



University of Messina

ISSN 2612-4033

Journal of Clinical & Developmental Psychology

Journal homepage: <http://cab.unime.it/journals/index.php/JCDP/index>



Psychological vulnerabilities and digital radicalization in incels: a theoretical and prospective analysis

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of “incels” (involuntary celibates) has recently gained growing scholarly and media attention. Predominantly heterosexual men who desire but cannot form romantic or sexual relationships, incels interpret their condition through the fatalistic and misogynistic lens of the black pill ideology. Originating from the red pill worldview, which promotes strategic self-improvement, the black pill asserts that romantic success is biologically predetermined and unchangeable. Although most incels are non-violent, the ideology has been linked to misogynistic aggression and online radicalization. This paper examines the psychological and sociocultural foundations of the incel identity, focusing on social isolation, low self-esteem, perceived injustice, and externalization of blame. It also analyzes how digital platforms facilitate echo chambers and the spread of pseudoscientific theories. Finally, it outlines clinical and preventive strategies that integrate psychological support, sexuality education (UNESCO, 2018; 2020), and digital policy reform to counter radicalization and foster resilience.

Keywords: *incel, black pill, manosphere, online misogyny, digital radicalization;*

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<https://doi.org/10.13129/2612-4033/0110-4840>

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Introduction

In recent years, the phenomenon of involuntary celibates (or incels) has garnered increasing attention from the media, the public, and the scientific community, raising questions about its origins, evolution, and potential risks (Stijelja & Mishara, 2022). The term “*incel*” - an acronym for involuntary celibate - was coined by bisexual student Alana, who initially created a small online community to share her romantic experiences with others in a similar situation (Sparks et al., 2022). Over time, however, discussions centered on emotional support gave way to a movement marked by strong feelings of resentment, misogyny, and, in some cases, violence (Caruso et al., 2021; Costello et al, 2023). Incidents at Umpqua Community College (2015), Isla Vista (2014), and Toronto (2018) - where perpetrators either identified as or were associated with the incel identity - have further polarized the debate, reinforcing the perception of danger connected to these communities (Stijelja & Mishara, 2022). However, it is important to note that the majority of incels do not engage in violent actions, even though they may share similar ideological backgrounds (Delaney et al., 2024). Within these communities, narratives often take the form of so-called “theories” that lack scientific validity (Caruso et al., 2021).

One of the most well-known is the *Red Pill*, which - drawing on principles of evolutionary psychology (Trivers, 1972; Costello et al, 2022) - argues that women are biologically predisposed to be highly selective in their choice of partners. According to this perspective, female emancipation and the supposed “end of patriarchy” have exacerbated the condition of certain men, who feel excluded from the “*sexual marketplace*” (Tomkinson et al., 2021). A further extension of this view is the *LMS theory* (Looks, Money, Status), which posits that female attraction is determined solely by physical appearance, wealth, and social status, relegating those who lack these attributes to inevitable failure (Cannito & Ferrero Camoletto, 2022). Over time, the *red pill* worldview has evolved into the more extreme and fatalistic ideology known as the *black pill*. While the *red pill* implies that men can “awaken” to the perceived truths of gender relations and potentially improve their romantic prospects through self-improvement, social strategy, or dominance behaviors, the *black pill* denies any possibility of change. According to black pill logic, physical appearance and genetic traits entirely determine romantic success, rendering personal effort meaningless. This shift from red to black pill marks a transition from a narrative of strategic adaptation to one of nihilistic resignation and resentment toward women and society. The black pill ideology therefore represents the

most radical and deterministic component of the contemporary manosphere, often linked to depressive and self-destructive worldviews.

Incels are also part of the broader “*manosphere*” – a network of online groups primarily composed of white, heterosexual men who hold antagonistic views toward women and gender equality (Ribeiro et al., 2001). Alongside so-called *Men’s Rights Activists* (MRA) and the *Men Going Their Own Way* (MGTOW) movement, incels share the belief that society should revert to a patriarchal model, which they perceive as “natural” and free from the supposed inequities that disadvantage them.

Incel culture is primarily consolidated in online spaces characterized by high anonymity (e.g., Reddit, 4chan), where the lack of face-to-face interaction facilitates the expression of aggressive and often violent content (Dolce & Pilla, 2019; Marwick & Caplan, 2018). Research on online harassment and digital abuse (Lenhart et al., 2016) highlights how the internet not only provides new opportunities for socialization and group formation but also serves as an ideal environment for the spread of coordinated violence and aggression. Emotions play a key role in shaping these virtual communities: feelings of frustration, anger, and loneliness fuel a sense of belonging, as noted by Papacharissi (2014). Within the broader manosphere, Farci and Righetti (2019) distinguish between groups focused on issues such as violence against men or fathers’ rights and others that, adopting a strongly victimhood-based perspective, place the blame for male failure on women.

In this context, *Reddit* serves as a key hub, offering subcategories that facilitate both the exchange of personal experiences and the circulation of misogynistic content (Salojärvi et al., 2020; Helm et al., 2022). Some studies suggest that sharing experiences of marginalization can, at times, generate a certain degree of mutual support (Wendorf & Yang, 2015), whereas other research has found no significant correlation between perceived online support and psychological well-being (Himawan et al., 2021). Moreover, the use of *throwaway accounts*, which are temporary profiles created exclusively to post controversial or sensitive content, indicates that relationships within these communities are not necessarily perceived as genuine friendships (Ammari et al., 2019). This paper aims to provide a theoretical overview of the incel phenomenon, addressing its historical background as well as its psychological and sociocultural dimensions. The first section clarifies the movement’s origins and conceptual definitions, illustrating how the notion of “involuntary celibacy” has evolved into a digital subculture characterized by polarized and antagonistic dynamics. The second section focuses on incel ideology and the specific features of its online culture, examining key constructs such as ideological “pills,” affiliation with the manosphere, and the use of cryptic or jargon-filled

language. The third section investigates the psychological characteristics of this population, particularly experiences of social isolation, low self-esteem, and the tendency to externalize responsibility for personal failures and frustrations. This is followed by an analysis of linguistic patterns and radicalization mechanisms that emerge within digital platforms such as forums, Reddit, YouTube, and TikTok. Finally, the paper discusses possible intervention strategies, with particular emphasis on clinical and preventive approaches. The aim is to highlight the limitations of purely repressive responses and to underscore the importance of addressing the psychological needs and vulnerabilities of individuals involved in this subculture.

The historical and ideological evolution of the incel phenomenon

The first nucleus of the incel community emerged in the late 1990s with intentions quite different from those seen today. In 1997, a young Canadian woman named Alana launched *Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project*, an online forum intended for both men and women who wished to share feelings of loneliness and distress due to the lack of romantic partners (Stijelja & Mishara, 2022). Initially, the project welcomed both men and women, reflecting a non-gendered understanding of involuntary celibacy as a shared emotional experience. However, over time, the community became overwhelmingly male-dominated. This shift may be attributed to sociocultural factors such as the stigmatization of male romantic failure, the rise of gender-polarized online spaces, and a reframing of incel identity around anti-feminist and misogynistic ideologies, which progressively excluded or discouraged female participation. This transformation reflects broader sociocultural dynamics: male romantic failure tends to be more heavily stigmatized than female celibacy (Farci & Righetti, 2019; Kimmel, 2013); online spaces have become increasingly segregated along gender lines (Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Dolce & Pilla, 2019); and manosphere ideologies have reframed involuntary celibacy as a symptom of male victimhood and resentment toward women's sexual autonomy (Carian, 2022). As a result, the incel identity evolved from an inclusive expression of loneliness into a predominantly male, ideologically charged subculture.

Within this environment of mutual support, the term *Invcel*, later shortened to *incel*, was coined to refer to anyone experiencing involuntary celibacy. Over time, however, the original vision of sharing and support underwent a radical transformation, evolving into a male-dominated movement infused with misogyny and resentment (Stijelja & Mishara, 2022; Delaney et al., 2024). These individuals tend to believe that their exclusion from the "sexual marketplace" is not the result of modifiable factors, such as social skills or personal growth,

but rather of immutable aspects including genetics, physical appearance, socioeconomic conditions, and a structural imbalance in gender relations. Within the broader manosphere, a network of online groups composed mainly of heterosexual men hostile to female emancipation, incels represent a distinct subset with specific characteristics. Alongside movements such as Men's Rights Activists (MRAs) and Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), incel groups are distinguished by a radically pessimistic worldview known as the *black pill* and by the conviction that female sexual liberation has created systemic injustice against them (Tomkinson et al., 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2001). A key concept frequently mentioned in incel forums is the *LMS theory* (Looks, Money, Status), which posits that women choose partners solely on the basis of attractiveness, wealth, and social prestige (Cannito & Ferrero Camoletto, 2022). Men who do not meet these criteria perceive themselves as irreversibly excluded and doomed to loneliness. This perspective, along with other related ideologies such as the *red pill* and *black pill*, blends pseudoscientific references with elements of evolutionary psychology and sociobiology (Trivers, 1972), yet lacks empirical validation (Caruso et al., 2021).

From a research perspective, the topic of involuntary celibacy has been investigated for several decades. Donnelly and colleagues (2001), for example, identified different categories of individuals unable to engage in sexual relationships: virgins with no prior sexual experience, singles who had partners in the past but are currently unable to find one, and partnered celibates in sexless relationships. Many of these individuals experience feelings of shame, sadness, and a sense of being "out of sync" with the normative sexual milestones of life. In the case of contemporary incels, however, this perception of being delayed or chronically excluded is intertwined with an ideology of hatred toward women and society, transforming individual suffering into a collective victimhood narrative (Stijelja & Mishara, 2022; De Vettor et al., 2024).

The incel digital subculture, the black pill, and hate speech in the manosphere

It is important to distinguish between the *red pill* and *black pill* ideologies. While the *red pill* supports the idea that men can navigate the sexual marketplace by understanding gender dynamics, the *black pill* asserts that no amount of effort can overcome inherent disadvantages such as unattractiveness or poor genetics, leading to a nihilistic and misogynistic outlook. Online incel communities, including dedicated forums, subcultures on Reddit and 4chan, and groups on platforms such as TikTok and YouTube, serve as the primary hubs for

ideological aggregation and dissemination. At the core of the incel worldview lies the *black pill* ideology, which claims that sexual attraction and romantic dynamics are rigidly determined by physical appearance and that individuals born “unfortunate” have no possibility of improvement (Delaney et al., 2024; Helm et al., 2022). Within these spaces, members self-identify as disenfranchised men who feel deprived of their supposed rights in a society where women are believed to have gained sexual and relational privilege. The main ideological frameworks circulating within the manosphere, particularly the red pill, black pill, and LMS theory, are summarized in Table 1, which outlines their core assumptions and main critical issues.

Table 1. Main ideological constructs within the manosphere and their key assumptions

Theory	Core beliefs	Critical issues
Red Pill	Men must “awaken” to female hypergamy and gender dynamics to regain control.	Overgeneralizes evolutionary psychology; reinforces gender stereotypes.
Black Pill	Romantic success is biologically predetermined; change is impossible.	Promotes fatalism, self-hatred, and misogyny.
LMS Theory	Women select partners based solely on Looks, Money, and Status.	Pseudoscientific and reductionist; ignores emotional and social factors.

From their perspective, competition for partners is ruthless: so-called *Chads*, men considered highly attractive, are thought to monopolize female attention, relegating incels to invisibility (Delaney et al., 2024). This sense of resentment serves as a justification for the widespread misogyny present in discussions, often manifesting as expressions of hatred and the dehumanization of women (De Vettor et al., 2024; Sparks et al., 2022).

Within the broader manosphere, the online network of male-centric groups hostile to feminism, incels position themselves alongside other factions such as Men’s Rights Activists (MRAs) and Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) (Ribeiro et al., 2001; Mountford, 2018). While some of these movements focus on alleged discrimination against men in areas such as child custody or gender-based violence, incels tend to emphasize their relational suffering and blame women for the “unjust power” they have acquired in contemporary society (Carian, 2022).

The manosphere has been linked to forms of extremism and online violence, including harassment, threats, and hate speech targeting women, ethnic minorities, and other groups (Lenhart et al., 2016; Marwick & Caplan, 2018). The anonymity and absence of face-to-face interaction facilitate the escalation of content that would likely be unacceptable in direct, in-person conversations (Dolce & Pilla, 2019). This environment, described as “toxic” by multiple

observers, has drawn the attention of social media platforms and law enforcement agencies, particularly after violent acts committed by individuals who had previously expressed misogynistic or suicidal rhetoric in incel forums (Mountford, 2018; Stijelja & Mishara, 2022).

Psychological distress, self-esteem, and locus of control in incels

Empirical research indicates that incels constitute a high-risk population for mental health distress, exhibiting elevated rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Sparks et al., 2022). In a study, 95% of surveyed incels displayed clinically significant symptoms of depression, and 93% exhibited high levels of anxiety (Stijelja & Mishara, 2022). Similarly, Delaney and colleagues (2024) found that although anxiety levels did not differ significantly from those of other groups, depression was markedly more prevalent among incels. Feelings of emptiness, anhedonia, and existential despair frequently emerge in online narratives, where users openly discuss their desire to end their lives and express a sense of having been defeated by life (De Vettor et al., 2024). The fatalistic perspective of the black pill, which asserts that there is no way out, exacerbates helplessness and contributes to the chronicization of distress.

In terms of self-esteem, members of these communities show a strong dependence on romantic validation. Repeated rejection or the complete absence of positive relational experiences fosters dysfunctional beliefs, such as the conviction that no one could ever want them or that they are genetically unfit for relationships. These beliefs, in turn, perpetuate a vicious cycle of avoidance and social anxiety (De Vettor et al., 2024). Past relational difficulties, including experiences of bullying, physical insecurities, and hypersensitivity to judgment, are frequently reported. In some cases, there is also an overrepresentation of individuals with traits associated with the autism spectrum (Stijelja & Mishara, 2022). These factors increase psychological vulnerability and facilitate adherence to online communities that provide a reassuring yet toxic narrative, temporarily alleviating the anxiety associated with social interactions.

At the cognitive level, a highly external locus of control is evident, with a tendency to attribute personal failures primarily to external and immutable factors such as female hypergamy, feminism, or genetics (Delaney et al., 2024). Women are stereotyped as opportunistic and manipulative, while men considered more attractive (Chads) are viewed as rivals, reinforcing a clear ingroup–outgroup distinction that strengthens incel group identification and legitimizes hostility toward outsiders (Costello et al., 2023).

A significant concern is that continuous exposure to misogynistic and violent rhetoric within these forums may desensitize members, normalizing anger and potentially fostering aggressive fantasies. Although the majority of incels do not engage in violent behavior, several studies emphasize the importance of monitoring these platforms to prevent extremist tendencies, particularly among highly vulnerable individuals (Stijelja & Mishara, 2022).

The dissemination of incel ideology across various digital platforms

Many incel communities adopt a shared language that can be described as an *anti-language* (*antilingua*; Berruto, 1987), a rigid jargon with specific classifications and rules designed to delineate boundaries between “us” and “them.” This has led to the creation of terms such as *Chad* (the attractive and successful man), *Stacy* (the desirable yet superficial woman), *gymcel* (an incel who attempts to improve his appearance through physical exercise), and *kissless virgin* (a man who has never even received a kiss), among others (Caruso et al., 2021). Although these neologisms are not inherently offensive, they reflect a dichotomous and fatalistic worldview in which only a few “chosen” individuals can succeed, while all others are destined for marginalization.

This internal language fosters a sense of familiarity among users but simultaneously promotes radicalization, as it acts as a filter for information and reinforces extremist narratives (Pelzer et al., 2021). Within this echo-chamber dynamic, the repetition of specific linguistic formulas and codes further strengthens group cohesion, reducing the likelihood of external critical thinking. In parallel, computational linguistics and machine learning systems have sought to develop algorithms to identify and moderate hate speech (Davidson et al., 2017; Schmidt & Wiegand, 2017). However, the constant evolution of incel jargon and the use of evasive strategies such as irony, altered spellings, or cryptic references make effective automated detection difficult (Hosseini et al., 2017). This can result in both false positives and false negatives (Pelzer et al., 2021) and is further complicated by the overlap between incel discourse and the misogynistic rhetoric common to other groups within the manosphere, making it difficult to distinguish incel-specific content from general sexist narratives (Fortuna & Nunes, 2018). For this reason, some researchers propose models that consider both textual content and community context (Chandrasekharan et al., 2017; ADL, 2018), since certain platforms or subgroups may be structurally more prone to abusive communication.

Reddit, in particular, has served as one of the main platforms where the incel subculture has reached a broader audience, facilitating both the recruitment of new members and conflict with

external users. Helm et al. (2022) note that incel posts on Reddit tend to be more toxic than those from other manosphere factions (Ribeiro et al., 2020a, 2020b), with discussions typically revolving around four main themes: (a) incel perspectives (*black pill* and fatalism), (b) willingness or resistance to change, (c) conflict with external users, and (d) deviant content (misogynistic, homophobic, or racist messages). Although interactions with outsiders can occasionally spark debates that push incels to moderate their rhetoric to avoid bans (Farrell et al., 2019), Reddit's open architecture also allows vulnerable individuals to encounter incel ideology more easily, potentially increasing radicalization (Helm et al., 2022). The periodic bans of subreddits such as *r/Incels* and *r/Braincels* (2017–2019) have not resolved the problem, as the community has migrated to other platforms and, in some cases, intensified hostile activity following forum closures (Ribeiro et al., 2020b).

YouTube represents another major channel for the dissemination of incel ideology, although some studies suggest that the likelihood of randomly encountering such content remains relatively low (Papadamou et al., 2021). However, once users begin watching several incel-related videos consecutively, the recommendation algorithm tends to propose similar material, creating a “rabbit hole” effect that increases exposure to extreme positions (Covington et al., 2016; Stöcker et al., 2020). Despite stricter moderation rules compared to forums (Agarwal et al., 2014; Zannettou et al., 2021), incel content creators often manage to convey violent or misogynistic messages in subtle or coded forms, sometimes framing them as self-improvement content (Papadamou et al., 2021). The case of Elliot Rodger, who uploaded misogynistic videos to YouTube before committing a mass shooting, illustrates the dangers of this phenomenon and highlights the need for ongoing monitoring.

More recently, TikTok has emerged as a new frontier for the dissemination of *black pill* and incel content (De Vettor et al., 2025; Giovanardi et al., 2025), particularly targeting young adults and adolescents (DataReportal, 2023). According to Solea and Sugiura (2023), certain accounts promote manosphere-related ideas, such as lookism or the perceived inevitability of failure for “unattractive” men, but present them in a format that is more accessible to a mainstream audience. Since the platform formally bans terms like *incel* or *black pill*, content creators often bypass moderation by using alternative expressions, viral clips, pseudoscientific arguments, and emotionally charged narratives designed to demonstrate women's alleged superficiality or the perceived injustice of the sexual marketplace (Solea & Sugiura, 2023). The result is the gradual normalization of extreme sexism, reframed and made palatable for a wider audience.

Crisis of masculinity, radicalization, and the role of digital media

The combination of personal distress (loneliness, low self-esteem, depression) and a group victimhood narrative serves as a powerful driver of radicalization among incels. These men find in their community a constant reinforcement of the idea that they are *victims*, providing them with an alibi to avoid experimenting with personal change strategies (Stijelja & Mishara, 2022). The group strengthens their sense of belonging while simultaneously fostering hostility toward the outside world, particularly toward women. In some cases, this environment—where individual frustrations are collectively validated—can facilitate aggressive acts, as demonstrated by the (few but striking) incidents of violence associated with the incel subculture (Stijelja & Mishara, 2022). This phenomenon fits into the broader framework of the *crisis of masculinity*, in which many young men struggle to reconcile with traditional models of masculinity based on success, dominance, and power (Kimmel, 2013). The incel, in particular, perceives himself as a *failure* in relation to these expectations but attributes responsibility to external factors (such as "hypergamous" women or feminist culture) rather than exploring alternative forms of masculinity (De Vettor et al., 2024). It is therefore essential to promote emotional and sexual education that legitimizes male vulnerability and allows for the redefinition of gender identity beyond the simplistic binary of *sexual success vs. failure*. In this context, digital platforms play a dual role: on one hand, they provide spaces for individuals who feel isolated to share experiences and seek support; on the other, they can function as *echo chambers* where extreme content is amplified. Algorithmic recommendation mechanisms, particularly on YouTube and TikTok, foster the creation of *media bubbles*, where users who show interest in incel-related content become increasingly immersed in it, intensifying radicalization processes and hindering potential paths toward reconsideration (Papadamou et al., 2021; Solea & Sugiura, 2023).

Clinical and preventive perspectives

The deep distrust that incels exhibit toward traditional psychotherapy (Sparks et al., 2022) poses a challenge for mental health professionals, as many report feeling stigmatized or misunderstood by therapists, whom they perceive as part of a *blue-pilled* system that denies the "truth" about how the world works (Moskalenko et al., 2022). For this reason, an approach based on condemnation and stigmatization risks reinforcing the victimhood narrative and

pushing incels further away. A more effective strategy may involve an empathetic attitude that, while acknowledging their suffering and loneliness, firmly rejects misogyny and violence.

This could be integrated with interventions such as social skills training, dating coaching, and cognitive restructuring of distortions regarding one's mate value (De Vettor et al., 2024). At the same time, it is crucial to strengthen self-esteem and self-efficacy, demonstrating that change is not solely dependent on immutable physical factors. Since many incels hesitate to seek help, online outreach strategies could be beneficial, adopting a respectful and non-judgmental approach (Sparks et al., 2022). An example of this is the subreddit *r/IncelExit*, where incels and ex-incels share their paths of personal growth, supporting each other in acquiring new social skills and gradually reducing resentment toward women. The initial success of this community suggests that some incels are open to leaving the subculture, provided they find an alternative sense of belonging.

The involvement of psychologists, educators, and more moderate members could facilitate the creation of parallel online spaces where misogynistic biases can be addressed and relational skills can be enhanced (De Vettor et al., 2024). These spaces should ensure moderation to prevent toxic dynamics while maintaining sufficient anonymity for users to feel safe.

On a broader level, the incel phenomenon raises questions about primary prevention. Society should intervene early, particularly during adolescence, to mitigate the emergence of loneliness and social exclusion (Himawan et al., 2021). For instance, programs such as UNESCO's *Comprehensive Sexuality Education* framework (UNESCO, 2018) promote early socio-relational and sexual-affective competence. The more recent UNESCO brief *Switched On: Sexuality Education in the Digital Space* (UNESCO, 2020) emphasizes the importance of addressing online risks, gender-based hate, and digital literacy within sexuality education curricula. A recent meta-analysis confirmed that such programs significantly improve adolescents' cognition, attitudes, and self-efficacy regarding sexual health and relationships (Kim et al., 2023).

At the same time, platforms such as Reddit and TikTok have implemented stricter moderation policies targeting misogynistic and radicalized content, although their long-term effectiveness remains under evaluation. In parallel, promoting alternative models of masculinity that value emotional vulnerability and respect for diversity may help reduce the radicalization of individuals who experience romantic failure as an unbearable humiliation (Kimmel, 2013). Social media platforms should also invest in more advanced moderation systems capable not only of removing openly violent content but also of detecting toxic

language and potentially self-destructive or externally destructive rhetoric at an early stage (Hussein et al., 2020). These measures should be complemented by fact-checking initiatives and by limiting the dissemination of pseudoscientific information, such as unverified statistics, that can fuel fatalism and resentment.

Conclusions

The incel phenomenon represents a complex challenge within the landscape of online subcultures, as it intertwines psychological fragility, relational suffering, and misogynistic ideology. This review has shown that incel identity emerges from two primary factors: (a) deep disappointment resulting from repeated romantic failures, which fosters loneliness and low self-esteem, and (b) online radicalization, facilitated by the *black pill* ideology, which claims that the “injustice” faced by less attractive men is irreversible. Analyses of digital platforms such as Reddit, YouTube, and TikTok indicate that incel discourse is not confined to isolated spaces but can easily spill into mainstream environments, reaching vulnerable individuals. Anonymity, ideological segmentation, and algorithmic recommendation systems contribute to the rapid dissemination of toxic narratives, normalizing hatred toward women and pushing some individuals toward increasingly extreme beliefs or behaviors.

From a clinical perspective, the literature underscores the urgency of recognizing the profound suffering of these individuals, many of whom perceive traditional psychotherapy as a judgmental and invalidating environment. A dual-track approach is therefore required: addressing individual vulnerabilities, such as self-esteem, social skills, and cognitive distortions, while simultaneously dismantling the collective narratives that sustain misogyny and generalized hostility. At the preventive level, interventions should focus on emotional and sexual education, the promotion of alternative models of masculinity that accept vulnerability and failure, and the development of online moderation systems capable of preventing radicalization. Ultimately, addressing the incel phenomenon requires acknowledging the experiences of individuals who feel deeply excluded and have reinterpreted their suffering through a worldview steeped in resentment. The key challenge lies in balancing empathy for their suffering, which reflects legitimate unmet relational needs, with a firm rejection of all forms of violence and discrimination. Only by combining clinical sensitivity with strong opposition to hate rhetoric can we hope to mitigate the impact of this subculture and offer its members pathways toward genuine change. By integrating psychological, sociocultural, and digital perspectives, this paper provides a comprehensive framework for understanding incel

identity as a process of online radicalization rooted in emotional vulnerability. In doing so, it bridges existing gaps between psychological theory and digital culture research, contributing an original, multidimensional perspective to the study of gendered radicalization in the digital age.

Acknowledgements, Grants and Funding

This work received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Ethical considerations

This study did not involve human participants or the collection of personal or sensitive data. All materials analyzed were publicly accessible online and were examined exclusively for academic and research purposes. No direct quotations containing hate speech, explicit content, or identifiable user information were included. The analysis focused solely on understanding the psychological and sociocultural dynamics underlying the incel phenomenon, with the explicit intention of avoiding any form of pathologization or stigmatization of individuals associated with this community.

Authors' contribution

VDS assisted with generation of the initial draft of the manuscript, study concept and manuscript editing, PF assisted with manuscript editing, study concept, GMC assisted with study concept, manuscript editing and study supervision. All authors contributed to and have approved the final manuscript.

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