

# "This is a political movement, friend": Why "incels" support violence

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## Abstract

How do members of extremist groups think about violence conducted by individual members on the group's behalf? We examine the link between extremism-motivated violence and extremist groups through a case study of misogynist incels, a primarily online community of men who lament their lack of sexual success with women. To learn how misogynist incels talk about mass violence committed by members of their group, we conduct a qualitative content analysis of 3,658 comments relating to the 2018 Toronto van attack, in which self-declared incel Alek Minassian drove a van into pedestrians, killing 10 and injuring 16. We find overwhelming support among self-proclaimed incels for the attack and violence more generally. Incels viewed mass violence as instrumental, serving the following four main purposes: garnering increased attention, exacting revenge, reinforcing masculinity, and generating political change. Our findings indicate the need to examine misogynist incels as a potential terrorist group and male supremacism as a basis for terrorism.

## KEYWORDS

incel, male supremacism, manosphere, mass violence, right-wing extremism, terrorism

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

On April 23, 2018, 25-year-old Alek Minassian intentionally drove a van into pedestrians in downtown Toronto, killing 10 and injuring 16. Just before the attack, Minassian wrote a Facebook post declaring himself an “incel,” a portmanteau for “involuntary celibate.” Although Minassian's attack was deemed a lone-wolf incident by Canadian authorities (Zimonjic, 2018), it led to increased media attention to misogynist incels,<sup>1</sup> an online community where thousands of men lament their inability to obtain sex due to being overlooked by *Stacys* (attractive women) in favor of *Chads* (attractive men).

In this article, we examine how incels discuss violence online. We analyzed 3,658 comments related to the Toronto attack that were posted to incels.is (incels.is),<sup>2</sup> the largest online forum of incels, during the week following the Toronto van incident (April 23–30, 2018). We found that incels view violence as instrumental in serving the following four main purposes: (1) attracting attention to the community, (2) getting revenge, (3) reinforcing masculinity, and (4) pursuing political change. We suggest that incel violence constitutes terrorist activity, which is broadly supported by the mainstream incel community. Our findings add to a growing body of literature seeking to map the incel community (e.g., Ging, 2017; Hoffman et al., 2020; O'Malley et al., 2020). In particular, our qualitative analysis allows for a richer understanding of some of the trends identified by broad quantitative and mixed method overviews of incel discussions (Baele et al., 2019; Jaki et al., 2019). Our analysis underscores the connection between the broader misogynist incel community and mass violence committed by self-declared incel individuals, highlighting misogyny as a basis for terrorism and violent extremism (Aslam, 2012; Bairner, 1999; Ferber & Kimmel, 2008; Haider, 2016; Kimmel, 2018).

## 2 | WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT INCELS?

At least 60,000 incel users actively participate in online forums globally (CBC the Fifth Estate, 2019b). According to Vox journalist Zack Beauchamp (2019), about 90% of the incel users are under the age of 30, almost all are men, and about 80% live in Europe or in North America. A self-administered survey of over 650 active users posted to incels.is in May 2020 corroborates this image. The survey reported that 55% of the users were White, over 80% of them were from North America or Europe, and more than 80% were between the ages of 18 and 30 (ADL, 2020). These results are nearly unchanged from similar polls conducted in earlier years. According to Cottee (2020), incels are also exclusively heterosexual. Jaki et al. (2019), who employed a quantitative text profiling technique that deduces demographic traits based on writing style, concluded that slightly more than half of the incels are likely under 25 years old and with low levels of education.

Incels form just one part of a larger online conglomeration of antifeminist men called the “manosphere,” which emphasizes men's rights and male supremacy (Zimmerman et al., 2018). O'Malley et al.'s (2020) analysis of incels' comments suggests that incel ideology is structured around claims of the sexual market as woman-controlled, women as naturally evil, masculine norms as legitimate, and men as oppressed. Cottee (2020) adds that misogyny, victimhood, and fatalism are the core values within the incel subculture. Incel rhetoric is largely based on evolutionary psychology and genetic determinism, wherein women are seen as irrational and in need of being dominated (Ging, 2017).

To rationalize their overt misogyny, incel discourse revolves around a myth that prior to the 1960s sexual revolution, every man had a female partner with whom to have sex. Incels believe that with the rise of feminism and the women's rights movement, men lost their “rightful entitlement” to dominate women, leading to a new societal order wherein only a small proportion of men gain access to women's bodies (Baele et al., 2019; CBC The Fifth Estate, 2019a; Tolentino, 2018). Because incels view sex as a basic human right, many therefore see women's restriction of access to sex as a crime that warrants punishment (Janik, 2018).

To express their grievances, incels have developed a set of original vocabulary. Young, attractive, white women are referred to as “Stacys,” and incels believe that these women are only attracted to successful and hyperattractive men, which they call “Chads” (Baele et al., 2019; Jaki et al., 2019). In sharing their emotional responses to personal experiences of rejection, incels embrace self-deprecating labels like “betafag” (Ging, 2017). However, incels simultaneously believe that their male status entitles them to sex and to the domination of women, thus performing a “hybrid masculinity” (Ging, 2017; Glace et al., 2021). Baele et al. (2019) have argued that incel ideology is somewhat distinct from that of other extremist groups in that it describes both the in-group and the out-group in both negative and positive ways. Incels view themselves as physically “subhuman” but psychologically superior while viewing Chads and Stacys as physically more attractive but psychologically and morally inferior. Still, it remains unclear whether incels are motivated by a clear and well-articulated political agenda. According to Hoffman et al. (2020), “the incel worldview is not obviously political,” and only the “extreme fringes of the incel community, as well as the violence they have committed, should be considered terrorism” (p. 568).

Incels have mostly attracted public attention following violent attacks that appeared to be connected to the incel ideology. Perhaps the most well-known act of incel-related violence occurred on May 23, 2014, in Isla Vista, California. Twenty-two-year-old Elliot Rodger stabbed three men to death in his apartment, shot three women outside of a sorority house, and then drove through the California college town shooting several pedestrians and ramming into others with his car before eventually committing suicide (Poston, 2018). Before driving to the sorority house, Rodger emailed his friends, family, and therapist a long manifesto, in which he expressed his hatred for women, frustration over not having sex, and plans for an uprising. He also uploaded a video explaining his motives, primary among them the desire to punish both women for rejecting him and men for being sexually active while Rodger was not (Rodger, 2014).

CBC's *The Fifth Estate* (2019a) has drawn links between incels and additional violent incidents over the last 5 years in addition to the 2014 Isla Vista attack and the 2018 Toronto incident. These include Nicolas Cruz, who in 2018 shot and killed 17 high school students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, and the perpetrator of the October 2015 mass shooting at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon. However, despite the growing number of violent incidents perpetrated by incels, these attacks are commonly perceived as individual incidents that pose no ongoing and consistent threat to public safety and national security in the way that terrorist attacks might (Zimonjic, 2018).

### 3 | THEORIZING INCEL VIOLENCE

Recently, some scholars have begun connecting the broader incel community to violence. Baele et al. (2019) have shown that support for violence is ubiquitous in online incel forums. Jaki et al. (2019) demonstrated that violence against women is generally deemed both acceptable and desirable among users of incels.me. O'Malley et al. (2020) showed that incel discourse legitimates violence and revenge. Our work builds on these studies by examining how incels talk about violence. To explore potential motives for incel violence, we draw from academic work on groups with similarities to incels. Because many incel attacks have taken the form of mass violence and many were conducted by young individuals in schools, we also draw on the literature addressing mass violence, especially school shootings. Given that incels organize around misogyny, we also look at the literature on other Manosphere groups and on violence against women more generally.

Incels are a large, dispersed group, in which many discuss the utility of, and justifications for, the use of violence, but few actually commit acts of violence. As such, they show some structural and ideological similarities to groups often labeled “terrorist,” so we also look at the literature on terrorism. While thinking about incels in this way may not be obvious, in May 2020, Canadian authorities laid the first-ever charge for terrorism related to incels after a teenage boy killed one woman and injured two others in a massage parlour in Toronto (Read, 2020). To our

knowledge, this was the first case in which an incel attack had been officially labeled an act of terror and it is yet unclear whether this new categorization will persist and spread to other jurisdictions.

Previous studies have suggested that the terrorist label is often unevenly applied. Beck and Miner (2013), for example, show that formal designations of groups as terrorist by governments do not simply reflect a group's volume of violence against citizens but also several organizational characteristics, including a focus on aviation targets and the presence of an Islamic ideology. Governments decide which groups to classify as a terrorist based not only on an objective assessment of their perceived danger but also on categorical schemas and cultural scripts about the threat (Beck & Miner, 2013; Olivero, 1998). In Western media, attacks are more likely to be framed as terrorist when perpetrated by Muslims (Betus et al., 2020; Mitnik et al., 2020; Powell, 2011). Violent incidents committed by Muslims receive more coverage and are often framed as "international terrorism," whereas domestic mass violence events are framed as isolated incidents committed by troubled individuals (Kearns et al., 2019; Powell, 2018). Differential framing also serves to humanize white male perpetrators and downplay their threat (Elmasry & el-Nawawy, 2020). This is evident, for example, in mass shootings, where white men are often presented as victims who act due to mental illness or the influence of video game consumption (Chen et al., 2015; Duxbury et al., 2018; Markey et al., 2020), as well as in cases of domestic femicides, where white non-Muslim perpetrators are invariably perceived as suffering from psychological issues (Shier & Shor, 2016).

The term "lone wolf" is sometimes used to characterize incel violence *as opposed to* terrorism. However, this creates a false distinction between individual attacks and "real" terrorism. In fact, so-called lone-wolf attacks—carried out by individuals independent of established organizations—are a form of terrorism (Spaaij, 2010). Lone actor terrorists are attackers who do not have regular affiliations to an extremist organization but draw inspiration from extremist groups and may have been members in the past (Post et al., 2014; Spaaij, 2010). 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 (Spaaij, 2010). Past incel attackers have often alluded to personal grievances while at the same time citing an ideological affiliation with the broader incel movement (Blommaert, 2018; Goodfield, 2020).

Even when governmental actors and media commentators recognize the connections of such attacks to the incel community, they mainly emphasize the perpetrators' psychological profile (Bell, 2018; Brugger, 2015) or traumatic past (Coblentz, 2018; Laidlaw, 2019). Such micro-level explanations are common in the broader literature on violence, particularly within the psychological literature. Allely and Faccini (2017), for example, have argued that narcissistic rage, combined with isolation due to Asperger's syndrome, pushed self-declared incel Elliot Rodger toward violence. Other psychological theories of violence have focused on childhood experiences and attachment styles that shape perpetrators' violent tendencies and behaviors (Dutton & White, 2012; Gallimore, 2004). While such individual-level theories of violence are valuable in identifying individuals who may be at risk of progressing to violence, they fail to account for the potential role of socio-structural factors such as culture and community support for violence.

We explore here the link between incel attackers and the misogynist incel community, specifically examining how the community perceives attackers who self-identify as incels. Drawing from the literature on groups with similarities to incels, as well as from the limited existing literature on incels, we derive four main theoretical explanations for why incels might support violence and why some of them engage in acts of violence: (1) seeking attention, (2) exacting revenge, (3) reaffirming masculinity, and (4) pursuing political change.

### 1. Seeking attention and fame, recruiting new members, and gaining support

In the literature on terrorism, a commonly cited aim of violence is attracting attention to an aggrieved group or an individual. Violence can be used as a means to attract attention, and consequently support, for a cause or a movement, especially when organizations are weak and find it difficult to gain momentum for collective action (Kydd & Walter, 2006). Weaker organizations that are limited in their capacity to mobilize support and attract new

members may turn to violence (Wood, 2010). Bringing attention to a group can also be a powerful motivating factor for individual members within a terrorist group. According to Moghadam (2010), a promise of martyrdom after death is one of the main ways that al-Qaida mobilizes its members to commit suicide attacks. Similarly, incel mass killers Minassian and Rodger both attempted suicide and both left documentation behind them that linked their actions to the broader "movement" for which they claimed to be fighting. The incel community, in turn, has granted them the status of "martyrs" and "saints" (Baele et al., 2019).

## 2. Exacting revenge

The second type of explanation provided for violence similar to that committed by incels centers on revenge. Crenshaw (1981) argued that terrorist organizations must satisfy demands among their ranks for revenge, which in turn motivates attacks. Brym and Araj (2006) studied suicide bombings during the Second Palestinian Intifada and found that many of these acts were motivated by a desire for revenge against Israeli killings of Palestinians.

According to various scholars, school shootings are also typically premeditated and motivated by a desire for revenge, either against a larger group of people or against specific individuals within that group (Muschert, 2007; Rose, 2009; Sommer et al., 2014). Scaptura and Boyle (2019) found that young men with misogynistic views may fantasize about revenge on poorly defined "enemies." Incels may be motivated by the desire to exact revenge, either against the larger society for ignoring their plight or against specific individuals such as women who have rejected them or men who have bullied them (Jaki et al., 2019). Baele et al. (2019) have reported that some incels indeed view violence as a liberating act of revenge.

## 3. Reinforcing masculinity

Masculinity may also underpin mass violence, even in cases where this does not seem obvious. According to Willer et al. (2013), men often react to perceived threats to their masculinity with extreme demonstrations of masculinity, including increased support for violence. Willer et al. (2013) found that men who were randomly given feedback suggesting that they were feminine expressed increased support for war. Others have suggested that boys who open fire in schools do so in retaliation against routine attacks on their masculinity by classmates (Farr, 2018; Kalish & Kimmel, 2010). This explanation of violence as a response to taunting and emasculation might also be applicable to incels, as many of them describe being previously bullied and all of them report failing to obtain sex with women, a potential symbolic failure of masculinity (Kibby & Costello, 1999; Sweeney, 2014).

Beyond a direct response to taunting, several scholars have argued that mass murder is one way that some men "do gender" (Haider, 2016; Kalish & Kimmel, 2010; Marganski, 2019). Marganski (2019) showed that violence against women often precedes mass murder and argued that gender role socialization reinforces men's violence. Bairner (1999) argued that terrorism is at one extreme of the same continuum that includes manifestations of hegemonic masculinity such as unruly sports crowd behavior. Ferber and Kimmel (2008) have similarly argued that white supremacist and terrorist movements are both enactments of masculinity. According to Aslam (2012), many Muslim men in various settings face political oppression and marginalization that calls their masculinity into question. As a result, some seek to achieve self-actualization and heroism by joining militant jihadist groups. Haider (2016) further argued that when everyday modes of violence become unavailable or no longer yield expected returns of self-actualization, masculinity turns toxic and can transform into rage and violence, including terrorism.

Explanations that focus on masculinity are especially relevant for incels given that the community is organized along the axis of gender distinctions, bringing together a group of men who feel wronged by women. According to Myketiak (2016), Elliot Rodger's attack was a response to his feelings of fragile masculinity. Bratich and Banet-Weiser (2019) have similarly argued that incel violence is a response to men's failures to achieve a sense of adequate masculinity through labour, stemming from the failure of neoliberalism to secure men's confidence in themselves and in the neoliberal system.

#### 4. Seeking policy change

A less discussed potential explanation for incel violence may be that it is viewed as a way to achieve desired policy changes. The strategic model views terrorists as rational actors and focuses on the possibility that violence might actually produce concessions (Thomas, 2004). Pape (2003) famously suggested that insurgents use violence because it is the most effective means of achieving policy changes, such as territorial concessions or the removal of troops from a region. Butler and Gates (2010) similarly argued that violence is used by guerilla and terrorist organizations as an instrument for achieving policy change. Guiora (2009), who analyzed the motives of Hamas activists in the Israeli Occupied Territories, also concluded that the most prevalent reason for participation in the organization was being convinced that committing terrorist violence would contribute to the establishment of a religious Palestinian state.

It remains unclear whether incels should be expected to have political motivations. Jaki et al. (2019) found a widespread belief in the incel community that incels' situation could only be ameliorated through violence toward an out-group (either attractive men or women) and abolishing women's rights, indicating some sort of a political agenda. Baele et al. (2019) have also suggested that major violent events are viewed by the incel community as potentially useful in forcing broader society to recognize how feminism has allegedly "gone too far" and pushing for policies that would facilitate men's sexual fulfillment. However, according to Baele et al., many incels seem to reject this idea and the incel worldview does not focus on political change, differentiating them from other extremist groups. Cottee (2020) similarly argued that incels do not advance a clear political agenda and that their political motivations, if any, are difficult to identify. It thus remains unclear whether political considerations actually play a significant role within the incel community and whether these considerations motivate support for violence.

## 4 | METHOD

### 4.1 | Data and sampling

We conducted a thematic analysis of all threads mentioning the Toronto van attack posted to incels.is in the 7 days following the attack (April 23–30, inclusive). Incels.is was chosen following preliminary research into the online incel community, which showed it to be the most highly trafficked website and the only one devoted entirely to incels. Incels.is has garnered more than 15,000 members since the website emerged in late 2017 (incels.is).

In total, about 1,000 new threads were posted to the main forum of the incels.is website in the week of April 23–30, 2018, following the Toronto van attack, and 194 of these included an explicit discussion of the attack. We retrieved these threads from the website and coded and analyzed all of them. The large majority of these threads included comments by multiple users, so that in total, we analyzed 3,658 comments. The 194 threads that we analyzed were posted by approximately 130 unique users (with several hundred additional users commenting on threads but not starting their own). Only nine users posted more than two threads and only three users created more than five, suggesting that the conversation around the attack was not monopolized.

The second and third days following the attack had the most posts referencing the incident. Users' attention significantly waned toward the end of the week, with users posting only four new threads about the attack on the seventh day, supporting the decision to limit the sample to 1 week.

### 4.2 | Coding

Given its usefulness in gaining a rich understanding of underresearched phenomena (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), we employed an open coding strategy using the software MAXQDA, with codes derived directly from the text.

For instance, a comment replying to a negative news article about incels with “well, I guess that's what the saying ‘any press is good press’ is for” would be coded in this first pass as “any press is good press.” We then reread the text several times to ensure that codes were consistently applied. Following Attride-Stirling's (2001) thematic networks technique, we then clustered these *basic themes* together to derive *organizing themes*, the more abstracted middle-order themes that reveal the true nature of the text. Finally, we grouped several organizing themes into a *global theme*, which Attride-Stirling describes as being both a summary of text's main themes and a “revealing interpretation” of a text. This process resulted in four organizing themes, which we discuss in our findings section: *Attracting Attention*, *Exacting Revenge*, *Reinforcing Masculinity*, and *Pursuing Policy Change*.

In what follows, we directly quote the comments we observed. To protect users, we do not provide their usernames in this text, although all data come from a public forum. The comments we present here come from a wide range of unique users. In general, we avoid presenting multiple quotes from the same users.

## 5 | FINDINGS

Online incels expressed overwhelming support for the Minassian attack, with the rare dissenter swiftly shunned. Less than 5% of comments about the attack expressed a negative outlook on violence. Minassian was promptly labeled as a martyr even before full details of the attack were revealed, earning praising nicknames such as “Father Incelistan,” “St. Minassian,” and “warrior of incelibacy.” A swift examination of more recent conversations in incel chat boards shows that this martyrdom was not fleeting, with Minassian still frequently mentioned and commended for his acts. Claims of martyrdom relied heavily on comparisons to Elliot Rodger, the 2014 Isla Vista killer and self-declared incel. Minassian was praised for “going ER”, referring to Elliot Rodger's initials, and some stated that “Elliot would be proud.” Many of the comparisons to Rodger were embedded in the text, for instance, when referring to Minassian as a “hERO” who made the world a “bettER place.”

In raising Minassian to the status of martyr, users supported his actions and the use of violence more generally. While we found about 600 instances of explicit support for violence, fewer than 40 comments argued that violence was ineffective for the goals of incels. Moreover, these sporadic comments were almost always immediately contradicted and ridiculed by multiple users. For example, when one user wrote that “when you post violent edgy shit you're not shocking normies—you're giving them what they want,” another retorted “because being nice to them really does us any good. Has totally worked at all ever. We need to strike fear into the hearts of normies.” Others claimed that the poster who opposed violence was a “concern troll” and “not an incel” and suggested he should be “banned on the spot.”

In their discussions of violence, incels primarily highlighted four desirable (in their eyes) outcomes emerging from the use of violence. These were (1) increased attention for the incel plight, (2) revenge for perceived injustice against incels, (3) reinforcement of masculinity, and (4) a potential tool for pushing policy changes. We expand on each of these four inclinations below and discuss the discourse representative of each.

### 5.1 | “No such thing as bad publicity”: Drawing attention and recruiting new members

Much of the praise for Minassian surrounded the attention his attack brought to incels. Around one-third of the comments justifying violence praised it as an instrument for gaining attention. The excitement surrounding new-found attention took two main forms: enjoying “fame,” and hoping to reach potential incels. Incels commonly used the phrase “going mainstream” to describe the effect of the increased attention to incels, with one user celebrating that “the message is getting out. We're mainstream now.” Another user agreed that “we finally made it,” while others wrote: “we're famous now.” Some incels started threads in which they presented evidence to support their claims of greater visibility in the form of trending google searches and the proliferation of media articles.



Many incels rejoiced not only in the general attention to the community but also in receiving personal attention from the mainstream media. Incels who learned they had been individually featured in news articles exclaimed "Im famous!!!" and "Not to brag too much, but a screenshot of one of my posts just appeared in the Washington Post." Users who were not specifically referenced in the news lamented this fact, as exemplified by one comment which read "GODDAAMIT I NEVER GET FEATURED" and another user complaining that he "didn't make it to a single article or video life just isn't fair sometimes." Although occasionally tinged with sarcastic support for mainstream news, most incels were happy with the attention the attack brought to incels and in particular to the incels.is forum.

Users also viewed attention as instrumentally valuable in potentially attracting new members to the community. Incels both hoped and assessed that the increased attention following the attack would "spread the blackpill" (the founding myth that physical attractiveness alone determines romantic success) and recruit more incels to the cause. One user suggested that the aftermath of the attack "might be our only chance to spread the atomic black pill to the general population" and reach "incels that don't know it yet [that they are incels]." Users posted threads directed specifically at guests, "spreading blackpills" by sharing pseudo-scientific studies on attractiveness and romantic success, or personal anecdotes of rejection. One incel explained that "Never has it been a better time to start posting many blackpills/redpills. Doesn't matter if they are repetitive or old black pills. With the amount of new guests (holy shit), the faster it spreads." As such, even negative media attention was viewed as an opportunity to reach potential future incels. One incel felt that despite negative media depictions, "at least the information is available and will make sense to those who are bright enough to connect the dots [and join the incel community]." Similarly, one user explained: "I am a big believer in the phrase 'there is no such thing as bad publicity', and I believe it applies here." Whether to attract attention to the group or to individual members of the community, incels generally viewed violence as a means for increasing much-desired notoriety.

## 5.2 | "Normies arent entitled to safety": Exacting revenge

Another common motive, appearing in about one-third of the comments that justified violence, was revenge. Incels especially advocated for revenge on sexually active women who do not have sex with incels (Stacys) and on "normies" who either actively ridicule incels or are merely insensitive to their plight. Minassian's attack was considered a rightful act of vengeance, with one user explaining that "this is what happens when you deny so many men love and affection for their entire lives." It was commonly suggested that women could have prevented the attack (and can still prevent future attacks) by having sex with incels. One user explained: "by having sex with the guy you couldve saved 10 lives. But I guess you dont think 10 lives are worth that much time or effort." Another echoed crudely: "blowjobs save lives." Yet another wrote that attacks like Minassian's were "what happens when you leave us without any love or companionship." One incel wrote that "Canadian women are legit some of the worst femoids on this planet [...] The women who died are terrible people."

While Stacys were a common target, normies (nonincels), especially bullies, were even more commonly discussed as a target, with around three-quarters of the revenge comments focusing on normies. One user wrote that "normies think we're not entitled to sympathy and love, so we should treat them the same way," while another claimed that "the bullies are pretty much the ones with the gun in their hands." On a poll posted by a user asking "which type of people deserve ER the most," a quarter of respondents answered "Your Highschool Bully." One user wrote that "bullies are the ones that directly oppose us and made a point to make our lives hell back in school. They deserve to be drowned in rivers of bleach." Others expressed similar feelings: "I won't feel bad for the people who've made my life a living hell," "the blood is on their hands!" and "i offer no sympathy [...] When did i ever get an apology for being bullied?" One user summarized the dominant sentiment: "I'm not going to apologize to normies when they're clearly provoking the attackers." Interestingly, the focus for revenge was rarely on Chads, the attractive men with whom Stacys are assumed to be having sex. Instead, revenge was aimed primarily at women



who deny incels sex, at women and men who bully or ridicule incels, and at the larger non-incel community who is indifferent to their plight.

### 5.3 | “The Roastie fears the Incelistani”: Reinforcing masculinity through misogyny

Many users also saw violence as a mechanism for reinforcing their masculinity. In particular, users celebrated a man's ability to instill fear in his surroundings, particularly in women. Users talked favorably about violence's ability to “trigger” women and leave them “freaking out, everywhere.” In response to a post containing news articles about how misogyny develops into violence, one user responded “good, they will be afraid of us.” Another bragged that “we have many screenshots of [women] claiming to fear leaving their homes now,” while yet another user wrote that “The Roastie [sexually active woman] fears the Incelistani [violent incel]. Let our Energy and Power resonate fear into their already weak hearts.” Some incels fantasized about a future where men terrorize women. One wrote that “soon, the day will come when we cut whores’ tits off in the street.” Another echoed the fantasy: “we have to make them all scared. Soon normies will be the ones rotting in the basement while incels roam the streets. It will be a glorious utopia.” Violence, in this fantasy, serves as a tool for the potential subversion of the current societal order, in which incels perceive themselves to be at the bottom of the masculine hierarchy.

Some incels viewed violence as a last resort to assert one's masculinity when other approaches had failed. One explained that incels only turn to violence after having “already tried and tried again” but failed at “getting laid,” seemingly implying that violence and sexual activity exist along the same spectrum. This user also expressed surprise at “how many mainstream people say a lack of sex-life isn't a big deal; like it's not a good enough reason to die/kill.” Another user shared a similar view: “ugly guys can only take so many gynocentric double standards before they go ER.” The ability to inflict violence seemed to empower incels and increase their sense of masculinity, with one of them writing: “[I]t's funny because [the people who are afraid of us now] are the same ones that said we were irrelevant and threatened and bullied us. LOL.”

Incels also viewed violence as a tool for restoring their sense of masculine pride and status as men who cannot be ignored, are feared, and command recognition and respect. “Incels are finally being taken seriously [thanks to the attack],” said one user. He went on to write: “one thing is obvious and it is that the normfags and cucked media are now taking Incels more seriously. Prior to this, I had only seen Incels being mocked on [Reddit] and even at least one stupid TV show. But with this latest incident, things appear to change.” Users hoped that “as we become more known, there will be more people who will be willing to recognize our issues and very real struggles.” Another user explained that “people just thought ER was a one off and a joke now they are beginning to see how dangerous this society can make incels I expect more to follow.” One user wrote that “It is good to see that our issue is becoming more prominent in society,” adding that “They can't keep ignoring us forever.” Violence “opens peoples’ eyes about the dangers of hypergamy [and] feminism,” said another user.

This relationship between masculine ideologies and norms on the one hand and support for violence on the other hand is hardly surprising. However, it is interesting to note not only that gender constructions matter in explaining incel violence but also that many incels are introspective and talk explicitly about this relationship.

### 5.4 | “Until radical changes are made”: Pursuing policy change

In some cases, incels’ desire to receive recognition and reinforce their masculinity was expressed through more concrete political demands. Around one-fifth of the justifications for violence included a desire for some sort of a tangible policy change. Although much of the conversation about political motives were vague or implicit, in some cases, it was more explicit. One user explained that “This is a political movement, friend. We talk about how people should act and how they should be governed, that is politics.”

One common desire was to increase men's power and "restore patriarchy" to its supposedly original form before the sexual revolution and feminism produced a "matriarchy." Violence in this view is not only meant to assert masculinity but rather also to lead to political changes that would improve men's status. One user, who actually hoped to achieve political goals without violence, asked: "if women were able to turn around a 100% patriarchy without firing a shot then why can't we turn around the matriarchy?" Another stated: "I will continue to make my voice heard until radical changes are made in our hostile, gynocentric society." This desire to restore patriarchy was accompanied by some more concrete ideas. Some users called for government-mandated monogamy. Another suggested:

You just need to cut off the escape routes [women] can use to evade their responsibilities. If we cut way back on women's ability to go to college, for example, more of them would stay in their communities, marry decent, productive local men and form families with them. And then the incel problem would start to get better organically, without any coercion involved.

In a similar vein, many users also argued for restoring men's "rightful" access to women's bodies. Interestingly, this was the goal for which incels provided the most specific policy proposals. Around a dozen incels mentioned legalized prostitution as a solution for which incels should advocate, a proposal which was well received by other incel users. Many believed that violent attacks could scare society into such a policy change, with one explaining "I hope these attacks keep occurring as long as incels are shat upon by society and don't have any sexual outlet in the form of legalized prostitution." Another user argued that Canada's prostitution law (which makes it legal to sell sex and illegal to buy sex) is "[s]exism against men."

Another recommendation was for governments to reduce or subsidize the cost of plastic surgery so that incels could make themselves more physically attractive and consequently increase their chances to access sex. A less realistic proposal was that governments assign "a chaste and loyal virgin bride" to every man. This was suggested a few times, with one user explaining that "it is time for the Canadian government to provide girlfriends for incels and to prevent Chads from having multiple partners."

Incels also sought to achieve policy objectives through more traditional political participation. Although not necessarily violent, this interestingly demonstrates a certain desire for traditional political action within the community. One incel suggested creating "black pill parties" so that incels could gain control of the government, while another explained more vaguely that "we need to infiltrate the system from every branch. political, educational, societal, financial etc."

## 6 | DISCUSSION: INCELS AS TERRORISTS

Our analysis of online incel discourse in the week following Alek Minassian's Toronto van attack found a violent discourse which was pervasive throughout the incel community. While the 2018 van attack was committed by just one individual, we found evidence of a broader community structure underpinning and supporting this violence. Users of incels.is, the largest online incel chat board, were overwhelmingly supportive of prominent incel attacks. Many of them advocated for additional violence, calling on others to commit similar acts and even sometimes expressing their own desire to engage in violent acts. Our analysis further provides considerable insight into the justifications and motives of violence among incels. We found that incels provide four main justifications for violence: attracting attention, exacting revenge, reinforcing masculinity, and mobilizing political change.

Similar to Baele et al. (2019), we found that incels often view attackers as martyrs or saints and hope that violence would attract the attention of the mainstream media, women, normies, and "dormant" incels who have yet to find the community. Of note, even drawing negative attention was seen as beneficial, highlighting incels' confidence in the legitimacy, veracity, and appeal of their shared ideologies and messages. This finding parallels

the literature on similar groups, including terrorist organizations, which use violence to build membership and credibility (Hutchins, 2017; Kydd & Walter, 2006; Moghadam, 2010).

Aside from attention, incels also saw violence as a justifiable form of revenge, both against the collective (incels as a group getting revenge on Stacys and normies) and on specific individuals (individual incels achieving retribution against their bullies or specific women who rejected them). We note that these narratives mirror those found in the literature on terrorist groups, where both individual and collective desires for revenge culminate in violence (Brym & Araj, 2006).

Somewhat surprisingly, incels directed most of their desire for revenge not onto Chads or Stacys but onto normies. This larger portion of the general population includes anyone who does not subscribe to the incel ideology, even those who do not directly hurt incels' sexual chances. Hence, it appears that for many incels, most of society is the enemy, as opposed to only specific societal factions. This rhetoric might also account for the seemingly indiscriminate nature of attacks by individuals such as Minassian and Rodger. Hurting "innocent passerby" is justified with the notion that these individuals are in fact not innocent, as they stand by and do nothing while incels are being wronged. This discourse also corresponds with that of many terrorist groups wherein all members of an outgroup are legitimate targets, rather than merely those who directly harm them (Mason, 2010; Steinberg, 2013).

Next, many incels explicitly considered violence as a means to restore their masculine status. Kimmel (2008) suggested that sex for most young men is not just about the sex itself. Rather, "the pursuit of conquests is more about guys proving something to other guys than it is about the women involved" (p. 192). Following this logic, when incels are unable to prove their masculinity through sexual conquests, they turn to other means, most notably the use of violence or support for those who use it. Even if most incels never commit violence, fantasizing about it, identifying with others who do, and feeling that they *could* commit violence if they wanted offers many of them a source of empowerment and a sense of reclaiming their masculinity and social status. By "striking fear," they believe that they could regain respect as men. This finding mirrors recent literature exploring misogyny as a potential basis for terrorist violence. Aslam (2012) and Haider (2016) have both argued that men may turn to terrorist violence when other opportunities to assert masculinity are blocked or become scarce.

Finally, we also found that some incels see violence as a means for promoting policy change. We found that incels view violence as an appropriate means to a political end, including as an instrument for gaining concrete policy changes. Incels in our sample were more concretely political than has been indicated by previous research on incels, including work suggesting potential parallels with terrorism (Baele et al., 2019; Hoffman et al., 2020; Robertson, 2019). This finding raises important questions about the ways in which incels have thus far been labeled by the media and by policymakers, given that having political aims is an important component of many definitions of terrorism (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2020; Ganor, 2002).

Immediately following the Toronto van attack, Canada's Public Safety Minister declared that there was "no national security connection to this particular incident" and called it "an isolated incident" (Zimonjic, 2018). Although the minister also called the incident an "attack," he later clarified that he used this term "not in the terror sense." Minassian was also not charged with terrorism. Our analysis reveals that beyond just hoping to instill fear, gain attention, or exact revenge, incel discourse includes clear desires to pursue political or social change. This is an indication that many incels do in fact have political and social motives, emphasizing the relevance of the theoretical literature on terrorism and its motives when studying this group.

The political aims behind incel violence were mostly vague (e.g., a general desire to reverse advances in gender equality) or highly improbable (e.g., government-assigned virgin brides for every male citizen). But we should be careful not to write these off just because they seem unrealistic. Aims need not be rational in order to be political. Indeed, Al-Qaeda's and ISIS' unrealistic stated goals of promoting the downfall of Western civilization and spreading militant Islam around the world did not stop Western governments and Western media from labeling them as terrorist organizations. The rational choice model is known to be imperfect and most terrorist groups are not successful at achieving political concessions (Abrahms, 2008, 2012; Caplan, 2006). Regardless of whether their political goals are feasible, many incels clearly believe that violence can generate

political and social change. Our findings thus reveal that the online incel community shares multiple similarities to other groups commonly labeled “terrorist.” Like them, this community supports the use of violence against noncombatants for political goals—a common definition of terrorism in the scholarly community (Goodwin, 2006; Saul, 2008; Shor, 2008, 2016, 2017).

Cottee (2020) argues that the online incel community trivializes violence committed by self-declared incels and that it would therefore be a mistake to classify the group itself as violent since it “does not ideologically justify these acts” (p. 16). Our findings suggest otherwise. We argue that many incels do in fact ideologically justify violence committed in the name of the group. As such, they may be considered a single-issue terrorist group, with sexism forming their core ideology. We thus join other scholars who have started looking at misogyny and male supremacism as a basis for terrorism (Aslam, 2012; Bairner, 1999; Haider, 2016; Hoffman et al., 2020).

As we noted earlier, there is also some indication that a shift in understanding and naming incel violence is occurring among policymakers and law enforcement agencies. In May 2020, charges for a February 2020 stabbing at a massage parlor in Toronto were updated to “murder—terrorist activity” (Bell et al., 2020). This marked the first time that a terrorism charge has been laid over incel-related violence, indicating an important turn in the way that incel violence is viewed by law enforcement agents. Our findings offer support for such developments.

Although we found evidence of discourse that resembles that of terrorist groups, further research is warranted into the mechanisms that transform a discourse of violence into actual violent incidents. Our analysis cannot determine the extent to which incels are seriously committed to their violent statements versus simply provoking reactions or blowing off steam. However, it is important to emphasize that the discourse we analyzed was anchored in a real attack—the 2018 Toronto van attack—and was therefore not purely a hypothetical discussion. Because our sample focused on the discourse immediately following the Toronto van attack, we were able to directly explore how incels talk about actual violence.

The dominance of support for violence in our analysis suggests that the incel community may be operating as an echo chamber, where shared narratives and beliefs are reinforced through repeated interactions with peers who also have similar attitudes (Cinelli et al., 2021). Papadamou et al. (2021) found evidence of an echo chamber effect in the incel community on YouTube, with the algorithm pushing additional incel content on users who interact with an initial incel-related video. Echo chambers can move the members of an entire group to take up more extreme views over time (Sunstein, 2002). To the extent that this takes place in the incel community, levels of violence committed by incels could increase over time as the ideology of the community further shifts toward extremism and as the martyrization of previous perpetrators pushes others to follow suit. It is therefore crucial to understand the online discourse of incels even as incidents of physical violence by community members remain rare at this time.

Of note, we should be cautious not to overgeneralize the findings and conclude about the opinions of all incels. Although we found that hundreds of unique users expressed sympathy for violence, it remains possible that these are simply a vocal group among the tens of thousands of incel users and that others who do not support violence remained silent and self-censored. Still, it is notable that the explicit and publicly available *discourse* of incels decidedly condones violence with little dissent and, in many cases, provides clear justifications for past violence and motives for future violence. Clearly, the view of violence as instrumentally valuable is not only shared by a marginalized fringe of the incel community. Instead, we posit that the *mainstream* incel ideology has evolved to include elements consistent with terrorist ideologies. Incel attackers are not simply individuals who have “gone rogue” and are detached from the broader incel community. Rather, the larger incel community operates in support of terrorist activities committed on behalf of the community and its grievances.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors report no known conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support this research were taken directly from publicly accessible parts of incels.is. The authors' compiled text sample is not available due to privacy and ethics considerations.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Some individuals may personally identify as involuntarily celibate without subscribing to a male supremacist worldview. These individuals are different from the online antifeminist community of incels we study, which Kelly et al. (2021) call "misogynist incels." In our paper, we use "incel," "involuntary celibate," and "misogynist incel" interchangeably.
- <sup>2</sup> The website has moved through several domains, including incels.me, incels.co, and incels.is. At the time of publication, it is hosted at incels.is.

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