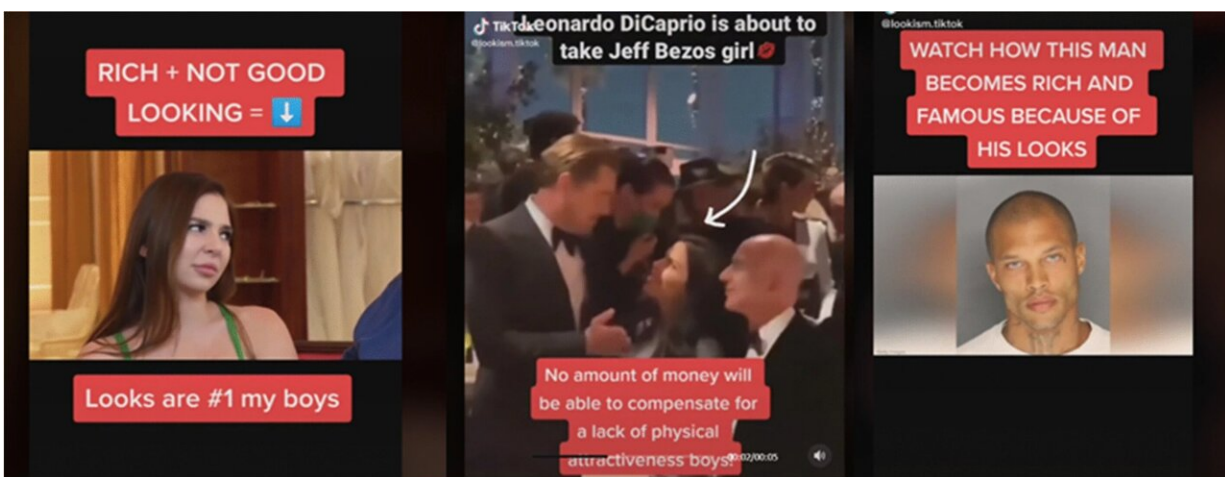


New research highlights the role of TikTok in spreading videos that encourage violence against women

October 10 2023



Account1 sample of thumbnails and video style. Credit: *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* (2023). DOI: 10.1007/s10610-023-09559-5

Researchers focusing on the concerning rise of groups who perpetuate misogyny, sexism and even violence against women have uncovered the use of TikTok by incels to spread their extreme beliefs.

Incels are men who are involuntary celibates. Recent violent incidents linked to incels (e.g., the 2021 Plymouth shooting, the 2020 Toronto machete attack, the 2018 Toronto van attack) have raised alarm bells

among policymakers and researchers. It was previously thought that misogynistic and violent views of incels had been confined to niche men's forums. Earlier studies delved into the incel phenomenon on secluded areas of the web, and until now their presence on mainstream platforms like TikTok has been largely overlooked.

[The research](#) by the University of Portsmouth specifically examined the incel subculture on TikTok, a platform that has shown a surge in misogynistic and anti-feminist content. Researchers analyzed two prominent incel accounts, and their respective 52 videos and 1657 comments.

Lead author, Anda Solea, School of Criminology and Criminal Justice Studies at the University of Portsmouth, says, "It is a common belief that incels are an underground community, removed from beloved and popular platforms such as TikTok. Our study demonstrates that incel ideology is also present, popularized and thriving on TikTok."

Online subcultures with extremist beliefs have been using the internet for decades to spread ideologies, contributing to the growth of hate speech and violence. In response to feminist advancements, anti-feminist men's groups have gained prominence in recent years, and have been able to promote masculinity, misogyny and opposition to feminism. Among these groups, incels have been most associated with violence.

Anda explains, "Incels consider themselves unable to attain [romantic relationships](#) due to societal hierarchies based on looks, money and status, where [women](#) wield power. They have been linked to gendered hate speech and violence against women, making them an increasing security concern."

"However, research has often oversimplified incels, overlooking their diversity across different online platforms. Mainstream platforms like

TikTok have stricter moderation policies but are not immune to incel influence. This study aims to understand how incels adapt their ideology to mainstream platforms and how they influence and are influenced by mainstream discourse."

To avoid detection, the research reveals that on TikTok, incel ideology takes a much subtler form, using emotional appeals and pseudo-science to share extremist views. Covert language and terminology are used on TikTok—in contrast to incel content observed on secluded incel spaces.

Incels are effectively communicating to larger and more dispersed audiences through:

- Pseudo-scientific appeals—using fake and misinterpreted graphs, surveys and information often based on [evolutionary psychology](#) and biological determinism to 'expose the supposed true nature of women'. This data is often presented scientifically to try and give it legitimacy.
- Emotional appeals—employing repurposed viral internet media (including TV clips and memes) depicting unattractive men's humiliation and suffering at the hands of women to portray men as victims and evoke empathy.
- Language sufficiently implicit to escape content moderation, yet apparent enough to be harmful and perpetuate hateful beliefs, representing a limitation of content moderation and policy.

The study also highlights how incel beliefs interlink with broader sexism and structural misogyny, ultimately normalizing their harmful ideologies. It explains and amplifies harmful gender stereotypes and provides justification for violence against women. The videos and their respective comments perpetuated rape myths consisting of:

- denying the importance of consent,

- blaming women for their sexual victimization and maintaining the belief that sexual assault allegations are tools used by women to prosecute and discriminate against men,
- that the [criminal justice system](#) is complicit, assigning assault charges without a due process (guilty until proven innocent).

Study co-author Dr. Lisa Sugiura, associate professor in cybercrime and gender at the University of Portsmouth, says, "These clever subtle approaches aim to resonate with broader audiences, including those who might be unfamiliar with the intricacies of incel ideology. They present a challenge to policymakers and a real danger to women. As TikTok gains popularity, more needs to be done to understand the growing incel activity on the platform."

The research is published in the *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*.

More information: Anda Iulia Solea et al, Mainstreaming the Blackpill: Understanding the Incel Community on TikTok, *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s10610-023-09559-5](#)

Provided by University of Portsmouth

Citation: New research highlights the role of TikTok in spreading videos that encourage violence against women (2023, October 10) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-10-highlights-role-tiktok-videos-violence.html>

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