



TRACING RADICALIZATION TO THE INCEL MOVEMENT AND ITS CONNECTION TO LONELINESS

Knowledge Synthesis Grant Final Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

This is a knowledge synthesis review of scholarship related to the online ideology of incels. This subculture, a portmanteau of involuntary and celibate, has become synonymous with a generation of disenfranchised and sexually deprived young men who voice their frustrations on electronic media such as forums and dedicated websites. Scholarship on the incel ideology emphasizes the centrality of loneliness and isolation among adherents, which is interrelated with problematic internet behaviours.

Research evidence suggests that social isolation is growing amongst youth, leading to adverse mental health indicators including loneliness, low self-esteem, and suicidal ideation. Concurrently, scholars have observed a digital shift in communicative practice, as socialization transitions to mediated spaces. This shift accelerated through the Covid-19 pandemic and has included increased incel forum participation, and scholars have noted these forums have experienced a spike in hateful and extremist right-wing messaging.

Academic study of the incel movement is currently undergoing an emergent, exploratory phase of knowledge development. As such, significant knowledge gaps about the characteristics of the community have been identified by scholars, raising questions about pathways into inceldom, personal characteristics of adherents, and the role of loneliness in forming the identity. These questions are now amplified by the ongoing pandemic, which has driven a global increase in the use of social media platforms, connecting new audiences with the incel movement

OBJECTIVES

This project examines empirical research on engagement with the incel ideology, escalation/radicalization through the incel ideology to violence, and desistance from the ideology by asking:

- 1) Why do people initially become engaged with incel groups, and how does loneliness extending from the emerging asocial society influence engagement?
- 2) Once engaged, how does the incel ideology progress to extreme views and acts of violence/self-harm?
- 3) What is known about desistance from inceldom, and what practicable interventions are possible to address engagement, extremism, violence, and self-harm?

METHODS

Our synthesis project used a scoping review approach to identify empirical studies and books related to incels and inceldom. We searched Google Scholar and EBSCOHost for literature relevant to our research questions using ten keywords and keyword combinations – 6,524 sources were identified. After removing duplicates and screening articles using a series of inclusion and exclusion criteria (e.g., published in 2017 or later, published in English), our final list included 319 sources, which were reviewed for this synthesis.

RESULTS

The research findings below can be used by policymakers and researchers when considering the causes of incelism and when developing possible responses to engagement, radicalization, and desistance.

- 1) What is an Incel
 - a. Incels ascribe sexual frustration to personal and external barriers, including physical and mental attributes, and socially constructed notions of attractiveness and status.
 - b. Many express a sense of *aggrieved entitlement*. While most often connected to sexuality, this worldview also carries over to other social domains. Unmet social and sexual expectations may portend humiliation and ultimately violence.
 - c. Reductive caricatures of sexually successful men (“Chads”) and women (“Stacys”) have encouraged a homogenizing transnational ideology. Additional neologisms drawn from popular culture form a constellation of commonly used hateful, discriminatory, and misogynistic memes (e.g., “Red Pill”).
 - d. Perpetrators of incel-related violence have been “canonized.” Examples include the Isla Vista shooter and the Toronto van attacker, whose acts are revered.
- 2) Demographic Characteristics
 - a. Incels tend to be young (i.e., under 30) cis-gendered heterosexual men but are otherwise demographically diverse. Additional identity groups, including women, may form smaller related communities (e.g., “femcels”).
 - b. Incels often report a history of social ostracism during middle and high school years, including bullying and sexual rejection.
 - c. High rates of mental health and psychological concerns are reported, including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Incels also report high rates of neurodivergence.
- 3) Engagement, Escalation, and Radicalization
 - a. Advice/support-seeking activities online may lead to initial exposure to incel circles.
 - b. Online support-seeking behaviours may be triggered by perceived local conditions, including: scarcity of single women, high income inequality, and gendered income gaps.
 - c. Recent scholarship demonstrates increased engagement following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes increases in the number of posts and threads; posting frequency; and violent/vitriolic discourse.
 - d. A very small number of incels will progress to acts of extreme violence and self-harm. Despite low occurrence rates, these acts are shared online and through news media, gaining hyper-visibility. Although most incels are not violent and many will reject violence, acts of violence ascribed to incel ideology are generally celebrated in incel forums.
 - e. Additional research on pathways to radicalization specific to incels is needed, including an investigation into whether the pathways differ for those who escalate to violence and those who do not.
- 4) Detection and Interventions
 - a. Very few incel-specific detection tools exist. Adjacent research related to extremism and terrorism may be relevant for identifying proximal and distal warning behaviours associated with escalation to acts of violence.

- b. Interventions aimed at reducing engagement with inceldom or promoting desistance from inceldom should be multifaceted and emphasize policy approaches targeting both individual and societal conditions that contribute to participation in inceldom.

KEY MESSAGES

Policy development aimed at limiting engagement with inceldom/promoting desistance from inceldom should target:

- Detection, prevention, and individual-level intervention
 - Incel-centric beliefs can be detected through communication typologies, which can be supported through applied rubrics.
 - Preventative and integrative responses delivered through sites of work and socialisation may foster empathy and opportunities for camaraderie.
 - Intensive mental health supports should develop prosocial behaviours and remediate ideological dogma.
- Operational and communications interventions
 - Prohibiting and removing incel discourse or forums funnels community members to extremist, under-regulated services.
 - Self-directed moderation empowers harmful discourse and neutralises debate.
 - Balanced, automated content moderation can assist with early detection.
- Government policy
 - Criminalization/threat identification cannot easily be employed against decentralised and anonymous groups; legal responses should target individual actors and actions.
 - National-level dialogue about regulating communications platforms is advised.
 - Diversified, inclusive cyber-safety and media skills curriculum can address gateways to inceldom.
 - Greater national investment in mental health supports relative to digital-era issues will facilitate access to services.
- Future research
 - The body of empirically validated incel-specific scholarship is underdeveloped.
 - Research on post-engagement desistance and pathways to violence is needed.
 - Primary, secondary, and tertiary programmatic development and testing is also needed.

BACKGROUND

The term *incel* is a concatenation of *involuntary* and *celibate*, and is used to define both an online ideological movement as well as those who are adherents to the community. Sexual frustration and social isolation are central themes in the community, with individuals who self-identify as incels framing their celibacy as an imposed condition related to their genetic disposition as well as socially constructed notions of physical attractiveness and procreation. Although the term has been in use for several decades, incel is most commonly connected with toxic online communities that began to emerge in the mid-2000s. These communities have crystalized the incel ideology into a homogenous and transnational identity over the past decade, often informed by the use of neologisms to convey complex ideas in a reductionist manner (Aulia & Rosida, 2022).

Most incels are heterosexual cisgendered young men that participate in incel communities as a leisure activity (Cousineau, 2020), but beyond that there is heterogeneity within the community. Some gender divergence has been noted as well, with recent increased participation on *femcel* or *female involuntary celibate* forums (Kay, 2021). Commonly held beliefs about sexuality are often expressed through a lens of aggrieved entitlement, with many participants in online communities expressing the opinion that sexual gratification is owed to them as they adhere to the rules and objectives of Western-informed societal values and interactions (Berthelsen, 2021; Dibranco, 2018; Larkin, 2018; Lindsay, 2022; Thorburn *et al.*, 2022). The predominance of English-language discussion, paired with the Americanization of the internet and social media platforms, have enabled the incel ideology to become a fixture in the online cultural zeitgeist (Kelly *et al.*, 2021; Liu, 2021). While the term is often applied to pariahs on mainstream platforms, its casual use and the relative ease of locating incel resources online may contribute toward the movement as disaffected youth and men seek outlets for their frustration (Bjork-James, 2020).

The incel ideology has recently gained prominence in mainstream political and media dialogue following a series of violent and random attacks that were attributed to incels (Han & Yin, 2022; Horgan, 2020; Jaki, 2020; Sang & Stanton, 2020). Notably, this includes the 2018 act of domestic terrorism that occurred in Toronto, Ontario. Alek Minassian, the perpetrator, drove a rented vehicle onto crowded sidewalks along Yonge St., killing 11 people and injuring another 15 (Hewitt, 2021). While research has indicated that many individuals within incel communities abhor these acts of violence, there nonetheless appears to be a movement toward *canonizing* those responsible for the most visceral of events (Witt, 2020).

Recent growth in the incel community appears to be correlated with the emerging asocial and asymmetric form of digital communications (Baele *et al.*, 2022; Ferrillo, 2021; Johanssen, 2021; Murray, 2017; Peeters *et al.*, 2021; Thorburn *et al.*, 2022; Vu *et al.*, 2021). Scholarship has observed that individuals who encounter social isolation are more likely to exhibit signs of problematic internet usage, including extreme reticence to disconnect and social problems associated with technological overreliance. These symptoms are also correlated with increased loneliness, suggesting that a cyclical isolation effect may occur as already-isolated individuals engage with isolating communities, internalizing toxic core beliefs, and thereby further disconnecting themselves from their offline communities (Larkin, 2018; Morton *et al.*, 2022; Rahman *et al.*, 2021; Speckhard *et al.*, 2021; Yesilada & Lewandowsky, 2022). Additional research has also demonstrated that individuals are now more likely to interpret online communications as social interaction, entrusting high levels of credence to asymmetric forms of dialogue (Goldsmith & Brewer,

2015). These issues may have been aggravated by the mandated isolation that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic (Davies *et al.*, 2021; Morton *et al.*, 2021; Roy & Allen, 2022; Vu, 2020).

As is implied by the label, the incel movement has historically organized around sexual frustration (Kelly & Aunspach, 2020). Academic scholarship on incelhood points to loneliness as a central factor in the construction of this identity, suggesting that individuals are caught up in a cycle of social isolation aggravated by problematic internet use (Maxwell *et al.*, 2020; O'Malley *et al.*, 2020), and that anonymous online message boards and forums, including open public services, serve as outlets where self-described incels can digitally congregate and share their feelings in a sheltered manner (Castells, 1998 ; Goldsmith & Brewer, 2015; Jaki *et al.*, 2019). The dialogue occurring in these spaces contributes toward the creation of resistance identities extending from core ideologies of masculinity (Daly & Reed, 2022) and has coalesced as negative, misogynistic, and hateful messaging (Byerly, 2020; Hoffman *et al.*, 2020). Considered together, academic study on this subject indicates that, while not homogenous, incelhood poses an increasingly unified ideological front that is attractive to young, lonely, disenfranchised, heterosexual men (Hintz & Baker, 2021).

CONCEPTUAL HISTORY

The body of incel literature generally forms the consensus that the term itself was first used in its current connotation on a gender-inclusive blog cataloguing a young person's struggle to find love beginning in 1997. *Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project* eventually included an online forum for discussion about sexual frustration and loneliness, as well as offering advice about dating and sexuality. While the site's creator relinquished control of the website to new operators in the year 2000, incelsite.com would continue to operate for another decade providing a point of congregation for individuals who identified with the website's primary descriptor of having a lack of sexual or romantic interaction in one's life, often for extended periods (Hintz & Baker, 2021). Notably, the original operator of the website has since distanced themselves from the project, explaining that it had begun to host violent and crude rhetoric.

During the early 2000s, additional websites dedicated to what has become known as the *manosphere*, a loose confederacy of male-centric interest groups, began to emerge (Chan, 2021; Couling, 2020; Cousineau, 2021; Farrell *et al.*, 2020; Ging, 2019; Habib *et al.*, 2022; Hunte, 2019; Johanssen, 2021; Jones *et al.*, 2020). For example, a parallel stream of sexuality-oriented online communities began to develop through the early-to-mid 2000s. Generally referred to as *Pick Up Artists* (PUA) or *the Game*, these websites were a continuation of a trend that began in the 1980s that focused on marketing techniques of seduction. Often presented by men who framed themselves as sexually successful, the decentralized nature of the emerging Web 2.0 and nascent social media services provided an opportunity to extend their product to a larger audience (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2021).

In many cases these services included forums or mailing lists that allowed for in-group communications along with the sharing of morally dubious advice about seducing sexual partners. The PUA movement gained significant popular traction beginning in 2007 with the VH1 channel program *The Pickup Artist* (DeCook & Kelly, 2021). These services, which often encouraged anonymous online dialogue, provided venues for anti-feminist discussions and often hosted flashpoint events (Ging, 2019; Nagle, 2017). While incels represent only a small segment of this movement, many of the concepts that originate within this community have come to permeate both the *manosphere* and much of the larger online environment.

Despite promising self-improvement and sexual gratification, many PUAs sold misogyny, contributing toward gendered discord online. Recent scholarship has drawn a direct connection between the PUA and incel communities, suggesting that the former bred disillusioned men who had been trained to expect a level of access to female bodies (Kelly *et al.*, 2021; Lilly 2016; Ribeiro *et al.*, 2021).

Some academic literature suggests the online manosphere began to splinter by the mid-2000s in line with the popularization of several social media platforms. This splintering was pronounced within the incel community: while services like incelsite.com continued to promote self-help and personal growth, vitriolic content began to emerge on competing websites like love-shy.com and 4chan.com. This divide was observed by Hoffman *et al.* (2020) who argue that “until less than a decade ago, two different types of incel digital forums appear to have existed: one still emphasized support for those frustrated or unable to find romantic connections, while another was becoming increasingly militant and hostile to women, expressing offensive biologically deterministic memes and openly advocating violence” (p. 566).

Scholarship has also observed broader migration toward several gender-oriented movements during this same era, each with distinct ideologies (Cousineau, 2021; de Koning, 2020; Ribeiro *et al.*, 2020). For example, Lilly (2016) assessed the representational politics occurring within a series of online communities and argues that four arms of antifeminist thought emerged, providing a taxonomy that includes:

- Pick up artists (described previously) whose focus is on seduction;
- Incels, the group that forms the subject of this report;
- Men’s rights activists (MRA) who approach social issues with a male-centric lens; and,
- Men going their own way (MGTOW) who advocate for personal autonomy and separation from society as a whole.

This divergence was studied by Ribeiro *et al.* (2021), who trace shifts toward hateful and abusive online commentary within a range of internet communities that organize along Lilly’s (2016) typology. Their assessment, which used forum postings on the Reddit platform as the primary unit of analysis, indicated that the more recently established Incel and MGTOW communities are in relative growth compared to older communities (MRA and PUA), and that these newer communities espouse far more toxicity than the others. Ribeiro *et al.* (2021) conclude by suggesting that migration from older to newer communities may be indicative of steps along a radicalization pathway, particularly in the context of Incel groups.

The current scope of the incel movement and its connection to violence reached popular knowledge in 2014 when Elliot Rodger, a self-described incel, murdered six people and injured fourteen others after sharing a manifesto and YouTube video about his intention to act. Rodger, who had posted his materials on the PUAHate.com incel forum, quickly became an icon within the community (Witt, 2020), and much of the verbiage used within his diatribes has since formed neologisms common to incel communities. Notably, several of these terms were parroted by Alec Minassian during his initial interview with a Toronto Police Service Detective after committing mass murder in 2018.

The rapid growth of the incel movement and its shift toward a vitriolic and often anti-feminist worldview has proven a topic of interest for scholarship in disparate fields, ranging from linguistics to terrorism studies. While the subject is relatively new to academic study, a burgeoning field has begun to emerge, calling for an assessment of the current state of knowledge.

OBJECTIVES

Research evidence suggests that social isolation is growing amongst youth, leading to adverse mental health indicators including loneliness, low self-esteem, and suicidal ideation (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2020; Calati *et al.*, 2019). These issues are particularly pronounced among young men, who often face stigma when seeking therapy and support (Rice *et al.*, 2020). Concurrently, scholars have observed a digital shift in communicative practice, as socialization transitions to mediated spaces (Miranda *et al.*, 2016). This shift accelerated through the COVID-19 pandemic and has included increased incel forum participation (Morton *et al.*, 2021; Vu, 2020). Moreover, scholars have noted these forums have experienced a spike in hateful and extremist right-wing messaging (Adams, 2021; Davies *et al.*, 2021).

Academic study of the incel movement is currently undergoing an emergent, exploratory phase of knowledge development (Hayes, 2012). As such, significant knowledge gaps about the characteristics of the community have been identified by scholars, raising questions about pathways into inceldom, personal characteristics, and the role of loneliness in forming the identity (Cottee, 2021). These questions are now amplified by the ongoing pandemic, which has driven a global increase in the use of social media platforms, connecting new audiences with the incel movement (Pantucci & Ong, 2020). Our synthesis condenses the primarily qualitative and small-sample body of incel literature to trace engagement pathways and assess how loneliness factors into these processes. We further assess the processes of integration into the incel movement as well as opportunities for intervention, contextualized within the global loneliness crisis (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2020; Wickens *et al.*, 2021).

This project examines empirical research on incels and inceldom, including engagement, escalation/radicalization, and desistance, by asking:

1. Why do people initially become engaged with incel groups, and how does loneliness extending from the emerging asocial society influence engagement?
2. Once engaged, how does the incel ideology progress to extreme views and acts of violence/self-harm?
3. What is known about desistance from inceldom, and what practicable interventions are possible to address engagement, extremism, violence, and self-harm?

Our goal in conducting this assessment is to provide a comprehensive of current, relevant literature that will provide informed knowledge relating to policy, interventions, and redress for all those who have been or will be affected by the incel movement.

METHODS

We adopted a scoping literature review method to answer our questions. Scoping literature reviews are useful when you would like to “present an overview of a potentially large and diverse body of literature pertaining to a broad topic” (Pham *et al.*, 2014, p. 372). Arksey and O’Malley (2005) explain that scoping reviews can inform scholarship about the range of research activity, summarize findings, and identify research gaps. The authors proposed a five-step process for scoping reviews, which included:

1. Identifying the research question
2. Identifying relevant studies
3. Study selection

4. Charting the data
5. Collating, summarizing, and reporting the results (Aksey & O'Malley, 2005, p. 22)

Below, we outline our research process in line with steps 2-4. Our research questions are identified above, and our summary/reporting of results makes up the body of our outcomes section.

LITERATURE SEARCH

Our scoping literature review (Peters *et al.*, 2022; Pham *et al.*, 2014) synthesis project began with a Google Scholar and EBSCOHost database search of a series of ten keywords or keyword combinations related to our research questions. While the use of Google Scholar as a primary resource is debated in the scholarship (e.g. Gusenbauer & Haddaway, 2019; Haddaway *et al.*, 2015), the platform is frequently employed for scoping reviews and often provides direct access to the identified resources. Moreover, a recent assessment of Google Scholar and other databases conducted by Martín-Martín *et al.* (2020) indicated that the search engine is the best choice for substantive coverage when bibliometric data is not required, particularly in concise searches of contemporary subjects.

A description of our search and screening processes is provided here and also overviewed in Figure 1, below. We intentionally kept our keywords broad in order to capture a wide literature base for screening. The search terms were formulated following discussions with an expert on incel research, and coauthor on this report, Dr. Sarah Daly. Our search keywords, and their respective numbers of records identified, included:

1. "involuntary celibate" (n=649)
2. "involuntary celibacy" (n=729)
3. "incel" AND "involuntary" OR "celibate" (n=1,710)
4. "red pill" AND "incel" (n=559)
5. "black pill" AND "incel" (n=199)
6. "Minassian" AND "incel" (n=465)
7. "Elliot Rodger" AND "incel" (n=705)
8. "manosphere" AND "incel" (n=1,030)
9. "femcel" (n=27)
10. "normies" AND "incel" (n=451)

In total, the searches of these keyword combinations identified 6,524 records. Next, we removed all duplicated records identified in our initial search (n = 4,951). We then divided the sources among members of the knowledge synthesis team and screened each source for inclusion. Our selection process was guided by several inclusion and exclusion criteria, which are summarized here and in Table 1, below. Specifically, sources were included if they were published in English and were peer-reviewed journal articles; textbooks, or chapters therein; doctoral dissertations; Master's theses from military or defense colleges; conference proceedings published in their entirety; pre-prints, where a peer-reviewed version of the paper was not yet available; or grey literature, including reports and briefs. As this represents an emerging body of literature, we limited our selections to sources published in 2017 or later.

Sources were excluded if they were news article or blog posts; conference papers not published in their entirety; Master's or undergraduate theses, other than military or defense colleges, or theses frequently cited in peer-reviewed literature; exclusively theoretical discussions; preprints where a subsequently published peer-reviewed version of the paper was available; non-scholarly or strictly opinion-based

manuscripts; and sources that brought up incels only in brief and not as the substantive focus of the article or in a way that addressed one of our research questions.

We began our screening process with a read through of abstracts. After screening each article, we removed 1,081 non-pertinent sources, leaving us with 492 sources. We then screened the remaining sources in their entirety, again using the inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined above, and removed an additional 226 sources.

Finally, the search process was iterative in that as we read each article, we also screened reference pages to identify articles that may be relevant to this knowledge synthesis that were missed during our initial search. This process resulted in an additional 53 journal articles and reports being identified for inclusion in this knowledge synthesis project. Our final list of included 319 sources which were reviewed for this synthesis.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria used in source screening

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Published peer-reviewed journal articles	Conference proceedings not published in their entirety
Books or textbooks, or chapters therein	Publications mentioning one of the keywords
Doctoral dissertations	Masters or undergraduate theses, other than military or defense colleges
Conference proceedings published in their entirety	News articles and blog posts
Published after 2016 ¹	Exclusively theoretical pieces
Pre-prints (where a peer-reviewed version of the paper is not yet published)	Preprints (where a subsequently published peer-reviewed version of the paper was available)
Grey literature	Books or articles bringing up incels only briefly, or as an example, but which are predominantly focused on a topic not relevant to the research questions
Published in English	

ASSESSMENT AND CODING

After compiling a list of relevant articles, the research team then commenced with a scan of titles, metadata (e.g., keywords, themes, authorship), and abstracts to identify the substantive goals for each item. At this stage, a preliminary deductive coding process was employed, and each item’s alignment with the project’s various research questions were recorded. This information was stored in a shared working file, allowing for iterative refinement by all researchers.

¹ Older studies and studies from adjacent bodies of research are included in this synthesis insofar as they contextualize the findings in our search timeframe.

Finally, the research team conducted a careful read-through of the items coded under each research question until it was agreed that conceptual saturation had been met. This process reflected four research areas (history; engagement and recruitment; escalation, radicalization, and violence; assessment, treatment, and prevention), and produced a number of subthemes that form the basis of our paper.

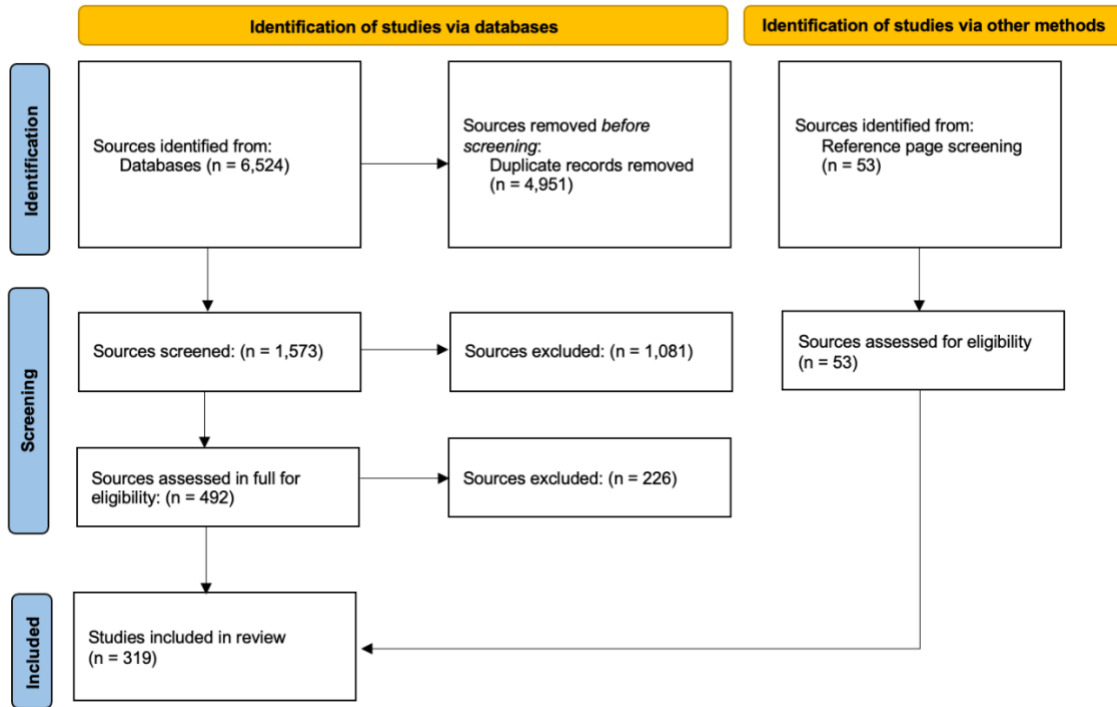


Figure 1. Flow diagram of the employed scoping review process

ENGAGEMENT

Our first research question focusses on the facets of incelness and their relationship with engagement to the identity. This question is addressed from multiple angles, including discussion of personal characteristics, the nature of incel communities, the development and fostering of in-group identity, and the language of incelness. When viewed from a perspective of online socialization, the movement poses a resistance identity that is attractive to already disenfranchised individuals, whose worldview is then strengthened through asymmetric online dialogue (Castells, 1997; DeCook, 2021).

KEY FINDINGS

Entitlement, Rejection, Loneliness, Societal Exclusion, and their Relationship to Sexuality

MEMBER CHARACTERISTICS

While compiling a social profile of those who participate in the incel community can be useful to understand warning signs for participation and escalation, it is important to note that as with most communities, incels are comprised of a variety of social, psychological, and cultural characteristics. Overall, incels tend to be cis-gendered heterosexual men participating from a range of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Surveys of self-identified incels conducted on Incels.co found participants were exclusively males (100%)² a mostly young (82% aged 18-30), and heterosexual (93.8%), but otherwise were demographically diverse (Hintz & Baker, 2021; Jaki *et al.*, 2019).

Additional identity groups, including women (i.e., femcels), form smaller related communities within the broader incel community. Example subsets include *baldcel* (bald or balding), *currycel* (Indian/Southeast Asian), *gymcel* (those who believe they can compensate for their incelness with muscles), *Medcel* (those who have psychological or medical illnesses), among others (Van Brunt & Taylor, 2020). Specific subgroups, such as *volcels* (voluntarily celibate – those who can change their characteristics) and *fakecels* (fake incels – those who are pretending to be an incel, or those who renounce incelness) are used to demonstrate the permanence of incelness (Hintz & Baker 2021; Van Brunt & Taylor, 2020).

Incels often report a history of social ostracism during middle and high school years, including bullying and sexual rejection. In the Jaki *et al.* 2019 survey, almost 81% of respondents reported being shy during their adolescence and shared experiences of bullying and social isolation during this time. Concerns regarding physical appearance are common and act as a uniting force: incels often define themselves and their sexual frustration through their unchangeable characteristics, such as height, race, body type, physical ability, learning disabilities, and neurodivergence (Glance *et al.*, 2021; Hintz & Baker 2021; Jaki *et al.*, 2019; Maxwell *et al.*, 2020; O'Malley *et al.*, 2022; Williams & Arntfield, 2020;). High rates of mental health and psychological concerns are reported, including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation: over 64% reported symptoms of depression and almost 60% reported symptoms of anxiety and almost half (47.8%) reported experiencing suicidal ideation (Speckhard *et al.*, 2021).

² Note that this was a by-product of the study design, with survey administrators opting to exclude the two female responses they received from the study results “to keep the results relevant to the male-only demographic of the forum.” (Anti-Defamation League, 2020).

While neurodivergence is not a cause of extremist thinking, there is emerging evidence that a diagnosis of autism-spectrum disorder (ASD) may create a *vulnerability* to extremism. A minority of those who associate with extremist ideologies – including incels - have been formally diagnosed or self-identify with ASD (Woodbury-Smith *et al.*, 2022). ASD's impact on an individual's thought patterns, particularly an adherence to black-and-white thinking, may give a certain appeal to extremist thought, as it provides order and structure in an otherwise chaotic world (Woodbury-Smith *et al.* 2022). In addition, children and adolescents with ASD often experience bullying and social ostracism, further fueling their resentment of their peers due to the feeling of a lack of acceptance (Woodbury-Smith *et al.* 2022). In a recent study of 272 self-identified incels, Speckhard & Ellenberg (2022) note that incels report that they believe that their ASD-characteristics contribute toward their inability to secure a romantic relationship.

LANGUAGE AND SEXUALITY

The incel subculture generally holds misogynistic worldview framed by self-identified group members to be a function of their social isolation. This ideology stems from self-perceived failures at relations with others, usually of the opposite sex (Cottee, 2020). In line with the bulk of scholarly research on problematic internet use and behaviours (Moretta & Buodo, 2020), loneliness figures heavily into incels' self-reported emotional states, and can lead to engagement with and uptake of radical perspectives (Daly & Reed, 2022).

Despite the observed heterogeneity of incels, many share experiences of loneliness, a lack of intimate relationships and feelings of delayed romantic development beginning in adolescence, often rooted in their preoccupations with appearance, body image, and feelings of low self-esteem (Donnelly *et al.*, 2001, Ging, 2019; Hintz & Baker, 2021; Labbaf, 2019; Stijelja 2021). The resulting late onset or lack of sexual relationships then further exacerbates experiences of stigmatization as being *off time* in relationship to one's peers is associated with ripple impacts: late onset of sexual experiences contributes to social isolation, lower self-esteem and is associated with having fewer other-gender peers, as well as a higher risk of being sexually inactive into adulthood (Gesselman *et al.*, 2017; Haase *et al.*, 2012; Stijelja 2021).

In a 2019 survey of self-identified incels, 85% of respondents reported never having had a sexual relationship (Stijelja, 2021). As a response to feelings of failure associated with the inability to attain expected interpersonal and intimate relationships, incels report ongoing feelings of marginalization and negative emotions (Daly & Reed 2022; Glace, 2021;). Experiences in adulthood solidify feelings of low self-esteem, as many incels report a lack of popularity on dating apps contributing to continued levels of dating anxiety (Sparks *et al.*, 2022).

AGGRIEVED ENTITLEMENT

There is a limited, but growing, body of literature related to incels that provides some context for how users become involved in the ideology (Brzuszkiewicz, 2020; Hoffman *et al.*, 2020). Many incels express a sense of *aggrieved entitlement*, a concept which can be used to explain why men engage with the manosphere (Ging, 2019). While most often connected to sexuality, this worldview also carries over to other social domains, whereby unmet social and sexual expectations may portend humiliation and ultimately violence.

Aggrieved entitlement amongst incels is theorized to be a response to their experiences of bullying, social isolation, and romantic rejection. The humiliation coming from these experiences is employed as

justification to hurt those who have caused this injustice. Kimmel (2017) posits that the loss of a perceived entitlement (i.e., to a romantic relationship) may be perceived “as an attack on masculine identity” and creates feelings of humiliation, frustration and hatred (Brzuszkiewicz, 2020; Kimmel, 2017; Thorburn *et al.*, 2022). Feelings of emasculation increase attraction to misogynistic ideologies and are conducive to violent behaviour, particularly for men, as Kimmel (2017) suggests that they are more likely to outwardly express their aggression more often than women (p. 75).

The current climate of advancing gender equality which has facilitated greater autonomy for women has intensified feelings of reduced privilege for men (Brzuszkiewicz, 2020). For incels, aggrievement stems from sexual inefficacy that is often blamed on mainstream social media platforms (Preston *et al.*, 2021). Participation in the manosphere is framed as a remedy to these (Cottee, 2020; Glace *et al.*, 2021). Incel forums therefore provide a means of connecting with other aggrieved individuals on these issues, and indeed, most forum participants engage for this purpose rather than for violent ends (Cottee, 2021).

ANTI-FEMINISM AND MISOGYNY AS A GATEWAY TO ENGAGEMENT

Anti-feminist and misogynistic sentiments function as one pathway to incelism. Guy (2020) notes that expressions of anti-feminism are more socially accepted than expressions of other *isms*, which allows misogynistic content to flourish across the manosphere without significant interference. Anti-feminist sentiments also respond to incels’ sense of grievance expressed by incels; manospheric misogyny provides a sense of comfort for those experiencing this perceived loss of privilege and power (Guy, 2020).

Literature on alt-right communities more broadly notes that a perception of *militant misogyny* acts as a uniting factor for many extremist groups, and that there is significant overlap between anti-feminist communities, homophobic communities, the white nationalist movement, and far-right conspiracy groups, and the rise of incels and related groups is noted as a backlash to the ongoing loss of power among white, heterosexual, cis-gendered, Christian, men (Roose *et al.*, 2020).

Additionally, the *black pill* identity forms a hostile world narrative that pits the incel against the rest of society (Cottee, 2020). These values are grounded in the belief that some level of biological determinism is natural to the human species, and confirmation of these ideas can often be found in anecdotal online discussions or couched pseudoscientific statements of fact (Sugiura, 2021). For example, Menzie (2022) observes that sexual deficits are often framed through an economic lens called the sexual marketplace (“SMP”) in online dialogue. A central facet of the SMP is the 80/20 rule, which makes use of the Pareto principle to argue that a minority of men (20 percent) account for the majority (80 percent) of sexual interactions with women. Similarly, Cottee (2020) notes that a “just be white” theory is often cited by incels, suggesting that heterosexual Caucasian men face the fewest obstacles when seeking female companionship, and informing a hierarchy of social attractiveness based on arbitrary features. These, and other, arguments provide the foundations of “knowledge” – or harsh truths – that objectify women and shape the black pill identity.

An incel sympathizer and self-proclaimed scholar writing under the pseudonym Dr. Lukas Castle (2019) explains that the black pill mindset represents a nihilistic worldview grounded in accepting that uncontrollable social structures inform one’s attractiveness and sexual prowess:

“The blackpill might be liberating, but it comes at the price of the loss of comfort and naiveté, of happy innocence. Harsh truths are cold and unforgiving, and blackpill thought is full of harsh truths” (p. 12).

INCELDOM PROVIDES COMMUNITY

Outside of romantic relationships, incels also report experiences of social isolation more broadly. Several studies have noted a lack of friendship as a common experience across participants in the incel community; Maxwell *et al.* (2020) and Jaki *et al.* (2019) both note social isolation, loneliness, and a lack of platonic, genuine bonds as commonly reported experiences of incels. This lack of connection then contributes to symptoms of anxiety and depression (Sparks *et al.*, 2022). The incel subculture and forums then provide the opportunity for missing social relationships, rooted in common values, identities and misogynistic ideology (Vu *et al.*, 2021).

Incels who are active on subcultural forums are steeped in norms and values of incel subculture and are simultaneously insulated from outside influences, reinforcing group identity and limiting the influence of possible competing ideologies (Lindsay, 2022). Rejection from broader society becomes a strengthening force among incels, as in-group bonding is reinforced through shared discourse that objectifies and dehumanizes women (Scotto di Carlo, 2022) and a shared narrative of being a social pariah (Blodgett 2020).

Ging (2019) adds that the rapid and cloistered form of communication occurring in anti-feminist circles contributes toward a transnational homogenization of rhetoric. The author explains that “[this] rapid propagation of ... ‘philosophy’ across multiple platforms demonstrates how a compelling cultural motif has succeeded in balancing emotion and ideology to generate consensus and belonging among the manosphere’s divergent elements” (p.645). Similar findings were reported by Atari *et al.* (2022), argued that markers of homogeneity, like the shared use of a common lexicon, entrenched a sense of oneness with the community, writing that “when individuals perceive homogeneity of moral views in their group, they develop a visceral sense of oneness with their group, which in turn can radicalize them into being willing to commit outgroup-derogatory acts to protect and preserve their own group” (p. 1002).

PHYSICAL CONDITIONS AND ENGAGEMENT

Recent scholarship demonstrates that phenomenon in the physical world may impact incel activity in online space. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, increased engagement with the incel community. This included increases in the number of posts and threads; posting frequency; and violent/vitriolic discourse. Davies, Wu, and Frank (2021) found that “posting behavior on violent right-wing extremist and incel forums increased significantly following the declaration of the pandemic” (p. 1). Similarly, a study by Vu (2020) noted an increased level of activity on incels forums, peaking in April 2020, as well as a “significant increase in murderous fantasies” (p. 2) during the pandemic.

In some spaces, incels celebrated the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, fantasizing that the virus would kill “normies” and force attractive people to experience the loneliness of isolation that incels endure (Brzuszkiewicz, 2020; Vu, 2020). Similarly, a study by Morton *et al.* (2021), which sought to measure the impact of COVID-19 quarantines on the incel community, found that lockdowns exacerbated feelings of isolation and resentment, with respondents noting less social contact, a reduction in extracurricular activities, a loss of routine and perceived freedoms, and an overall “perceived decline in their experience of being” (p. 11) as contributing to their increased sense of isolation.

The COVID-19 pandemic also changed our social landscape, as dating apps such as Tinder saw record-breaking daily active users during periods of lockdown (Wiederhold, 2021). Recent work suggests that engagement with inceldom may be motivated by local conditions, including increased scarcity of single

women, high income inequality and gendered income gaps. A study by Brooks *et al.* (2022) tested the hypotheses that places with male-biased sex ratios, high income inequality and gender-equitable circumstances would increase incel activity in online spaces. Their results indicated "... that a local scarcity of women (especially single women), high income inequality, and small gender gaps in income—individually and in combination—are associated with more aggregate incel activity online" (Brooks *et al.*, 2022, p. 250).

LEADERLESS NATURE

Inceldom may be appealing to individuals because of its decentralized and leaderless nature. Gillett and Suzor (2022) explain that this facet of the movement falls in line with the cyberlibertarian ethos of self-selection. Individuals can locate sources of information and community that best align with their personal interests, allowing them to avoid participation in fora that may castigate their life choices or place them at blame for their loneliness and perceived rejection. Bobin (2020) notes that the resulting morass of information found in these communities can encourage self-radicalization. An individual might be motivated by a singular non-mainstream position but encounter and internalize additional divergent ethos as they navigate through uncurated and unfiltered dialogue.

The forums also have the potential to radicalize participants because they act as an echo chamber that emphasizes passive victimhood and an external locus of control (Brzuszkiewicz, 2020). Bobin (2020) adds that the lack of formal structuring within incel communities may be appealing to the types of personalities that they attract because there are few barriers to participation as there are no membership rites and few physical meetups.

COMMON LANGUAGE PRACTICES

Radicalization toward the incel identity is often premised on the internalization of several key underlying ideological concepts. Bogetić (2022) explains that "incels draw on coded and specialised vocabulary, characterised by gender-based lexis, hate speech, misogyny, and a dehumanised view of male-female relationships" to express the boundaries of the ideology (p. 1). Mastery and employment of the figurative vocabulary by group members can serve as one form of validation in the absence of a formal structure (Decook & Kelly, 2021).

Beyond empowering individuals to metaphorically express their sexual frustrations, accepted use of the emergent lexicon also allows incels to demonstrate their commitment to the identity (Jaki *et al.*, 2019). Recent scholarship has identified as many as four convergent lexicons, many of which tacitly convey harmful meaning to their subjects and include self-derisive terminology (Brooks *et al.*, 2022; Farrell *et al.*, 2019; Gothard, 2021).

Most common amongst those is the use of pill analogies, stemming from the 1999 science fiction film *The Matrix*. The film is premised on the idea that most humans' minds are living in a complex virtual reality system while their bodies are used for bioelectric power generation by intelligent machines. Early in the film the main protagonist is presented with the choice of taking a red or a blue pill and advised that taking the blue pill will return him to the matrix while the red pill will allow him to escape the simulation and learn about the true nature of the world. This proposition of choice and the realities that it can expose has taken root as a rhetorical device amongst incel communities, most commonly appearing in discussions about the 'truth' of socialization and attraction (Waśniewska, 2020).

A third, fatalistic black pill category has organically emerged in online dialogue and typically refers to accepting one's fate in relation to the perceived causal factors of their asexuality (Preston *et al.*, 2021). This term is used to encapsulate the spectrum of ideological beliefs that are commonly held by incel communities. Further, the term is often used in its adjective form *blackpilled* to describe an individual or concept that is fully subscribed to incel identity – something akin to reaching a new spiritual plateau, although not necessarily a defining feature of inceldom (Lindsay, 2022; Speckhard *et al.*, 2022).

The –pill suffixes are part of a broader lexicon commonly used by incel communities, employing terminology and visual representations as shorthand to convey ideological concepts. For instance, incels will often refer to hyper-sexual men as *Chads*, a hypothetical alpha-male figure destined to be attractive to women (Thorburn *et al.*, 2022). Similarly, *Stacys* refers to hyper-sexual women who make use of their femininity to selectively engage in sexual encounters with the man of their choosing. Additional terms like *Beckys* (less attractive women seeking male attention), *cucks* (males who are subservient to females), *Normies* (individuals who do not see the world through an incel or red pill lens), and *betas* (individuals who cannot compete with Chads/Alphas, typically incels) among others. While assessing the range of the incel dictionary is outside of the scope of this paper³, we feel that it is important to acknowledge the complexity of this emergent digital language.

³ Language used by adherents to the incel ideology is dynamic and frequently evolving (Bogetic, 2022). Good starting resources for commonly used incel terms include Lyndsay, 2022; Papadamou et al, 2021; and Waśniewska, 2020.

ESCALATION, RADICALIZATION, AND VIOLENCE

Our second research question is intended to assess the processes by which an individual who self-identifies as an incel may internalize and escalate to radical ideological arms of the movement. This question first interrogates the potential of inceldom as a nexus to radicalisation and ideologically motivated violent extremism (IVME), and then considers how the form of the modern internet may influence the radicalization process. Beyond cataloguing the many facets of incel dialogue, academic scholarship has also traced the escalation of discussions into overtly violent misogyny calling for action intended to reclaim the manosphere by causing harm to the public (Witt, 2020). To its extreme end, these conversations have manifested as open calls for rebellion: For example, van der Veer (2020) articulates that an *incel rebellion* was a motivating factor for Alek Minassian, perpetrator of the 2018 Toronto van attack. His actions are revered within some incel communities as an exemplar of fighting back “for the cause” (Baele *et al.*, 2021).

KEY FINDINGS

Embedded Violence & Misogyny, Problematic Internet Use, Echo Chambers, and the Reciprocal Radicalization between groups

CONNECTION TO VIOLENCE AND EXTREMISM

As mentioned above, at its core, the incel movement employs a common lexicon to convey vitriol against those who the incels view as successful participants in a sexual economy (Menzie, 2022). In some cases, the dialogue has called for acts of violence directed toward themselves as well as others (Daly & Laskovtsov, 2021; Daly & Reed, 2022). This is most clearly articulated by the *canonization* of incels who have engaged in violence and whose actions become common rallying cries against perceived oppressors (Daly & Reed, 2022; Witt, 2020). While most incels will not act in response to these sentiments (Hoffman *et al.*, 2020; Speckhard *et al.*, 2021), the centrality of violence alongside misogyny and disdain for *normies* (normal people – see Nagle, 2017) within inceldom is cause for concern. Indeed, a 2020 Public Report issued by the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service links incel-based IVME with *personalized worldviews* informed by radical dialogue occurring on social media platforms (Canada, 2020).

There is general consensus amongst incel scholarship that the community is a gateway to, and often gatekeeper of, the groundswell alt-right political movement. The alt-right movement proposes anti-establishment and radically conservative politics and gained popularity through the early years of the 21st century before reaching a boiling point in the run-up to the 2016 US federal election. As Main (2018) explains, the alt-right movement grew out of relatively unmoderated political discourse online to champion a rejection of liberal democracy, white racialism, anti-Americanism, and vitriolic rhetoric (p. 8).

Many of these facets emerged in opposition to social trends that the movement has labeled *cultural Marxism*, including feminism and political correctness. Kelly and Aunspach (2020) connect this standpoint with the incel ideology, linking alt-right notions of white masculine dominance and the subjugation of women with the incel-held ideal of compulsory sexuality. Similarly, Zimmerman (2018)

concludes the hyperbole found in online incel rhetoric has manifested as “an extremist political ideology focused on terrorizing women and normies and spreading the Blackpill” (p. 8). Baele *et al* (2020) argue that, as with the manosphere, the far-right online landscape can be conceptualized as a dynamic and interconnected ecosystem, of which incels make up one group.

ANTI-FEMINISM AND MISOGYNY AS RISK FACTORS FOR ESCALATION TO VIOLENCE

Recent research has also demonstrated that the presence of and support for misogyny is a risk factor for violent attitudes and intentions and is linked to increased support for interpersonal violence. Rottweiler, *et al.* (2021) investigated how misogyny is linked to violent attitudes, intentions and willingness to participate in acts of interpersonal violence. Their research linked the presence of collective narcissism in men, defined as *frustrated group-based entitlement* and “a belief that one’s own group (the ingroup) is exceptional and entitled to special recognition and privileged treatment, but it is not sufficiently recognized by other” (de Zavala *et al.*, 2019, p. 37) as associated with viewing women as a threatening out-group

Similarly, values of *hypermasculinity*, defined as rigid commitment to masculine gender roles, are linked to the subjugation of women, including engaging in violent fantasies about women, particularly when there is a perceived threat (Rottweiler *et al.*, 2021). Studies on motivations of mass acts of violence have found connections between hegemonic masculine ideals, the perceived loss of power and an escalation to violence. Historical analyses of American mass shootings – from familicides to school and terrorist shootings, including Rodger’s Isla Vista shooting – have linked these incidents to a *crisis of masculinity* whereby men take *corrective action* to maintain their gendered conceptions of power (Myketiak, 2018; Silva *et al.*, 2021).

GENERAL ONLINE RADICALIZATION AND PROBLEMATIC INTERNET USE

Generally, there is evidence to suggest that incels spend prolonged periods of time in online space, including on social media and gaming platforms, and often have skills and interests in computers and programming (Sugiura, 2021). While the precise role that forums play in the radicalization process is undetermined, the internet facilitates the ability for those with extremist ideologies to form communities, share ideas and spread information (Marwick *et al.*, 2022).

In addition, a reliance on online communities for social interaction can be detrimental to a person’s feelings of connection more broadly, as social exchanges that occur solely in online space have been shown to increase feelings of loneliness (Brignall & Van Valey, 2005; Twenge *et al.*, 2019; Van Brunt & Taylor, 2020; Zizek, 2017). Given that incel communities congregate primarily in online spaces, their already-limited ability to connect socially in the physical world may be further reduced, compounding feelings of isolation and sadness (Van Brunt & Taylor, 2020). Two facets of online interaction that commonly appear in the literature may further contribute to the process of radicalization: anonymity and algorithms.

IMPACT OF INTERNET ANONYMITY

Anonymity in online space fosters the conditions for both toxic and supportive communities (Brown *et al.*, 2018). Anonymity has been noted as important in creating the conditions whereby difficult topics –

such as mental health struggles – can be freely discussed without shame. Alternatively, platforms that allow anonymity may also attract communities with nefarious goals, from trading child sexual abuse material (CSAM) (Tufekci, 2017) to participating in the sharing of hateful content (Allwin & Bockler, 2021).

Many of the forums that incels and other manosphere groups flourish on allow for anonymous participation; Reddit and 4chan for example are designed to allow users to interact largely anonymously, even though true anonymity is largely impossible (Brown *et al.*, 2018). For incels, anonymity provides the conditions for users to act in harmful or illegal ways with more impunity than in the physical world. Guy (2020) also notes that mass-anonymity fosters the development of extreme ideologies as it encourages “the donning of a group identity” (p. 623), whereby users can use their online personas to act out hyper-masculine fantasies, reinforcing concepts of hegemonic masculinity and group solidarity.

IMPACT OF ALGORITHMS, RABBIT HOLES, AND ECHO CHAMBERS

As noted, while the relationship between radicalization and online space is not yet fully understood, it is generally accepted that the rise of the internet and the affordances of online platforms play a role in the adoption and spread of radical ideologies (Baker & Chadwick, 2021). Interactions in online spaces can allow for the flourishing of toxic, radicalized content as increasingly extreme ideas and behaviours are learned and normalized due to constant interactions with others who hold similarly extreme worldviews, and a lack of interactions with those who offering conflict viewpoints (Carvin, 2021).

The very design of online space can facilitate the spread of misogynistic and similarly extreme content through *technological seduction* that occurs via top-up or bottom-up methods. In top-up seduction, content is purposefully presented to the user; the organization of content is designed to position extreme content as legitimate. Top-down seduction “often leads people to accept uncritically one of the framed opinions as legitimate and to carry on searching (encountering further menus) having already made a choice within that frame space” (Alfano *et al.* 2018, p. 303). Bottom-down seduction refers to the process of personalized content suggestions based on a user's previous engagement; their location, previous likes, search history and other data are compiled to create a category of suggestions for further interactions with like-minded individuals and content (Alfano *et al.*, 2018; Percich, 2021).

These personalized pathways to related content seek to maintain users' engagement through a constant feeding of content that aligns with their interests; for some users, this content that is entirely benign, but for others, this process creates “a dangerous on-ramp to extremism” (Agostinone-Wilson, 2020, p. 140). In addition, users in the process of radicalization may find like-minded Individual's in the comments section of online content, reinforcing a sense of community and creating additional connections (Agostinone-Wilson (2020). These *rabbit holes* provide a pathway for users to be exposed to increasingly extreme content (Habib *et al.*, 2022).

Specific to incels, the forums and websites this community uses to engage with one another create *digital echo chambers* that reinforce and amplify worldviews through interactions with like-minded users (Baele *et al.*, 2019; Jaki *et al.*, 2019; Sugiura, 2020; Zimmerman *et al.*, 2018). Their sites of choice, such as Reddit, design spaces which prioritize content geared towards their user base: young, white, straight men (Percich, 2021). The process of upvoting – allowing users to recognize other users' comments – means that the user base controls what content is seen by most users on the site, which incentivizes users to post content that could result in the rewarding of upvotes, and facilitates *herding*, that sees users reproduce the voting behaviour of others on the platform. *The Fappening*, a misogynistic campaign to mass leak private

celebrity photos that took place largely on various subreddits, is cited as an example by Massanari (2017) of how the design of Reddit, particularly the system of upvoting, incentivizes platforms to host problematic and toxic content in the name of traffic and revenue.

YouTube is another popular platform identified as spreading incel-related content (Champion & Frank, 2021) and poses similar problems for the process of radicalization (Marwick *et al.*, 2021). Papadamou *et al.* (2021), for example, found that YouTube's recommendation algorithm is feeding incel-related videos to users. The study found a relatively significant amount of incel-related content (5.4%) within YouTube's recommendations to users, and overall concluded that the probability that a user will encounter an incel-related video via the platform's recommendation algorithm as 1 in 5. YouTube has responded by attempting to tweak their algorithm to limit the promotion of incel-related content, but evidence suggests that algorithms contribute to the spread of far-right content in online space (Marwick *et al.*, 2021; Ribeiro *et al.*, 2020; Yesilada & Lewandowsky, 2022).

VIOLENT BEHAVIOURS

Although most incels are not violent and many will reject violence, acts of violence ascribed to incel ideology are generally celebrated and a very small number of incels will progress to acts of extreme violence and self-harm. Despite low occurrence rates, these acts are shared online and in popular media, gaining hyper-visibility. And while acts of violence in the physical world have been correlated to activity in online forums, the role of forums in motivating violence is still debated.

For some, online activity increases the motivation for violence in the physical world (i.e., Anders Breivik), but for others, the camaraderie found in online space lessens feelings of societal rejection and loneliness and may provide a sense of comfort and acceptance, lessening the likelihood of real-world action (Vu *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, most incels do not become radicalized to violence. While the discourse of the incel community is certainly misogynistic and celebrates violent ideations, many individual incels maintain that they are not physically aggressive, and overall rates of violent acts perpetrated by incels are low. In the words of Ging, "... violent or terrorist acts that are statistically predictable but individually unpredictable" (Proitz *et al.*, 2021, p. 7). While beliefs of incels are generally considered radical and extreme, it is not uncommon for incels to reject acts of violence (Broyd *et al.*, 2021).

Violent dialogue is commonly encountered on incel-oriented services, typically through the use of metaphor or implicitly embedded in the commonly used lexicon described above. For instance, Prazmo (2020) observed that dehumanization often occurs in online conversations about women through the employment of derisive terminology such as *female humanoid organisms* or *femoids*. The authors note: "According to incels, women do not deserve any position in the hierarchy of living beings. They are to be treated as artificial, robotic organisms and – by extension – are not deserving of any compassion, empathy, rights (not even animal rights) or even humane treatment" (p. 23). Similarly, O'Malley *et al.* (2022) observe that commonly encountered themes on various incel forums included framing women as naturally evil and legitimizing violence/vengeance. In many cases this legitimization occurred through veiled generalities that allude to violent acts, such as the use of the initials ER (referring to Elliot Rodger, discussed below) to validate murdering women. Violence is also legitimized through the gamification of violence, "where users challenge each other to 'get the high score' by 'killing as many people as possible' also occurs in incel forums (Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2021). Through this gamification, violence is framed as a competitive act to impact and provoke other acts of violence.

At a more general level, present scholarship does indicate that violence is embedded in the incel worldview. This is most directly stated by Baele *et al.* (2021) who draw a comparison between the incels and other violent extremist groups, noting commonalities including clear group boundaries, staunch belief in an oppressive social hierarchy, and clearly identified aggressors. The authors explain that “For Incels like for most violent political actors, violence would only be a legitimate reaction to the outgroup’s [Chads and Stacys] constant and increasing oppression and abuse” (p. 1683). Additionally, O’Malley *et al.* (2022) conclude that the incel subculture is organized around five pillars, including “the sexual market, women as naturally evil, legitimizing masculinity, male oppression, and violence” (p. NP4999).

It is important to note that violence does not permeate all members of the incel community, and that many scholars identified resistance to statements of violence within studied dialogue. Ging (2021) explains that “While incel discourse is frequently replete with extreme misogyny and performative or ironic violent ideation, most do not actually condone violence and many condemn the attacks perpetrated by Minassian and others” (p.7). Moreover, Kaati *et al.* (2021) estimate that approximately 0.6 percent of participants in online digital communities pose any heightened risk for violent behaviours. Despite these observations, violence remains a constant in incel dialogue and is often downplayed as discussants minimize the harms experienced by victims and exonerate perpetrators.

Several major acts of violence perpetrated by individuals who identify as incels, or who have been retroactively associated with inceldom by the community (e.g, Marc Lepine; see: Bloom, 2022), are frequently glorified and have become foundational to the violent pillar of the incel subculture. The two most prominent examples addressed in the current body of literature are the acts of mass murder committed by Elliot Rodger in 2014 and Alek Minassian in 2018. Rodger, a 22-year-old man and self-described incel, murdered six people and injured 14 others through various means near the University of California Santa Barbara campus. In the lead-up to his rampage, Rodger posted a video to YouTube complaining about being rejected by women and shared a manifesto detailing his plot for revenge.

Minassian, a 26-year-old man who frequently participated in incel discussions on the 4chan platform, murdered 11 people and injured 14 others by driving a rented into pedestrians along Yonge Street in Toronto. Minassian had posted a veiled message that alluded to violence on his Facebook profile declaring that an incel rebellion had begun. Notably, during his initial interview with Toronto police detectives, Minassian stated that he began participating in the incel community after learning about Rodger’s attack.

Scholarship has demonstrated that these, and other actors, have been canonized or made martyrs within the incel movement. Am & Wiemann (2020) suggest that this is part of a broader trend that sees a shift from hero-worship and leaders to admiration of lone-wolf attackers. The authors explain that incel martyrs are often framed as men who have ascended to Chad status through their actions despite remaining sexless. Meleagrou-Hitchens *et al.* (2021) make a similar observation, noting: “by framing previous attackers as masculinized heroes within extreme-right social media in this way, the movement thus incentivizes further acts of violence as a way for other members to generate status” (p. 68-69). The primary concern, expressed repeatedly within the literature, is that continued worship and sanctification of incel killers may contribute toward normalizing violence within the community (e.g., O’Malley *et al.*).

Minassian’s use of the term rebellion resonates with an ideological belief amongst incels that an uprising against perceived oppressors, like *femoids*, is necessary to equalize sexual access in society. Sugiura (2020) explains that the acts of rebellion proposed in online discussions typically do not call for violence but rather entail ideas like withdrawing from society, engaging in catfishing campaigns [misrepresenting

oneself on dating websites], and participating in online debates. The dialogue does occasionally turn to acts of self-harm and violence but are often accompanied by disclaimers acknowledging that the proposed acts are purely hypothetical. Nonetheless, Hoffman *et al.* (2020) suggest that repeated online conversations about mobilization can be enough to encourage action, as was witnessed with Minassian. Chan (2022) adds that dialogue about a *beta uprising* has recently taken a tone of urgency, which may hasten action by those who adhere to the ideology.

ASSESSMENT, DETECTION, TREATMENT, AND PREVENTION

For our third research question we reviewed literature related to the assessment and detection of involvement with the incel ideology. Our research prioritized locating clinical tools and approaches intended to promote the early identification of participation in or uptake of the incel ideology, along with assessing the relative commitment to the ideology. Unfortunately, very few incel-specific detection tools exist, and none have been validated. Adjacent research related to extremism and terrorism may be applied to identify proximal and distal warning behaviours associated with escalation to acts of violence. Likewise, assessments of individuals at risk of involvement with the incel ideology using existing validated radicalization frameworks (e.g., Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2021; Young, 2020) may provide one alternative avenue for detection. Again, however, these tools have not been validated for this use.

KEY FINDINGS

Indoctrination Rubrics, Behavioural Intervention Teams, Validation Issues

ASSESSMENT USING THE INCEL INDOCTRINATION RUBRIC

Van Brunt and Taylor (2021) propose the 20-question Incel Indoctrination Rubric (IRR)⁴ as a tool for assessing incelism indoctrination in their book *Understanding and Treating Incels*. This rubric was developed following an assessment of common themes across 50 violent incel related incidents. The question topics, which are structured around four themes related to incelism, are overviewed in Table 2 below. Questions are scored on five-point scale ranging from 0 (not present) to 1 (fully present), with increments of 0.25 in between, and a total possible score of 20. Though it has yet to be validated (Broyd et al, 2022), this tool appears to provide the most comprehensive method for detecting involvement with the incel ideology thus far developed.

Notably, the Incel Indoctrination Rubric is not intended to be a threat assessment tool, but rather a means of assessing indoctrination into the incel ideology. For threat and violence risk assessments, Van Brunt and Taylor (2021) suggest that the SIVRA-35 (Van Brunt, 2015), RAGE-V (Association of Threat Assessment Professionals, 2006), HCR-20 (Hart & Logan, 2011), and MOSAIC (de Becker, 1997) may be useful.

⁴ We have not reproduced the rubric here, but it can be found in its entirety in Appendix I of Van Brunt and Taylor's (2021) book, *Understanding and Treating Incels*.

Table 2. Incel Indoctrination Rubric question categories and topics

Question Category	Question Topics
Thinking	Misogynistic and racist views, blackpill perspective, inaccurate self-perception, fame seeking
Feelings and Emotions	Feelings of rage and hopelessness, emphasis on previously experienced negative events, disability, abandonment
Behaviour	Threatening/approach behaviours, conditional threats/howling, suicide, past attacks, redpill
Environment	Exposure to incel or related materials, rejection from women, experiences with bullying, previous failed attempts at change, low self-worth

TREATMENT AND PREVENTION

Much of the current incel literature draws attention to the need for practical prevention, intervention, and exit strategies in response to the incel movement (e.g., Daly & Reed, 2022; Hoffman, *et al.*, 2020). Recent scholarship has provided a growing series of recommendations in this regard, many of which extend from conversations with self-identified incels, as well as those who have exited the movement (e.g., Daly & Reed, 2022; Hintz & Baker, 2021; Hoffman *et al.*, 2020; de Coning, 2022). Notably, however, scholarship in this area is limited, particularly when compared to the extensive assessments of incel language use and online forum participation.

MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT

Integrative responses may provide opportunities for camaraderie, foster empathy and provide potential turning points away from incelism. In a study by Hintz & Baker (2021), incels who have distanced themselves from their former incel identify identified new life experiences and realizations as a key process that prompted their move away from the incel ideology. Going to college/moving away from their family home and *growing up* were noted as particularly impactful experiences that widened their world view and contributed to their desistance from incelism. Restorative justice processes, which emphasize reconciliation, building understanding and peaceful resolution also be considered in de-radicalization strategies (Mühlhausen, 2017; Yamuza, 2018).

In addition, intensive mental health supports which facilitate the development of prosocial behaviours and remediate the impact of ideological dogma could also help to mitigate the impacts of radicalization processes. In Moskalenko *et al.*'s 2022 survey of the incels.co forum, almost half (49%) of the survey participants reported never having tried psychotherapy. In Speckhard & Ellenberg's 2022 study, incels surveyed noted a variety of reasons for having never participated in therapy from practical challenges (a lack of access, particularly in the United States) to experiences of shame and embarrassment over

discussing their experiences. However, the noted Hintz & Baker (2021) study revealed incels who “started working on” themselves and “went into therapy to change” reported these experiences as a component of their move away from their incel identities. They further noted that “undoing” inceldom is possible through the use of communicative labour and counseling that extricates involuntary celibacy from ones’ identity.

Likewise, Daly and Reed (2021) put forth that interventions would benefit from employing mental health resources that counteract hegemonic masculinities but warn that any actions must respect the diversity of thought within the incel community. Hoffman *et al.* (2020) provide a several policy recommendations, such as adapting countering violent extremism (CVE) programming to avoid radicalism and providing mental health resources. To facilitate these approaches, there needs to be a greater national investment in mental health supports relative to digital-era issues that will facilitate access to services. Speckhard & Ellenberg (2022) also note the promise of using online forums as a creative way of advertising and/or providing access to mental health treatment.

DIGITAL LITERACY SKILLS

Governments should consider the development of diversified, inclusive cyber-safety and media skills curriculum that can address gateways to inceldom by reducing belief in media that supports gender-based violence and inequality (O’Malley *et al.*, 2020). An inability to distinguish between true, false and misleading content in online space increases the likelihood of sharing extremist propaganda, and perhaps surprisingly, young internet users may lack this ability (Williams *et al.* 2021). Increased digital literacy skills can be used to raise awareness of how radicalization to violence occurs in online space and help to reduce vulnerability to extremist thinking. School-aged youth should be targeted and taught critical media skills to build resilience to violent and extreme online content, as well as how to engage in online space in safe ways. Teachers should be trained and supported to encourage discussion and identify potentially problematic behaviours (Government of Canada, 2018).

REGULATING ONLINE SPACE

A national-level dialogue about regulating communications platforms is advised. Lessig (2006), in *Code Version 2.0*, notes that “a mix between public law and private fences” is the best approach to online regulation (p. 170). Given the constant and fast-paced nature of technological change, if we hope to minimize harms associated with online misogyny and other radical behaviours, any technological solution – such as text-classification detection and other content moderation solutions – will only ever be temporary fixes to broader issues reflected in the debates of online governance and regulation and as such, legislative and technological solutions must work in tandem. There is no one legislative change that will create safe online spaces for all users; however, legislators must continue to balance tensions of free speech and expression with the detrimental impacts of online hate to reign in an industry that has long been operating without external regulation.

Government regulation of online platforms is necessary – but there currently exists a lack of consensus on how to do this well, and international efforts to regulate online platforms vary in terms of approach. American regulations of online space have taken a far more laissez-faire approach, emphasizing the importance of free speech and expression. However, free speech *absolutism* and a reluctance to moderate online content often results in online space where sexist, racist and homophobic content can flourish (Agostinone-Wilson, 2020).

By contrast, European governments are taking a more proactive approach and the European Union has recently approved the *Digital Services Act* (DSA), which contains provisions against the dissemination of hate speech and misinformation and imposes requirements for the removal of dangerous and illegal content from platforms (The Digital Services Act Package, 2022). Governments are beginning to understand the tensions being negotiated by online platforms for the last decade: how difficult it is to balance people's desire to communicate and connect with one another, with the need to create safe online spaces, all while accounting for nebulous definitions of behaviours that are context-dependent and often require interpretation. There is no silver bullet legislation that will create safe online spaces for all users; instead, legislators must continue to balance these tensions to provide oversight to an industry that has long been operating without external regulation.

TECHNOLOGICAL SOLUTIONS

Online platforms facilitate the spread of incel ideology, but technological affordances and the design of online spaces can also be manipulated to address this growing concern. While it is by no means a silver bullet, technology can and should be incorporated into efforts to reduce the spread of incel ideology, as code can be an effective mechanism to control user behaviour in online spaces (Lessig, 2006). Platforms can employ text-classification detection and other content moderation solutions to detect problematic behaviours in online communities, and simultaneously governments must work to design effective regulatory policies to foster safe(r) online spaces. Both platforms and governments must work together to limit the radicalization process that is associated with participation in online forums.

Various techniques and tools exist that can be employed by platforms to detect warning signs and problematic behaviour in online space. Some platforms, like Reddit, allow self-moderation of communities where the moderators are themselves members of the subreddit community. Reddit users are still bound by the overarching Terms of Service of the platform, but individual subreddits impose their unique policies to govern how users participate (Gillett & Suzor, 2022). However, this technique contributes to the creation of echo chambers, neutralizes the opportunity for conflicting information to permeate the forums and allows extremism to fester within these insular communities.

The work of Gillett & Suzor (2022) demonstrated that moderators of incel subreddits utilized Reddit's auto-moderator tool (*automod*) to delete comments criticizing incel ideology and to ban users identified as outsiders, demonstrating that platform affordances can also be used to further isolate communities from denunciation. "Without intervention and strong governance, hateful norms can become entrenched and continuously reinforced by existing and new participants" (Gillett & Suzor, 2022, p. 5).

There are various automated techniques rooted in the principles of text analytics that can be employed for automatic detection of misogynistic content and other various forms of hate speech and multiple studies have worked to create tools to automatically detect problematic text in online space (Akrami *et al.*, 2018; Allwin & Bockler, 2021; Davey *et al.* 2020; Jaki *et al.*, 2019; Molsby, 2020; Sang, 2020; Shrestha *et al.*, 2020; Theisen *et al.*, 2021). *Named Entity Recognition* (NER) employs algorithms to assign detected text to categories and can be used as a first step in screening text for risk of threats on possible targets and fixations on persons (Allwin & Bockler, 2021). Sang (2020) suggests a method to transform screenshots of incel speech into training data for automated content moderation whereby labels are used to train AI to auto-detect incel related content to be flagged for removal.

The *Profile Risk Assessment Tool* (PRAT), uses 30 personality and risk-behaviour related variables to assess and detect written communication to assess threat potential (Akrami *et al.*, 2018). Text can also be

analyzed to detect expressions of emotions; expressions of anger, contempt and disgust (ANCODI) have been found to be associated with increased risk of violence particularly when directed toward a potential target. According to a study by Matsumoto *et al.* (2016), anger when combined with disgust is more likely to lead to offline violence than when anger alone is present in online space. Habib *et al.* (2019) suggest utilizing tools to detect hateful content in order to employ proactive content moderation strategies more purposefully, by narrowing down the number of communities that administrators need to monitor.

Content moderation methods, including the banning of incel communities, have been shown to be effective in reducing posting activity in toxic communities, including the number of posts, active users, and newcomers (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2021). Alternatively, quarantining specific communities has been shown to slow their growth rate as it limits their ability to attract new participants (Chandrasekharan *et al.*, 2022; Gillet & Suzor, 2022).

However, content moderation solutions aimed at flagging and removing content are limited in their utility. First, the expansive nature of the internet has created a “whack a mole” situation, whereby removing content from one platform inevitably causes a migration of content from one space to another (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2021; Suigura, 2021; Williams *et al.*, 2021). For example, in 2019, when Cloudflare refused to continue hosting 8chan, thousands of new users per day moved to Gab.com (Guy, 2020). Migrations to alternative platforms are common when mainstream platforms tighten their content moderation practices and enforce bans on specific forms of user-generated content (Williams *et al.*, 2021). Worse yet, in response to a ban, users may migrate to platforms with less moderation, allowing misogynistic content to flourish in an unregulated environment. In addition, DeCook (2019) found that bans against incel communities specifically may act as a uniting force, strengthening their resolve to maintain their community.

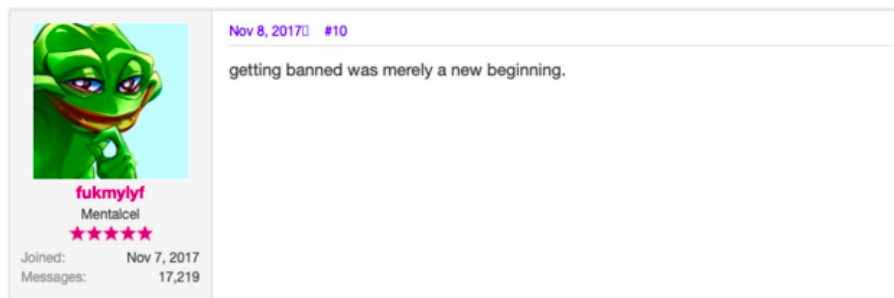


Figure 49. Getting banned is a new beginning

(DeCook, 2019, pp. 130)

In response to the 2017 ban of r/Incels from Reddit, DeCook found many users saw the ban as an opportunity, “... a phoenix-type death that allowed for the forum’s rebirth, free of the constraints that had been imposed upon the community by not just reddit administrators, but other reddit communities like r/IncelTears and others” (DeCook, 2019, p. 128). Banning incel forums may merely serve to galvanize their communities and bond the community together further in resistance to their deemed oppression and further push back against mainstream culture (Sugura, 2021). Platforms will continually need to negotiate the tension between quarantining or outright banning incel communities to protect their user base from exposure to hateful content with the potential unifying impact of further pushing incel communities to the margins of online space.

IDENTIFICATION AS TERRORISTS

A significant proportion of literature has connected the incel community with terrorism, although in many cases this is presented as a post hoc analysis of individual actions rather than a holistic assessment of the ideology. To this end, the body of academic literature remains unclear about the utility of labelling incels as terrorists wholesale (e.g. Brzuszkiewicz, 2020; Carvin, 2021; Hoffman, 2020; Norris, 2020), particularly when it comes to the prevention of future violence. For instance, Pantucci and Ong (2021) argue that while elements of incel attacks mimic the modus operandi of terrorist, they lack “a clear political goal, beyond a revenge for their personal rejection by the opposite sex” (p. 2). Cottee (2020) provides similar insights, choosing instead to label acts of violence undertaken by community members as incel-inspired terrorism” (p. 96) and pointing again to the fact that incels do not belong to a singular social movement, organization, or crusade. O’Donnell & Shor (2022) adds that the single-issue modality of the incel ideology does not conform to traditional models of terrorism, undermining the utility of counterterrorism policies that target organizations and leaders.

Despite differing perspectives, scholarship is beginning to coalesce in agreement that incel-dom does align with the facets of violent extremism (e.g. Aguis *et al.*, 2020; Atari *et al.*, 2021; Brzuszkiewicz, 2020; Carvin, 2021; Habib *et al.*, 2022; Rottweiler *et al.*, 2021; Zimmerman *et al.*, 2018 etc.). In this context, incel-related acts of violence and terror are often referred to as *lone-wolf* acts (e.g., Agius *et al.*, 2020; Am & Weimann, 2020; Boire, 2021; Breen-Smyth, 2020; Gimse, 2020; Lindsay, 2022; O’Donnell & Shor, 2022; Sugiura, 2021). O’Donnell and Shor (2022) posit that “[lone] wolf terrorists typically arrive at their ideological motivations through a combination of personal grievances and broader political, religious, or social aims, which often correspond with those of extremist movements” (p.339) and draw connections between these facets with the range of concepts – inclusive of aggrieved entitlement – communicated in incel circles. Similarly, Lindsay (2022) argues that the black pill nexus of beliefs contributes toward random acts of terror “where individuals are encouraged to find their own (violent) ‘solutions’ to the problems identified and emphasized by the collective experience of incel-dom” (p. 211).

Some scholarship has suggested that labelling incels as terrorists may have unpredicted or detrimental effects on curbing violence (e.g., Fox & Levin, 2022; Hunter *et al.*, 2021; McBride *et al.*, 2022; Morton *et al.*, 2021). For instance, Morton *et al.* (2021) argue that a terrorism designation risks further isolating incel communities and may foster additional societal resentment. The authors conclude that “society’s reciprocal animosity or labeling the collective as a terrorist outfit absent some empathy for their condition and/or evidence-based understanding of their grievances is likely to make them feel dehumanized as well” (Morton *et al.*, 2021, p. 29), which they caution may drive incels away from seeking support. Conversely, Fox & Levin (2022) warn that appending “terror” to incel-related acts may produce additional media coverage and garner additional adulation of perpetrators.

Notably, the syntax used to define terrorism may be contributing to legalistic barriers in Canada and other jurisdictions as the justice system attempts to tackle the threat of violence posed by a subset of incels. For instance, scholarship has pointed to the differential responses to violent acts in Canada: Alec Minassian’s 2018 killing spree was not pursued as a terrorist act, whereas a 2020 stabbing murder committed by a 17-year-old self-confessed incel was. Conversely, the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service has previously labelled incel-inspired acts as Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism, but as not added the incel ideology to its terrorist listings (Bloom, 2022; Canada, 2020; Moskalenko *et al.*, 2022; Nesbit & Hansen, 2022). Lindsay (2022) adds that the stochastic, or randomly patterned nature of incel-

inspired acts leave individual actions difficult to predict and may be interpreted as individual killers responding to deeply personal circumstance.

KEY MESSAGES FOR POLICY, PRACTICE, AND RESEARCH

In this section, we provide a summary of the key findings from this knowledge synthesis report. The research findings below can be used by policymakers and researchers when considering the causes of incelism and when developing possible responses to engagement, radicalization, and desistance.

- 1) What is an Incel
 - a. Incels ascribe sexual frustration to personal and external barriers, including physical and mental attributes, and socially constructed notions of attractiveness and status.
 - b. Many express a sense of *aggrieved entitlement*. While most often connected to sexuality, this worldview also carries over to other social domains. Unmet social and sexual expectations may portend humiliation and ultimately violence.
 - c. Reductive caricatures of sexually successful men (“Chads”) and women (“Stacys”) have encouraged a homogenizing transnational ideology. Additional neologisms drawn from popular culture form a constellation of commonly used hateful, discriminatory, and misogynistic memes (e.g., “Red Pill”).
 - d. Perpetrators of incel-related violence have been “canonized.” Examples include Elliott Rodger and Alec Minassian, whose acts are revered.
- 2) Demographic Characteristics
 - a. Incels tend to be young (i.e., under 30) cis-gendered heterosexual men but are otherwise demographically diverse. Additional identity groups, including women, may form smaller related communities (e.g., “femcels”).
 - b. Incels often report a history of social ostracism during middle and high school years, including bullying and sexual rejection.
 - c. High rates of mental health and psychological concerns are reported, including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Incels also report high rates of neurodivergence.
- 3) Engagement, Escalation, and Radicalization
 - a. Advice/support-seeking activities online may lead to initial exposure to incel circles.
 - b. Online support-seeking behaviours may be triggered by perceived local conditions, including: scarcity of single women, high income inequality, and gendered income gaps.
 - c. Recent scholarship demonstrates increased engagement following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes increases in the number of posts and threads; posting frequency; and violent/vitriolic discourse.
 - d. A very small number of incels will progress to acts of extreme violence and self-harm. Despite low occurrence rates, these acts are shared online, gaining hyper-visibility. Although most incels are not violent and many will reject violence, acts of violence ascribed to incel ideology are generally celebrated.
 - e. Additional research on pathways to radicalization specific to incels is needed, including an investigation into whether the pathways differ for those who escalate to violence and those who do not.
- 4) Detection and Interventions
 - a. Very few incel-specific detection tools exist. Adjacent research related to extremism and terrorism may be relevant for identifying proximal and distal warning behaviours associated with escalation to acts of violence.

- b. Interventions aimed at reducing engagement with incelism or promoting desistance from incelism should be multifaceted and emphasize policy approaches targeting both individual and societal conditions that contribute to participation in incelism.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE AREAS FOR RESEARCH

The digitization of society through the 21st century has contributed to dramatic shifts in many of our social institutions and interactions. Most Canadians now have home access to the internet (Statistics Canada, 2019) and many turned to its milieu of services at increased levels through the COVID-19 global pandemic (Statistics Canada, 2021). While internet-based tools and communications platforms provide a short-term solution to social engagement in the context of social distancing and lockdowns, the removed nature of electronic interactions cannot replace the social value of face-to-face communications and may further one's feelings of loneliness (Wallinheimo & Evans, 2022).

Our project considered how the asocial and asymmetric nature of most electronic communications has contributed toward the growing spectre of hate found in many online communities. Our particular attention was paid to the rapidly growing ideology of involuntary celibates, or incels, who have turned to internet communities as a means of seeking support and venting their frustrations with their self-perceived enforced asexuality.

Our report provides a scoping literature review of research related to incels and incelism. Peer reviewed and grey literatures were drawn on to answer three research questions, including

- (1) Why do people initially become engaged with incel groups, and how does loneliness extending from the emerging asocial society influence engagement?;
- (2) Once engaged, how does the incel ideology progress to extreme views and acts of violence/self-harm?; and
- (3) What is known about desistance from incelism, and what practicable interventions are possible to address engagement, extremism, violence, and self-harm?

These research questions were informed by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada's (SSHRC) Knowledge Synthesis Grants (KSG) Emerging Asocial Society competition, which sought to develop knowledge in response to the *loneliness crisis*. To assess the state of knowledge in relation to our research questions, we screened 1,573 unique articles and identified 319 that were deemed academically sound and relevant to our project. Our deductive analysis of this body of literature produced a series of themes that identified the facets of incelism and their connection to loneliness; connections between the incel movement and extremist or radical; and assessed the state of knowledge on detection, assessment, treatment, and prevention.

Occurring at the intersection of several overlapping and largely online movements centred on misogyny and anti-feminism, we can conclude that incelism exploits the loneliness and isolation endured by socially rejected individuals to foster anger and hate. The incel movement crystalized in forums and discussion boards through the previous decade to form a homogenous transnational identity whose facets encourage further isolation and has occasionally manifested as violence against perceived belligerents in response to what incels believe to be an unbalanced sexual marketplace.

Unfortunately, Canada has borne witness to several attacks committed by perpetrators who have claimed allegiance to incelism or whose actions have later been appropriated by the movement. These actions, despite being committed by a very small fraction of self-identified incels, are representative of the violence embedded in the language and subcultural values of the ideology. Moreover, the literature makes it clear that the anonymous and under-regulated nature of many online services produces a low-barrier and engaging environment. Here the incel movement shares many features with other online

extremist groups: algorithmic discovery exposes individuals to increasingly concentrated sources of information, driving users deeper into the inceldom rabbit hole.

Remediation of inceldom, in both general and specific terms, poses a significant challenge for scholars and policymakers. The ideology is nebulous at best, lacking any organizational structure or clearly stated political agendas beyond sexual access, and most acts of violence perpetrated by incels are described as lone-wolf or incel-inspired actions. While some jurisdictions – both private and public – have attempted to excoriate incel communities and enforce their deplatforming, the online community has proven itself robust to such policies through intra- and inter-platform migration. Additionally, some literature has indicated that actions taken to suppress incel dialogue and sentiments may have the opposite effect, driving contrarian enfranchisement with the ideology.

The internet has provided Canadians and the world with open access to a wealth of information. While this access has encouraged new domains of social growth, the freedom of knowledge found online has also provided opportunities for the formation of antagonistic identities and ideologies to flourish. It is our conclusion that interventions aimed at reducing engagement with inceldom or promoting desistance from the ideology must be multifaceted and emphasise policy approaches that reflect both the individual and societal conditions that contribute to participation in inceldom.

RESEARCH STRENGTHS AND NEEDS

We feel that it is important to conclude our paper with our assessment of the body of academic research relating to the incel ideology. First, we note that incel-related scholarship published to this point is marked by an abundance of discourse analyses and linguistic assessments (e.g., Adams, 2021; Chang, 2020; Cousineau, 2021; Gimse, 2020; Gothard, 2021; Høiland, 2019; Hunte, 2019; Jones, 2020; Jones et al, 2022; Laskovtsov, 2020; Lindsay, 2022; Reichert, 2020; Williams, 2020). As a result, much is now known about the language incels tend to use and their communication patterns online. Less research has been devoted to the assessment, detection, and prevention of incel related self-harm and violence. Further research is needed into the validity of the Incel Indoctrination Rubric (Van Brunt and Taylor, 2021) and other preexisting scales (e.g., SIVRA-35, RAGE-V, HCR-20, MOSAIC, TRAP-18) as violence risk and threat assessment measures for incels. Likewise, little is known about effective treatments for incels (Broyd et al, 2022).

O'Malley *et al* (2020) identify two additional research gaps worth noting here. First, though few incels are likely to become violent, little is known about the characteristics that set apart those who engage in violence with those who do not. The authors argue that “researchers must consider the extent to which individuals express awakenings or turning points that increase their willingness to accept an incel identity” (p. 21). Second, the pathways through which individuals become radicalized require further research, and in particular, an investigation is needed to determine if the pathways differ for those who eventually perpetrate violence and those who do not.

KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION ACTIVITIES

Our plans for continued knowledge mobilization activities stemming from this project emphasize reaching a wide breadth of stakeholders. We have several activities planned, each with a differing audience in mind. These include:


- 1) Publishing our evidence brief, full report, and all future knowledge mobilization outputs on the Centre for Research on Security Practices [webpage](#) created for this project.
- 2) Summarizing findings into evidence briefs that will be disseminated to public safety agencies and policy makers via research team members' collaborative networks.
- 3) Communicating key findings from this report to practitioners dealing with youth at-risk for incel radicalization (e.g., high school guidance counsellors, university counsellors) in an accessible format through the creation of a short, practitioner friendly version of this report.
- 4) Working with Folktale Studio podcast producer, Avery Moore Kloss, to produce and publish a podcast episode highlighting the key findings and knowledge gaps identified in this synthesis project. This podcast will be included in Season 3 of the Centre for Research on Security Practices ongoing podcast series, *CRSP Talk*.
- 5) Continuing knowledge mobilization by sharing findings through academic conferences and workshops, peer reviewed publications, and/or book chapters.

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