

Incel activity online is evolving to become more extreme, study shows

February 9 2023



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Incel activity online is evolving to become more extreme as some of the online spaces hosting its violent and misogynistic content are shut down and new ones emerge, a new study shows.

Experts tracking the evolution of the conglomerate of online spaces known as the "incelosphere" have discovered the nature of discussions have become more extreme and that real-world events such as the 2018 Toronto van attack had an impact on online activity.

Levels of violent extremist language vary across different parts of the incelosphere and have steadily increased in the main online spaces over the past six years. There are now new prominent incel spaces online, and the incelosphere is a continually evolving ecosystem connected to other online extremist ecosystems.

Dr. Lewys Brace and Professor Stephane Baele from the University of Exeter, and Professor Debbie Ging from Dublin City University analyzed the largest known linguistic corpus of incel online content, millions of posts across all of the major incel online spaces between 2014 and 2022, aided with with a custom dictionary of incel violent extremist language they have produced.

Professor Baele said, "We have found clear evidence of a greater volume of incel discussion online over time, including an increasing use of dehumanizing labels and words depicting violence."

Forums currently dominate the incelosphere, with one forum occupying a major role as the longstanding anchor of the community since the closure of a series of older sub-Reddits. After they were shut down, more extreme forums were set up and were harder to shut down.

Researchers found levels of violent extremist language were four times greater in some online spaces compared to others. Particular platforms often had their own specific linguistic profile, with forums being more toxic than sub-Reddits, especially after the summer 2019 when one of the major sub-Reddits closed.

The pandemic and two incel-inspired acts of violence—in Toronto and Glendale—led to significant changes in posting activity on the largest incel forum. This change was much larger following the Toronto attack.

Researchers believe users are now migrating between different online spaces. Daily numbers of Reddit posts found by researchers decreased from late 2020 onwards, and there was an increase in posts on other sites, as well as the establishment of new sites.

Incel violent extremist language was more often found in [forums](#) than in chans and on Reddit.

Dr. Brace said, "Current activity on Reddit shows users have toned down the more extreme conversation to avoid having the board shut down. While Reddit initially hosted communities that increasingly adopted violent extremist language, the platform's actions seem to have partially tamed the discussions.

"Reddit's implementation of terms of use on hate speech and bullying and its quarantine policy have made it a more unstable place for incel communities. As a result, the Reddit region of the incelosphere has produced a series of different, shorter-lived communities with overlapping yet not identical membership."

The dominant, longest running platform became a place where people were using more misogynistic and racist language.

Dr. Ging said, "In key online spaces of the incelosphere—where the main "discussions" are taking place—are indeed marked by increasing levels of violent extremism in language. Behavior in these online spaces is responsive to real-world, offline events but an increase in daily posts does not necessary correlate with an increase in extremist discussions."

Researchers used custom-built web scrapers to collect the content first-hand following a double process of ethics clearance, with the only exception being some of the old sub-Reddits that were shut down for violating Reddit's terms of service in relation to hate speech and bullying long before this project began, so their content was extracted from the Pushshift.io open-source data archiving site.

More information: Stephane Baele et al, A Diachronic Cross-Platforms Analysis of Violent Extremist Language in the Incel Online Ecosystem, *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2022.2161373](https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2022.2161373)

Provided by University of Exeter

Citation: Incel activity online is evolving to become more extreme, study shows (2023, February 9) retrieved 27 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-02-incel-online-evolving-extreme.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.