THE INCEL MOVEMENT IN CANADA – INTERSECTIONS WITH GENDERED VIOLENCE AND EXTREMISM

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

INTRODUCTION

- Esli Chan (she/her)

- PhD Student, Political Science (Gender Studies Option), McGill University

- Research focus: the intersection of technology, extremism, gender issues

- Chan, E. (2022). Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence, Hate Speech, and Terrorism: A Risk Assessment on the Rise of the Incel Rebellion in Canada. *Violence Against Women, 29*(9), 1687-1718.

OUTLINE

- Overview of the history and ideological development of the incel movement

- Implications of the online space

- Intersections with gender-based violence and extremism

- Implications:

  - How do we conceptualize incel violence?

  - How do we address incel violence, from a gender and extremism perspective?

  - Balancing sympathy and accountability

WHY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT INCELS NOW?

- The persistence of male ideological violence in various forms

- The influence and impact of the online space

- Increasing radicalization and physical acts of incel-motivated violence

- Public consciousness

The problem: minimization by law enforcement, characterizations as 'lone wolf actors', dismissal of online connections, weaponized mental health framing

HISTORY

- Alanna's Involuntary Celibate Project: An online social support group to gain dating advice, share personal experiences – 1980s-90s

- Early 2000s: Separation into IncelSupport and LoveShy (Forestal, 2023; Sparks, 2022)

- Part of the complex of the 'men's rights movement' and the manosphere: men's rights activists, pick-up artists (Lilly, 2016)

- Increasing radicalization and incel-motivated physical violence: Elliot Rodger 2014; Alek Minassian, 2018

- Intersects with white supremacist groups, far-right groups

IDEOLOGICAL TENANTS

- Key ideological tenets: "a lack of sexual intimacy granted by women is a form of oppression against men" (Chan, 2022; Lilly, 2016)

- Chads, Stacys, and the incel hierarchy

- Taking the "Redpill" and the "Blackpill" (ADL, 2019)

- Racialization (Chan, 2022)

Link to image: https://www.isdglobal.org/explainers/incels/
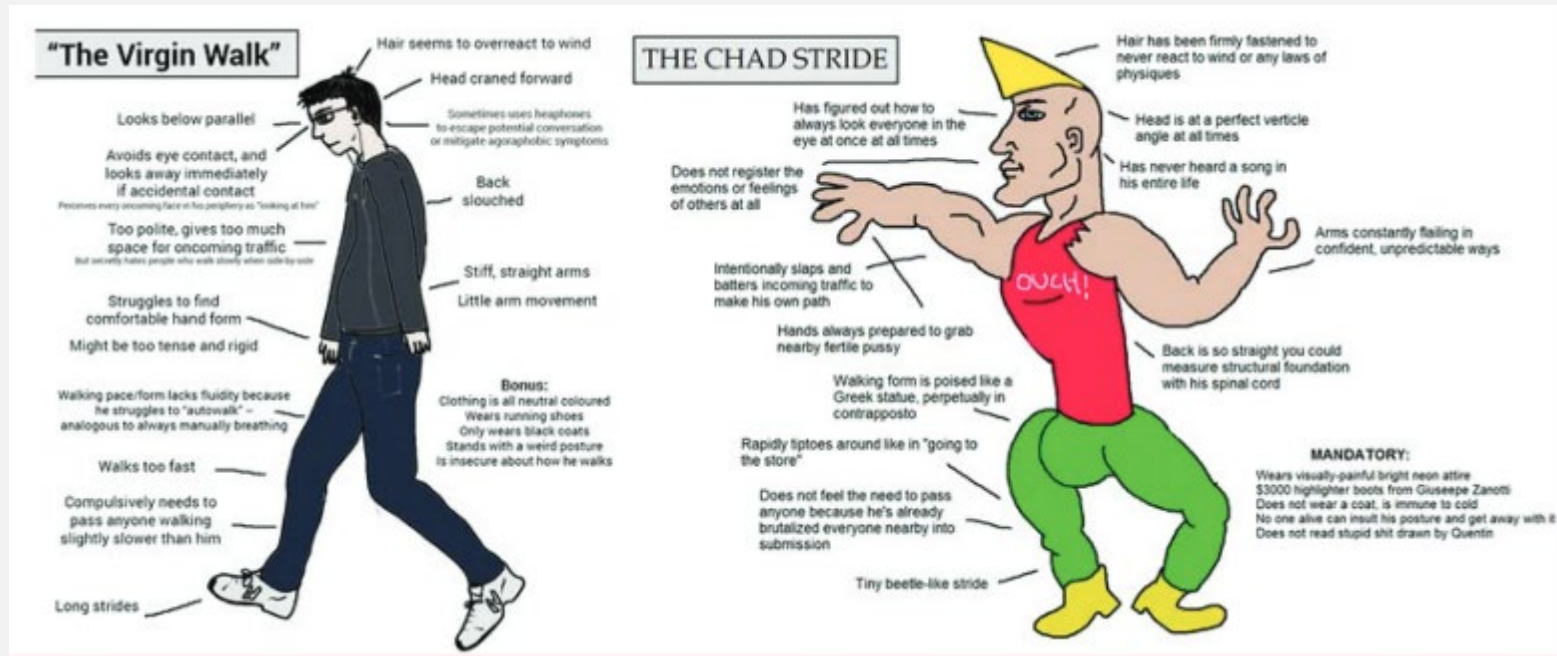
THE ONLINE SPACE: RADICALIZATION AND STRATEGIES

- The centrality of networks and online connections to the incel community

- Echo chamber effects and group loyalty (Byerly, 2020)

- "Lone wolf actors" versus the networked effects of the incel movement (O'Malley et al, 2020; O'Donnell & Shor, 2022)

- In-group language and neutralizing language (Dynel, 2020)

- The use of various platforms (Chan, 2022)

MAJOR EVENTS IN CANADA

- Alek Minassian Van Attack, 2018, Toronto

- Massage Parlour Attack, 2020, Toronto
  - Terrorism ruling – first in Canada related to incel violence

INTERSECTIONS WITH GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

- *Strategy to Prevent and Address Gender-Based Violence* (Status of Women Canada, 2019)

- Expanding the term 'online gender-based violence' to 'technology-facilitated gender-based violence' (Henry & Powell, 2018; Chan, 2022)

  - Highlighting the crucial role of technology

  - Continuation – online to offline

  - Connecting 'online in-group' hate speech to gendered hate crimes and violence

INTERSECTIONS WITH EXTREMISM

- IMVE: " an individual's propensity to commit an act of violence extremism is first motivated or directed by a larger ideologically driven movement" (House of Commons Report, 2022, pg 11)

- 2022 Study on Alek Minassian and the Incels.Co Forum
  - Violent Extremism Risk Assessment (VERA) and the Cyber Extremism Risk Assessment Framework (CYBERA) (Pressman, 2009; Pressman & Ivan, 2019)
  - Minimization of gender in extremist frameworks

- conceptualization of 'extremism' and security: avoiding surveillance and hyper-securitization of gender issues

TENSIONS IN ADDRESSING INCEL VIOLENCE

- Mental health, COVID-19, and isolation (Vu, 2020)

  - Scapegoating: the weaponization of mental health (Halpin, 2022; Gheorghe & Clement, 2023)

  - Balancing sympathy and accountability

- The challenges of the online space

  - Free speech and hate speech, polarization, disinformation

  - Assessing online threats

  - Surveillance and privacy

THE KEY PLAYERS IN ADDRESSING INCEL VIOLENCE

Canadian policy-makers (public safety, online telecommunications regulators, status of women)

- Expanding the understanding of "women and gender" in public policy
- Re-evaluating frameworks and approaches to extremism
- Adopting interdisciplinary perspectives to gender, technology, and extremism

United Nations and international players

- Adopting a tech/cyber approach to the women, peace, and security (WPS) agenda
- Adopting a gendered approach to cyber norms

THE KEY PLAYERS IN ADDRESSING INCEL VIOLENCE

Social Media Platforms

- Balancing free speech and hate speech; content monitoring

Educators – adopting a preventative approach

- Cyber hygiene education for all children
- Gender inclusive education

Health Practitioners

- Awareness of gender-based extremism indicators
- Deradicalization and support

Local communities

- Increasing awareness of online harms

THANK YOU

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Clinical Support, Empathy, Accountability, Oh My!
Exploring Incels from a Clinical Perspective

Ruxandra Mihaela Gheorghe

April 23 2024

Learning Network & Knowledge Hub

Outline

1. Therapeutic work with incel clients

2. Exit, disengagement & deradicalization

3. Take-aways & further reading

INCEL

- Involuntarily celibate
- Largely heterosexual men
- North America
- About half are white, half are BIPOC
- Average age: 25 years old
- Online community
- Aggrieved entitlement, anti-feminism, networked misogyny
- Most not actively physically violent

(Høiland, 2019; Sharkey, 2021; Speckhard et al., 2021)

Incel Worldview

- 5 dominant themes (O'Malley et al., 2020):
    1. Sexual market
    2. Women are evil
    3. Legitimizing masculinity
    4. Male oppression
    5. Justified violence
- Sexual access = power = scapegoat women (Fowler, 2021; Manne, 2021; Srinivasan, 2021)
- Entitlement = symptom of structures (Manne, 2021; Srinivasan, 2021)
- Everyday misogyny

Part 1:

**Therapeutic Work
& Incel Clients**

Incels, Mental Health & Therapy

- Compared to general population, incels report significantly higher mental health challenges:

  - Depression (range: 62–95%)
  - Anxiety (range: 59.6–94%)
  - ASD (range: 18–28.5%)
  - Histories of bullying and exclusion (range: 63.6–70.8%)
  - Suicidal ideation (range: 47.8–67.6%)

- Mandated into short-term counselling (Van Brunt & Taylor, 2021)

- 51.5% of incels seek therapy (Speckhard et al., 2021)

Feminist Perspectives in Therapy

- Clinical sessions = microcosm of larger social conditions

- Structural forces seep into clinical sessions – e.g., toxic masculinity, patriarchal norms

- "*Little research exists that addresses [hegemonic masculinity] in the counseling relationship*" (Marasco, 2018, p. 231)

(Bograd, 1991; Dienhart & Avis, 1991; Ganley, 1991; Marasco, 2018; Tyagi, 2006)

Balancing Act?

- Know about incels
- Take care of yourself
- Do not act on feelings of dislike, or the need to debate ideology
- Build rapport by meeting basic needs
- Explore ideology
- Build coping skills and resiliency
- Encourage community connections offline
- Recognize men's histories/contexts
- Contextualize it in structures of masculinity/patriarchy
- _Understand but don't validate_

(Augusta-Scott, 2020; Bograd, 1991; Deering & Gannon, 2005; Dienhart & Avis, 1991; Ganley, 1991; Harway, 2012; Heward-Belle et al., 2019; Marasco, 2018; Sweet, 2012; Tyagi, 2005)

Empathy

noun em·pa·thy \ˈem-pə-thē

: the feeling that you understand and share another person's experiences and emotions
: the ability to share someone else's feelings

Empathy?

- Need some empathy (partial identification)

- But not too much...
  - Cloud judgement
  - Could ignore accountability
  - *Himpathy* (Manne, 2017)

wonderworldmotion.tumblr.com

(Folkman, 1984; Gelso & Hayes, 2002; Green, 2006; Groshong, 2013; Guest & Carlson, 2019; Hayes et al., 2011; Baehr, 2004; Linn-Walton & Pardasani, 2014; Manne, 2017; Peabody & Gelso, 1982; Reich, 1951; Tyagi, 2006)

*Empathy...*as harm?

- Fritz Breithaupt (2019): *The Dark Sides of Empathy*

- Kate Manne's (2017) concept, *'himpathy'*

- Paul Bloom (2016): *Against Empathy* and act utilitarianism

- *Who does it serve? Who does it harm?*

Himpathy © Colleen Tighe, 2018

*Empathy…*is not neutral when operationalized
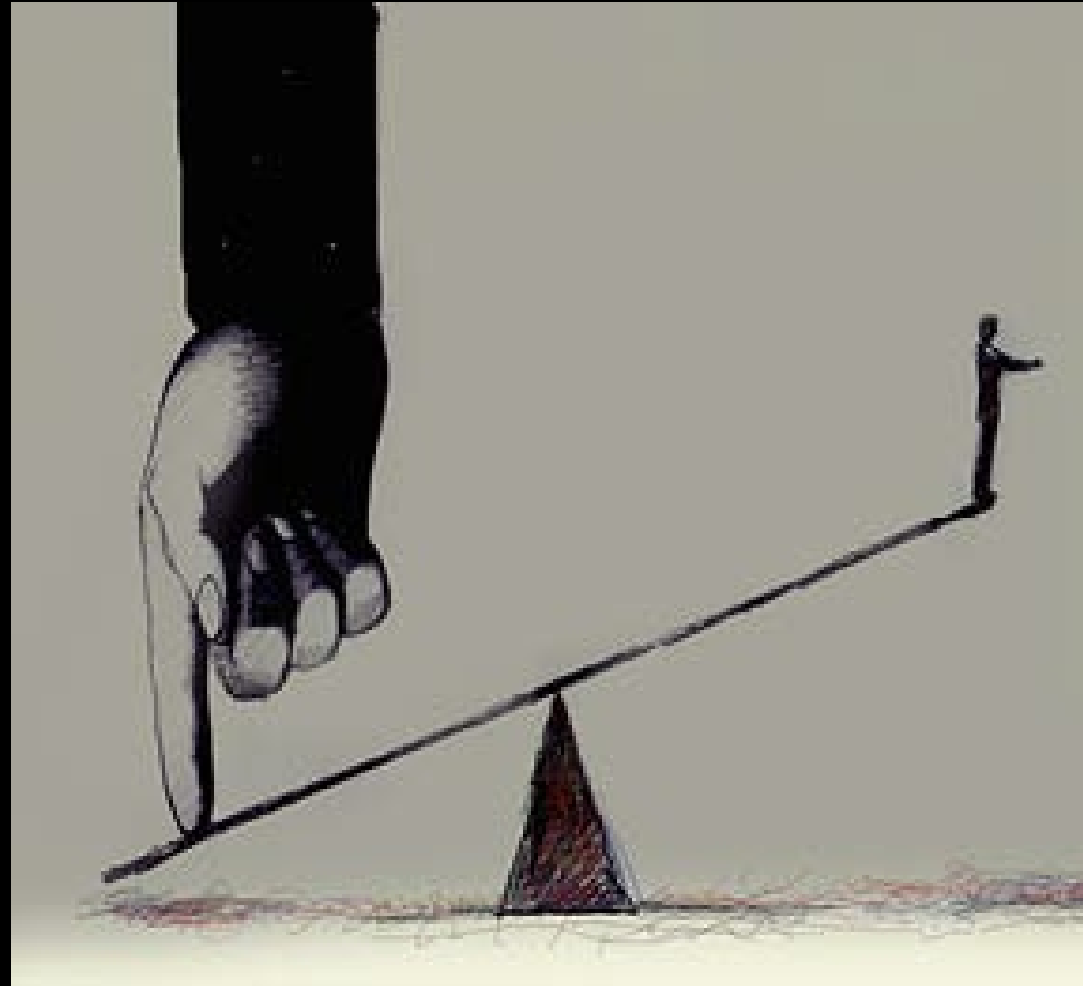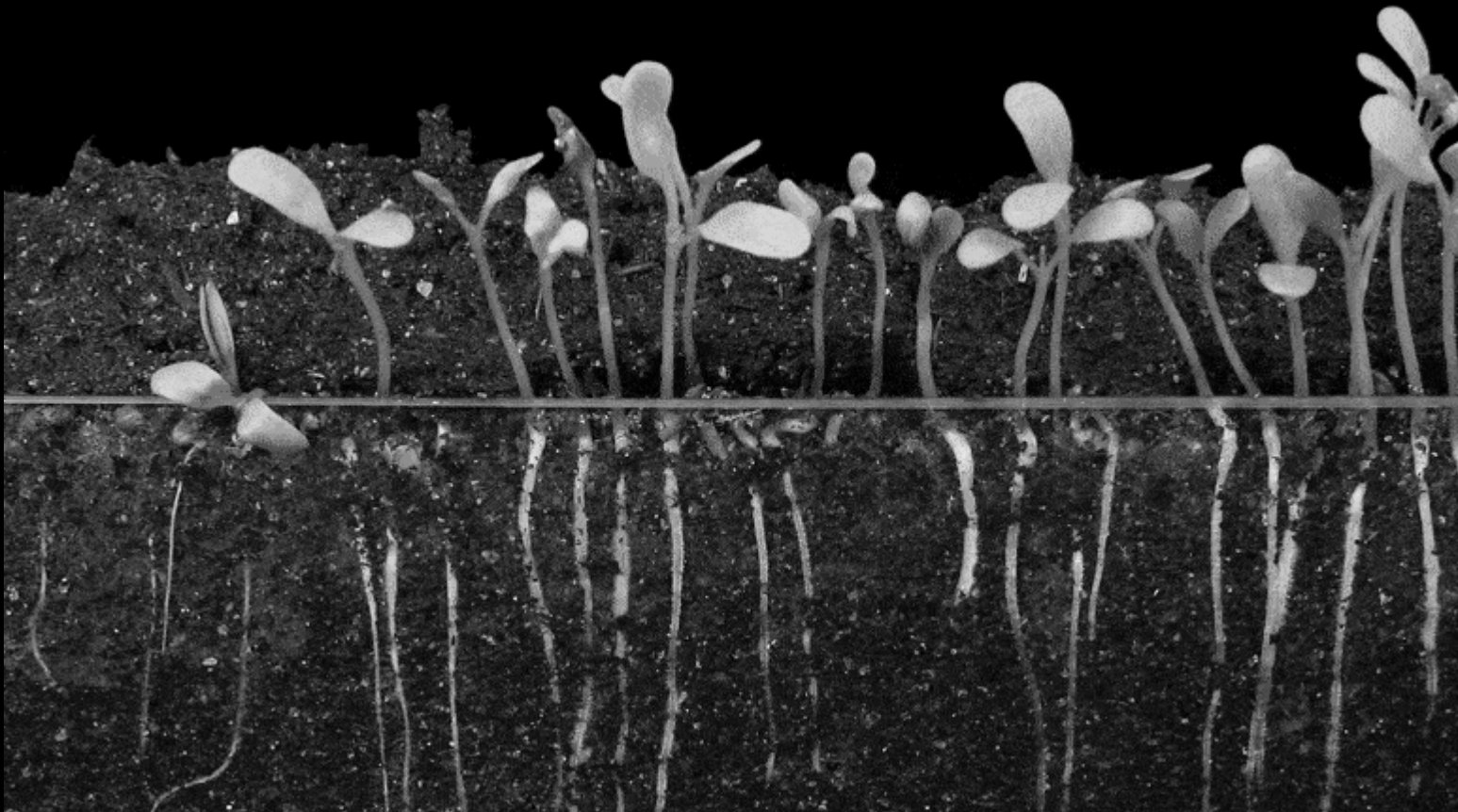
Part 2:

Exit, Disengagement
& Deradicalization

r/IncelExit

- Created in 2019
- 18,000 registered members
- Advice, encouragement, support in exiting inceldom

Methodological Framing

RQ1: What kind of topics are being discussed within the most engaged posts in r/IncelExit?

RQ2: What kind of behaviours and activities are promoted and discussed within r/IncelExit to support disengagement from inceldom?

Theoretical Framework

How to theorize exiting inceldom?

1) Deradicalization and disengagement
2) Mutual aid and peer support

"Mutual aid-informed deradicalization lens"

Data Collection & Analysis

- Top 25 most-engaged forums

- PDF snapshots

- Excel unique IDs

- Import into NVivo for Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021)

Findings

1

Self-improvement & Self-care

- Mental health care
- Physical health care
- Lifestyle changes
- Skill-building (i.e., education and employment)
- New hobbies

> "None of these changes flipped a light switch in my head and made me happy. It was too gradual for that. But once I started improving my life in small ways, it became easier to make more improvements. And feeling better physically gave me more energy to do more things. After a year of these incremental changes, being a virgin was no longer top of my mind. I still felt weird about it but I wasn't obsessed with it. I had other sources of strength in my life, other pillars to lean on when things were rough. I think this is the Chinese finger-trap aspect of the blackpill – by not obsessing about sex and dating, and instead just focusing on making myself happier in ways that I could control, I was unintentionally turning into a more attractive person. "

Findings

2

Community involvement

- Pro-social engagement
- Making new friends
- Attending events in community
- Joining clubs or groups
- Volunteering, charity work

" I decided I wanted to make some friends. I would never find a girlfriend but I might as well have some friends to talk to. So I started signing up for random meetups – tabletop games, chess clubs, painting classes, improv classes, French language groups, just a bunch of random things. Most of them were duds but I kept forcing myself to go. Eventually I made some friends. Some people at the board game club wanted to do a movie night, someone from the French language group invited all of us from the group to a local festival, and I actually showed up. This wasn't love or sex but it felt like people enjoyed talking to me, like I had some basic worth as a human being. Maybe I'm a virgin loser but not an absolutely worthless virgin. "

Findings

3

Disrupting incel rhetoric

- Challenge/question misogynistic belief systems
- CBT-esque: finding exceptions, deconstructing generalizations, challenging black and white thinking, etc.

> A lot of the Blackpill mindset is based on these cognitive distortions. Which isn't to say everything every Blackpiller has ever said is completely false, but rather the truths that are there get distorted where things seem much, much worse than they actually are … A lot of Blackpilled types will hyper-focus on their difficulty finding a partner [and] start thinking that being unable to find a partner means life isn't worth living – and that's catastrophizing, because life absolutely can be worth living even in the absence of romantic or sexual partners.

> You have to remember that incel spaces are ignorant. You haven't been enlightened. You've been tricked with false information into thinking the situation is hopeless, when it isn't.

Findings

4

Exiting is non-linear

- A process of negotiation
- Distancing from AND reinforcing incelcom
- Push and pull factors
- Anxiety about leaving

" Being able to be friends with women without immediately expecting a relationship is pretty much the antidote to incel misogynistic thinking. You find out femoids are actually much more complex and interesting than the prospect of having sex:) And no you're not a cuck for befriending women, it's actually a very refreshing experience! "

" …crippling depression and anxiety "

" …defeatism, passiveness and pessimism "

" …a deep sense of loneliness "

Findings

5

Community encouragement sustains exit

- Encouragement
- Motivation
- Validation
- Instill hope
- Non-judgement

" Nice job getting off of the internet and away from toxic spaces and just living your life! That's not easy to do and it's really impressive you had the drive and mental clarity to take time away from something you recognized was not helping you. Keep it up! "

" I think I'm really going to put serious mental and spiritual energy into letting go of the hate, preconceptions, and expectations that have stunted me for so long. I want to thank the people here that have gone really deep with their comments and advice, in aid of complete and total strangers on the internet. Thank you. "

Discussion & Implications

> " What deradicalizes people is not facts, but emotions, community, acceptance, a sense of belonging. "

- Online peer-support and mutual aid communities can help share, teach, sustain concrete exit strategies

- The role of community support

- Role as practitioners?

Part 3:

Take-Aways &
Further Reading

"Just Be White (JBW)": Incels, Race and the Violence of Whiteness

Ruxandra M. Gheorghe

Abstract

Largely operating online, incels are predominantly male individuals who are frustrated by their involuntary celibacy—their inability to get a romantic or sexual partner. Their worldview is grounded in hostile sexism largely directed at women and shared contempt for mainstream dating standards and feminism. Some incels posit that they can undertake specific racially-defined actions (i.e., skin bleaching, lying about one's ethnicity, cosmetic surgery) to increase their access to women by appearing more white and, hence, more desirable. By thematically analyzing 10 online incel forums on the topic of race, this research identifies the role of race as a sustaining facilitator of networked misogyny and white supremacy. Despite these racialized efforts to appear more white, many incels conclude that these efforts to change themselves are largely ineffective in increasing their access to women. Seeing as over half of incels seek counseling and social work services, this research puts forth several implications for social workers supporting incel clients and highlights the importance of understanding the role that race plays in incel clients' rhetoric—not only in reproducing racism, but also in provoking violence-sustaining affects (e.g., anger, disappointment, resentment) that generate a shared sense of betrayal and reinforce gender-based violence.

Keywords
incels, involuntarily celibates, whiteness, gender-based violence, social work practice

Free access:
https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/08861099221144275

Weaponized Autism: Making Sense of Violent Internalized Ableism in Online Incel Communities

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ABSTRACT

Much attention has been paid to incel communities in recent years. Comprised of involuntary celibate individuals who are dissatisfied with their shared experiences of romantic and sexual rejection, incels blame women and the societal rejection of hegemonic masculinity as the cause of their grievances. Current scholarship has produced conflicting results regarding the prevalence of autism within incel communities when compared to the general population. At the same time, no research to date has explored the intersection of incels and autism using perspectives from individuals in the incel community. Using a critical autism lens, this present study thematically analyzes 20 online incel message boards to explore the sense-making of self-identified autistic incels. Findings indicate that incels' internalized ableism of autism is employed to categorically justify the victimhood and entitlement that grounds their ideology. This weaponization of autism is then used to promote ableism and networked misogyny. Implications for understanding ableist and misogynistic beliefs associated with inceldom are provided.

The spectacle of the online incel community has become an emergent area of research for critical scholars alike. Commonly made up of self-identified involuntarily celibate men who

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https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01639625.2023.2268253

'It's time to put the copes down and get to work': a qualitative study of incel exit strategies on r/IncelExit

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ABSTRACT

Incels, the now-widely notorious community of involuntary celibate individuals, represent an emergent online subculture predominantly composed of young men who are dissatisfied with their inability to experience romance or become involved in sexual relationships with women regardless of their desire in doing so. Despite incels being commonly portrayed as upholding a fatalistic and inescapable ideology that promotes networked misogyny and violence, there exists a unique online Reddit forum called r/IncelExit that aims to support self-identifying incels who are considering leaving inceldom. By thematically analyzing the top 25 most-engaged forums on r/IncelExit, this research highlights how online community support can be mobilized to encourage, share, teach, and sustain concrete exit strategies for incels who want to move away from incel rhetoric and disengage from incel communities. Findings illustrate various avenues for exiting inceldom that together focus on working towards self-improvement, community involvement, and disruption of incel rhetoric – efforts that are sustained by the r/IncelExit community's continued motivation and encouragement. Implications for countering violent extremism (CVE) approaches are provided. Seeing as most CVE approaches focus on education programs, psychosocial mediation, or criminal justice interventions, this research highlights a complementary CVE measure grounded in mutual aid, peer support, and inner-group collaborative encouragement.

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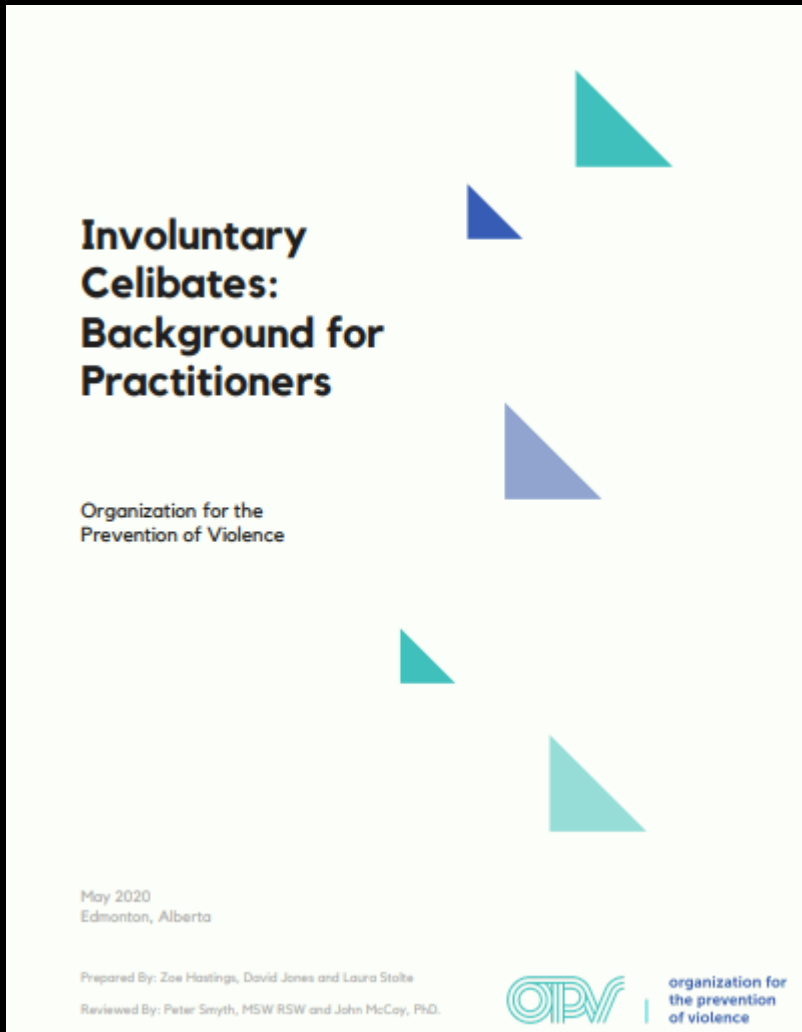
Organization for the Prevention of Violence (OPV) – Background for Practitioners *[report]*
https://preventviolence.ca/publication/incels-background-for-practitioners/

Moonshot – Understanding and Preventing Incel Violence *[report]*
https://moonshotteam.com/resource/understanding-and-preventing-incel-violence-in-canada/
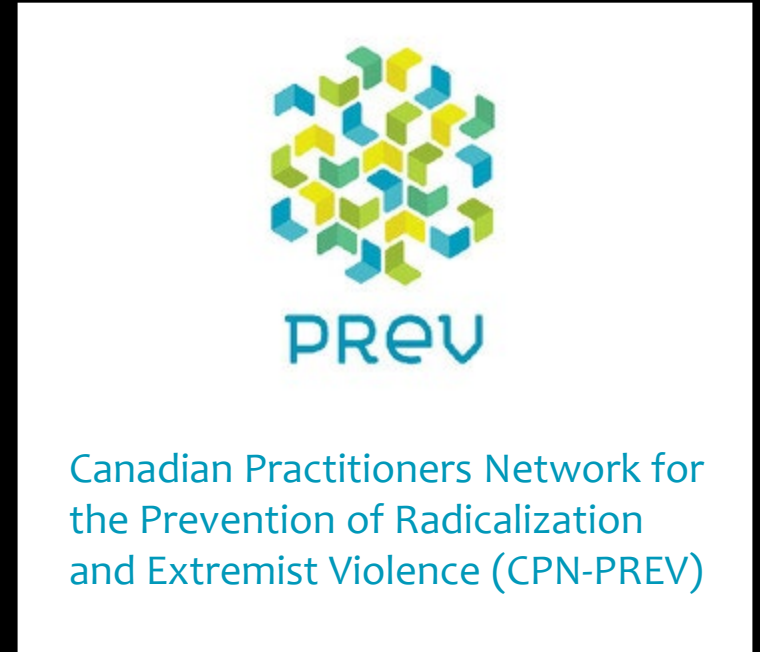
Canadian Practitioners Network for the Prevention of Radicalization and Extremist Violence (CPN-PREV)

Canadian Practitioners Network for the Prevention of Radicalization and Extremist Violence (CPN-PREV)

[website + network]

https://cpnprev.ca/

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Thank You!

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