

Did COVID-19 increase radicalization potential among misogynist extremists?

Keywords: covid-19, misogynist extremism, online radicalization, Incels, Manosphere

Extended Abstract

Incels (involuntary celibates) who base their identity on the inability to form romantic relationships have recently been recognized as an important contemporary phenomenon among extremist communities [Baele, Brace, and Coan 2019; Tomkinson, Harper, and Attwell 2020; Tranchese and Sugiura 2021]. Incels are a part of the Manosphere, a group of loosely coordinated misogynist communities, which is currently a popular online community [Horta Ribeiro et al. 2021], of which they are claimed to be the most radical subgroup [Tranchese and Sugiura 2021]. They have been shown to display signs of violent extremist ideology [Baele, Brace, and Coan 2019; Tomkinson, Harper, and Attwell 2020].

We conceptualize the ideology promoted by Incels as misogynist extremism because the gender-based [Berger 2018: 34] extremism prevailing in this forum has a direct anti-women agenda [Tranchese and Sugiura 2021]. We understand extremism as a belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group, as defined by Berger [2018: 79]. Misogyny can be defined as "*an unreasonable fear or hatred of women that take on some palpable form in any given society*" and "*sexual prejudice that is symbolically exchanged (shared) among men*" [Gilmore 2010: 9]. Contrary to widespread belief, research shows that misogyny can be a factor in the radicalization process [Cottee 2021].

Covid-19 has been shown to increase traffic on Incel forum. From this, Davies et al. [2021] derive an increased potential for radicalization. Vu (2020) finds the first indication of increased use of hostile and violent language on the largest Incel forum incels.is. We want to analyze those claims more in-depth. Apart from replicating the findings of existing studies, we plan to employ use of language measures and topic modeling. Therefore, the research question we pose is: did covid-19 increase the threat of radicalization among Incels?

We conduct our analysis on the publicly visible posts of the incels.is forum. In contrast to previous research [Davies et al. 2021, Vu 2020], we analyzed the activity numbers of incels.is for a longer period (2019-2022) - thereby, we can identify the beginning and end of the Covid-19-caused activity spike. This allows a comparison of pre-lockdown, lockdown, and post-lockdown periods to investigate the initial effect of the lockdown and the longer-lasting impact of Covid-19 on the forum.

Using piecewise regression, we detected four breakpoints that mark the moments in the time series when the trend changes significantly (see Figure 1). Their dates mark the transition periods between the pre-lockdown, lockdown, and post-lockdown times. By lockdown, we mean the initial first wave of lockdowns worldwide. This period in data coincides with the first lockdowns in most countries worldwide [Mathieu et al. 2020]. Based on the forum's activity data, we conclude that the first wave had the most decisive impact on the forum's activity. This is perhaps because lockdown measures worldwide started to differ later in the pandemic.

Drawing on this preliminary finding, we will further observe if the pandemic significantly influenced forum users' communication regarding signs of extremism. Membership in a community and engagement with extremist content is a proxy concept for increased chances of radicalization [Neumann 2016]. We will use several variables measuring different dimensions of misogynist extremism to capture this. We operationalize misogynist extremism as having three dimensions: toxicity, misogyny, and topic. Toxicity has been suggested to

correlate strongly with hate speech and offensive language [Lees et al. 2022], which is a good predictor of extremist language [Kleinberg, van der Vegt, Gill 2020]. Misogyny is an integral part of this particular kind of extremism that Incels engage in [Cottee 2021; Jaki et al. 2019]. Topic models on Incel forums have been shown to capture particular topics distinctive for misogynist extremism [Baele, Brace, and Coan 2019]. For toxicity and misogyny trends assessment, we will again conduct piecewise regression. We will derive topics from data segmented as pre-lockdown, lockdown, and post-lockdown, as the piecewise regression on activity data suggests, allowing us to compare the differences in topics in these significantly different periods of activity.

References

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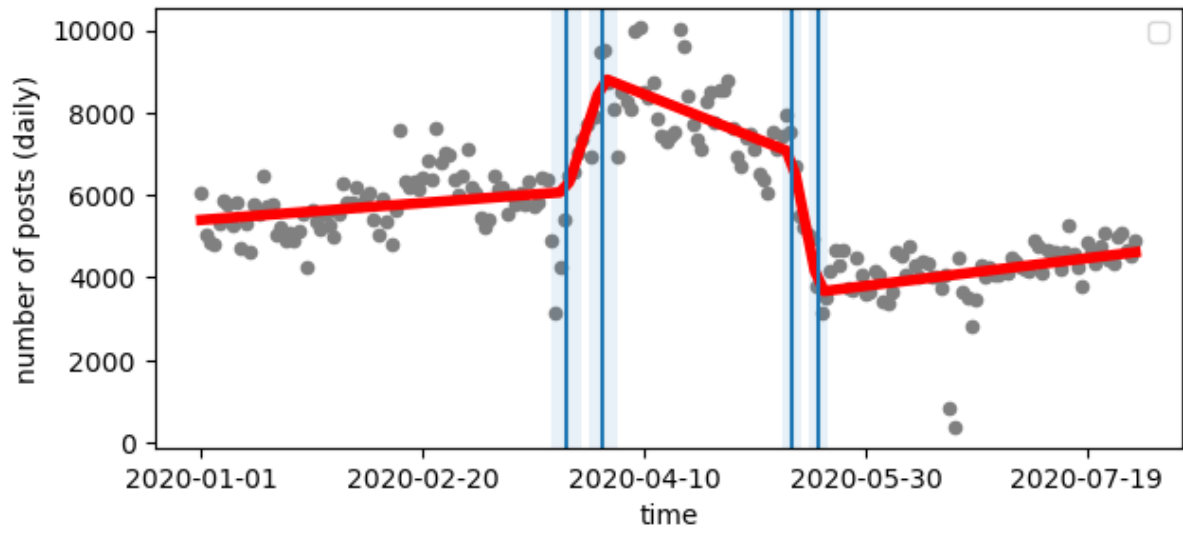


Figure 1. piecewise regression on number of posts