

From Intimate Relationship Failure to Social Issues: A Thematic Analysis of Incel Discourse on YouTube

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Abstract. This study examines the online commentary discourse surrounding the "Incel" phenomenon as a sociological field, exploring how frustrations in intimate relationships are transformed into interpretations of self-identity, gender relations, and social order. Drawing on a corpus of 24,648 top-level comments from ten popular YouTube videos related to the incel discourse and employing a computer-assisted thematic analysis method (MDCOR), four recurring thematic areas are identified: cognitive shifts and self-repositioning following romantic setbacks, competing explanatory frameworks for relationship dilemmas, controversies over gender roles and economic obligations in dating, and multidimensional social attributions of the incel phenomenon. Through the theoretical lens of emotional capitalism, the analysis further elucidates the mechanisms by which private emotional experiences are externalized, narrated, and reconstructed into public discourse under contemporary platform conditions. A core finding of this study is that intimate relationship frustration does not necessarily produce a single response pattern; rather, similar experiences are channeled through divergent interpretive paths—ranging from self-doubt and withdrawal to self-correction and growth. This challenges the prevailing tendency in existing literature to treat incel discourse as a homogeneous and internally consistent ideology. Instead, the study argues that the incel discourse on YouTube functions as a heterogeneous discursive field in which contemporary anxieties concerning intimacy, masculinity, and social legitimacy are continuously defined, contested, and re-narrated.

Keywords: Incel, social media, neoliberalism, intimate relationships, social norms

1. Introduction

The random attacks on passengers by Elliot Rodger in May 2014 is widely recognized as the first public incident involving "Incel", alongside with the subsequent series of social incidents involving hatred and violence caused by Alek Minassian and Scott Beierle, after which the curtain between the Incel community and the public eye has been opened, and this community started to be regarded as one of the anti-social force, labelled even as terrorism from time to time [1].

By a broad definition, "INCEL" refers to males who perceive themselves as being forced to stay in "involuntary celibacy" against their will and who are often immersed in the "manosphere" culture,

which disseminates misogynistic or hateful views in a frequent term [2].

Positive as the implication of social media has been mainly recognized, many researchers, however, still observed a correlation between extremist from hate group and its well-constructed organization by the means of social media, as Ganesh simply puts it: "the explosion of digital hate culture represents the dark side of the democratizing power of social media" [3].

Existing academic research has been predominantly focused on tracing the extreme expression, ideological construction (i.e. Black-pill Philosophy), community mobilization mechanisms, and the reproduction of masculinity and misogynistic culture [4]. While this research framework sometimes tends to simplify INCEL discourse into a relatively coherent while homogeneous worldview in an understandable way when it comes to considering the harm caused by certain explicit INCEL spaces, which are majorly centered around sexual deprivation, anti-feminist resentment, and hostile masculinity, it may, nevertheless, obscure an important sociological fact that once the term or its discursive pattern spreads beyond specialized forums and enters the broader platform ecosystem, its meaning becomes more unstable, controversial, and heterogeneous in a deeper term. Therefore, a detailed description and interpretation of the discursive structures within this space would help to address the existing research's insufficient focus on platform contexts and discursive heterogeneity.

This is particularly evident on mainstream platforms like YouTube, which has its incel community growing rapidly, posting negative comments voluminously [5]. Unlike the relatively closed "single men" forums, YouTube comment sections succeed in integrating different subjects (e.g. self-identified "single men", critics, sympathizers, casual browsers, and users who, despite rejecting the label, still express similar frustrations or grievances) into one space, where "single men" not only function as a stable identity category or ideological stance, but also manifest as labels, accusations, insults, confessions, warnings, jokes, explanations, and shortcuts to interpretation, making the discourse on YouTube platform per se worthy of analysis.

With a corpus of 24,648 main comments collected from ten YouTube videos related to the "incel" discourse, this article uses a topic modelling tool MDCOR to discover themes within and provide a solid interpretation afterwards with a sociological perspective of "emotional capitalism" to elucidate the processing and reconstruction mechanisms of private emotions in the contemporary platform environment. Hereby, this study proposes three key research questions:

- (1) What are the significant themes emerging within these discussions?
- (2) What is the process of incel discourse reproduction on the YouTube platform?
- (3) How are these comments transformed beyond hopelessness to broader rationally sociological and philosophical issues?

Overall, the answer we draw to these questions together points towards a reconceptualization of the incel discourse that, compared to existing literature which posits incel discourse as a fixed misogyny or terrorist existence, it can, however, also be reconsidered and studied as a broader social language by which contemporary anxieties concerning intimacy, masculinity and identity in nowadays cyberspaces and times are expressed.

2. Literature review

Since the internet has started becoming an integral part of people's daily lives, the incel movement has also grown without anyone knowing [6]. In the beginning, the first group that emerged was Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project, which was not specifically targeting any gender. At that point, the main motive behind creating such a community was to help the individuals who were trapped either due to their loneliness or bad romantic experiences. However, as days passed by, the number

of men in the community kept increasing, making this forum a space of hate towards women and the entire society [7].

Also, mental disorders such as depression, anxiety, and other psychological problems due to prolonged social isolation are rather widespread among the incels' community. The recent research shows that the significant part of the community suffers from these problems [8, 9]. In fact, many of these individuals believe they have been bullied or socially rejected for quite some time because of their natural qualities such as appearance or height. In order to gain some form of acceptance, they seek it online and become members of the incel communities that follow the so-called "Black Pill" ideology according to which romantic failures are caused by unchangeable deficiencies of the individuals [10, 11]. Any attempts to change something from one's side seem pointless in such cases. Furthermore, the labeling of oneself as "Chad/ Stacy" or "hypergamy" adds up to the negative attitude.

However, the use of social media in incel culture is not limited to being unidimensional. For example, the anonymity provided by the internet enables people to express any radical thought without any restriction—they know that they will not face any consequences of their actions in real life. At the same time, recommendation algorithms on the internet keep showing users everything they are already interested in, thereby pushing the development of radical beliefs [12]. Moreover, the platform such as TikTok provides a covert means to spread radical beliefs by making incel topics appear to be self-improvement videos. Thus, many young men find themselves indoctrinated in the incel community unconsciously. Notably, however, social media does not necessarily mean spreading extremist beliefs. There are online communities that can help one to leave the incel subculture [13].

One may consider that belonging to the incel group necessarily implies being against feminism or being an extremist, but recent studies show a different perspective on this topic. Incels are diverse; they vary by their skin color, education, and even their attitude to violence. Interestingly, the overwhelming number of self-identified incels are against violence [8, 9].

Incels continue to be studied in academia as a homogeneous and misogynist entity. Indeed, the previous studies tended to concentrate either on the extremism of the community or "toxic masculinity" [4]. Naturally, this approach is justified as some activities carried out by individuals identifying themselves as members of the community have brought substantial damage to society. However, the issue is that there has been not enough research conducted on the diversity of people in the incel community and their interaction on mainstream media channels such as YouTube comments sections. Actually, people react differently to failed relationships. There are those who blame themselves and get away from toxic relationships; there are people who feel motivated by failure and set new goals for themselves; there are also people who choose extremes. This statement can be explained with the help of the idea presented by Illouz [14] about emotional capitalism—one's private emotional problems slowly become public and are related to the identity, gender conflict, and blame. Incels, anti-incel, and even interested people all share the same space—the YouTube comment section. And there are voices of peaceful people in the community.

3. Data collection & study design

In this study, we selected ten videos from the YouTube platform that were identified by searching the keyword "Incel" on YouTube and applying the following filters: "This Year," "Video," "4–20 Minutes," and "Sort by View Count." From the search results, four videos were excluded due to being in Hindi, Cantonese, or French, or focusing on Femcel content. The remaining top ten ranked videos were retained for analysis.

The number of comments on these videos was 5,406; 2,006; 684; 3,691; 3,514; 2,071; 390; 558; 5,806; and 522, respectively, yielding a total of 24,648 comments. The videos predominantly take the form of personal monologues, covering topics such as group introductions, news tracking, psychological analysis, and theoretical reflection. In addition, some videos feature multi-person conversational formats, with discussion themes including Alpha Male culture and eccentric social groups. All selected videos were published in 2025, with release dates ranging from January to November.

To minimize interference and enhance consistency in interpretation, we chose to extract the original parent comments for the following analysis rather than the reply chains (child comments) as the former can more directly reflect users' initial reactions to incel-related videos than to the claims of the parental comments.

After data collection, this study employed the computer-assisted thematic analysis method. "Machine-Driven Categorization of Open-Ended Responses" (MDCOR) is a machine learning-based framework designed to automatically categorize large-scale open-ended texts. This method reduces the subjective bias of researchers in manual coding, enhances the reproducibility of results, and provides strong scalability, enabling it to efficiently process thousands to tens of thousands of social media comments [15]. The use of MDCOR in this study enables the extraction of potential themes from a vast number of YouTube comments, while retaining access to the unmodified qualitative content in each categorized text, thus laying the foundation for subsequent theory-driven interpretive analysis. It has to be noted that the goal of this study is not to replace qualitative interpretation but to provide preliminary large-scale thematic categorization, which can then be followed by interpretive integration through close reading.

Specifically, all collected parent comments were imported into MDCOR, with designated ID and text columns. An automatic text cleaning procedure was then executed to eliminate invalid or abnormal responses. Where appropriate, researchers manually removed certain high-frequency words. Next, sampling parameters were set and a metric analysis was performed. The system automatically generated charts to guide the selection of the optimal number of codes, followed by final classification. After completing the analysis, MDCOR not only outputs the categories assigned to each text but also highlights the words that play a key role in classification and provides a fit index to support the interpretation of potential themes. Subsequently, researchers examined how the identified themes revealed value orientations, group identities, and gender discourse, integrating these findings into a theoretically based thematic interpretation.

4. Results

After importing the comment data into MDCOR, the system generates an evaluation metrics plot to help determine the appropriate number of codes (Figure 1). The chart tracks four widely used indicators: Arun2010 and CaoJuan2009 (both should be minimized), and Griffiths2004 and Deveaud2014 (both should be maximized). As shown in the figure, when the number of codes increased from 2 to about 9, the changes in each indicator are most obvious. Within this range, the Arun2010 index fell sharply, while the Griffiths2004 index rose significantly. At the same time, the two indicators of Deveaud2014 and CaoJuan2009 also began to show obvious inflection points when approaching 9 codes. Combining these changing trends, it can be considered that 9 codes provide a relatively balanced and stable solution, so this value is adopted for subsequent analysis.

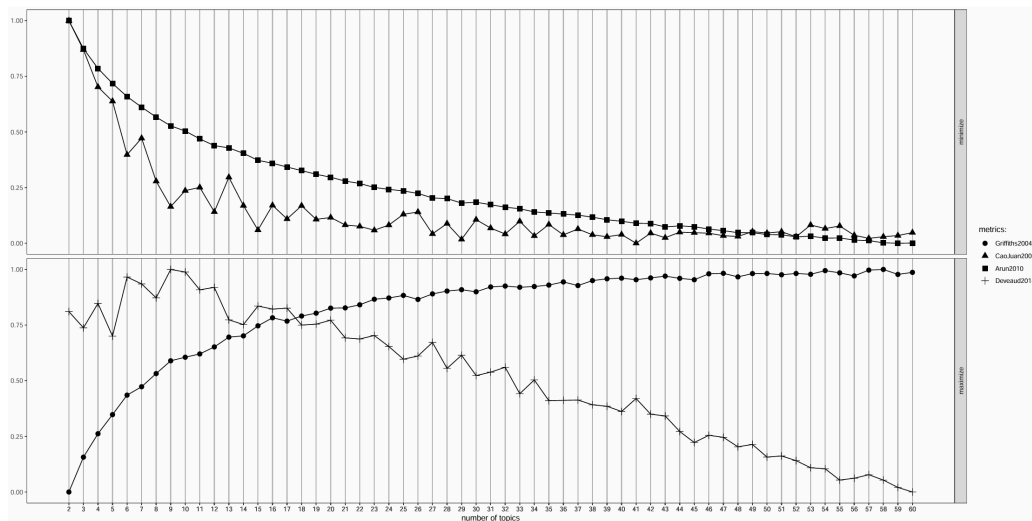


Figure 1. Topic-number evaluation metrics generated in MDCOR

Figure 2 shows the inter-theme distance diagram generated by pyLDAvis. In the visual space, the nine themes are scattered to each other and have almost no obvious overlap, which shows that the themes generated by the model have a good distinction. The size of each circle corresponds to the proportion of the theme in the whole corpora. The bar chart on the right lists the 30 most prominent words in the overall corpus, which will also reappear in the subsequent qualitative analysis.

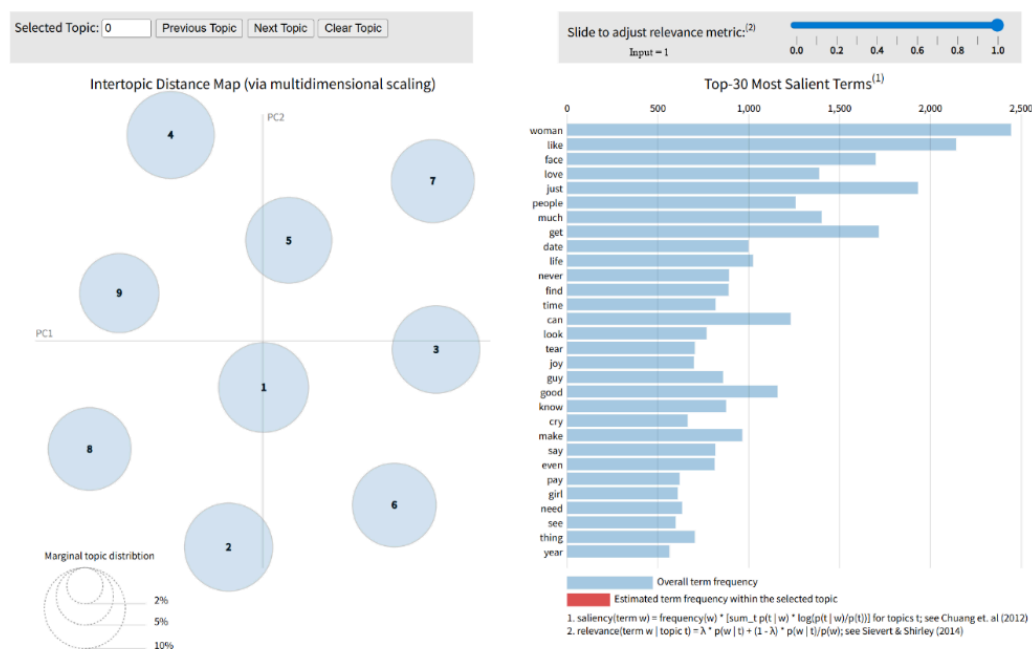


Figure 2. Inter-topic distance map of the nine identified topics

After using the MDCOR model to model the theme of the comment text, a total of nine themes (V1–V9) were obtained from the analysis. These topics are based on the keyword coexistence model, reflecting the different ways in which people express their views in the comment area. In order to surpass the results automatically generated by the model, we further manually read and compared the 20 most representative comments assigned by MDCOR to each code. Although these

codes differ in focus and tone, they always return to some similar core issues. Based on this, we further integrate the nine codes into four higher-level subject categories - the basis for each group of division and its analysis logic will be explained in detail below.

(1) Views on single status after experiencing the frustration of intimate relationships: V1, V2

(2) Explanation framework of Involuntary Singlehood: V3, V4, V5, V7

(3) Controversy on how different genders should bear economic responsibility in dating situations: V6

(4) Multidimensional social interpretation and attribution of the incel phenomenon: V8

V9 is mainly composed of emojis and short emotional responses. It lacks a stable semantic structure, so it is regarded as an emotional expression rather than a substantive thematic content and is not included in the follow-up analysis.

4.1. Theme 1: views on single status after experiencing the frustration of intimate relationships: V1, V2

The expression of V1 and V2 is slightly different - V1 is more inclined to understand the single state in its own situation; while V2 is more focused on the narration of personal experiences - but both ultimately have similar semantic cores. Emotional frustration, long-term singleness and disappointment in relationships constitute the common starting point of the two, and further extend to deeper thinking about love, self-worth and the meaning of life.

Comments on this topic have a similar starting point: commentators often start from the dilemma of intimate relationships or long-term singleness, and then turn to their inner self to rethink what love, self-worth and personal priorities mean. But the views of these comments are not unified, but divided into two different interpretation paths.

One type of comment regards singleness as a problem - it means a failure in a relationship, or it means that there is some kind of deficiency in the individual himself. This kind of voice usually comes from the ruins left by long-term singleness, emotional frustration, or the breakdown of past relationships, and what runs through it is a vague sense of powerlessness: as if the intimate connection between people will not really come after all. A very representative comment in V1 (relative_text_contribution: 1, relative_group_fit: 0.895) puts romantic love in the center of the meaning of life, and in this connection Show strong anxiety when the law is realized (participant ID: 8212). In other comments, emotional betrayal is described as an experience that is enough to plunge people into a crisis of trust for a long time and will permanently affect the establishment of intimate relationships in the future (participant ID: 7646).

Another type of comments went in a different direction: they redefined the state of singleness by renegotiating the meaning of love and self-worth. Compared with treating intimate relationships as the first goal of life, such comments tend to turn their attention to personal growth, the texture of daily life, and broader and more stable social connections, and thus re-understand their own situation. Some comments even further regard singleness as a lifestyle that can be truly accepted or even actively chosen, and oppose the tendency of society to default singleness as a "problem that needs to be fixed" (participant ID: 7216). Other comments describe taking the initiative to withdraw from love after emotional injury, and turn the energy originally invested in love to study, hobbies or self-growth (participant ID: 7992).

On the whole, this topic shows that individuals in the incel context do not just passively absorb and repeat a certain fixed discourse logic. On the contrary, they are taking the initiative to construct the meaning around "single" and "relationship failure", but the interpretation paths adopted are different. Some people still continue the narrative logic of "being single is a problem" to varying

degrees; others try to break away from this logic and establish a new cognitive foundation by re-negotiating the meaning of love and self-worth.

4.2. Theme 2: explanatory frameworks of Involuntary Singlehood (V3, V4, V5, V7)

The comments in this theme try to attribute the dilemma of long-term singleness. Unlike the expression of theme one based on personal experience, the comments on theme two often express their views directly, discussing why relationships are difficult to establish or maintain and the action strategies under these attribution judgments.

Although V3, V4, V5 and V7 adopt different expressions, their core problem has always emerged: romantic relationships are difficult to really start. Some comments stay at the individual level, regard attractiveness, self-confidence and social skills as important variables that determine the outcome of the relationship, and believe that self-improvement will indeed have an impact on the outcome (participant ID: 15440). Other comments attribute the problem to long-term accumulated psychological trauma, long-term isolation, or self-esteem gradually worn away by years of frustration - this continuous consumption makes the real intimate relationship more and more distant (participant ID: 8257). Both types of explanations clearly determine that the relationship dilemma is at the individual level.

Another type of commentary places the relationship problem in a broader contemporary social environment and links it with the Internet environment, platform mechanisms and changes in modern values. Some commentators believe that social media amplifies the comparison and screening mechanism, making individuals more likely to have a sense of "mismatch" (participant ID: 7379) in the process of continuous evaluation. Other comments believe that dating software has changed the way relationships are established, making the interaction between people more and more inclined to quick judgment rather than slow emotional connections (participant ID: 8037). Some comments point out that the gradual disappearance of offline social life has made the social environment that could naturally develop stable relationships more and more scarce (participant ID: 8194).

For some commentators, these structural observations further extend to thinking about "what love itself means". Some commentators believe that contemporary society has to some extent commercialized love - constructing it into an idealized narrative that is constantly promoted and consumed - and what is really important is the ability to get rid of projection and truly understand another person (participant ID: 6954). Other comments are further promoted to the macro level, expressing dissatisfaction with mainstream gender norms and moral values, and believing that these changes have reshaped role expectations in intimate relationships, and these changes make some men feel marginalized or unable to benefit from them (participant ID : 7347). In this path of interpretation, the dilemma of relationships is no longer just a failure that needs to be borne and repaired by individuals, but becomes the result of the joint effect of the technical environment and contemporary ideology.

At the individual level, the narrative of self-improvement actually confronts the common deterministic tendency in incel discourse to a certain extent - it retains a possibility that the dilemma of the relationship is not unchangeable, and personal adjustment can still bring different results. Structural explanations tend to extrapolate problems to the environmental and ideological levels, but they are not completely converged into a single gender antagonistic logic, but involve multiple dimensions such as platform mechanisms, changes in the view of love and broader social transformation.

Some comments further directly respond to the incel-related narrative per se. On the one hand, there are comments that clearly oppose the core views in incel discourse - such as opposing the "laws of nature" as an explanation of the failure of a relationship, and insisting that the result of the relationship is not only determined by congenital conditions (participant ID: 5113). On the other hand, there are also comments that reaffirm or reinforce the logic of gender opposition to some extent: for example, criticizing women for packaging self-interested behavior as "honesty" or "mate selection criteria", thus rationalizing the demand for resources in intimate relationships (participant ID: 10087); or that women are biased. The tendency to love "bad boys" is distorting male behavior patterns (participant ID: 11085). Another view is to put the focus back on men themselves, believing that some men take the initiative to withdraw from the female-centered love model and turn their attention to other goals in life (participant ID: 6892).

There is no unified position between these comments. Refutation, reinterpretation and reinforcement are staggered, so that incel-related explanations are always in a controversial and unstable state in the context of intimate relationships.

On the whole, the commentators of this topic are not only trying to explain why the relationship is difficult to achieve, but also putting forward corresponding strategies, norms and behavioral suggestions. In the incel context, this "interpretation" and "discipline" are often difficult to separate. Together, they constitute a multi-dimensional, internally controversial relationship understanding system.

4.3. Theme 3: controversy on how different genders should bear economic responsibility in dating situations (V6)

This topic mainly revolves around the distribution of economic responsibilities in dating, in which "who should pay" becomes the core issue. The frequent appearance of words such as "female", "date", "payment", "money" and "gentleman" shows that the discussion continues to revolve around the same point - that is, the conflict between gender expectations and economic obligations.

The comments on this topic show a highly controversial position opposition, which can be seen in the model results: the `relative_text_contribution` of most comments is low (about 0.4), indicating that the topic is more aggregating scattered and contradictory views. Point, instead of presenting a coherent and unified discourse position.

Among these representative comments, some comments criticize a contradiction that they think exists: on the one hand, women require men to bear the traditional dating expenses, and on the other hand, they emphasize independence and equality, and regard it as a "double standard" (participant ID: 10001). Other comments went further, directly questioning the traditional norm of "male payment", and instead advocated the AA system (participant ID: 10750) or flexible arrangement according to the specific situation (participant ID: 11975). Another view is that simplifying dating to the question of "who pays" will make it lose its original meaning as an emotional interaction, and eventually reshape the relationship into a process of resource exchange and interest calculation (participant ID: 11044).

One of the comments is significantly higher than the other comments in terms of text concentration. Its `relative_text_contribution` is 1 and `relative_group_fit` is 0.93. By continuously stacking a large number of extreme and highly specific appearance standards, it constructs an almost parody "ideal male image" (p Participant ID: 11044). The effect of this comment is more rhetorical than simply descriptive: it forms an ironic criticism of unrealistic mate selection criteria through continuous repetition and accumulation, which is also an important reason why it has high semantic density and high weight in the model.

In general, this theme shows that in the incel context, dating is not only regarded as an emotional connection space, but also a field of constant collision between gender roles, resource allocation and value exchange. The debate over "who pays" and the more extreme discussion of appearance standards and mate selection conditions reflect a broader tendency - that is, constantly problemize intimate relationships and incorporate them into the logic of power and transactions. What finally emerges is a way of understanding gender relations with obvious structural colors, and this perspective has a fairly stable existence in incel discourse.

4.4. Theme 4: multidimensional social interpretations and attributions of the incel phenomenon (V8)

Unlike other topics, the commentators here do not mainly focus on intimate relationships or dating per se. Individual behavior is extracted from its specific situation and placed under a broader social context, so as to accept interpretation and moral evaluation. The word frequency data also reflects this point: words such as "incel", "video", "autism", "blame" and "excuse" appear frequently. Commenters try to explain incel-related behavior from the psychological, social or structural levels, and further discuss who should bear the responsibility.

In terms of content, many discussions take a specific network event as a starting point - such as discussions about a controversial YouTube video - and then quickly expand into more general social judgment. Some comments clearly oppose the use of mental illness as an excuse for misconduct, insisting that individuals must bear personal responsibility no matter what state they are in (participant ID: 4935).

However, individual cases are not all. Many comments further link the incel phenomenon to larger-scale social factors. Family background and early growth experience are frequently used as the basis for explanation: there are comments that poor growth environment or premature exposure to harmful content may gradually push individuals to extreme ideas (participant ID: 5224). There are also comments that further turn the criticism to society per se: they believe that identity labeling and narratives based on "sympathy" are actually quietly weakening the sense of personal responsibility and may exacerbate the problems of these groups (participant ID: 4853). Other comments completely jump out of the case analysis level and discuss the incel phenomenon directly from the perspective of the social system. Some comments criticize the obvious inconsistency within the judicial system by comparing the differences in judicial punishment for different types of behavior - responsibility and punishment are not equally distributed among different groups (participant ID: 4899).

In this theme, individual behavior is no longer regarded as an independent phenomenon. On the contrary, it is embedded in a multi-level interpretation framework, and the incel phenomenon per se is gradually built into a multi-dimensional social problem.

5. Discussion

Research findings indicate that the incel discourse does not constitute the homogeneous and internally consistent ideology that has been often implied in previous studies [16]. Rather, it forms a diverse interpretative field centred on issues of intimate relationships, self-worth, fairness and responsibility. In this sense, the comment section serves as a socially structured arena where individuals' experiences of romantic frustration are transformed into broader interpretations of the self, gender relations and social order.

An important preliminary conclusion is that the frustration in intimate relationships does not necessarily bring about the discursive pattern of failure, defect, or loss, accompanied by pessimism, distrust, and avoidance [17], where similar experiences can also be interpreted through self-development, life planning, and alternative sources of meaning. This finding is crucial because it indicates that the narration of incel community can be reorganized through different interpretative frameworks since the key issue is not only that people have been hurt, but also how such hurt is given meaning.

To a certain degree, Illouz's [14] literature on "emotional capitalism" effectively elucidates this divergence. It is pointed out that modern emotional life is increasingly structured by the demands of self-responsibility [14], and therefore, emotional pain can easily be transformed into a project of self-evaluation and self-correction. This helps explain why some comments in the corpus fall into self-denial and self-deprecation, while others present themselves as self-healing and repositioning – under the same self-responsible pattern, they are able to redirect the same experience into a moment that allows them to enter a new period of better self.

Theme 2 further expands on this argument by showcasing commentators explaining relationship dilemmas from theoretical perspectives. As commentators oscillates between individualistic and structural explanations, rather than addressing the issue at either level, this oscillation is of significant sociological importance because it indicates that romantic failure is situated at the intersection of personal experiences, platform architecture, and broader moral transformations. Aligned with analysis by Illouz [14], which posits that intimate relationships on the Internet relocate individuals in a situation of increased visibility, comparison, and evaluative choice. Therefore, the "sex market" logic presented in the corpus can be interpreted as a reinforced manifestation of broader postmodern forms of intimate evaluation.

Theme 3 indicates that these tensions coalesce into a more explicit moral economy of dating. As Pateman's [18] theory of sexual contract argues that formally free contractual relationships may mask enduring hierarchies and subordination, and that modern civil relationships cannot be properly understood without attention to their repressed sexual-patriarchal dimensions, debates about dating expenses are therefore a field where parties negotiate whether intimate relationships should be governed by equality, exchange, traditional provision, or some unstable combination of the three [19].

Theme 4 symbolizes an extension of the discourse from courtship per se to the multi-dimensional interpretation of incel phenomenon. The discursive distinction here indicates that the incel phenomenon are regarded as a controversial social category through which people conduct different behaviour, for example, negotiate deviation, sympathy, and punishment. In this regard, the concept of "frustrated entitlement" proposed by [20] provides a useful explanatory discourse: what is presented in the corpus includes not only loneliness, but also the belief that recognition, reciprocity, or value has been unjustly deprived. At the same time, the research results also complicate any simple explanation of resentment, as they also include self-reflection, resistance, and non-misogynistic interpretations, echoing the core finding of this article that the "incel" discourse is not internally unified, but rather uneven.

5.1. Theoretical and methodological contributions

The theoretical significance of this study lies primarily in its opposition to treating incel-related discourse as a singular ideology with high internal consistency. Instead, this paper advocates for its understanding as a discursive field interwoven with multiple interpretative paths; within this field,

intimate relationships, self-worth, notions of fairness, and attributions of responsibility are continuously defined, contested, and re-narrated.

Secondly, this article further introduces the perspective of "emotional capitalism" proposed by Illouz into the interpretation of incel discourse. Following this path, it can be observed that the experience of frustration in contemporary intimate relationships is increasingly not directly experienced as private emotions, but is organized through reflective self-examination, public self-display, continuous social comparison, and evaluative selection mechanisms. Because of this, seemingly conflicting expressions such as self-blame, self-repair, resentment, and dissatisfaction appear simultaneously in the corpus; and those highly personal feelings of emotional loss are often placed within a broader narrative of failure and value judgment system for explanation.

Furthermore, this article further places the aforementioned mechanism back into the "moral economy" of heterosexual intimate relationships for understanding. The debates surrounding issues such as "who should pay for dates", "what is fairness", and "whether men and women owe each other" indicate that the incel discourse is not only related to the issue of thwarted desires, but it is also deeply entangled with the negotiation of exchange logic, reciprocity principles, and gender obligations. Thus, this article reveals how unstable experiences in intimate relationships are recoded into a gendered understanding framework, and further condense into more collective resentment under certain conditions.

Methodologically, this study highlights the sociological value of online comments as a form of public discourse. Comments are studied based on the assumption that they are vital spaces where emotions, judgements and identities are publicly organized and negotiated, in avoidance of the presumption that all discourse can be simplified into one single coherent ideological line. With the admission of observed inherent tensions and imbalances within the material, this study is better able to reveal the complexity of incel discourse in a more heterogeneous and diversified way.

5.2. Limitations and future directions

This study certainly has its limitations. In the first place, the online review data which forms the basis of this analysis is relatively inadequate in both volume and scope, so that it would be difficult to regard them as representative samples of the entire incel community.

Furthermore, the online expression extracted takes place under the continuous influence and shaping of various factors regarding with cyberspaces, including algorithmic mechanisms, interaction patterns, comparison structures, and norms of self-presentation, so that the findings of this paper should be understood as the results of discourse in a specific digital context, rather than a direct reflection of the real state of the relevant groups.

Secondly, the advantage of comment data lies in its ability to capture emotional expressions and position constructions at the public level. However, its ability to reveal individual's continuous life experiences, underlying motivations, and offline practices remains limited. Online expressions are often compressed, rhetorized, and performed, and they are often not directed towards real acquaintances but rather an imagined public. If future research can further integrate interviews, digital ethnography, and longitudinal observation, it may be possible to place these public statements back into specific life histories and social relationships for understanding.

Again, this article excels at explaining how discourse is formed and operates, but it is more difficult to trace its subsequent evolution. This article can reveal how intimate relationship setbacks are socially narrated, explained, and negotiated, but it still cannot fully answer why certain expressions remain in reflection and self-organization, why they transform into misogynistic tendencies, and why they further develop in a more extreme direction. Considering that existing

research has already noticed feelings of alienation, de-realization experiences, and escalation of violence in some situations, future work should more systematically examine how resentment accumulates, amplifies, and completes its transformation over time.

In brief, these limitations suggest subsequent research should adopt cross-platform, cross-cultural, mixed methods to clearly distinguish general pressures in recent intimate life from specific discourse mechanisms generating, spreading, and justifying "incel" dissatisfaction.

6. Conclusion

This paper argues that it is more appropriate to understand the incel discourse on YouTube platform as a heterogeneous discursive space, where the frustrations of intimate life are transformed into different narratives about self, gender relations, fairness, and society. Based on the qualitative analysis of 24,648 top-level comments from 10 popular videos, four recurring themes were identified: cognitive transformation and self-healing after intimate relationship setbacks, explanatory frameworks and interpretations of difficulties in intimate relationships, gender roles and economic responsibility disputes in dating situations, multidimensional social interpretation and attribution of the incel phenomenon. In this sense, Incel is not only a marginal identity label but also a broader social language used to express contemporary anxieties about intimate relationships and masculinity.

A core finding is that similar experiences of different individuals manifest not in a single way, but through either self-doubt, distrust, pessimism or withdrawal, self-correction, or personal growth. While a large amount of content regarding with misogyny and gender hostility exists in incel discourse, they certainly cannot at all banish the other similarly significant proportion of "peace and love", as unexpected by former literature or public opinion, in which both the intensify of the pain attained and the explanatory mindset and communication circumstances are together playing important intermediate roles.

Hence, from the perspective of emotional capitalism, YouTube platform functions as a social setting where intimate suffering is externalized, narrated and reproduced into public discourse, and its sociological importance lies in, therefore, that it provides a valuable opportunity of observation about the instability of intimacy under platform conditions, since what the comment sections show indicates a wider struggle over value, recognition, and gendered legitimacy in contemporary social life.

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