Incels and Firearms

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Introduction

Involuntary celibates, or "incels," are members of an online community predominantly comprised of young men who consider themselves unable to attract romantic partners, often expressing hostility or misogynistic views toward women as a result (Cai and Landon, 2021). Digital subgroups dedicated to incel ideologies have emerged on platforms including YouTube, Twitch, and Reddit where topics related to perceived sexual disenfranchisement, physical appearance rankings, and violence against women are regularly discussed.

This study investigates potential quantitative links between online incel groups and real-world violence. Using two datasets, the 2021 Crime, Health, and Politics Survey and comment threads collected from various social media platforms, we analyze incel digital communications for mentions of firearms and violent intent. Through text analysis methods, the frequency of key terms related to weapons and harm are evaluated to explore correlations between violent speech and actual violence perpetration. We aim to understand if increases in extremist incel rhetoric predict rises in acts of terrorism involving weapons or firearms, as well as determine whether tracking digital incel activity could enable violence prevention.

Methods

The research involved a systematic investigation of how the incel community discusses and threatens violence across major online platforms where they are active. The methods included:

Video Platform Analysis

- Platforms like Twitch and YouTube were scanned to identify videos likely to attract incels, such as female gaming streamers. This provided access to conversations among incels.
- The comments sections under these videos were carefully reviewed. Comments were scanned for signs of incel rhetoric, marked by misogynistic language. Comments containing threats of violence were also identified.
- Any relevant comments were copied verbatim into a dataset for further analysis. This allowed compilation of a sample of incel conversations from video platforms.

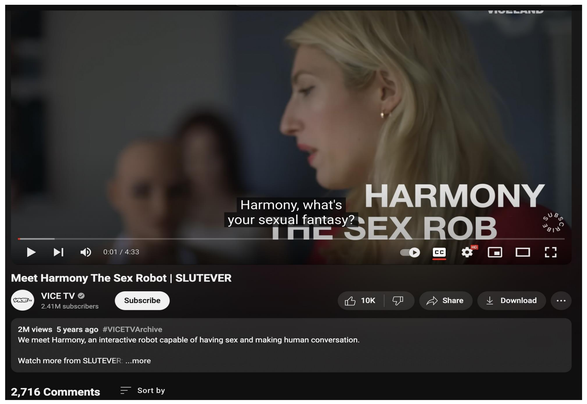
Forum Analysis

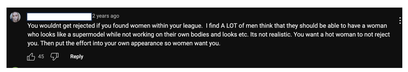
- Platforms like Reddit, 4chan, and Telegram were searched using key terminology commonly used by the incel community. This helped identify forums and conversations centered on incel ideology.
- Posts and comments from these forums that were relevant to incel ideas and violence were identified. These posts and comments were copied into the dataset.
- This provided a sample of conversations and rhetoric used by incels on forum-based platforms.

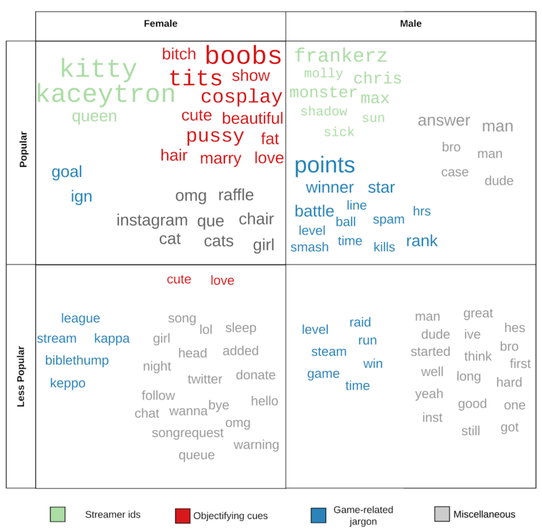
Data Analysis

- The compiled dataset of comments/posts was examined to uncover overarching patterns in how incels discuss and threaten violence across platforms.
- Rhetoric, thought patterns, and warning signs were analyzed to shed light on the incel community and its relation to violence.

By pulling conversational examples directly from platforms where incels are active, this approach aimed to provide real-world insight into how this online community engages with violent speech and threats. The goal was to further understand incels and inform prevention of violence.







Results

- The results obtained include a very broad scope of misogyny and violent ideologies, most of which fell outside the narrow focus of this project.
- On Twitch, there were little to no findings related to violence or incels, likely because the platform is so public and moderated. While data analysis has not been completed yet, we expect to discover code words and/or emojis relating to violence and incel ideology from the comments taken from video game streams.
- On YouTube, the platform integration of the incel subcommunity is more covert. Most content cannot be found directly through the utilization of a search bar. Manipulation of Youtube's algorithm is an indirect method of gaining access to the incel subculture.
- Initially upon investigating the incel community, incel sentiments were either directly discouraged through seemingly overwhelming content creator disapproval or incel sentiments were more widely regarded with pity and self-identified incel loathing. Indirect interaction with misogyny-ridden content associated with the "Manosphere" gave rise to more insidious content.
- Manosphere related content often posed as a breeding ground for incels where incel-rhetoric was more tolerable. While overt expressions of violence were rare allusions to female sex slavery, pedophilia, and misogynistic views were endorsed and discussed.

Discussion

It is important to note that it is not possible to decipher whether a violent comment or post came from an incel or from an extreme misogynist. The overall presence of incels on the platforms examined in this project was not as visible or violent as initially expected. However, there is likely a far greater and more apparent presence of incels on more private platforms.

References