’ Experiences of and Grievance over Sexual Exclusion and the Potential Threat of Violence Among Those Active in an Online Incel Forum”; Moskalenko et al., “Incel Ideology, Radicalization and Mental Health”; Hintz and Baker, “A Performative Face Theory Analysis of Online Facework by the Formerly Involuntarily Celibate.”

21. Jaki et al., “Online Hatred of Women in the Incels.me Forum”; Baele, Brace, and Coan, “From ‘Incel’ to ‘Saint.’”

22. Hoffman et al., “Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence,” pp. 569–581.

23. S. Zimmerman, L. Ryan, and D. Duriesmith, “Recognizing the Violent Extremist Ideology of ‘Incels,’” *Women In International Security*, p. 2. Policy Brief, 2018, https://www.academia.edu/download/57506191/Policybrief-Violent-Extremists-Incels.pdf.

24. Cottee, “Incel Incentives,” p. 7.

25. E. Leidig, “Why Terrorism Studies Miss the Mark When It Comes To Incels,” ICCT Publications, 2021, p. 4.https://icct.nl/publication/why-terrorism-studies-miss-the-mark-when-it-comes-to-incels/.

26. C. Warhurst, D. van den Broek, R. Hall, and D. Nickson, “Lookism: The New Frontier of Employment Discrimination?” *Journal of Industrial Relations* 51 (2009): 131–36, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022185608096808; A. Adomaitis, R. Raskin, and D. Saiki, “Appearance Discrimination: Lookism and the Cost to the American Woman,” *The Seneca Falls Dialogues Journal* 2, no. 6 (2017), https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/sfd/vol2/iss1/6.

27. A. Mason, “What’s Wrong with Everyday Lookism?” *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 20, no. 3 (2021): 315–35, https://doi.org/10.1177/1470594X20982051.

28. See note 6 above.

29. E. Walster, V. Aronson, D. Abrahams, and L. Rottman, “Importance of Physical Attractiveness in Dating Behavior,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 4, no. 5 (1966): 508–16, https://doi.org/10.1037/h0021188.

30. P. K. Jonason, T. Raulston, and A. Rotolo, “More than Just a Pretty Face and a Hot Body: Multiple Cues in Mate-Choice,” *The Journal of Social Psychology* 152, no. 2 (2012): 174–84, https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2011.586654.

31. M. A. Fugère, C. Chabot, and K. Doucette, “The Importance of Physical Attractiveness to the Mate Choices of Women and Their Mothers,” *Evolutionary Psychological Science* 3 (2017): 243–52, https://doi.org/10.1007/s40806-017-0092-x.

32. Jaki et al., “Online Hatred of Women in the Incels.me Forum.”

33. See note 5 above.

34. See note 6 above.

35. A. Sarangi, S. Yadav, J. Gude, and W. Amor, “Video Conferencing Dysmorphia: Assessment of Pandemic-Related Body Dysmorphia and Implications for the Post-Lockdown Era,” *Cureus* 14, no. 3 (2022), https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.22965.

36. G. Halbeisen, G. Brandt, and G. Paslakis, “A Plea for Diversity in Eating Disorders Research,” *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 13 (2022), https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2022.820043; S. Griffiths and S. B. Murray, “Muscle Dysmorphia: Clinical Presentation and Treatment Strategies,” in *Clinical Handbook of Complex and Atypical Eating Disorders*, ed. L. K. Anderson, S. B. Murray, and W. H. Kaye (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 235–52.

37. Mathew Barnes, Purva Abhyankar, Elna Dimova, and Catherine Best, “Associations Between Body Dissatisfaction and Self-reported Anxiety and Depression in Otherwise Healthy Men: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis.” *PLoS One* 15, no 2 (2020): https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0229268.

38. Wilson, “Nostalgia, Entitlement and Victimhood”; Ging, “Alphas, Betas, and Incels”; Brzuszkiewicz, “Incel Radical Milieu and External Locus of Control”; Cottee, “Incel (E)motives”; Blommaert, “Online-Offline Modes of Identity and Community.”

39. Ging, “Alphas, Betas, and Incels.”

40. R. W. Connell and J. W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829–59, https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639.

41. Brzuszkiewicz, “Incel Radical Milieu and External Locus of Control.”

42. See note 6 above.

43. DeCook and Kelly, “Interrogating the ‘Incel Menace.’”

44. Blommaert, “Online-Offline Modes of Identity and Community.”

45. Regehr, “In(cel)doctrination.”

46. https://en.incelwiki.org/List_of_incel_forums.

47. The ecosystem of incel online forums is constantly in change: Forums are created, shut down, and change names and domains. Since our data was

gathered in August 2021, two forums (lookism.net and lookstheory.org) have been shut down.

48. Baele, Brace, and Coan, "From 'Incel' to 'Saint'"; Jaki et al., "Online Hatred of Women in the Incels.me Forum"; Brzuszkiewicz, "Incel Radical Milieu and External Locus of Control"; Speckhard et al., "Involuntary Celibates' Experiences of and Grievance over Sexual Exclusion and the Potential Threat of Violence Among Those Active in an Online Incel Forum"; K. Preston, M. Halpin, and F. Maguire, "The Black Pill: New Technology and the Male Supremacy of Involuntarily Celibate Men," Men and Masculinities 24, no. 5 (2021): 823–41, https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X211017954; B. Pelzer, L. Kaati, and K. Cohen, "Toxic Language in Online incel Communities," SN Social Sciences no. 1 (2021): 213, https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-021-00220-8; O'Donnell and Shor, "This is a Political Movement, Friend."

49. N. Fairclough, *Media Discourse* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995a); J. Blommaert and C. Bulcaen, "Critical Discourse Analysis," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 29, no. 1 (2000): 447–66; See also A. Dremel and R. Matić, "Discourse and/as Social Practice—the Analysis of the Problem of Resistance and Hegemony," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 5, no. 22 (2014): 155, https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n22p155; N. Fairclough, Language and Power, 2nd ed. (Harlow: Longman, 2001).

50. Fairclough, *Media Discourse*.

51. Blommaert and Bulcaen, "Critical Discourse Analysis," 449.

52. See Wilson, "Nostalgia, Entitlement and Victimhood."

53. Speckhard et al., "Involuntary Celibates' Experiences of and Grievance over Sexual Exclusion and the Potential Threat of Violence Among Those Active in an Online Incel Forum."

54. e.g. S. F. Aikin, "Poe's Law, Group Polarization, and Argumentative Failure in Religious and Political Discourse," *Social Semiotics* 23, no. 3 (2013): 301–17, https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2012.719728.

55. See note 3 above.

56. D. Maxwell, S. R. Robinson, and J. R. Williams, "A Short Story of a Lonely Guy": A Qualitative Thematic Analysis of Involuntary Celibacy Using

Reddit," *Sexuality & Culture* 24 (2020): 1852–74, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09724-6.

57. V. S. Greene, "Deplorable" Satire: Alt-Right Memes, White Genocide Tweets, and Redpilling Normies," *Studies in American Humor* 5, no. 1 (2019): 31–69, https://doi.org/10.5325/studamerhumor.5.1.0031.

58. See Chang, "The Monstrous-Feminine in the Incel Imagination."

59. See a. s. franzke, A. Bechmann, M. Zimmer, C. Ess, and the Association of Internet Researchers, "Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0," 2020, https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf.

60. M. Conway, "Online Extremism and Terrorism Research Ethics: Researcher Safety, Informed Consent, and the Need Tailored Guidelines." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33 no. 2, (2021): 367-380, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1880235.

61. Conway, "Online Extremism and Terrorism Research Ethics."

62. See N. Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: the Critical Study of Language* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 1995b), 28–36.

63. See note 5 above.

64. e.g. Brzuszkiewicz, "Incel Radical Milieu and External Locus of Control."

65. Speckhard et al., "Involuntary Celibates' Experiences of and Grievance over Sexual Exclusion and the Potential Threat of Violence Among Those Active in an Online Incel Forum"; Jaki et al., "Online Hatred of Women in the Incels.me Forum."

66. See note 6 above.

67. See O. Lynch and C. Joyce, "Functions of Collective Victimhood: Political Violence and the Case of the Troubles in Northern Ireland," *International Review of Victimology* 24, no. 2 (2018): 183–97, https://doi.org/10.1177/0269758018758396.

68. DeCook and Kelly, "Interrogating the 'Incel Menace'"; Speckhard et al., "Involuntary Celibates' Experiences of and Grievance over Sexual Exclusion and the Potential Threat of Violence Among Those Active in an Online Incel Forum"; cf. Wilson, "Nostalgia, Entitlement and Victimhood."

69. See Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006).

70. See Lynch and Joyce, “Functions of Collective Victimhood.”

71. See Blommaert, *Online-Offline Modes of Identity and Community*.

72. See Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 28–36.

73. See Ibid; R. J. VandenBerg, “Legitimating Extremism: A Taxonomy of Justifications for Political Violence,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33, no. 6 (2019): 1237–55, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1606800.

74. See Jaki et al., “Online Hatred of Women in the Incels.me Forum.”

75. E. Vainikka, “Naisvihan tunneyhteisö. Anonyymisti esitettyä verkkovihaa Ylilaudan ihmissuhdekeskusteluissa,” *Media & Viestintä* 42, no. 1 (2019), https://doi.org/10.23983/mv.80179; T. Ylä-Anttila, V. Eranti, and S. Hardwick, “Going Overboard: How Ironic Group Style Becomes Political on an Anonymous Imageboard,” *Social Media + Society* (2020), https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120969912.

76. M. Conway, “Determining the Role of the Internet in Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Six Suggestions for Progressing Research,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 1 (2016): 77–98, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1157408; Speckhard et al., “Involuntary Celibates’ Experiences of and Grievance over Sexual Exclusion and the Potential Threat of Violence Among Those Active in an Online Incel Forum”; Jaki et al., “Online Hatred of Women in the Incels.me Forum.”

77. Ibid.

78. See VandenBerg, “Legitimating Extremism.”

79. See S. D. Moeller, “A Hierarchy of Innocence: The Media’s Use of Children in the Telling of International News,” *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 7, no. 1 (2002): 36–56, https://doi.org/10.1177/1081180X0200700104.

80. O’Donnell and Shor, “This is a Political Movement, Friend.”

81. Ibid.

82. VandenBerg, “Legitimating Extremism.”

83. See I. Fairclough and N. Fairclough, *Political Discourse Analysis: A Method for Advanced Students* (Oxon: Routledge, 2012).

84. R. Parry and M. Sullivan, “WARPED KILLERS Plymouth Shooting: Inside Sinister Incel Death Cult Where Sex-Starved Loner Jake Davison Shared his Warped Views,” *The Sun*, August 13, 2021, https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/15865201/plymouth-shooting-inside-death-cult/; C. Kitching, “Inside incel Death Cult of Plymouth Killer—as Movement Linked to 6 Mass Murders,” *Daily Mirror*, August 14, 2021, https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/inside-incel-death-cult-plymouth-24759416.

85. A. Solomons, “Inside Warped incel Cult After ‘Virgin’ Jake Davison Murders 5 in Plymouth Shooting,” *Daily Star*, August 13, 2021, https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/inside-incel-cult-after-virgin-24757102.

86. cf. O’Donnell and Shor, “This is a Political Movement, Friend.”

87. Baele, Brace, and Coan, “From ‘Incel’ to ‘Saint.’”

88. See Jaki et al., “Online Hatred of Women in the Incels.me Forum.”

89. See note 6 above.

90. L. Sugiura, The Incel Rebellion: The Rise of the Manosphere and the Virtual War Against Women. (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2021).

91. See Conway, “Determining the Role of the Internet in Violent Extremism and Terrorism”; Chang, “The Monstrous-Feminine in the Incel Imagination.”

92. See Conway, “Determining the Role of the Internet in Violent Extremism and Terrorism.”

93. See note 5 above.

94. O’Donnell and Shor, “This is a Political Movement, Friend.”

95. V. Dickel and G. Evolvi, “‘Victims of Feminism’: Exploring Networked Misogyny and #MeToo in the Manosphere,” *Feminist Media Studies*, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2029925.

96. Ging, “Alphas, Betas, and Incels”; S. Banet-Weiser, “‘Ruined’ Lives: Mediated White Male Victimhood,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 1 (2021): 60–80, https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549420985840.

97. H. Marcks and J. Pawelz, “From Myths of Victimhood to Fantasies of Violence: How Far-Right Narratives of Imperilment Work,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2020), https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1788544; L. Jeffery and M. Candea, “The Politics of Victimhood,” *History and Anthropology* 17, no. 4 (2006): 287–96, https://doi.org/10.1080/02757200600914037; Lynch and Joyce, “Functions of Collective Victimhood.”

98. Wilson, “Nostalgia, Entitlement and Victimhood.”

99. See Jeffery and Candea, “The Politics of Victimhood.”

100. R. Horwitz, “Politics as Victimhood, Victimhood as Politics,” *Journal of Policy History* 30, no. 3 (2018): 552–574, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898030618000209.

101. Moskalenko et al., “Incel Ideology, Radicalization and Mental Health”; Hintz and Baker, “A Performative Face Theory Analysis of Online Facework by the Formerly Involuntarily Celibate.”

102. Baele, Brace, and Coan, “From ‘Incel’ to ‘Saint.’”

103. Moskalenko et al., “Incel Ideology, Radicalization and Mental Health”; VandenBerg, “Legitimating Extremism”; T. Pyszczynski, M. Motyl, and A. Abdollahi, “Righteous Violence: Killing for God, Country, Freedom and Justice,” *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 1, no. 1 (2009): 12–39, https://doi.org/10.1080/19434470802482118.

Appendixes

	incels.is	lookism.net	looksmax.org	blackpill.club	love-shy.net	looksmaxxing.com	lookstheory.org	ncu.su	All forums combined
Percentage and absolute number of posts	43% (732)	24% (394)	16% (268)	13% (228)	3% (54)	0,6% (10)	0,2% (3)	0,2% (2)	100% (1691)

Table 1. Distribution of posts in data by forum.

	incels.is	lookism.net	looksmax.org	blackpill.club	love-shy.net	looksmaxxing.com	lookstheory.org	ncu.su	All forums combined
Attacker's appearance	14% (105)	25% (99)	20% (53)	11% (26)	4% (2)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	17% (285)
Lookism	8% (57)	27% (106)	10% (26)	15% (35)	13% (7)	0% (0)	0% (0)	50% (1)	14% (232)
Attacker's appearance and lookism combined	22% (162)	52% (205)	29% (79)	27% (61)	17% (9)	0% (0)	0% (0)	50% (1)	31% (517)

Table 2. Percentage of main lookism-related code occurrence in different forum data. Absolute number of posts in parentheses.

	incels.is	lookism.net	looksmax.org	blackpill.club	love-shy.net	looksmaxxing.com	lookstheory.org	ncu.su	All forums combined
Violence	28% (207)	14% (56)	21% (56)	32% (73)	35% (19)	50% (5)	33% (1)	0% (0)	25% (417)
Share of positive and negative portrayals of violence in all posts discussing violence									
Violence as negative	11% (36)	46% (26)	36% (20)	11% (8)	32% (6)	30% (3)	0% (0)	0% (0)	24% (99)
Violence as positive	32% (67)	13% (7)	20% (11)	49% (36)	5% (1)	10% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)	30% (123)

Table 3. Percentage of main violence-related code occurrence and distribution of positive and negative portrayals of violence by forum. Absolute number of posts in parentheses.

	incels.is	lookism.net	looksmax.org	blackpill.club	love-shy.net	looksmaxxing.com	lookstheory.org	ncu.su	All forums combined
Mental health of the attacker	6% (44)	8% (31)	9% (24)	4% (9)	19% (10)	20% (2)	0% (0)	0% (0)	7% (120)

Table 4. Mental health code occurrence by forum. Absolute number of posts in parentheses.