

Incel Radical Milieu and External Locus of Control

Sara Brzuszkiewicz

Abstract

In the last few years, incel violence has been the subject of many excellent journalistic accounts, but — with few notable exceptions, whose insights will be acknowledged and valued throughout this research paper — there has not been much scholarly output addressing the phenomenon. Individuals who self-identify as involuntary celibates are being radicalised into believing that the world is dominated by women and attractive men, and their marginalisation depends on this domination within what incels often term the mating market. After a number of violent attacks in which the perpetrators were linked in various ways to the inceldom — the status of involuntary celibacy — researchers have started to debate whether incel violence should be considered terrorism or not.

This paper examines the pillars of incel ideology through an analysis of incels' own vocabulary and narratives. Based on this analysis, it introduces two distinct research hypotheses. First, it argues that, while consensus is being gradually reached on considering incel violence as terrorism, scholars do not possess an effective analytical framework for studying the broader incel communities and, in order to partly fill this gap, a proper notion is that of a radical milieu, i.e. a community where radicalisation occurs. The second research hypothesis suggests that the radicalisation power of this milieu lies in the external locus of control that most incels adopt and take to the extreme in their perception of themselves and of inter-sex relations.

Keywords: incels, inceldom, violence, radicalisation, radical milieu, locus of control, misogyny

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Introduction

Incels is the portmanteau of “involuntary celibates” and designates individuals who describe themselves as unable to find women who are willing to engage in romantic relations with them. Their status is described as *inceldom*. The first documented usage of the term incel dates back to 1993, when a Canadian university student, known on the internet as Alana, launched the website Alana’s Involuntary Celibacy Project, to discuss thoughts and experiences related to the condition of involuntarily not having love and sexual relationships.¹ A few years later, in 1997, Alana created a mailing list on the same topics that used the abbreviation INVCEL, later shortened to *incel*, but stopped her activity on the website around 2000.

According to the individuals who identify as involuntary celibates, being an incel is not a unitary ideology *per se* or a unitary social movement. Rather, it is a state of being that applies to a diverse array of people. Nonetheless, incels are gathering in increasingly violent online communities that do reveal multiple ideological commonalities. Therefore, given the recurrent ideological tropes and the homogeneity of incel narratives

that can be identified in their discourse, it is appropriate to look at *inceldom* as a social movement, albeit one that is not completely unitary and structured.

Manoel Horta Ribeiro and other scholars, who analysed the main contemporary trends within the modern online *manosphere*,² identified four different categories:³ Pick Up Artists (PUAs); Men’s Right Activists (MRAs); Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW); and Involuntary Celibates (Incels).⁴

From a historical perspective, the first online incel forums were used to create a sense of community and to fill emotional needs.⁵ Today, however, older and less violent groups are not as relevant as before and membership in the more aggressive groups is becoming increasingly prevalent.⁶ In a recent groundbreaking paper on incel violence, Bruce Hoffman, Jacob Ware, and Ezra Shapiro highlight that, until less than a decade ago, two distinct types of digital forums appear to have existed within the incel galaxy. The first type, which can be identified mainly with the forum IncelSupport, emphasised support for those unable to find romantic connections, while another forum, LoveShy, was becoming increasingly militant and hostile to women.⁷ The website LoveShy was founded in 2003

1 Ashifa Kassam, “Woman behind ‘incel’ says angry men hijacked her word ‘as a weapon of war’,” *The Guardian*, 26 April 2018. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/25/woman-who-invented-incel-movement-interview-toronto-attack>, accessed 12 November 2020.

2 Zack Beauchamp defines the manosphere as a loose group of websites united by their belief in various male-dominant ideologies. See Zack Beauchamp, “Our incel problem,” *Vox*, 23 April 2019. Available at: <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/4/16/18287446/incel-definition-reddit>, accessed 12 November 2020.

3 Even though scrutinising the characteristics of the other three categories of the manosphere falls outside the scope of the present research paper on Incels, a number of features need to be highlighted.

Pick Up Artists attempt to coax women into having sex with them through a mixture of flattery and psychological manipulation and coercion. Therefore, they do not believe, as incels do, that there is nothing that can be done to convince women to have a sexual relationship with men unless men are physically attractive, charismatic, or rich.

Men’s Right Activists are groups in the manosphere that centre their discourse on issues such as bias in family courts or sexual abuse suffered by men. However, the online activities often move in disturbing and highly misogynistic directions and blame women for being too independent or sexually promiscuous.

Men Going Their Own Way have three main principles: no cohabitating, no marriage, and no children. According to men who embrace this solution, this is an individual lifestyle choice that implies walking away from the current sexual marketplace, which is unjust and unbalanced in favour of women and attractive men.

4 Manoel Horta Ribeiro, Jeremy Blackburn, Barry Bradlyn, Emiliano De Cristofaro, Gianluca Stringhini, Summer Long, Stephanie Greenberg and Savvas Zannettou, “From Pick-Up Artists to Incels: A Data Driven Sketch of the Manosphere,” *arXiv*, 21 January 2020. Available at: <https://deepai.org/publication/from-pick-up-artists-to-incels-a-data-driven-sketch-of-the-manosphere>, accessed 12 November 2020.

5 Sylvia Jaki, Tom De Smedt, Maja Gwózdź, Rudresh Panchal, Alexander Rossa and Guy De Pauw, “Online Hatred of Women in the Incels.me Forum: Linguistic Analysis and Automatic Detection,” *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2019), pp. 240-268.

6 Tanya Basu, “The ‘manosphere’ is getting more toxic as angry men join the incels,” *MIT Technology Review*, 7 February 2020. Available at: <https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/02/07/349052/the-manosphere-is-getting-more-toxic-as-angry-men-join-the-incels/>, accessed 12 November 2020.

7 Bruce Hoffman, Jacob Ware and Ezra Shapiro, “Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol 43, No. 7 (April 2020), p. 566. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1751459>, accessed 12 November 2020

and the more extreme elements of this virtual community moved their messaging there due to the less stringent moderation policies. In more recent years, increasingly radical content started to appear on online platforms such as 4chan and Reddit, where by 2016 the incel community had 40,000 users; the current numbers are probably double that.⁸ From the following year, Reddit started banning incel subreddits for violent incitements and more heavily-moderated versions of the former subreddits began to emerge, such as *r/brincels*, though this was also banned in 2019. Today, while radical incel subreddits continue to regularly surface they are banned relatively quickly, and incel forums have largely migrated to online gaming and to dedicated websites like *Incels.co* and *Incels.net*.

Within the online communities, there are multiple status markers, mostly based on the level of interaction with women or lack thereof. Therefore, the most authentic incels are *kissless, touchless, hugless, handholdless, friendless, and virgin*, a status description that is usually shortened to KTHHFV. Over the last five years *incels* have been attracting increasing amounts of public attention — particularly because of the involvement of self-described *incels* in a number of terrorist incidents, which will be analysed later — but this community remains largely unknown to the world.

In the realm of terrorism studies, not much research has been produced about the incel phenomenon, its violent messaging, and its radicalisation patterns and dynamics. Based on these premises, this paper is divided into three sections. The first one analyses incel core ideological components through incels' own narratives, terminology, and keywords. The second section aims at verifying the research hypothesis according to which the notion of radical milieu has a strong explanatory power for addressing incel communities and

enriching the debate on whether or not incel violence should be considered terrorism.⁹ The third part of the present research paper — deeply intertwined with the former — argues that radicalisation within incel radical milieu is triggered and fostered mainly by incels' external locus of control. Locus of control is the degree to which people believe that they, as opposed to external forces beyond their influence, have control over the outcome of events in their lives. The hypothesis is that not only does external locus of control dominate incel communities, but it is also a foundational incel perspective about themselves and the world.

Methodology

Methodologically, this paper is based on a months-long monitoring of communicative exchanges and interactions among European users of incel forums and social media platforms in English, Italian, and French. Monitoring European incel forums proved to be particularly interesting, as most of the prior research has focused on North American incels.

Among these primary sources, a major role was played by incel subreddits, *Incels.co* — arguably one of the most important incel forums currently active on the internet after it replaced the now shut down *incels.me*¹⁰ — and the Facebook page *Incel Liberation Army*.¹¹ As far as the material in French is concerned, the Facebook page *Code d'Incels*¹² [Incels' Code] and the forum *Virginité Tardive* [Late-in-life Virginity] have proved to be particularly relevant.¹³ Finally, the most popular incel platform in Italian is *Il Forum degli Incels*¹⁴ [Incels' Forum], which is divided into public and private chatrooms.

According to Jan Blommaert, within the predominantly male incel galaxy messages

8 Ibid., p. 567

9 Stefan Malthaner, "The Radical Milieu," Institut für interdisziplinäre Konflikt und Gewaltforschung (IKG) (Bielefeld, November 2010), p. 1; Stefan Malthaner and Peter Waldmann, eds., "Radikale Milieus. Das soziale Umfeld terroristischer Gruppen," (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2012).

10 *Incels.co*. Available at: <https://incels.co/>, accessed 12 November 2020.

11 *Incel Liberation Army*, Facebook page. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/IncelLiberationArmy/>, accessed 12 November 2020.

12 *Code d'Incels*, Facebook page. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/CodeIncels/?ref=page_internal, accessed 12 November 2020.

13 *Virginité Tardive*. Available at: <https://forum.virginité-tardive.fr/>, accessed 12 November 2020.

14 *Il Forum degli Incels*. Available at: <https://ilforumdegliincel.forumfree.it/>, accessed 12 November 2020.

that spread misogyny or incite crime help a user to cement his reputation as an “alpha” user.¹⁵ As a result, incels’ forums are creating a sort of subcultural language, partly composed of in-group terminology for much-discussed topics, and partly composed of youth language in general.¹⁶ Scrutinising its language use is crucial to analysing the distinctive features of any radical milieu. In a recent work on incels’ discourse, — analysed through the lenses of narratology — Renske van der Veer states that, in order to understand the perpetrators of incel violence, we should overcome (legitimate) resistance to their own personal narratives and accounts, and closely read them.¹⁷ The same author notes that, when studying ego-documents of people who committed acts of violence based on a belief system built on gender stereotyping, it is useful to apply the methods and insights available from gender studies, for instance those used to study female autobiographies. Female autobiographies often contain elements that lament the marginalised position of their writers as women and, similarly, perpetrators of incel violence feel marginalised and illegitimate. This sense of marginalisation and lack of legitimacy, combined with witnessing the eclipse of many socio-cultural male privileges and the redefinition of women’s social roles can create, for some, a situation of inner conflict.¹⁸

In incels’ personal accounts, inner conflict and marginalisation are common tropes:

“We all seemed to notice a genuine change in women’s mating preferences, but we still weren’t exactly sure of the standards needed to be met. In other words, both our social and romantic roles, as men, were lined with confusion. Centuries ago, a man’s primary role was to provide and protect. Now? We weren’t quite sure. Our roles were no longer defined and none of us could agree upon a clear model of what

it meant to be considered ‘an attractive man.’”¹⁹

For these reasons, listening to what incels say is crucial to any informative research on the *inceldom* and the radicalisation of the *manosphere*.

Words matter: incelom ideology in its own words

Incel ideological milestones, grievances, and narratives represent an extremely complex puzzle that is only partly known and understood. Consolidated recurrent patterns are constantly integrated with new trends and obsessions, thus making the incel prism increasingly multi-faceted. Trying to summarise the ideology of a young and animated online community could be problematic and misleading. The topics, narratives, and discursive features that dominate *inceldom*, however, do allow us to highlight a few key ideological pillars that undergird this phenomenon. Therefore, the most accurate way to acquire a deeper understanding of *inceldom* is disclosing its ideological contents through the words of its own members.

This is particularly true because the incel vocabulary is characterised by high levels of dynamism and prolificacy: new terms, nicknames, acronyms, and abbreviations are constantly created and then adopted by online communities worldwide, in the effort to categorise every component of their worldview. As with political science and communications literature, gender studies have tended to more or less ignore the *manosphere*, thus missing the point made by Mimi Schippers who highlights that, instead of ‘possessing’ masculinity, individuals move through and produce masculinity by engaging

15 Jan Blommaert, “Online-offline modes of identity and community: Elliot Rodger’s twisted world of masculine victimhood,” *Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies*, Tilburg University, 2017.

16 Sylvia Jaki et al., “Online Hatred of Women in the Incels.me Forum: Linguistic Analysis and Automatic Detection,” *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (November 2019), pp. 240-268. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334306160_Online_hatred_of_women_in_the_Incelsme_Forum_Linguistic_analysis_and_automatic_detection, accessed 12 November 2020.

17 Renske van der Veer, “Analysing personal accounts of perpetrators of incel violence: what do they want and who do they target?,” *The International Centre for Counter- Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT)*, (June 2020). Available at: <https://icct.nl/publication/analysing-personal-accounts-of-perpetrators-of-incel-violence-what-do-they-want-and-who-do-they-target/>, accessed 12 November 2020.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Dr. Castle (pseudonym), “The Blackpill Theory: Why Incels are Right & You are Wrong,” independently published, 2019, p. 26.

in masculine practices.²⁰ For these reasons, listening to what incels have to say is crucial and, arguably, listening to *how* they say it is equally fundamental.

Three ideological pillars

The incel galaxy is an ever-evolving system of narratives and identity markers, yet, in spite of these rapid changes and the growth of users, a few ideological pillars that characterise incel discourse remain constant and can be identified. They are centred on: 1) incels' self-perception and identity; 2) on their view of gender relations and misogyny; and 3) on their belief in the uselessness of being kind to women.

As far as their self-perception is concerned, incels are unable to have romantic relationships because they perceive that they are systematically rejected by women. When it comes to the discourse of *inceldom* on gender relations, virtually all women are portrayed as unreliable, highly promiscuous, and attracted to a small number of males who dominate the romantic market.

We are thus presented with a unique form of misogynistic perspective. The standard form of misogyny is based on the misogynist's support for a power dynamic between men and women where women are in the inferior position. With incels, instead of hating women from a position of alleged superiority, hatred derives from a position of perceived inferiority, since they believe that all levers of sexuality are controlled by women.²¹ Obviously, there are some continuities between incel misogyny and older variants of antifeminist discourse, mainly because both look towards the past and express nostalgia for older models of family with traditional gender inequalities.²² However, the *manosphere* in general — and incels in particular — have been complicating the orthodox alignment of power

and dominance with hegemonic masculinity by operationalising their tropes of victimhood.²³ Incel communities display a unique form of hybrid masculinity, in which involuntary celibates distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity while simultaneously reproducing it through their nostalgia narratives of a utopian pre-feminist past and their derogatory, violent rhetoric against women and non-incel men.²⁴ These new tropes of victimhood are deeply intertwined with the notion of incels' external locus of control, which is one of the strongest radicalisation factors within incels' communities and will be addressed in the last section of the paper.

The third ideological pillar — which stems from the first two and is arguably the one with the highest radicalising power — implies that there is no point in being kind to women and respecting them, since they will ultimately choose alpha-males, no matter how rude or untrustworthy they might be. For the majority of individuals describing themselves as incels, women are promiscuous and suggestible creatures who are fascinated by social status, handsomeness, money, and charisma and are unwilling to appreciate kindness and sensibility. Believing that kindness, sensibility and respect towards women are pointless potentially has a strong radicalising power on incels, as these values are systematically rejected as useless. What replaces them is the institutionalisation of disparaging, offensive and verbally violent attitudes that characterise most incel forums and platforms. In other words, hostility towards women is legitimised to the point of becoming the most distinctive feature of these environments.

These concepts represent the theoretical basis of *inceldom*, and relate to the fact that incels consider sex as a commodity, rather than an agreement between two individuals.

In a post found on the most important Italian

20 Mimi Schippers, "Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony," *Theory and Society*, Vol. 36 (2007), p. 86. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4501776?seq=1>, accessed 12 November 2020.

21 Dr. Castle, "The Blackpill Theory," 2019, p. 56.

22 Mary Lily, "'The World is Not a Safe Place for Men': The Representational Politics of the Manosphere," MA Dissertation, University of Ottawa, 2011, p. 16. Available at: <https://ruor.uottawa.ca/handle/10393/35055>, accessed 12 November 2020.

23 Debbie Ging, "Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere," *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (2019), p. 638. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1097184X17706401>, accessed 12 November 2020.

24 *Ibid.*

incel forum, a user complains:

“All women look at the LMS (Look, Money, Status) of a man, even intelligent and good girls (this is the most demanding type) and, if you are below their standards, forget about sexual and love life. Saying that not all of them look at money is pointless, because even if this was the case (but I strongly doubt that you would consider [dating] a beggar), you will look at the physical appearance and the status.

So a man must necessarily share his physical attractiveness, his bank account, and his reputation to get sex and love from a woman. There is no relation, not even in casual intercourses, in which an ‘exchange’ is not implied.”²⁵

Considering sex as a commodity creates a worldview where couples are formed through mercenary considerations within an evolutionary competition where attractiveness-utility maximisation is the aim. In this framework, according to incel ideology, women hold the selection advantage for a wide spectrum of reasons, ranging from feminism to being able to use make-up for improving their appearance.²⁶

From redpilling to blackpilling

Incels communities are located within the realm of so-called *redpilling*. “Pills” started as a prominent feature in online chat rooms and forums of the alt-right and then they became crucial within inceldom. The term *redpilling* is derived from a popular scene of the movie *The Matrix* (1999) in which the protagonist Neo is offered one of two pills: the blue pill would allow him to continue to live in a sort of happy ignorance, while the red pill would show him the world as it really is. By choosing the blue pill, individuals opt for reassuring blindness, whereas by choosing the red pill they are willing to know unpleasant truths. *Redpilling*, accepting the truth as bad as it is, represents a core philosophy for incels, and one of the biggest incel internet communities on Reddit,

The Red Pill, was named after this notion, although it was never an incel-only forum. On the contrary, it was a site for many of the online misogynist manosphere groups and alt-right users who engage in “Red Pill” culture.

The forum — now quarantined — was based on the beliefs that: women’s lives are easier than men’s; feminism is a harmful ideology; and society is now plainly anti-male.

After rejecting the blue pill, incels have two options in gender relations. First, they can recognise that the world favours women over men and attractive men over the unattractive ones and try to do something to change this — mainly becoming alpha males. Most likely, they will end up being *gymcels*, i.e. incels who go to the gym trying to improve their bodies. The second option is acknowledging that there is no solution to this systemic condition. By making this choice, they take a further step, and swallow the so-called *blackpill*, bitterer than the red one.

Some of the incels’ heroes metaphorically took the black pill and are celebrated for that, most notably Santa Barbara mass murderer Elliot Rodger, who “martyred” himself to the incel cause and whose profile will be addressed along with those of other incel and incel-inspired terrorist offenders in the next sections of the paper. Inevitably, once a man takes the black pill, *it’s over*, a very common incel sentence, often followed by *it never began*. These few words summarise the victimhood narratives of the incel galaxy, according to which if you are ugly and not rich, you have absolutely no chance of ever being happy in intersexual relations.

This sort of physical determinism is the primary connotation of thousands of incel posts on the internet and it is closely linked to the notion of external locus of control: people’s attractiveness depends exclusively on how genetically gifted they are and this is not in their hands. Dr Castle, a self-proclaimed scholar who wrote about incels under this pseudonym and

²⁵ Author’s translation.

²⁶ Alexandra Scaggs, “‘Sex redistribution’ and the means of reproduction,” Financial Times Alphaville, 8 May 2018. Available at: <https://ftalphaville.ft.com/2018/05/08/1525779677000/-Sex-redistribution--and-the-means-of-reproduction/>, accessed 12 November 2020.

strongly sympathises with their grievances,²⁷ explains:

“Some readers will be in great appreciation of the blackpill. For them the dots will connect very predictably, creating a logical final picture. For others, it will not be as easily digested. Consuming this information can be life changing. It can also be soul-crushing.”²⁸

The *blackpill* represents a road to the abyss and leads individuals to believe things will never get better: “Some locks just do not have a key.”²⁹

If the red pill and the black pill play the most crucial roles in incel ideology and online interactions, they are not the only ones within the broader incel-dom pilling theory.³⁰ The purple pill is the incel version of centrism. It rejects both redpill and bluepill philosophies and could be described as the most moderate pill. On the opposite side of the spectrum we find the so-called rape pill, a term used within a small subset of incel forums whose members identify as “rapeceles.” They believe sexual interactions between men and women can only be coercive,³¹ and so for two reasons. First, because women are not capable of making rational decisions, so it is men’s right and duty to decide for them. Secondly, because sexual relations should be based on a power mechanism, according to which the male is dominant and the woman is submissive.

Incels’ categorising obsession

Incel communities display a sort of categorisation obsession in their quest to quantify and rank individuals based on attractiveness and success in relationships. Sometimes these markers are ethnic: incels can be *currycel* if they are of Indian or similar descent, and *ricecel* if they are of East Asian

origin. The most important category by far, however, is *Chad*, the anti-incel par excellence, against whom incels worldwide gather online to express their frustration.

A *Chad* is a man that women are attracted to. He is sexually successful, charismatic, and sociable: contrary to the incels, *Chads* won a sort of genetic and social lottery and everything is easy for them. Obviously, *Chads* can be of different ethnicities as well, thus being called Tyrone (black Chad), Chang (East Asian Chad), Chadpreet (Indian), and Chaddam (Arabic).³² Between incels and the *Chad* image there is a dual relationship made up of envy and appreciation: incels tend to hate *Chads* while simultaneously looking up to them and their successes. Involuntary celibates’ feelings are less mixed when it comes to *Stacy*. Stacy is the incel-chosen name denoting a woman who allegedly has sexual relations with multiple men, usually Chads. Stacy’s portrait is extremely stereotypical and it includes shallowness, lack of intelligence, and promiscuity.

Homogenisation and dehumanisation of women are constants in incel narratives. Women are referred to as *female humanoid organisms*, often shortened to *foids*, a term that is usually followed in English by the pronoun “it” to further dehumanise them. In hundreds of posts, women are described with the most derogatory and humiliating epithets. They are irrational and unintelligent, promiscuous, selfish, manipulative, and attention-seeking. Very popular are the acronym AWALT for “All Women Are Like That” and EWALT “Enough Women Are Like That.” The underlying theory is that even women who eventually marry *betas*³³ still want Chads and will invariably cheat on their honest and caring husband with a less sensitive but more attractive man.

Every item of incel-dom’s rich jargon contributes

27 “I have committed the last ten years of my life to the study of men who struggle to find intimacy, both sexually and emotionally (...) As a trained ethnographer with a Ph.D in the social sciences, my past academic scholarship has focused on male body image dissatisfaction, and masculinities.”, Dr. Castle, “The Blackpill Theory,” 2019, p. 1.

28 Ibid., p. 19.

29 Ibid., p. 16.

30 Alt-right currents and forums have many other pills as well. See, for instance, Anti-Defamation League (ADL), “The Extremist Medicine Cabinet: A Guide to Online “Pills,”” ADL, 9 November 2019.

31 Moonshot CVE, Violent misogyny, mass murder and suicide: it’s time to save incels from themselves. Available at: <http://moonshotcve.com/save-incels-from-themselves/>, accessed 12 November 2020.

32 Incel Inside Forum. Available at: https://incels.wiki/w/Incel_Forum_Term_Glossary, accessed 12 November 2020.

33 One of the terms incels use to describe themselves.

to the categorisation of incels and the rest of the world, creating a distinctive worldview and set of acronyms, nicknames, and plain insults denoting these concepts, which are then threaded through from one online post to another, stimulating the development of a unique radical milieu.

Inceldom as a radical milieu: tangible and intangible violence

The notion of radical milieu and its informative value for the study of inceldom

An increasing number of scholars assert that extreme fringes of the incel community and the actual attacks perpetrated by self-defined involuntary celibates should be considered terrorism. Tim Squirrel, who has carried out substantial research on incels' vocabulary, argues that incel violence should be labeled misogynist terrorism.³⁴ Amarnath Amarasingam highlights that calls for violence are commonplace on incel forums and that — under the right set of psychological and personal circumstances — these kinds of forums can be dangerous and push people into violence.³⁵

In a recent paper, Bruce Hoffman, Jacob Ware, and Ezra Shapiro note that, to date, violence committed by males calling themselves incels or in sympathy with incel ideology has claimed the lives of nearly fifty victims, and that there is ample reason to believe the threat from violent incels will remain grave going forward.³⁶ Further, Hoffman et al. warn in the same work that classifying incels is very difficult because

incel violence is not triggered by purely political motivations. Nevertheless, its ethos revolves around subjugation and repression and, for this reason, it is appropriate to talk about terrorism, at least when it comes to incels' most radical fringe.³⁷ With a few notable and insightful exceptions,³⁸ experts are gradually reaching a consensus that considers tangible incel violence as terrorism. Indeed, when it is aimed at violently dismantling a social order — primarily the order governing sexual interactions and gender roles — it displays one of the major characteristics of terrorism, which is exactly overthrowing the status quo that perpetrators see as unjust. J.M. Berger cautions that the word *terrorism* has been politicised like few others and there is no universal definition of it. However, he admits that, for the sake of clarity, we can describe it as public violence aimed at advancing a political, social, or religious cause or ideology.³⁹ Alek Minassian's post, left after his April 2018 car-ramming attack in Toronto, for instance, announces that the revolution has begun, in the form of his attack.

On 23 April 2018 in Toronto, a van drove into pedestrians killing ten people and injuring sixteen others in the deadliest attack of its kind in Canadian history. The attacker Alek Minassian, a self-described incel, was then arrested after trying to goad police into shooting him. In his statement, Minassian quotes incel terrorist Elliot Rodger. On 23 May 2014, 22-year-old Rodger killed six people and injured fourteen in Isla Vista, near the campus of the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), before committing suicide. Rodger penned a 141-page, 100,000-word manifesto about his sexual deprivation and the evils of women before his attack.⁴⁰

While consensus on the opportunity to consider tangible incel violence as terrorism

34 Tim Squirrel, "New article at The Independent: why Incels are more (and more violent) than just Men's Rights Activists," timsquirrel.com, 26 April 2018. Available at: <https://www.timsquirrel.com/blog/2018/4/26/new-article-at-the-independent-why-incels-are-more-and-more-violent-than-just-mens-rights-activists>, accessed 12 November 2020.

35 Justin Ling, Jill Mahoney, Patrick McGuire and Colin Freeze, "The 'incel' community and the dark side of the Internet," The Globe and Mail, 24 April 2018. Available at: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-the-incel-community-and-the-dark-side-of-the-internet/>, accessed 12 November 2020.

36 Hoffman, "Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence," 2020, p. 565.

37 Ibid. p. 568.

38 Phil Gurski, "Incel violence is not terrorism... at least not yet," Borealis Threat and Risk Consulting, 28 May 2020. Available at: <https://borealisthreatandrisk.com/incel-violence-is-not-terrorism-at-least-not-yet/>, accessed 12 November 2020.

39 J.M. Berger, "The Difference Between a Killer and a Terrorist," The Atlantic, 26 April 2018. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/04/the-difference-between-killer-and-terrorist/558998/>, accessed 12 November 2020.

40 The incel discursive features that Rodger and Minassian revealed will be analysed in the following sections of the Paper.

is gradually growing, there is no such dynamic when it comes to incel communities as whole, including its non-physically violent fringes, where aggressive and misogynistic narratives are in any case pivotal. While increasingly grappling with the many facets of the incel community and documenting its complexities, experts have not yet found a complete theoretical framework or an informative notion that could potentially enrich the debate; this paper proposes that regarding inceldom as a radical milieu could help filling this gap. In the incel context, radical milieu would be defined as an environment that, while not physically violent itself, shares core elements of the terrorists' perspective and experiences. In this way, radical milieus provide the breeding and recruiting ground, as well as direct and indirect support to those individuals who might continue their process of radicalisation to the point of committing actual attacks. This definition aligns with that given by Stefan Malthaner and Peter Waldmann, who use the term "radical milieu" to describe the community in which radicalisation takes place.⁴¹ The radical milieu is composed of people who are not necessarily violent or radicalised, but where members can find a support system, a unique sense of belonging and camaraderie, and, within this environment, individuals find implicit or explicit legitimisation for their grievances and frustration. In the case of self-defined incels, loneliness plays a major role in their lives, as it emerges from their own words, and sharing emotions and feelings with

an online peer group is particularly appealing. Scrutinising similarities and differences between the incel radical milieu and other comparable radical environments will be crucial to better understand the trajectory of this ideology.

The notion of a radical milieu could be crucial for identifying the radicalisation processes taking place within incel communities. It is in this milieu that demands for recognition and legitimacy are voiced and the gradual separation from the out-group — i.e. mainstream society — takes place, as the in-group sees itself as increasingly vulnerable and threatened by the out-group.⁴² In the last few years, scholars have been observing these patterns mostly when studying jihadism,⁴³ and jihadist recruitment, but their insights largely are generalisable to other forms of radicalisation. The confluence of peer-to-peer interaction, coupled with the ubiquitous connectivity of social media, creates the "perfect storm for recruitment",⁴⁴ and tempting alternatives to a life perceived as meaningless.⁴⁵ Lisa Sugiura describes incel forums as a "networked misogyny", and urges such forums be taken seriously — not only because of the widespread hate speech, but also because of the inherent nature of grooming that could radicalise more vulnerable, disillusioned young men.⁴⁶

It should be noted that within the incel radical milieu, the practice of grooming has peculiar

41 Malthaner, "The Radical Milieu," 2020, p. 1; Malthaner, "Radikale Milieus. Das soziale Umfeld terroristischer Gruppen," 2012; Stefan Malthaner and Peter Waldmann, "The radical milieu: conceptualizing the supportive social environment of terrorist groups," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 37, No. 12 (2014), pp. 979-998. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2014.962441>, accessed 12 November 2020.

42 J.M. Berger, "Extremist Construction of Identity: How Escalating Demands for Legitimacy Shape and Define In-Group and Out-Group Dynamics," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague (ICCT)*, 21 April 2017. Available at: <https://icct.nl/publication/extremist-construction-of-identity-how-escalating-demands-for-legitimacy-shape-and-define-in-group-and-out-group-dynamics/#:~:text=Extremist%20Construction%20of%20Identity%3A%20How%20Escalating%20Demands%20for%20Legitimacy%20Shape,Group%20and%20Out%2DGroup%20Dynamics&text=By%20J.M.%20Berger.,forerunner%20known%20as%20British%20Israelism>, accessed: 12 November 2020.

43 See for instance Arturo Varvelli, ed., *Jihadist Hotbeds. Understanding Local Radicalization Processes*, (Milan: Institute for International Political Studies, 2016); Rosanna E. Guadagno, Adam Lankford, Nicole L. Muscanell, Bradley M. Okdie and Debra M. McCallum, "Social Influence in the online Recruitment of terrorists and terrorist Sympathizers: Implications for Social Psychology Research," *Revue Internationale de Psychologie Sociale*, Vol. 1, No. 23 (2010), pp. 25-56. Available at: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-internationale-de-psychologie-sociale-2010-1-page-25.htm#>, accessed 15 June 2020; Francesco Bergoglio Errico, "Where Do I Belong? — Identity Crises and Islamic Radicalism," *European Eye on Radicalization*, 12 September 2018. Available at: <https://eeradicalization.com/where-do-i-belong-identity-crises-and-islamic-radicalism/>, accessed 12 November 2020.

44 Ali Soufan and Daniel Schoenfeld, "Regional hotbeds as drivers of radicalization," in Arturo Varvelli, ed., *Jihadist Hotbeds. Understanding Local Radicalization Processes* (Milan: Institute for International Political Studies, 2016), p. 19.

45 Valentina Colombo, "Multiple Layers of Marginalization as a Paradigm of Tunisian Hotbeds of Jihadism," in Arturo Varvelli, ed., *Jihadist Hotbeds. Understanding Local Radicalization Processes* (Milan: Institute for International Political Studies, 2016), p. 116.

46 Amelia Tait, "Rise of the women haters: Inside the dark world of the British 'incels,'" *The Telegraph*, 18 August 2018. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/the-filter/rise-women-haters-inside-dark-world-british-incels/>, accessed 15 November 2020.

characteristics.⁴⁷ Instead of being carried out by charismatic leaders or recruiters belonging to the group that the individual is yet to join, in the case of inceldom a sort of reciprocal grooming can be observed, in which peer-to-peer pressure, in synergy with the value attributed to the actions of incel “heroes” like Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian, seems to have remarkable radicalisation potential. This horizontal radicalisation, which largely abandons the hierarchical structure of other ideologies and social movements, is one of the features of the inceldom that make it a unique radical milieu in need of further research.

Similar to any other radical milieu, incels’ online forums show an ongoing tension between trying to recruit more members to their cause and protecting themselves from the outside world — of *normies* and alpha men. This tension leads the milieu to a perpetual struggle over authenticity,⁴⁸ which in turn fosters the categorising obsession analysed above. Users engage in endless arguments over how pure an incel has to be and accuse each other of being *fakecels* or voluntary — instead of involuntary — celibates, thus creating a radical milieu that is constantly fed with narratives of victimhood, misogyny, authenticity issues, and *us vs them* discourses.

Tangible violence: consolidating incels’ radical milieu

In the last six years, violence perpetrated by individuals who self-described as incels has killed almost fifty people. These attacks represent the shift from theorisation of violence to tangible destructiveness. Interestingly, all the perpetrators of major incel attacks had a variable degree of proximity and participation to incel radical milieu, which range from being an active user of incel online forums — like Elliot Rodger or Alek Minassian — to Armando Hernandez, who declared his intention to target couples but, according to the first results of the police investigation, did not seem as active as

other perpetrators online.

The Rodger case in California in May 2014 has become a model and inspiration to the fringes of inceldom. Firstly, Rodger stabbed three men to death in his apartment and, a few hours later, he drove to a sorority house but failed to gain access. He then shot three women outside, killing two of them. Rodger then shot to death a student in a deli nearby and, while driving through Isla Vista, shot and wounded several pedestrians while running over others with his car. Fourteen people were wounded in total. The attacker’s car eventually crashed into a parked vehicle and police found him dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.

Before staging his multiple attacks, Elliot Rodger had uploaded a video on YouTube, titled “Elliot Rodger’s Retribution.” It was a sort of manifesto outlining the details of the imminent actions and his motives. His main goals were punishing women for rejecting him and punishing sexually active men because he envied them.⁴⁹ After uploading the video, the terrorist circulated a further manifesto, a manuscript titled *My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger* that he sent to some family members, acquaintances, and his therapist, describing his childhood, family conflicts, and, most importantly, frustration over inability to find a girlfriend, his hatred of women, and his contempt for couples, particularly interracial couples. In the video, he explains:

“Well, this is my last video, it all has to come to this. Tomorrow is the day of retribution, the day in which I will have my revenge against humanity, against all of you. For the last eight years of my life, ever since I hit puberty, I’ve been forced to endure an existence of loneliness, rejection, and unfulfilled desires — all because girls have never been attracted to me. Girls gave their affection, and sex and love, to other men but never to me [...] I’ve been through

47 The term grooming has been introduced in terrorism and radicalization studies to describe the process in which a recruiter creates emotional bonds with the potential recruit through increasingly close interactions. The notion originally indicates the behaviour of online sexual predators with their victims.

48 Tim Squirrell, “A Definitive Guide to Incels Part Three: the History of Incel,” [timsquirrell.com](https://www.timsquirrell.com), 4 June 2019. Available at <https://www.timsquirrell.com/blog/2018/6/4/a-definitive-guide-to-incels-part-three-the-history-of-incel>, accessed 12 November 2020.

49 Associated Press, “Transcript of video linked to Santa Barbara mass shooting,” CNN, 28 May 2015. Available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/05/24/us/elliott-rodger-video-transcript/index.html>, accessed 12 November 2020.

college for two and a half years, more than that actually, and I'm still a virgin. It has been very torturous. [...] Within those years, I've had to rot in loneliness. It's not fair. You girls have never been attracted to me. I don't know why you girls aren't attracted to me, but I will punish you all for it. It's an injustice, a crime, because [...] I don't know what you don't see in me. I'm the perfect guy and yet you throw yourselves at these obnoxious men instead of me, the supreme gentleman."⁵⁰

During his self-declared Day of Retribution, he was planning to take his War on Women to the climax, while imagining an ideal world in which he would have quarantined all women in concentration camps. At these camps, the vast majority of the female population would have been deliberately starved to death. He also dreamed of,

"A pure world, where the man's mind can develop to greater heights than ever before. Future generations will live their lives free of having to worry about the barbarity of sex and women, which will enable them to expand their intelligence and advance the human race to a state of perfect civilization."⁵¹

Minassian's attack took place just under four years later. A self-described incel, Minassian's mother publicly said that her son has Asperger syndrome.⁵² Before the attack, he had posted this Facebook message: "Private (Recruit) Minassian Infantry 00010, wishing to speak

to Sgt 4chan please. C23249161.⁵³ The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys! All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!"⁵⁴

The terrorist quotes and celebrates Rodger, with whom Minassian claimed to have been in contact until days before Rodger's 2014 attacks, thus displaying patterns of ideological and operational acknowledgment and imitation that are frequently found in other radical milieus.⁵⁵ Minassian's interrogation with a detective from Toronto police was later made public and contains crucial insights into the perpetrator's grievances and frustrations, and his own description of the process of being radicalised by incel ideology online.⁵⁶

Just a few months later, on 2 November 2018, Scott Paul Beierle entered a yoga studio in Tallahassee, Florida, and shot dead two women, then killed himself. Beierle was a military veteran and a former teacher. He had been charged twice for battery, in 2012 and 2016.⁵⁷ YouTube videos dating back to 2014 showed that he identified with the involuntary celibate community, sympathised with Elliot Rodger, and used to post misogynistic songs on SoundCloud. In February 2020, police in Toronto charged to a 17-year-old boy with terrorism following a machete attack at a north-end Toronto massage parlour, where the perpetrator killed a woman. During the investigation, police say they found evidence the teen was inspired by incels.⁵⁸ More recently, on 20 May 2020, Armando Hernandez shot and injured three people at Westgate Entertainment

50 Elliot Rodger, "My Twisted World, The Story of Elliot Rodger," 2014. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/05/25/us/shooting-document.html>, accessed 12 November 2020.

51 Ibid.

52 Stewart Bell, "'If you bothered him, he might hiss at you': Former classmates recall Toronto van attack suspect," Global News, 24 April 2018. Available at: <https://globalnews.ca/news/4166115/if-you-bothered-him-he-might-hiss-at-you-former-classmates-recall-toronto-van-attack-suspect/>, accessed 12 November 2020.

53 A source in the Department of National Defence told media that C23249161 was Minassian's military identification number during his army training.

54 Ben Collins and Brandy Zadrozny, "After Toronto attack, online misogynists praise suspect as 'new saint,'" NBC News, 25 April 2018. Available at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/after-toronto-attack-online-misogynists-praise-suspect-new-saint-n868821>, accessed 12 November 2020.

55 Sara Brzuskiewicz, "Jihadism and Far-Right Extremism: Shared Attributes With Regard to Violence Spectacularisation," European View, (April 2020). Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1781685820915972>, accessed 12 November 2020.

56 Electronically Recorded Interview of Alek Minassian by Detective Robert Thomas (2917) of the Sex Crimes Unit Polygraph Unit on Monday, 23 April 2018 at 22:46.

57 Gary Fineout, "Man who appears to have made racist, misogynistic videos kills 2 women in Tallahassee yoga studio shooting," Chicago Tribune, 3 November 2018. Available at: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/nation-world/ct-florida-yoga-studio-shooting-20181103-story.html>, accessed 12 November 2020.

58 Ben Cousins, "Teen 'incel' charged with terrorism could change how we view similar cases: expert," CTV News, 20 May 2020. Available at: <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/teen-incel-charged-with-terrorism-could-change-how-we-view-similar-cases-expert-1.4947684?cache=wpwecmoua>, accessed 12 November 2020.

District, a popular shopping and restaurant strip in Glendale, west of Phoenix.⁵⁹ The suspected shooter shared his attack on Snapchat, filming his assault rifle and naming himself. According to authorities, he is a self-described involuntary celibate who was targeting couples. A few days later, on 2 June, the 23-year-old Cole Carini went to a Virginia hospital with one hand amputated, several fingers missing from his other hand, and shrapnel wounds to his neck and throat. In his bedroom, federal investigators found bomb-making materials, including an explosive substance and rusty nails. Behind his home, the FBI also found a crumpled letter, which mentioned violence against “hot cheerleaders,” and Carini’s desire to make a statement like Elliot Rodger.⁶⁰

All the perpetrators of major incel attacks show a variable degree of ideological and communicative proximity to the incel radical milieu. Evidence of this proximity are the choice of filming the attack for the benefit of fellow incels, writing and circulating manifestos, participating in incel online forums, and using incel keywords and tropes in them. This proximity implies being an active user of incel online forums — like Elliot Rodger or Alek Minassian — or having a behaviour that is more similar to that of Armando Hernandez, who declared his intention to target couples but, according to the first results of the police investigation, did not seem as active as other perpetrators online. Regardless of the perpetrators’ degree of participation in online forums, all these episodes of incel tangible violence strengthen and legitimise incel radical milieu by providing it with visibility and attention and showing users that taking action against the unjust outside world is possible.

In a vicious circle, the incel radical milieu functions as a legitimising and radicalising environment

for incel violence and, concurrently, tangible violence consolidates the role of incel online communities as a radical milieu. Within the incel radical milieu, the multiple narratives and tropes analysed above contribute to create a fertile ground for radicalisation. Arguably, the most distinctive trait that informs the entire incel *Weltanschauung* within the radical milieu is the so-called external locus of control, the core of the next section of the paper.

External locus of control: incels’ crucial trait

Conceptualising locus of control

The locus of control is a psychological notion introduced by Julian B. Rotter in 1954 and has since become a crucial concept in personality studies.⁶¹ It indicates the degree to which individuals believe they have control over the events in their lives — or vice versa, that they are at the mercy of external factors that determine their successes and failures. A person’s locus is conceptualised as internal if the belief that they control the direction of their life dominates, whereas the locus is external if the belief that life is controlled by outside factors that one cannot influence prevails.⁶²

Even though different loci of control are located on a spectrum and an individual rarely shows a uniform internal or external locus in every situation. It is also true that those who self-identify as incels display a markedly external locus of control that doubtlessly overshadows the internal one. Locus of control is one of the four dimensions of core self-evaluations, which are one’s fundamental appraisal of oneself, along with neuroticism, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. Twenge, Zhan, and Im note that the feeling of not having control can nurture

59 Other deadly attacks that have cited incel ideology or inspiration have occurred at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon, in October 2015; Aztec High School in Aztec, New Mexico, in December 2017; Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in February 2018. For some caveats about Hanau attack (19 February 2020) see Greta Jasser, Megan Kelly and Ann-Kathrin Rotherme, “Male supremacism and the Hanau terrorist attack: between online misogyny and far-right violence,” ICCT, 20 May 2020. Available at: <https://icct.nl/publication/male-supremacism-and-the-hanau-terrorist-attack-between-online-misogyny-and-far-right-violence/>, accessed 12 November 2020.

60 Jill Sederstrom, “Man Who Revered ‘Incel’ Murderer Blows Off His Own Hand While Allegedly Making Bomb To Target ‘Hot Cheerleaders’, Authorities Say,” Oxygen, 8 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.oxygen.com/crime-news/cole-carini-blows-off-hand-while-allegedly-making-bomb-to-target-hot-cheerleaders>, accessed 12 November 2020.

61 Julian B. Rotter, “Social learning and clinical psychology” (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1954).

62 Julian B. Rotter, “Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement,” Psychological Monographs: General and Applied, Vol. 80 (1966), pp. 1–28.

victimhood mentality and narratives, whereby adversity is consistently attributed to outside forces.⁶³

When talking about incel-dom, one is dealing with a sort of institutionalised external locus of control. This is not only visible as a core component of most communicative exchanges within incel online communities, but is also a pillar of the broad theoretical framework of incel-dom. Accordingly, members are designated as *involuntary* celibates because of women's unrealistic demands and promiscuity, and because they are genetically unlucky, while at the same time their social life is non-existent or very limited because the world is an unfair place. Systematically interpreting and experiencing the world through the lenses of a categorically external locus of control fosters a sense of powerlessness and exclusion. This, in turn, further undermines the notion of personal responsibility, which might otherwise provide a brake on the slide towards antisocial behaviour and radicalisation.⁶⁴

Incel radicalisation through external locus of control

Incels perceive themselves as “unlucky men who are left out of the mating market”⁶⁵ and, in some instances, they demand the same empathy as is given to “other marginalised groups.”⁶⁶ According to the discourse that involuntary celibates create and articulate online, their frustrating status is simply ingrained in certain oppressive cultural and economic factors, such as lookism and classism, which engender inequality throughout society. In the incel worldview, involuntary celibates do not have any kind of responsibility for their social- and love-life difficulties.

Incel-dom, therefore, reflects a radical form of nihilism: if genetic, social, and/or economic preconditions are set, then any amount of work is just a futile expenditure of effort. *It is over*

or, most likely, *It never started*, two sentences that have become common tropes of incel discourse.

In some instances, incels' critique of the world becomes profound and goes beyond mere anger against *Stacys* and *Chads*. When this happens, *accelerationism* — the idea that society as we know it should collapse — takes over. Society is sick and the harmful cult of meritocracy dominates in every field: “Why do we assume that one aspect of our lives, dating and sex, is always controllable? That if we put effort into romance and bettering ourselves, no matter how short or ugly the starting point, we will always be rewarded with a caring, loving relationship?”⁶⁷ This, according to incels and the black pill theory, is one of the most widespread fallacies of mankind. As human beings, we like to believe that we are in control of the outcomes of our lives and that most of our successes and failures are the result of something that we did.

In the pure incel worldview, society is obsessed with meritocracy and self-improvement, which in involuntary celibates' discourse are simply ways to oppress incels through unrealistic social expectations. If loneliness, powerlessness, and emotional and sexual frustration are caused by external problems outside incels' control, the same external locus is applied when it comes to demands and desires. In other words, the outside world — made of *Stacys*, *Chads*, and the entire sick society — is both the source of incels' problems and the counterpart from which the solution to those problems should come. In his *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era*, Michael Kimmel theorises the notion of aggrieved entitlement as stemming from the perception of a dramatic loss of what some men believe to be their privilege.⁶⁸ If you feel entitled and you have not got what you expected, that is a recipe for humiliation, which can be conducive to violence.⁶⁹

63 Jean M. Twenge, Liqing Zhang and Charles Im, “It's Beyond My Control: A Cross-Temporal Meta-Analysis of Increasing Externality in Locus of Control, 1960-2002,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (February 2004), pp. 308-319.

64 Willem Koomen and Joop Van Der Pligt, *The Psychology of Radicalization and Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2015).

65 Dr. Castle, “The Blackpill Theory,” 2019, p. 6

66 *Ibid.* p. 10.

67 *Ibid.* p. 26.

68 Michael Kimmel, *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era* (New York: Type Media Center, 2013).

69 J. Oliver Convoy, “Angry white men: the sociologist who studied Trump's base before Trump,” *The Guardian*, 27 February 2017.

Violent behaviour is particularly salient for men who feel entitled to certain social privileges and, in the case of some incels, to satisfactory emotional and sexual relations. When these expected privileges are thwarted, these men often respond with frustration and hatred. In line with their external locus of control, broader social forces, such as greater gender equality and women being more selective in their choice of partners, stop men from acquiring perceived rewards, resulting in a sense of reduced privilege in society.⁷⁰

Men who experience aggrieved entitlement might perceive violence as justified and necessary for restoring their dominance against those who caused humiliation.⁷¹ Elliot Rodger's manifesto, *My Twisted World*, offers multiple instances of both external locus of control and aggrieved entitlement. The very first line clarifies: "All of my suffering on this world has been at the hands of humanity, particularly women."⁷²

In accordance with his worldview deeply shaped by aggrieved entitlement, Rodger also posits that women should be sexually attracted to intelligent gentlemen, rather than those who demonstrate hegemonic masculinity: "Females truly have something mentally wrong with them...They are attracted to the wrong type of man (...) everything my father taught me was proven wrong. He raised me to be a polite, kind gentleman."⁷³ Because of his almost total absence of internal locus of control and sense of personal responsibility, his social difficulties are blamed on the outside world: sex is a sort of market in which other men's sexual relationships with women contributed to Rodger's sexual starvation. Dr. Castle, the

alleged scholar specialising in masculinity issues and males' self-perception, recounts a post found online that is quintessential of external locus of control and aggrieved entitlement: "I was your stereotypical polite, respectful, and quiet person for the longest time. The world has stomped and spit on me because of my genetics and I became this way as a result. It was not the product of 'toxic masculinity' or some other retarded shit. I became a cynical shit-poster that hates life because society has shit [sic] on me."⁷⁴

During the 2020 Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic, involuntary celibates' locus of control has become — if possible — even more external and focused on outside forces and events. On forums and subreddits, many incel users celebrated the lockdown enforced in their countries because finally *Chads* and *Stacys* would be forced indoors and would not have the chance of seeing each other and having sex.⁷⁵ In addition, many posts across these forums see coronavirus as karma for having casual sex, whereas the most violent fringes call coronavirus a *gift from God* or *St. Coronavirus* because "it increases the likelihood that *normies* will die."⁷⁶ In the context of intersexual relations, involuntary celibates get to the point of comparing women with the virus itself: "*Foids* are making society way worse than corona virus ever could."⁷⁷ In incel communities, the institutionalised external locus of control functions as the strongest justification for verbal and — at times — physical violence, giving individual grievances the opportunity to become tropes of an entire radical milieu premised on male sexual entitlement.⁷⁸

Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/27/michael-kimmel-masculinity-far-right-angry-white-men>, accessed 12 November 2020.

70 Christopher Vito, Amanda Admire and Elizabeth Hughes, "Masculinity, aggrieved entitlement, and violence: considering the Isla Vista mass shooting," *International Journal for Masculinity Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (October 2017). Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/18902138.2017.1390658>, accessed 12 November 2020.

71 Michael Kimmel, *Angry White Men*, 2013.

72 Elliot Rodger, "My Twisted World," p. 1.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 84, p. 99.

74 Dr. Castle, "The Blackpill Theory," p. 158.

75 Anh V. Vu, "The Pandemic as Incels see it, Cambridge Cybercrime Centre COVID Briefing Paper #5," 4 August 2020. Available at: <https://www.cambridgecybercrime.uk/COVID/COVIDbriefing-5.pdf>, accessed 12 November 2020.

76 Sarah Manavis, "Incels are celebrating lockdown because attractive people can't have casual sex," *New Statesman*, 24 March 2020. Available at: <https://www.newstatesman.com/science-tech/coronavirus/2020/03/incels-celebrating-lockdown-casual-sex-chad-stacy-4chan-reddit>, accessed 12 November 2020.

77 *Ibid.*

78 Manavis, "Incels are celebrating lockdown because attractive people can't have casual sex," 2020.

Conclusion

In the last few years, involuntary celibates' violence has attracted increasing attention, particularly because attacks committed by males calling themselves incels or in sympathy with incel ideology have killed nearly fifty people. In order to increase our knowledge of this violence and incel online multi-faceted communities, analysing incels' own words and narratives is crucial. Listening to what they say and observing how they say it is fundamental to effectively assessing the threat they pose.

Through the investigation of involuntary celibates' communicative exchanges, this paper identified a number of ideological pillars related to incels' self-representation and identity, views on gender relations and misogyny, and the perceived uselessness of being kind to women. All of these ideological points are based on the typical incel assumption of being unable to have romantic relationships because they are systematically rejected by women, who are unreliable, promiscuous, and attracted by a small number of males who dominate the market of romance. Incels' theoretical framework reveals a unique form of misogyny, as they are not hostile to women out of a sense of superiority. On the contrary, they hate them from a position of inferiority, since they believe that women are privileged and control the mating market. These are all painful truths that incels can understand when swallowing the so-called *redpill*. By choosing the blue pill, individuals opt for reassuring ignorance, whereas by choosing the red pill they are willing to know shocking and sad truths.

Redpilling is a core philosophy for incels but, after knowing the truth, they usually acknowledge that nothing can be done about it, because their loneliness and marginalisation cannot be improved. Taking this step, they swallow the so-called *blackpill*, bitterer than the red one. This entire set of narratives on *inceldom*, women, and nihilism contributes to creating a shared space in which, in a sort of reciprocal grooming, individual grievances become group grievances.

The present paper argues that this shared

space can be effectively described as a radical milieu. Scholars are reaching an increasingly broad consensus about considering incel violence as terrorism. However, a theoretical tool aimed at studying incel communities as a whole — including their non-physically violent fringes, is yet to be found. The notion of radical milieu could help fill this gap. A radical milieu can be described as an environment made up of people who are not necessarily radicalised, but capable of offering members a unique sense of belonging and camaraderie. Within this environment, individuals find implicit or explicit support and legitimisation. Moreover, in this radical milieu demands for recognition and legitimacy are voiced and the separation from the out-group increases. For all these reasons, the notion of radical milieu is crucial for identifying and monitoring the radicalisation processes taking place within incel communities.

Arguably, the most distinctive trait that informs this radical milieu is the so-called external locus of control, which is the belief that life is controlled by outside factors that one cannot influence. This external locus of control has been effectively institutionalised, becoming a pillar of *inceldom's* worldview, according to which they are celibates and lonely because of women's unrealistic demands and promiscuity, because they are genetically unlucky, and because the world is unfair. It is the widespread view of incels that they do not have any kind of responsibility for the difficulties in their social- and love-lives. Society is sick and the harmful cult of meritocracy dominates in every field, according to incels, leading people to believe in the *myth* of self-improvement. *Inceldom's* peculiar misogyny, the evolution of *inceldom's* radical milieu, and the institutionalisation of their external locus of control require close monitoring and further research.

Considering *inceldom* as a radical milieu is recommended as it could provide scholars and practitioners with an effective research category to describe the entire incel environment, including its non-violent components, which represent the overwhelming majority. By doing so, the notion of breeding ground for radicalisation, which remains insufficiently conceptualised in relation

to the incels community, can take on a new role, characterised by high explanatory power on the entirety of incelism, instead of limiting the scope of the analysis to incel terrorist perpetrators only. Furthermore, introducing new perspectives on this radical milieu would make it possible to increase our awareness of the similarities and differences between incels' milieu and other forms of radical environment.

As far as the notion of locus of control is concerned, the implications of understanding this incelism's primary feature are potentially many and diverse. The research on incelism is still in its infancy, but deepening our knowledge of the mechanisms related to external locus of control could be crucial both for sharpening our ability to identify possible warning signs of radicalisation and to develop effective counter-narratives based on individual accountability, principles of personal choice, and consent in sexual relations — that is to say, challenging the very principle of external locus of control.

Online communities of involuntary celibates are extremely accessible, since joining them does not require any particular knowledge or training, and participation is based on personal frustration and grievances. Understanding how these grievances are weaponised within incel radical milieu is vital for any counter-radicalisation effort.

About the Author

Sara Brzuszkiewicz is the Editor in Chief of European Eye on Radicalization and post-doc researcher at Alma Mater Studiorum University (Bologna). Previously, she has been visiting researcher in the Program on Extremism at George Washington University (Washington D.C.)

She holds a PhD in Institutions and Politics (University of Sacred Heart, Milan). Sara speaks Italian, Arabic, English, and Spanish. She holds a diploma in Terrorism Studies (Terrorism Modus Operandi) from the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, University of St. Andrews (2017) and diploma in Emergencies and Humanitarian Intervention from the Institute for International Political Studies of Milan (2014). Her research interests focus on radicalization

and de-radicalization, jihadism in Europe, and involuntary celibates' violence.

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