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Social Media Incel Communities and Teenagers' Online Experiences

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Abstract. With the rapid development of social media, Incel (involuntary celibate) related content has gradually spread in the online community and received more and more attention. Some Incel communities not only discuss personal loneliness, love difficulties and rejection experiences, but also form negative views on women and more extreme gender concepts. This article mainly studies the communication characteristics of Incel discourse on social media and the impact that these contents may have on teenagers. Through the analysis of existing relevant literature, the research focusses on the formation of the Incel community, social media communication, network algorithms and echo chamber effects, and further analyses the gender stereotypes and negative attitudes in it. The study found that loneliness, insufficient social support and identity difficulties may increase young people's dependence on online groups, while continuous exposure to content with similar views may further reinforce negative gender perceptions. This article believes that the content of Incel does not directly lead to extreme behaviour of all contacts, but some of the views that justify misogynism and violence may affect teenagers' understanding of love, gender relationships and self-worth. Therefore, schools, families and social media platforms need to strengthen the media literacy, social support and mental health education of teenagers, while reasonably managing online content with obvious hate and violent tendencies.

Keywords: Teenager, incel, social media, psychology

1. Introduction

With the development of social media, the Internet has become an important place for teenagers to obtain information, express their views and establish social relationships. In this environment, the Incel (involuntary celibate) group and its related discourse are gradually attracting attention. Incel was originally mainly used to describe men who wanted to establish an intimate relationship but could not fulfil this desire for a long time. Some studies have also found that Incel activities are not completely isolated from the real social environment, and their online activities are related to the local love and mate selection environment [1]. However, some online Incel communities have gradually formed a more fixed ideology, including negative views on women, strong dissatisfaction with social injustice, and the view that personal failure in love is attributed to women and society. Studies have shown that loneliness, rejection, low self-evaluation and mental health problems may

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be related to the identity formation of some Incel members, and the online community may further reinforce these negative emotions and views [2, 3].

This article mainly analyses Incel discourse from the perspective of social media communication, and further discusses its possible impact on teenagers. The article believes that Incel content does not necessarily directly lead to extreme behaviour in teenagers, but some of these extreme views on gender, love and social relationships may affect teenagers' gender concepts and social cognition through repeated contact, group identity, emotional resonance and online echo rooms. Especially for teenagers who feel lonely, have less social support or are experiencing identity difficulties, this kind of content may be more attractive. Therefore, the handling of this problem cannot simply rely on deleting content, but should strengthen the media literacy, social support and mental health education of adolescents at the same time, and improve the identification and management of extreme gender hate content on social media platforms.

The Internet has become an important part of teenagers' daily life. Teenagers not only communicate with friends through social media, but also learn about social issues and other people's life experiences through short videos, forums, comment areas and online communities. The openness of the Internet allows different types of groups to find their own communication space, but at the same time, some online communities with obvious negative emotions and extreme views can also quickly gather people with similar experiences.

Incel is a kind of network group that has attracted attention in recent years. Incel is usually understood as "involuntary celibate", that is, "involuntary celibate", mainly refers to men who think they cannot establish a relationship or sexual relationship. It should be noted that not all men who lack love experience are Incel, and it cannot be considered that all Incel members will have violent behaviour. The research of Sparks, Zidenberg and Olver pointed out that the Incel group has a certain relationship with factors such as love rejection, loneliness, mental health problems and negative emotions [2].

What is really worth paying attention to is that some online Incel communities no longer only discuss personal love difficulties, but also form a set of common words to explain personal experiences. For example, some members believe that women will only choose a few attractive men, while ordinary men have little possibility of changing their love situation. This view is called "black pill" in some communities, that is, it is believed that an individual's appearance, social status and other factors have determined the result of one's love, so efforts are meaningless [3].

2. Background

The formation of the Incel group has a certain relationship with personal love experience, social relationships and psychological state. Sparks et al. summarised the relevant research and found that the Incel experience is often associated with love rejection, loneliness, low self-esteem and other negative psychological experiences [2]. In addition to the love experience and rejection, the mental health status of the Incel group is also worthy of attention. Delaney et al. discussed the psychological state of involuntary single people from the perspective of psychological happiness, showing that loneliness, negative emotions and poor psychological well-being are factors that cannot be ignored when understanding this group [4]. Therefore, the Incel identity cannot only be understood as "no love object", it may also be associated with the individual's long-term emotional and social relationship experience [4]. Therefore, from the most basic level, the Incel community has the function of "seeking understanding" for some members [2]. A person who feels lonely or rejected in real life may find people with similar experiences on the Internet and thus gain a feeling that "I am not the only one like this". Relevant studies have also found that there is a link between

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Incel identity and depression, anxiety, paranoid thinking and certain attachment patterns, which shows that the online behaviour of some members may be related to earlier psychological and interpersonal difficulties, and cannot be simply understood that social media has caused these problems [5].

This kind of group identity itself is not necessarily negative. The problem is that when a network group begins to use a very single way to explain the life experience of its members, new problems may arise. De Vettor et al. conducted a thematic analysis of identity and emotional experience in the Incel online community, pointing out that the identity of community members is related to their views on love, male roles and social acceptance [6]. This means that the Incel identity is not only a description of a personal love experience, but also a way for individuals to understand themselves and society [6]. For example, if a person originally thought that "I don't have love experience may be because of insufficient social skills", but after entering some Incel communities, he keeps seeing views such as "women only like a certain man" and "society doesn't care about ordinary men at all", then his understanding of his own experience may change.

The research of Costello et al. further points out that there are different psychological and ideological development paths within the Incel group [3]. The study found that the relationship between poor mental health and identification with Incel ideology and harmful attitudes and beliefs is stronger than simple online communication. That is to say, it cannot be simply thought that "using the Incel forum" itself will lead to extreme views. The original psychological state of the individual and the degree of acceptance of ideology are equally important.

Therefore, it is understood that Incel cannot simply be regarded as an exactly identical group. Some members may mainly express loneliness and frustration, while others may gradually accept more extreme misogynistic views

Social media has changed the way people access information. In the past, a person's views may mainly come from family, school and real-life friends, but now, teenagers may come into contact with a large number of strangers' views every day. Incel-related content can also be disseminated through forums, comment areas, short videos and other online platforms. One obvious feature of this communication is that emotions are often more likely to attract attention than complex explanations. Anger, irony, ridicule and "victim narratives" are easy to make users react emotionally, so they are easier to remember than more complex and rational discussions. De Roos et al. studied the language changes in the Incel community, paying special attention to the development of extreme language and emotional language [7]. Its study describes the Incel community as a network environment with obvious expressions of anger, which shows that emotional language is not an accidental individual content, but may gradually become part of community communication [7].

De Roos et al. studied the language in the Incel network community and found that there are obvious anger and extreme language characteristics in such communities, and pointed out that the continuous participation in such a network environment is worthy of attention [7]. At the same time, the study emphasises that it cannot be considered that all members will commit violence just because some Incel is related to violence; broader issues include cyber harassment, aggressive language and hostility to women. This shows that the influence of Incel speech is not necessarily a very extreme behaviour. Even if a teenager does not commit any violence, he may gradually think that some obviously unreasonable gender views are "normal" because of long-term exposure to relevant content.

In addition to users actively searching for content, social media algorithms may also affect what users see. When a person frequently watches a certain type of content, the platform may continue to recommend similar content. In this way, the views encountered by users will become more and more

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focussed. This phenomenon can be associated with the concept of "echo chamber". In the echo room, users constantly see content similar to their original views, and the chance of different opinions is reduced. Over time, a person may have the illusion that "everyone thinks so". Coufal and Wedel conducted a case study of an Incel forum and analysed the development of misogynistic extremist views in the community from the perspective of cyber radicalisation. This shows that the online community is not only a place for information exchange. It may also gradually connect ordinary frustrations with more extreme ideologies through the continuous repetition and reinforcement of similar views among members [8].

This issue is particularly noteworthy for teenagers. Teenagers with high levels of loneliness and less social support are more likely to have a strong dependence on social media, and the way they use social media may be related to finding group connections.

Therefore, if a teenager lacks friends in real life and often feels lonely, the online community may become a very important source of emotion. At this time, a group that can provide a "common identity" will be more attractive than ordinary information. The Incel community provides this kind of group identity: members are no longer just "a person without love experience", but become a group member with common experience and common interpretation.

One of the most noteworthy issues in Incel-related content is the way it describes the relationship between men and women. In some extreme communities, women are not regarded as individuals with independent ideas and choices, but are simply classified as groups that "only value appearance" and "only like high-value men". This view is actually an oversimplification. In reality, love relationships are influenced by personality, social environment, values, communication skills, personal experience and other factors. There is no simple formula that can decide who can find a partner. However, when complex personal problems are interpreted as "women are like this", it is easy to form gender stereotypes. The thematic analysis of De Vettor et al. found that in the Incel network community he studied, membership is related to the pressure of male roles and the threat of being accepted by society [6]. At the same time, there is a demeaning and depersonalised expression of women within the community.

More seriously, some extreme words may further explain personal love failures as what women "owe themselves". Gosse, Halpin and Maguire analysed 22,060 comments in the discussion area and found that some Incel members would describe sexual violence against women as "retaliation" against their Incel situation and support it by distorting scientific research [9].

This shows that extreme Incel words are not just "complaining about not having a girlfriend". When personal frustration is interpreted as the result of a certain group, negative emotions may change from "I am not satisfied with my life" to "I hate the person who caused all this". This shift has expanded the problem from personal psychological difficulties to gender and social relations. However, it is also necessary to avoid another kind of excessive simplification. The research of Costello et al. shows that mental health problems and ideological identity are important factors explaining harmful attitudes, while the predictive effect of online communication itself is relatively low [3]. Therefore, a more reasonable understanding should be that the online community may provide a reinforced environment for existing loneliness, frustration and negative cognition, but it is not the only reason. Papandreou et al. conducted a qualitative study on men who identified themselves as Incel, focussing on emotions such as "sense of corruption", anger and blame in the process of identity formation [10]. This further shows that some members may gradually turn the setbacks in their personal experiences into negative interpretations of themselves, women or society. Therefore, the formation of Incel identity is more suitable to be understood as a process of gradual development than directly caused by a single factor.

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3. Discussion

Teenagers are in the stage of gradual formation of values and identity, so the online content they are exposed to may affect their understanding of themselves and others. This can also be linked to the identity of the Incel group itself. Fontanesi et al. found that Incel identity has a certain relationship with factors such as depression, anxiety, paranoid thinking and attachment patterns, while Papandreou et al. emphasised the role of anger and blame in identity development [5,10]. This shows that when a young person himself is already lonely, rejected or has social relationship difficulties, he may be more likely to accept online narratives that can explain these negative experiences [10].

First of all, Incel speech may affect teenagers' understanding of the relationship between men and women. If a teenager is exposed to the views of "women only look at appearance" and "men must have a high social value to be liked" for a long time, he may gradually regard these views as the universal law of the real world. In this way, a normal love relationship may be understood as a kind of competition rather than a relationship based on mutual respect.

Secondly, these contents may reinforce the stereotype of women. Teenagers themselves may not have enough real love experience, so simple explanations on the Internet may become an important source for them to understand the relationship between men and women. If the online content repeatedly describes women as "money worship", "snobbish" or "no feelings", teenagers may form a negative preset before they really establish a relationship with women.

Third, the content of Incel may affect the self-evaluation of teenagers. Some Incel views emphasise factors such as appearance, height, social status, and believe that these conditions determine a person's love value. This may make teenagers who lack confidence in their appearance or social skills more anxious.

Therefore, the impact of Incel discourse should not only be measured by "whether it becomes a violent element". More common effects may be more negative gender attitudes, pessimistic understanding of love relationships, negative self-evaluation, and hostility to the opposite sex.

Teenagers are easily affected by this kind of content, which is first of all related to the stage of their psychological development. Adolescence is an important stage for the formation of self-identity. Teenagers will constantly think about "who I am", "what others think of me" and "whether I am accepted by others". If a person is not recognised enough in real life, he may pay special attention to group identity on the Internet.

This means that a teenager who feels lonely in real life may spend more time looking for understanding on the Internet. One of the characteristics of the Incel community is to constantly emphasise that "we have the same experience". For a person who lacks a sense of belonging, this expression may be very attractive.

In addition, teenagers' ability to judge online information is still developing. The views in the online community may often be wrapped in words such as "data", "science" and "research", which makes a young person who lacks relevant knowledge think that these contents are scientifically based. The research of Gosse and others found that some Incel discussions will selectively use scientific concepts to support negative views on women.

Finally, repeated contact in the network environment will also add problems. When encountered only once, a particular view may be perceived by teenagers as an individual opinion. However, repeated exposure to similar content, especially when it receives widespread support in comment sections, may gradually make the view appear "normal." This process constitutes an important aspect of online group influence.

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For young people, the biggest problem that Incel speech may bring is not a single extreme message, but a long-term way of thinking. For example, a teenager may gradually think that he is "not good enough" and that women are "untrustworthy" at the same time, and finally form a pessimistic attitude towards love relationships.

On the other hand, the platform also faces management difficulties. If the platform directly deletes all content related to Incel, it may also delete the content that normally discusses loneliness, singleness and male mental health. Therefore, what the platform really needs to deal with is hate, harassment, depersonalisation and content that encourages violence, rather than simply prohibiting a certain identity tag.

This also shows that the problem cannot only be solved by "blocking the account". The platform can strengthen the identification of extreme gender hate content, while reducing the continuous recommendation of obviously inflammatory content. Schools can strengthen media literacy education so that teenagers can learn to judge whether "an online view is true or not".

In addition, the attention to mental health issues is also very important. The study of Costello et al. believes that interventions for mental health and ideology may be more effective than simply reducing networking [3].

Therefore, if a teenager begins to rely on extreme online communities because of loneliness, rejection or lack of social support, the really effective method should include support in real life, rather than simply telling him "don't surf the Internet". Mental health intervention is also a part of this problem that cannot be ignored. Bachaud et al. studied the relationship between the Incel group and psychotherapy, pointing out that some Incel individuals may be resistant to mental health intervention [11]. Therefore, it may not be easy for this group to simply ask them to "change their minds". A more effective way may be to first understand their loneliness, rejection experience and attitude towards psychological intervention, and then gradually build trust and support.

4. Conclusion

In general, Incel discourse is an issue that intersects with online culture, gender relations, loneliness and mental health. Some Incel members may feel lonely and frustrated just because of the long-term lack of love relationships, and some online communities have developed more obvious misogyny and extreme ideas on this basis. Therefore, all Incel cannot be regarded as dangerous people, but the problem of gender hatred and violence justification in extreme Incel communities cannot be ignored.

Social media makes this kind of speech easier to spread. For teenagers, repeated contact, group identity, algorithm recommendation and loneliness in real life may increase the possibility of being affected. Especially when a teenager lacks social support, an online community that can provide a "sense of belonging" may be easier to attract him than ordinary information.

Therefore, the most reasonable way to deal with this problem is not to simply label the entire Incel group, but to pay attention to three levels at the same time: first, to help teenagers establish correct gender concepts and media judgement ability; second, to provide more practical support for young people who are lonely and undersupported by society; Third, social media platforms need to pay more attention to the dissemination of extremely misogynistic, harassment and violent justifying content.

In the end, what really needs to be solved is not just "how much Incel content appears on the Internet", but why some young people need to find identity and belonging through such online communities. Reducing loneliness in offline life, strengthening social support, and fostering healthier attitudes toward gender and romantic relationships among young people may help mitigate the potential influence of extreme online discourse on teenagers.

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