

The Dynamic Radicalization Process and Violent Behaviour of Incels

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Extended Abstract

Problem

The Involuntarily Celibates (Incel) community was originally founded as a non-violent online support group, to help young men and women who struggled with romantic relationships. During the last two decades, the Incel community changed drastically into an aggressive and hate-driven environment. Now, Incels are often associated with sexism, extreme misogyny, and have been known to escalate in supporting and perpetrating violent attacks (Vink et al., 2023; Beauchamp, 2019; Van der Veer, 2020; Salojärvi et al., 2020). Recent years have shown an increase in both members of the Incel community and violent Incel attacks, and more generally, in men identifying with Incel related concepts and beliefs. As a previously non-violent group, the rise in members who support and encourage violence has raised concerns about public safety. The question is: how do different factors contribute to the radicalization process of Incels? And which factors aid the shift towards violence?

Methods & Model Description

To better understand how different factors contribute to the radicalization process and the shift to violence of the Incel community, the system dynamics method was chosen. An explanatory simulation model was developed to present the driving mechanisms of radicalization and their interconnectedness. The model is specifically made to understand the process of men becoming Incels, and is tailored to the grievances and struggles of the Incel community. This work thus not only contributes to the literature for understanding the rise of Inceldom and related radical acts, but also considers potential entry points for intervening in the system.

The basic radicalization process is modelled with a series of aging chains, where men who are initially disinterested in the Incel community may become interested, radicalized, and even extremized into committed radical acts. There is a large group of disinterested men that encounter Incel related content through the internet, piquing their interest. Online forums subject visitors to a high dosage of anti-feminist and violent content, and normalises these beliefs (Regher, 2022). The more Incel related posts that are being made, the higher the probability that individuals will come into contact with, and become interested in the Incel ideology. Loneliness, being bullied, struggling to fit in, and a high risk of having mental health issues are found to increase the susceptibility of radicalizing into an Incel (Regher, 2022; Moskalenko et al., 2022). Furthermore, social media glorification of violent Incel attacks and (mass) violence attracts new members (Laguna Serrano, 2020). Lastly, as a form of backlash, more men radicalize into Incels after an influential feminist reaction to violence against women. Incels become enraged by the fact that women see themselves not just as human, but as equal beings, and believe that feminism is something to be fought against (Lindner, 2022; Lopes, 2023; Sugiura, 2021; O'Malley et al., 2022). The majority of Incels will eventually deradicalize and leave the Incel community. This happens through loss of interest, as a reaction and rejection of Incel related violence, and when an abundance of extremist Incel related content causes Incels to distance themselves from the ideology (Salojärvi et al., 2020; Moskalenko et al., 2022; Baele et al., 2023; Horgan et al., 2017).

A small group of Incels will go through a further extremization process and become Incel extremists. These are the core members of the Inceldom who openly support and possibly commit radical acts (CCDH, 2022). Feelings of alienation, being bullied or having experienced persecution for being an Incel can cause Incels to move to Incel extremists (Moskalenko et al., 2022). Due to the time spent online and on Incel forums, there is a normalization of extreme views and beliefs and acceptance of violence, this also adds to the further extremization towards Incel extremists. Moreover, harmful and dangerous stereotypes used by mass media can lead to feelings of persecution amongst Incels, and encourage anger and violence (Tomkinson et al., 2020). Similar to Incels, Incels extremists can deradicalize because of too much Incel related content or eventually rejecting the use of violence. Because de-extremization (and deradicalization) is not a linear process, extremists can either completely reject the Incel community, or only partly reject the Inceldom and their violence but still remain part of the community (Barelle, 2015; START, 2019).

Findings & Discussion

In order to reduce and prevent a further increase in Incel members and violence, several interventions have been tested. These interventions supported the deradicalization process and aimed to limit the number of men radicalizing into Incels, by introducing mental health services and banning Incel posts on websites. The analysis of the model simulation has shown that the main driver of the radicalization process of Incels is the forum posts and Incel content, which matches with the Incel community being predominantly located on the Internet. The normalization of Incel values and the promotion of violence on these forums, creates an accessible radicalization and extremization environment. While the banning of Incel related forum posts showed that the level of Incels eventually reached similar numbers, it also led to a decrease in radical acts and Incel extremists. However, it should be noted that following the ban of Incels on Reddit, the Incels moved to other forums which are harder to govern and thus easier to turn extreme and toxic (Baele et al., 2023). Banning of Incel posts and forums seems to be sensitive to becoming policy resistant, especially since there might be a backlash that further bolsters feelings of persecution within the Inceldom.

Mirroring findings in the literature (see Regher, 2022; Moskalenko et al., 2022), the model showed how mental health issues (in this case depression) and feelings of alienation also play an important role in the radicalization process. The effect of mental health services is tested, indicating men going to therapy or seeking different kind of help for their depression or more general mental health issues. This results in a lowered *probability of mental health issues in society*, which means there are fewer potential radicals, and thus a lower probability of men radicalizing into Incels. Similar to mental health services, the scenario of deradicalization programs showed promising results in lowering the number of Incels and violent attacks. Deradicalization programs are meant to help extremists disengage from the ideology and leave the Incel community. Increasing the probability of deradicalization and de-extremization leads to more Incels rejecting the Incel ideology and less violent attacks. This leads to less Incel related internet content and media glorification, and thus less men radicalizing and becoming members of the Inceldom.

Based on the findings of the model, supporting the deradicalization process and offering mental health services offer the most promising results in reducing the amount of Incels and the violent attacks. While the model is focussed on the essential feedback mechanisms, it is a good starting point for future research. The foundation for radicalization is represented and more feedback loops can be added where deemed necessary, for instance the crossover with the broader right-wing movement and influences of Christian values on gender roles.

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