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## Strength in Contradiction: The Radicalization of Incel Rhetoric

In 2014, the term “incel” entered the mainstream media after twenty-two-year-old Elliot Rodger committed the Isla Vista murders in which he “stabbed and shot 6 people to death near the UCLA campus” (Jaki, 1). Prior to the mass killing, Rodger explained his actions in a YouTube video and a one-hundred-thirty-seven-page manifesto in which he blamed women for forcing him “to endure an existence of loneliness, rejection, and unfulfilled desires” and pledged to punish them for “[giving] their affection and sex and love to other men but never to [himself]” (Palma, 11). Rodger identified as an incel, a portmanteau for involuntary celibate, and his words summarized the incel ideology, which is based on misogyny, racism, homophobia, and which views “sex...as a human right” to which all men are entitled (Labba, 17).

Incel communities are based entirely on online forums and chatrooms, and participants of incel groups express a worldview that appears to be contradictory and paradoxical. Incel rhetoric emphasizes hatred towards out-groups that include sexually active men and women and non-white and non-heterosexual individuals, but simultaneously, “the sense of solidarity among Incels is rooted in their self-deprecating perceptions of physical appearance and a shared sense of inferiority” (Labba, 21-22). Furthermore, incels see “hating women...as an inherent characteristic” of their ideology, yet the definition of “incel” implies a desire for romantic relationships or sex with women, and many self-described incels clearly express this wish (Jaki, 12). These contradictions are overcome through the construction of vocabularies and schemas unique to the incel community and through the appropriation of existing schemas of prejudice and bigotry that incels use to deflect the blame for their lack of romantic success onto out-groups. The portrayal of the incel in-group as victims of these out-groups justifies hateful rhetoric and acts of violence and allows incels to maintain a belief in their “true” superiority. Thus, incel rhetoric relies on the contradictions of the incel worldview by allowing incels to use their self-loathing as a basis for a group identity while avoiding personal responsibility for their loneliness and romantic rejection by blaming their condition on members of the out-group.

The construction of the incel group identity relies on a shared vocabulary that is utilized in incel forums and chatrooms to commiserate over common feelings of inferiority and social isolation in order to “help address...emotional needs” (Labba, 21). The incel worldview relies on the assumption that physical appearance is the primary factor that prevents members of the incel community from being attractive to women. This incel obsession with their self-perceived ugliness is reflected “by their username, such as Hunchback, MicroDong...blackletcel, [and] Asianmanletcel...(where -let refers to a shorter height)” (Jaki, 16). Incels have even created a “categorization system based on specific facial features...build, height, personality, and/or normally-sized genitals” known as *lookism* or *LMS* to discuss their physical characteristics and to “attract attention, pity, and confirmation of their perceived hopeless situation” (Jaki, 16). In their article “Online Hatred of Women in the Incels.me Forum: Linguistic Analysis and Automatic Detection,” Sylvia Jaki and several other researchers used a Machine Learning (ML) system to

analyze sixty-five-thousand messages from the website Incels.me. Their psychological profile of users of the site revealed that a large proportion of the conversations analyzed expressed “negative emotions like anger and uncertainty, and...social inhibition (i.e., avoidance, anxiety)” (Jaki, 15). This preoccupation with ugliness and the expression of such negative emotions form the basis of the incels’ “companionship motive for participating in virtual communities,” a phenomenon in which users turn to online interaction to escape feelings of isolation (Dholakia and Bagozzi, 258). The language of self-deprecation thus serves a vital role in the formation of the incel in-group by providing members with a “safe-space...to find kinship [and] camaraderie...through a shared sense of victimhood,” which is communicated using a common vernacular unique to the in-group (Labbaf, 17).

Although expressions of hopelessness and inferiority are common themes across incel forums, incel rhetoric asserts the superiority of the incel community over out-groups by incorporating the schemas for established forms of bigotry and by creating new vocabularies to describe sexually active women and men. The division between the schemas used to discuss the in-group and the out-group allows any conversation regarding the out-group to focus solely on prejudiced statements and on blaming members of the out-group for the incels’ self-perceived inadequacies without touching upon the self-hate that characterizes discussion of the in-group. Important features of the incel lexicon include terms borrowed from the 1999 science fiction film *The Matrix* with incels comparing themselves to “the main character...[who] chooses to swallow a ‘red pill,’ which dissipates the illusion of freedom and reveals the ugly truth of humanity’s exploitation – thereby enabling revolution” (Van Valkenburgh, 5). In incel terminology, “redpill” means “to believe [that] women are only attracted to a small subset of men with certain physical features,” while “bluepill” is used to describe individuals who have not awakened to the truth and who “believe that kindness toward women will increase chances of a relationship” (NCR, 1). In addition to creating words to describe the incel worldview, incels use terms such as “chad” – meaning a sexually active, physically attractive man – and “femoid,” “roastie,” or “holes” – derogatory expressions against women – to designate an out-group comprised of sexually active individuals. The use of such in-group-specific terminology functions “as a rhetorical force that strengthens the interconnectedness of an ingroup and ostracizes those who are deemed unwelcome” (Labbaf, 19).

Stephen Riggin’s discussion of the use of stereotypes and the naming of Others in his chapter “The Rhetoric of Othering” also illuminates how incel rhetoric uses naming to establish implicit positions of power over the out-group while reconciling misogyny with the desire for sex and romance using stereotypes. In incel forums, the out-group of sexually active individuals is divided into females, referred to as “staceys,” and males, who incels call “chads.” A stacey is “the ‘perfect’ woman who...spends her days lusting after chads,” and incels blame their inability to find sex on chads, who they see as stealing the sexual opportunities open to others (NCR, 1). The application of generic names to the out-group allows incels to transform the individual members of the out-group into a contemptible, anonymous mass. When this view of the out-group is paired with intimate discussions of the personal issues and inner lives of the in-group, incels are able to frame themselves as sensitive individuals who truly matter in contrast to the reprehensible and lustful members of the out-group.

The in-group's exclusive use of incel-created names and other derogatory expressions to describe the out-group also manifests the incels' reliance on "repetitious and contradictory" stereotypes to understand the out-group. Although the stereotype of staceys and chads as sex-obsessed, inferior individuals expresses a strong sense of disdain and scorn, Riggins notes that "through stereotypes, the Self expresses ambivalence toward Others, expressing not just derision but derision and desire" (9). The incel condition of celibacy is involuntary and unwanted, and the definition of a "chad" as an "ideal" man who women are attracted to reveals that the concept of the "chad" embodies a "human quality that [is] in some ways appealing [and is] recognized in Others" (Riggins, 10). Similarly, incels express desire for "staceys" who they see as a "perfect" woman, but because romantic contact with a "stacey" is seen as unattainable for incels, the attractive qualities of staceys "are disavowed...by the Self" but simultaneously desired (Riggins, 10). Thus, through naming the Other and through the exclusive characterization of the Other with stereotypes, incels acknowledge their wish to identify with the Other while also repressing the shame of their inability to do so by dehumanizing and hating the Other.

The terminology used to describe these aspects of the incel worldview may be exclusive to the incel in-group, but incels have also co-opted the schemas and ideas from existing forms of misogyny, racism, and homophobia to legitimize their ideology. In some cases, crossovers of rhetoric have occurred between mainstream right-wing pundits and the "manosphere," defined as "the loose confederacy of interest groups" whose members "purport to liberate men from a life of feminist delusion" (Ging, 1). The majority of hate speech found on incel forums such as Incels.me consists of misogynistic statements, as demonstrated in Jaki's study that found that "thirty-percent of threads are misogynistic" compared to "fifteen-percent [that] are homophobic, and three-percent [that] are racist" (Jaki, 10). These misogynistic feelings subsequently find causes in political issues, and some of the rhetoric used in the manosphere is captured and mirrored by the mainstream media. For example, researchers Lisa Gotell and Emily Dutton of the University of Alberta, Canada found that "in the past few years, counterclaims to anti-rape feminism have intensified, casting contemporary feminism as a force of stultifying political correctness" (Gotell and Dutton, 68). Their assertion is reflected by "right wing columnists...including Caroline Kitchens in *Time Magazine* (2014), Barbara Kay in *The National Post* (2014) and Margaret Wentz in *The Globe and Mail* (2013)" who have "repeatedly made the argument that rape culture is feminist hysteria" (Gotell and Dutton, 75).

Groups associated with the manosphere play a similar role "in this emergent backlash [against anti-rape feminism]" by using a victim-victimizer reversal to "[position] men as the scapegoated and silenced victims of anti-rape feminism" on their websites and in online forums and chatrooms (Gotell and Dutton, 69). The reframing of anti-rape feminism as "feminist hysteria" and the overemphasis of men as victims of anti-rape feminism in both the manosphere and the mainstream media establishes a "hierarchy of meaning" that allows misogynistic "voices identified with a dominant group [to] appear to embody the truth," while "the voices of the subordinated" – which in this case are anti-rape feminists – "appear to provide simply a partial explanation of events" (Riggins, 11). Jaki cites an article by Andreas Kamper that shows "that the anti-feminist movement is connected to white supremacy and to anti-Semitism," which also ties the incel community to existing communities dedicated to hate against racial minorities and queer peoples (Jaki, 3). By incorporating the rhetoric and language of other hate groups into their own ideology, incels apply the hate and blame that they feel for "staceys" and "chads" to

other minority groups, who they “scapegoat...for [economic] alienation, exploitation, unemployment, and precarity” (Van Valkenburgh, 2). Thus, the connections between the rhetoric of incel groups and the rhetoric of other hate groups legitimizes incel ideas and speech among far-right extremists, which allows incel hate speech to become “the digital transmogrification of very real political problems” (Van Valkenburgh, 2).

Formed from the need to express grievances and to find sympathy and camaraderie, the injection of incel rhetoric, language, and views into the political sphere catalyzed the development of incel rhetoric from hate speech to rhetoric that advocates for a movement of violent extremism. The roots of incel terrorism emerged from the aforementioned Isla Vista killings where after his rampage and subsequent death, Elliot Rodger was “lionized within online forums of Incels” for the violence of his act and for his manifesto and YouTube videos, which soon “became a staple hold of the Incel movement, serving as a guide for many Incels who want to partake in acts of violence” (Labfaf, 17). Aside from the rejection that he faced from women, other focal points of Rodger’s manifesto included his anger towards “men of color who are able to succeed, socially and sexually, despite their race” (Yang, 1) and his “[obsession]...about getting rich” to impress women (Rodger, 61). Rodger, who became known as “Saint Elliot” in the incel community after the Isla Vista attack, related several incidents from his life that revealed his frustration and anger towards African-Americans, Mexicans, and Asians who he resented and blamed for his failure to attract women. There is a clear incorporation of white supremacist rhetoric in Elliot’s description of “an inferior, ugly black boy,” “an ugly Asian,” and his reference to “a beautiful Eurasian like myself,” and the blame that he casts on racial minorities for his lack of wealth and sexual success echoes far-right beliefs that immigrants and minorities deprive whites from possessing the economic and social position that they are entitled to (Rodger, 121).

The mass murders committed by other incel violent extremists reveal a coalescing of violent incel rhetoric around Rodger and the political ideas that motivated him. Prominent examples include Alek Minnassian’s statement that “the Incel Rebellion has begun...All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger” and Scott Paul Beierle’s post in which he said that “the position, the situation, the disposition of Elliot Rodger...that was me” (NCR, 1). Minnassian was responsible for the 2018 Toronto van attack in which he killed ten people and injured sixteen others and Beierle perpetrated a mass shooting at a yoga studio in Tallahassee, killing two and injuring five. These terrorists were respectively dubbed “Saint Alek” and “Saint Yogacel” by the incel community after their murders, and the use of religious language further manifests the evolution of incel rhetoric from language used to discuss personal and emotional issues to the language of radical political extremism.

The path to radicalization in the incel community necessitates the overcoming of cognitive dissonances created by the contradictions in the incel ideology, and in her article “A New Understanding of Terrorism Using Cognitive Dissonance Principles,” Andrea Kohn Maikovich discusses the means through which members of terrorist groups and cults, such as Al Qaeda and the German Red Army Baader-Meinhof Gang, become radicalized by suppressing cognitive dissonance using the rhetoric of their ideologies. According to Maikovich, “this dissonance serves as an effective inhibitor” of extremist violence, but in certain cases, individuals can reduce cognitive dissonances, which increases the possibility of extremist behavior (Maikovich, 377). Maikovich cites Leon Festinger’s original cognitive dissonance theory to establish that

“dissonance is aroused when two ‘elements of knowledge’ are both relevant to one another and dissonant,” and because “dissonance is psychologically uncomfortable,” those who experience it will seek to “remove dissonant cognitions, add consonant cognitions, or reduce the importance of dissonant cognitions” (Maikovich, 376).

Earlier, an examination of the rhetoric of incel ideology revealed a number of such dissonant cognitions, including a contradiction between desiring sex and relationships and the advocacy of violence towards women as well as juxtapositions of self-loathing and the belief in the inferiority of the out-group. While the large majority of incels confine their online speech to angry, hateful, and sometimes violent forum posts, sporadic incidents of incel terrorism show that some individuals are able to overcome the inhibiting effects of cognitive dissonance to act out extremist violence. Maikovich’s table of dissonance-reducing mechanisms can be applied to many aspects of incel rhetoric to explain how individuals such as Rodgers, Minnassian, and Beierle escalated their virtual expressions of hate into real-life bloodshed:

*Table I*

Condition	Dissonance-Reducing Mechanism	How?
Isolation from outside world	Reduce dissonant cognitions	Avoid hearing opposite perspectives from non-organization members
“Good vs. Evil” view of world	Increase consonant cognitions	Frame actions as “good” fighting “evil”
Society as illegitimate and unjust	Increase consonant cognitions	Legitimize using drastic means to fight unjust governments and their people
Need for radical social change	Increase importance of consonant cognitions	Make the situation seem urgent
Lack of legal means to achieve change	Increase consonant cognitions	Emphasize paucity of alternative solutions
Ideal society justifies any means	Reduce importance of dissonant cognitions	De-emphasize doubts about violence because of the importance of an ideal society
Terrorists can bring about social change	Increase consonant cognitions	Idealize terrorists’ role
Societal change improves organization’s standing	Increase consonant cognitions	Emphasize how actions can bolster support for organization

Most of the items under the “Conditions” column can be applied to some element of the incel ideology as expressed by online incel rhetoric. Online incel forums, which attract individuals sharing the same problems, grievances, and worldviews, effectively act as echo chambers in which hateful speech and advocacy for violence is mutually reinforced. The inability of incels to obtain the sex that they believe is entitled to them as a result of “staceys” and “chads” reveals a belief in an unjust society that rewards a depraved out-group at the expense of the “Supreme Gentlemen” of the in-group (NCR, 1). Finally, the incel concept of the “redpill” asserts that female non-attraction to incels is an unchangeable truth that implies that those who identify as incels need to either accept their state of permanent celibacy or bring about a change in their situation through direct violence (i.e. rape) or a revolution that will establish an ideal society for the in-group (i.e. Minaissan’s “Incel Rebellion”).

The “How?” column of Maikovich’s table briefly summarizes the means by which an extremist ideology reduces its adherents’ cognitive dissonances through its expression of its worldview. Some of the most powerful rhetorical techniques to reduce cognitive dissonance are the use of the “Just World Bias,” the use of social support, and the establishment of an in-group hierarchy. The incel use of harshly misogynistic, homophobic, and racist language against the out-group “catalyzes a process of devaluing victims and their suffering because of the assumption that this suffering is deserved,” which leads incels to view the world “through the lens of a just world bias” that sees victims of incel terror attacks as “deserving [their] fates...because of what they did” (Maikovich, 383). In the case of incel extremist ideology, victims of incel terror attacks deserve retributive violence for being sexually active and for being an Other. Social support reduces cognitive dissonance “by adding consonant cognitions, namely by seeking reassurance from each other and by increasing the number of believers,” and the elevation of incel terrorists to a status of sainthood within the in-group transforms these murderers into “leaders [who] are extremely legitimate, commanding of respect, and powerful” and who are to be emulated by the broader in-group community (Maikovich, 382, 388). Thus, the development of different non-violent factions within the manosphere, such as anti-feminists and far-right groups, into an extremist incel community that advocates for and commits acts of violence mirrors the evolution of “many terrorist organizations [that] began as non-violent protest groups that radicalized and became violent only over time” (Maikovich, 381). Although the incel community is far less structured than traditional terrorist groups, its adoption of rhetorical strategies that allow members to overcome cognitive dissonances within the ideology demonstrates the essential nature of contradiction to the ideology. Like members of other terrorist organizations, incels create a community and bond over a worldview inconsistent with reality; and by separating the hardcore believers, who are able to overcome their cognitive dissonances regarding the ideology, from non-believers – “normies” in incel terminology – the incel community becomes even more isolated and radicalized.

Contradiction is a core part of the incel ideology, and rather than weakening in-group solidarity, incels have made use of their language and rhetoric to ignore and even derive rhetorical strength from these inconsistencies. By creating vocabularies and schemas particular to the incel community to discuss the in-group and out-group, the incel community bonds over highly emotional issues, such as self-worth and romantic rejection. Meanwhile, the out-group is clearly identified using terminology specific to incels or to the language of hate speech. Such rhetoric and frames of thought allow incels, who are “predominantly adolescent, [heterosexual] males,” to overcome feelings of powerlessness through a belief in their “superiority” and to shift the blame for their romantic and economic problems onto the out-group (Labaf, 18).

The commonalities that incels find with mainstream prejudiced or hateful language, such as the “anti-anti-rape backlash,” or with hate groups has also infused a twisted sense of political unity and action into incel rhetoric (Gotell and Dutton, 68). Instead of using negative emotion exclusively to connect with and find sympathy from others, these feelings find new cause in the rhetoric of a political movement by allowing “incels [to amplify] sentiments of self-hate, self-loathing, and anger towards women” and other out-groups to the point where users on incel forums will encourage “rape and murder...as well as [the plotting of] mass shootings (Labaf, 20, 22). In addition, incels resolve the conflict between the desire for and the despising of

women by using such violent rhetoric to claim that rape is the only way for self-identified incels to have sex. Self-contradicting language can be found in the views of a number of extremist groups and ideologies, and as incel rhetoric continues to fester among online forums, it will be important to examine the development of how users of these forums express fanatical and violent ideas and intentions.

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