Mainstreaming the Blackpill: Understanding the Incel Community on TikTok

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Abstract

Incels (involuntary celibates), a subgroup of the so called 'manosphere,' have become an increasing security concern for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners following their association with several violent attacks. Once mostly contained on niche men's forums, redpilled and blackpilled communities and theories are gaining prominence on mainstream social media platforms. However, whilst previous research considerably enhanced our understanding of the incel phenomenon and their presence on Reddit and secluded incel forums, incel's presence on mainstream social media platforms is understudied and their presence on TikTok is yet to be addressed. The present paper examines the incel subculture on TikTok, through an analysis of incel accounts, videos and their respective comments, to understand the role mainstream social media platforms play in the 'normiefication' and normalisation of incel ideology and discourse. The findings suggest that on TikTok the expression of incel ideology takes a covert form, employing emotional appeals and pseudo-science to disseminate common incelosphere tropes. Further, we demonstrate how the process of mainstreaming incel beliefs is facilitated by their interconnectedness with wider sexism and structural misogyny. The harms generating from this association are conducive to the normalisation of blackpill beliefs and the reinforcement of misogyny, sexism and justification of rape culture.

Introduction

Of increasing interest to scholars, practitioners and policymakers are online subcultural communities with deviant and extremist beliefs and their use of digital spaces (Benkler et al., 2018; Holt et al., 2017; O'Malley et al., 2022). The networked nature of online connectivity allows the diffusion of "moral or legal responsibility for group members" (Henry & Powell, 2015, p. 769). This facilitates echo-chambers enabling the production of hateful and violent ideologies and narratives, reinforcing opposition to mainstream culture and resentment towards groups ascribed blame (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019). Online anti-feminist men's groups enabled by technologisation have risen in response to and against contemporary feminist advancements, contributing to the growth in online hate and activities promoting gender-based violence (GBV) against women (Marwick & Caplan, 2018). These groups coalesce under the term 'manosphere'—an association of men's rights groups interconnected via websites, blogs and forums promoting masculinity, misogyny and opposition to feminism (Ging, 2017). Communities within the manosphere include Men's Rights Activists (MRAs), Incels (involuntary celibates), Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) and Pick-Up Artists (PUAs) (Ribeiro et al., 2020). Whilst manosphere groups are heterogeneous and exist on multiple platforms and websites, they are united in male supremacist beliefs, which blame women and feminism for the adoption of a gynocentric society where men are victims and women prioritised (DeCook & Kelly, 2022).

Of the manosphere groups, incels, a portmanteau of involuntary and celibate, have been most associated with violence. Those who adopt the name view themselves as unsuccessful in obtaining heteronormative sexual and romantic relationships (Sugiura, 2021). Incels view society as fundamentally hierarchised according to looks, money and status, where women hold the power and unattractive men are excluded from romantic or sexual relationships (Ging, 2017). Incels have been associated with misogyny, gendered hate speech, endorsement of physical and sexual violence towards women and linked with several mass murders over the past decade (Baele et al., 2019; Hoffman et al., 2020). According to DeCook & Kelly (2022), flaws in current research involve interpreting incel communities as homogenous, which ignores the convoluted and often contradictory nature of incels. Additionally, Baele et al., (2023) suggest that whilst previous research has enhanced understanding of the incel worldview and its connections with the manosphere and far-right ecosystem (Ging, 2017; Ribeiro et al., 2020) it "fails to capture the dynamism and heterogeneity of different incel formations" (Baele et al., 2023, p.3) impacted by diverse platforms and their respective affordances, that host incel communities. Hence research on incels needs to adopt a more dynamic ap-

proach to account for distinctions across platforms. The beliefs and levels of toxicity of incels differ, depending on the platform used, which influences the content they post and engage with, the degree of misogyny and hate they espouse, and the types of harm they propagate (Baele et al., 2023; Sugiura, 2021). Mainstream platforms have stricter policies and are subject to some platform-level moderation but benefit from heightened visibility, whilst fringe platforms/forums, particularly those dedicated to incels and misogynistic communities, are more secluded and often lack moderation, resulting in more toxic and misogynistic speech and content (Mamié et al., 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2020). Nevertheless, incel related ideas and messaging are dispersed online beyond dedicated incel spaces to those sites considered more mainstream, despite more stringent controls (Sugiura, 2021). Previous literature on incels has analysed incel presence on YouTube (Papadamou et al., 2020) and Reddit (Helm et al., 2022; Hintz & Baker, 2021), whilst others examined incel hosted forums such as incel.co/incel.me (Baele et al., 2019; Chan, 2022), or a combination of the two (Ribeiro et al., 2020), whilst a few scholars (Daly & Reed, 2021; Sugiura, 2021) have conducted interviews with incels. More recently Baele et al., (2023) have created a unique corpus involving data collected from an expansive range of online spaces across the incelosphere spanning several years. However, less is empirically known about incel activity on mainstream platforms and the extent to which incels are influencing and influenced by mainstream discourse.

We use the concepts of 'normiefication' and normalisation to explore the process of mainstreaming incel beliefs. According to de Zeeuw et al., (2020), 'normiefication' refers to the online diffusion of 'born-digital' cultural artefacts that come to fruition within fringe online subcultures before evolving to larger and more dispersed mainstream audiences. Through normiefication previous niche ideas, theories and discursive practices have greater reach outside of their native subcultural context, on mainstream platforms (de Zeeuw et al., 2020). Normalisation describes the process where fringe ideas are widely accepted and societally integrated, with more people believing in the truth of the ideas (Preist et al., 2014). Normiefication is thus one of the predecessors of normalisation. Considering this, we argue that the process of normiefication and normalisation of incel beliefs is bi-lateral. 'New' fringe ideas undergo a process of adaptation aided by technological affordances - global reach, anonymity, audience, community etc. (Castells, 2004), and the manipulation of emotional and pseudo-scientific appeals to communicate subcultural and misogynistic concepts to wider audiences. Misogyny, however, is pervasive and not simply the product of fringe ideas or incel communities. Online misogyny is the product and continuation of enduring offline sexist beliefs and gender stereotypes (Jane, 2016). 'Novel' fringe incel tropes and widespread sexist beliefs converge to promote, amplify and normalise online misogyny and the justification of violence towards women. We contend that this convergence facilitates the production of 'generative harms' (Wood, 2021), which considers what technologies do to actors and how technologies amplify and facilitate societal harms that go beyond the use of technology.

This article seeks to contribute new insights regarding incel ideology on TikTok[1], a mainstream social media platform, understudied in current literature. We examine how incel beliefs are framed and disseminated to users outside of their immediate community, how content is received, adopted and normalised within the comments sections, and how mainstream discourse is both influenced by incels and influencing them in return. We explore the generative harms emerging from the interconnectedness between 'new' incel beliefs and 'old' sexist tropes that reinforce each other and facilitate the normalisation and popularisation of incel ideology assisted by technologisation and mainstreaming. In the first instance, the article begins with a brief explanation of the incel subculture before we contextualise the concepts of hybrid masculinities and male victimhood. We then explore the impact of fringe ideologies on mainstream social media platforms through the lens of normiefication and normalisation.

Incel Subculture, Hybrid Masculinity and Male Victimhood

One way of understanding incel's formation and community is by viewing them as a subcultural group. Subcultures emerge when individuals develop a shared set of beliefs and values, which guide their perception of the world and influence their behaviour (Cohen & Short, 1958). According to Carian (2022), secular male supremacist groups share the belief that progressive social advances aimed at stifling gender inequality such as inclusive employment practices, movements tackling sexual violence e.g. #MeToo (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019), and anti-rape activism (Loney-Howes, 2020) are subjugating men. Such advancements and feminist gains, are alleged by male supremacists to have propelled women into a privileged class, challenging the hegemonic status of men, who are now at a disadvantage (Carian & Johnson, 2020). In response to this supposed status shift threatening men's societal position, the male supremacist beliefs of the redpill and blackpill have emerged as a solution to dilemmas posed by these 'new' social structures and constraints (O'Malley et al., 2022; Young, 2011). Manosphere groups, including incels, can therefore be understood as subcultural groups formed in opposition to the imagined dominant culture and its values, as an act of resistance against progressive societal changes and men's supposed threatened social status (Eddington, 2020). The redpill ideology, which unites manosphere groups, purports to awaken men to the process of feminist brainwashing and misandry (Ging, 2017). Conversely, the blackpill is central to the incel belief system and claims that unattractive men are unable to transcend the confines of the social-sexual hierarchy

[1] TikTok is a relatively new platform and has been documented as the fastest-growing social media app with more than 1 billion monthly active users worldwide (Doyle, 2023) and a significant impact on contemporary culture. TikTok has also seen an increase in content created by manosphere and incelosphere communities (Das, 2022; Smith Galer, 2021).

that excludes them, and are forced to live in a state of doomed existence because of women's rejection and privilege (Baele et al., 2019).

In response to and as a defence mechanism to these supposed circumstances and realisations, multiple types of masculine identities are constructed and performed (Johanssen, 2021). Redpilled MRAs often adopt exaggerated performances of masculinity, dominance and misogyny to defend or regain hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Complexities within incel culture, however, manifest themselves in complicated and contradicting representations of gender and masculinity (Menzie, 2020; Messner, 1998). In one respect, incels perform a subordinate masculinity in criticising normative masculinity and hypermasculine males and claiming to be oppressed victims of an unfair society. Yet, contrastingly, incels advocate for a return to the older hierarchies of power and desire to reinstate masculine hegemony (Chan, 2022; O'Malley et al., 2022), by advocating for the oppression of women.

Incels' convoluted representations of masculinity has been the focus of academic debate. Nagle (2017) describes incels as both too subordinate to be hegemonic and too misogynistic to be subordinate. Ging (2017) has challenged this position and introduced the concept of hybrid masculinity, arguing instead that betas and incels strategically claim subordination in order to reassert hegemony in online spaces. These dual identities, as oppressed and oppressor, stand in opposition to one another and simultaneously distance incels from and align them with representations of traditional patriarchal masculinity (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Supporting Ging's position, Halpin's (2022) study demonstrates how through hybrid masculine practice incels weaponise their subordination, using their perceived inferior status to justify their misogyny. Adopting a subordinate victim status is not exclusive to incels or the manosphere as victimhood has previously been examined within the context of white supremacism. Berbrier (2000) discussed how white supremacists adopted a 'new racist' discourse, distinct from older overtly racist styles, which denies their prejudice and privilege, and instead proclaims them to be the victims of a 'new' social order in which whiteness and maleness are stigmatised characteristics. Berbrier (2000) further theorised that the victim ideology is an attractive recruitment tool for young white males, ignorant of their privileged position, who also perceive themselves as victims of 'radical feminism,' and changing gender roles. The victim narrative constitutes a key aspect of what Carian (2022) has termed inversive sexism, which represents the idea that feminism has created a gender order in which women hold the hegemonic position and have an unfair advantage in society and men hold a subordinate status. Carian (2022) finds that inversive sexism is not unique to the ideology of 'radical fringe groups' such as those within the manosphere, but reaches a level of endorsement among men outside of such marginal groups, and is indistinguishable from hostile and broader societal sexism.

Building upon the narrative that they have been deprived of a manhood rightfully theirs, a primary example of incel's claim to victimhood and marginalisation is the concept of 'Lookism,' a central feature of the blackpill philosophy (Papadamou et al., 2020). 'Lookism' (2023) is a term first reported in the 1970s describing "prejudice or

discrimination based on physical appearance and especially physical appearance believed to fall short of societal notions of beauty." Within the incelosphere, women are perceived as inherently lookist, prioritising men based on their alpha masculine physical characteristics, thus, excluding and discriminating against most men (Sugiura, 2021). 'Lookism' is imagined to be the overarching logic of all social interactions, and it is what restricts most unattractive men from entering sexual or romantic relationships with women as women seek 'Chads' or alpha men as partners. To overcome this predicament, those who subscribe to the redpill assert that improving their physical appearance or their confidence and 'pick-up' skills will reassert their hegemony (Sugiura, 2021). Blackpilled incels, however, vehemently reject the notion of improvement as they believe looks are genetically determined at birth, and thus, this attractiveness-based social hierarchy is immutable (Baele et al., 2019). When incels are unable to achieve the goals and characteristics of traditional masculinity, their failures are attributed to the state of society and modern feminism, rather than on patriarchal structures reinforcing strict gender norms and structural inequality (Baele et al., 2019; Chang, 2020; Preston et al., 2021). This sense of feminism-induced victimhood amplifies and enables men's absorption into blackpill beliefs and hateful communities and strengthens the male victimhood trope (Boyle, 2019; Dickel & Evolvi, 2022; Halpin, 2022). How incels weaponise their supposed marginalisation and subordination to legitimise misogyny has been documented (Halpin, 2022; Kelly et al., 2021); however, the implications of the presence of such content on mainstream media necessitates further exploration.

Incels into the Mainstream

Incel forums are becoming increasingly popular with young men (Beauchamp, 2019), and the incel community has grown exponentially from the use of online communal social platforms and technological connectivity (Byerly, 2020). Research examining the language employed on dedicated manosphere and incel forums and subreddits established an increase in violent extremist expressions, including dehumanisation and words depicting violence towards women (Baele et al., 2023; Ribeiro et al., 2020). Baele et al., (2023) contend that the incelosphere is heterogeneous when it comes to extremist expressions, and as such the speech employed on one platform can significantly differ from another platform. In their case, incel-specific forums have been found to be more extreme than subreddits.

However, whilst the exponential rise in the popularity and toxicity of these niche online spaces is worrying, incel activity goes beyond Reddit and incel-dedicated forums. A narrative in the media frames incels as unique deviant men, populating obscure internet forums and distinct from 'normal' men (Cobby & Francis, 2022; Sugiura, 2021). Viewing misogynistic acts as something that only niche communities of men engage in minimises the seriousness of structural misogyny, underplaying how incel ideology is potentially absorbed, accepted and disseminated into the mainstream (DeCook &

Kelly, 2022). Incel ideas and rhetoric are not only found on dark corners of the internet and hard-to-reach forums but also are present on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok (Hajarian & Khanbabaloo, 2021; Papadamou et al., 2020; Smith Galer, 2021), yet the presence of incel communities on mainstream social media has received less academic attention. This does not indicate that the language and beliefs deployed on more mainstream platforms are harmless, but that manosphere and incel rhetoric are reaching greater audiences, encouraging the normalisation of these beliefs and discourse.

On this note, it is important to emphasise that incels are not solely responsible for popularising subcultural misogynistic ideologies. The reach of broader manosphere and redpill ideas and their engagement on mainstream platforms has been explored (Ging, 2017; Han & Yin, 2022; Rothermel, 2023; Sugiura, 2021) and more recently highlighted by the popularity of alpha male men's rights figures like Andrew Tate, Jordan Peterson and Sneako. Whilst these figures are not part of the incelosphere, and they often challenge their association with the manosphere; their content involves much of the same anti-feminist and anti-women narratives. The significant rise to fame of such 'influencers' is facilitated by mainstream platforms such as TikTok and YouTube. For example, despite much of Tate's content contravening TikTok's rules, which explicitly bans misogyny, hate speech and threats of violence, Tate's ban from the platform did little to limit his spread or curb the accounts responsible (Das, 2022). Instead, TikTok has propelled Tate and other similar manosphere figures into the mainstream—allowing their clips to proliferate, and actively promoting them to young users, predominantly boys who use the same language and gestures (Sugiura, 2023). Manosphere discourse is therefore extending into the mainstream, which exacerbates and reinforces misogynistic mainstream culture and speech resulting in misogynistic and violent beliefs resonating with many young men on and offline. The successful protrusion of manosphere discourse into the mainstream is relevant to the current study on incels for two primary reasons. First, it demonstrates that fringe ideologies such as that of the redpill can find their way onto mainstream platforms and enter mainstream culture and speech. It is therefore important to assess whether the same process applies to the incelosphere and the blackpill. Second, the presence of misogynistic and violent beliefs on highly regulated platforms such as TikTok suggests that fringe beliefs and ideologies undergo a process of alteration to contravene platform regulations and be propelled to primarily young men. We suggest that this process can be explained via normiefication (de Zeeuw et al., 2020) and normalisation enabled by technological affordances, and the convergence of fringe misogynistic beliefs and widespread sexism.

Normiefication and Normalisation

The Internet plays a significant role in the dissemination of extremist ideas and fringe online groups as well as their influence on public discourse (Benkler et al., 2018).

The dissemination and popularisation of these ideas and groups is achieved through forms of multimodal communication, such as memetic imagery, videos, trolling and vernacular internet humour (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). This is pertinent when exploring the diffusion of information between fringe and mainstream platforms and the concepts of normiefication and normalisation. The fringe is defined as the outer, marginal or extreme part of an area, group or activity and is generally something that does not conform to societally dominant ways of speaking, knowing, and doing, and as such is removed from the centre, or what is known in the context of mass media as 'the mainstream' (Chomsky, 1997). However, fringe ideas can sometimes enter the mainstream through the process of normiefication (de Zeeuw et al., 2020). Whilst de Zeeuw et al., (2020) applied normiefication to examine Q-anon, this concept also applies to the incel community, which similarly emerged and congregated on Reddit, 4chan, and dedicated forums before migrating to larger platforms, notably YouTube and TikTok (Ribeiro et al., 2020). Through normiefication, previous niche ideas, theories, and discursive practices have greater reach outside of their native subcultural context, on mainstream platforms governed by other networked publics and rules of engagement (de Zeeuw et al., 2020). The nature of digital platforms facilitates this process through increasing exposure and shareability, facilitating and amplifying the viral spread of ideas from one digital sphere to another. Whilst normiefication does not necessarily lead to these ideas being accepted by more people, the repeated exposure and popularisation of these ideas to the 'general' population might potentially lead to their normalisation and adoption into mainstream discourse (Phillips, 2018).

Normalisation involves a wider process of acceptance of fringe ideas in the sense that more people take them to be true (Preist et al., 2014). The extent of misogyny and harmful speech directed towards women online demonstrates its normalisation (Chadha et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2017) but is not limited to the manosphere or the incelosphere, nor are the two solely responsible for online misogyny. In particular, Lewis et al. (2017) examined the experiences of women online on several mainstream social media platforms. They argue that there is a continuum of online abuse directed towards women raging from frequent, highly threatening and hateful messages to sporadic, less inflammatory, non-threatening messages and suggest these particular instances of routine low-level misogynistic abuse play a significant role in the desensitisation to and normalisation of abuse and harmful speech directed at women (Lewis et al., 2017). This reflects wider experiences of victimisation, beyond online communities, what Liz Kelly (1987) terms the continuum of sexual violence, which connects everyday intrusions into women's autonomy with the rarer, though no less serious, instances of rape and sexual violence. Therefore, whilst the normalisation of misogynistic abuse on social media, outside of the incelosphere, has been established (see Jane, 2016 for example) further research is required to examine how the presence of incel content and beliefs on mainstream social media contributes to the amplification of and adds more complexity to the normalisation process.

Generative Harms

Perspectives on online abuse and emerging gendered harms need to be considered to contextualise the harms generated by incel content present on mainstream media. Lewis et al., (2017) suggest that online abusive messages result in serious emotional and physical repercussions for women and have a cumulative effect leading to the normalisation of online abuse and misogyny, where it is something mundane women have to manage. Megarry (2014) argues that online abuse limits women's voices, thereby impacting women's participation in the online sphere. Citron and Norton (2011) contend that the gendered nature of online abuse represents a civil rights violation, compromising women's 'digital citizenship.' Similarly, the mainstreaming of online incivility has been theorised by Emma Jane (2014), as 'e-bile,' conceptualising practices such as trolling, cyberbullying, cyberviolence and cyberhate. Jane (2014) argues that online incivility is becoming more prevalent, encompasses several distinctly gendered characteristics and is bounded by elements of hostility, harassment, denigration and exclusion. Such practices, including violent and sexual threats, have become normalised within online spaces and represent a gendered practice targeting primarily women (Jane, 2014; Powell & Henry, 2017). This is supported by Herring (2003) who contends that both online and offline, women are more likely to be the targets of this type of discourse whereas men are disproportionately the perpetrators. Furthermore, women are most impacted by rape culture (Herman, 1989) and rape myths, where men are excused for their sexually deviant behaviours, consent is viewed as an optional, subjective afterthought, and blame is attributed to women for instigating such behaviours.

There is no consensus in the literature when considering the harms propagated by incels. There is research which purports incels as extremists engaging in unique and spectacular forms of misogynistic violence, focusing on instances of domestic terrorism and mass shootings (Chan, 2022; Hoffman et al., 2020). Whilst other studies (Helm et al., 2022; Heritage & Koller, 2020; Jaki et al., 2019) found that most members of incel communities appeared to be nonviolent, only a few engaged in misogynistic and toxic hate speech (however, why they would choose to participate in misogynistic spaces is unexplained). Other research contends that incel violence goes beyond such attacks and that the harm they produce does not need to be spectacular or physical to have serious effects on women (Kelly et al., 2021; Sugiura, 2021). Incels are infamous for their engagement in technology-facilitated harms towards women including online harassment campaigns (e.g., THOT campaign; Sobieraj, 2020), gender trolling and gendered hate speech portraying women as unintelligent, subhuman or evil (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021). Henry & Powell, (2015) argue that the intersection of online harms with real physical harms coalesce to generate technology-facilitated sexual violence (TFSV) conducive to tangible effects impacting women as much as traditional physical harms.

A different perspective with analytic potential for investigating incel propagated harms is that of generative harms (Wood, 2021), which considers not only how indi-

viduals use technologies to enact harms but also rather what technologies do to actors and how they amplify and facilitate societal harms moving beyond the use of technology. This approach builds on Henry & Powell's (2015), Jane's (2014) and Lewis et al., (2017) conceptualisations of gendered harms by first acknowledging that online hate and abuse have 'real-world' implications extending beyond the online environment. Second, this perspective puts at the forefront that the presence of hate speech and sexual abuse within mainstream digital spaces plays a significant role in the reproduction and amplification of misogyny and sexism.

For the purpose of this study and based on Baele et al., (2023) "Incel Violent Extremism Dictionary," we consider incel extremist expressions as containing mentions of acts of violence ('kill' and 'rape') and explicit dehumanisation of women (e.g., 'femoid'/ 'foid,' 'roasties'). We hypothesise that on TikTok, more covertly sexist incel expressions like 'lookism,' and 'heightpill,' and more conventional (though no less sexist) stereotypical descriptions of women (for example, women as promiscuous or as gold diggers) and surreptitious language will be employed to disseminate the incel ideology, to avoid moderation. In this sense, incel content on TikTok can be interpreted as borderline content, described by Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT, 2022) as content/accounts that do not clearly violate platform policies but may be hateful or harmful. This would be represented by less inflammatory, non-threatening messages that deny incel's prejudice and instead portray women as nefarious and discriminatory through reinforcing common incelosphere and sexist tropes.

Responding to the growing influence of fringe communities on mainstream platforms, this article seeks to explore the incel community on TikTok. As of the time of writing this article, the incel TikTok content and community have not been examined in the academic literature apart from O'Connor's (2021) investigation of extremism and hate speech on TikTok, which considered online misogyny but not incels. Whilst the concept of harms emerging from normalising hostile and harmful modes of discourse online have previously been examined, there is limited understanding of the generative harms emerging from the normiefication and normalisation of incel beliefs and discourse on mainstream social media platforms, particularly on TikTok. By examining the generative harms emanating from the popularisation of these beliefs disseminated on mainstream media, we can gain a more nuanced view of incel misogyny and how this is reflected in mainstream society, amplifying social and cultural inequalities. To explore how incel rhetoric is presented and embraced on mainstream social media, as well as how blackpill beliefs fit with common misogynistic tropes, we analysed two TikTok accounts dedicated to incel ideology, providing an analysis of the account's videos and their respective comments.

Methodology

The methodological approach employed in this study is a qualitative multimodal thematic analysis of TikTok involving two accounts, 52 videos and 1657 comments examining incel's presence, content, and rhetoric on TikTok. First, we aim to identify *how* incels frame and present their ideology on TikTok and *to what extent* this ideology is embraced and further diffused by TikTok users. Second, through a combined analysis of TikTok incel accounts, videos and their respective comments sections, we consider whether the incel discourse present on TikTok *plays a role in the diffusion* of fringe misogynistic beliefs into the mainstream, facilitating their normalisation. Lastly, we consider whether these beliefs *converge with, reproduce and amplify* widespread sexism and *evaluate* the emerging generative harms.

Account Selection and Data Analysis

Whilst we can only make inferences about the demographics of the accounts, video creators and users posting comments on our sample of videos, according to recent research, 71.3% of TikTokers are between the ages of 18 and 34, 38.9% of which are aged between 18 and 24 and 46.6% of TikTok's global users are male (DataReportal, 2023). Additionally, due to their ideology, incel content is targeted at males. Within our sample of comments, commenters' profile names and pictures were used to assert their identification as men.[1] These demographics align with the presumed demographics of incels, which are often described as young men (Jaki et al., 2019; O'Malley et al., 2022) and are consistent with Carian's (2022) findings which suggest inversive sexism is more concentrated among young lower-middle class men. Therefore, for this study, it is assumed that many users commenting on these videos are primarily young men.

Data from two active and public TikTok accounts disseminating blackpill content was analysed. This study considers that whilst the accounts and their content were created by users that subscribe to the blackpill ideology, the target audience of these videos may not be members of the incel community, but rather general TikTokers. Both accounts were identified by searching incel-adjacent key terms in the TikTok search bar. Whilst the specific terms 'incel' and 'blackpill' were banned, searching for the term 'lookism' revealed multiple results out of which the two accounts were selected for their

[1] We have also encountered a limited number of comments made by users explicitly identifying as women, but these comments have been excluded from this analysis and will be considered in a future study.

relevance (see Table 1). All the accounts' videos were posted between May 2022 and September 2022 and collected in October 2022. Videos were downloaded manually and comments were scraped employing pyktok.

Table 1 TikTok accounts metrics

Account	**Followers**	**Likes**	**Videos (*N*)**
lookism.tiktok (Account1)	4625	217.6k	45
redblack_pills (Account2)	4330	51.3k	7

The multimodal analysis was done on three levels involving accounts, videos and comments analysis and consists of the examination of the visual (pictures, videos, titles and overlay text) and audio (narrations, dialogues and music) content. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was employed to critically explore and interpret patterns and themes present in the videos and comments sections. The data was first organised into initial codes, which were then reviewed and collated into themes and sub-themes. The videos were coded to establish the general messages they purport and underpin the mode in which fringe beliefs are presented and communicated on the platform (see Table 2). For the analysis of the comments, the three most popular videos (according to TikTok's metrics of views, likes and comments, see Table 3) from both accounts were selected, and thus, six videos formed the sample of the comment analysis. The comment analysis explored how blackpill ideological tropes are received and responded to by a heterogeneous audience and their intersection with widespread sexism on a mainstream platform (see Table 4).

Table 2 Thematic categorisation of videos by account

Account	**Video theme categories**	**Count**
Account1(lookism.tiktok), $N = 45$	Lookism	38
Women cruel	9	
Hybristophilia	7	
Women promiscuous	7	
Beta bucks	6	
Anti-redpill	6	
Men's suffering	6	
Sexual assault claims subjective	3	
Advice for unattractive men	3	
Account2(redblack_pills), $N = 7$	Lookism	5
Exposing dating misconceptions	4	
Beta bucks	1	

Table 3 TikTok video metrics

Account	Video title	Views	Likes	Comments[1]	Collected comments
Account1—lookism.tiktok	Video1—Watch how Chad can kiss without consent	1.2M	131.9k	821	595
	Video2—Watch what it takes to get girls as a short guy	72.4k	2773	256	156
	Video3—Looks > “gAmE” (clown emoji)	16.5k	436	37	20
Account2—redblack_pills	Video4—Height matters pt.1	401.1k	22.2k	1166	621
	Video5—Dating lies you’ve been told	274.1k	24.7k	475	201
	Video6—The Entitlement Switch Pt. 4 (last part)	36.8k	1508	121	64

Table 4 Categories, themes, and sub-themes for comments analysis (including counter-comments)

[1] The total number of comments displayed by TikTok is higher than the actual number of visible comments displayed underneath each video. The reason for this is unclear but we believe this is because a number of comments have been deleted or removed from the comments section

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Category	**Theme**	**Sub-theme**	**Count**	**Total**
Blackpill	*Incel ideology*	Nihilism	22	196
Lookism	176			
Redpill	*Redpill ideology*	Attractiveness—confidence/ pick-up artistry/ improvement	38	90
Attractiveness—money	52			
Intersection with sexism	*Perpetuation of rape culture*	Consent is optional	115	186
Sexual assault (SA) claims subjective	49			
Praising perpetrator/SA endorsement	20			
Male victimhood	Injustice/difficulty for unattractive men	102	102	
Women's characteristics	Hypocritical	110	132	
Promiscuous	22			
Counter-comments[(2)]	Importance of consent	53		
Disagreement with video content	82			
Dismissive comments	44			

Note: these are not discrete categories as in some instances themes/sub-themes overlap, exemplifying the contradictory nature of incel/manosphere ideologies and their interconnectedness with widespread sexism

a number of comments have been deleted or removed from the comments section

[(2)] Counter-comments are beyond the scope of this article and will be approached in a future study

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We received ethics approval for this research from our institutional faculty ethics committee. To prevent individuals from being identified usernames of the commenters are anonymised and quotations are not presented verbatim (Sugiura et al., 2017). The names and profiles of the two TikTok accounts are included because as creators they can be treated akin to authors, in terms of being credited for their online contributions and do not require anonymisation (Snee, 2013). Furthermore, the inclusion of the account names aids the contextualisation of the videos analysed, showcasing how users can contravene TikTok's content moderation measures by avoiding banned key terms, instead identifying themselves as 'incel' content accounts through inconspicuous terminology. Lastly, due to the comments' relation to specific media artefacts, the qualitative analysis should not be seen as generalisable to all incel/blackpill expression on TikTok—rather, it serves to explore and assess blackpill and incel ideology presence on TikTok in the context of the two accounts analysed and their comments.

Findings

Stylistically, the videos present on the two TikTok accounts employ emotional appeals, viral internet clips and pseudo-scientific claims as means to assert and convey the ideology of the blackpill. The language and terminology employed are covert and implicit signalling a departure from incel content observed on more secluded incel spaces. In terms of the message communicated, whilst the content was focused on explaining and diffusing the incel ideology, several links to traditional, widely endorsed sexist tropes and stereotypes were identified, and these findings were mirrored in the comments. Discussions about incelosphere concepts of lookism and unattractive men's predicament are normalised, amplified and legitimised through their convergence with structurally ingrained gendered misconceptions such as male victimhood, female privilege and the perpetuation of rape culture. The generative harms resulting from the normiefication and normalisation of such beliefs and their convergence with wider misogynistic stereotypes are then considered.

The Stylistic Framing of Incel Content on TikTok

Whilst both TikTok accounts were chosen because they espoused blackpill and incel ideology, the two accounts differ in the stylistic presentation of this ideology. The name of the first TikTok account (Lookism.tiktok) demonstrates the focus on the issue of lookism, stating in the account's description "*Looks determine your dating life as a man. Fuck the redpill & the bluepill .*" Account1 videos include repurposed and collated viral internet videos and pictures to demonstrate women's lookist nature. The account creator provides little explanations in his videos, no narration, and relies on sensationalised titles and brief overlay text commentaries to make his point (see Fig. 1).

Account2, however, attempts an educational format, with slides and overlay text specifically created to further points argued for by the narrator, using 'evidence' involving graphs, surveys, and pseudo-scientific input (see Fig. 2). This account reposts short clips originally created by Wheat Waffles—a self-identified blackpilled YouTube content creator. The videos on this account are centred around the themes of dating and women's lookist nature. Despite the account's name (redblack_pills), the content here dismisses redpill beliefs and instead makes a case for the blackpill ideology. The account claims to expose and explain dating misconceptions and myths, and provide 'evidence' supporting the belief that unattractive men have minimal chances of dating

Fig. 1 Account1 sample of thumbnails and video style

a woman. The 'scientific' evidence provided includes graphs and results obtained from dating application surveys and research studies; however, there are no references as to where this 'evidence' was obtained from, the population surveyed, or any other data and methodological information. Furthermore, the pseudo-scientific nature of this account is evidenced by bold and generalised claims about women's behaviour backed up by a selection of pictures, videos and supposedly incontestable factual evidence based on 'well-established scientific proof'. Through the attempted scientific style and tone of the videos, the author seeks to legitimise the content and portray the information presented as conclusive and well-known 'truths.' Therefore, whilst the first account provides an emotional appeal, through videos depicting unattractive men's humiliation and women's 'double standards,' the second account makes a pseudo-scientific appeal using 'logic' and 'evidence'.

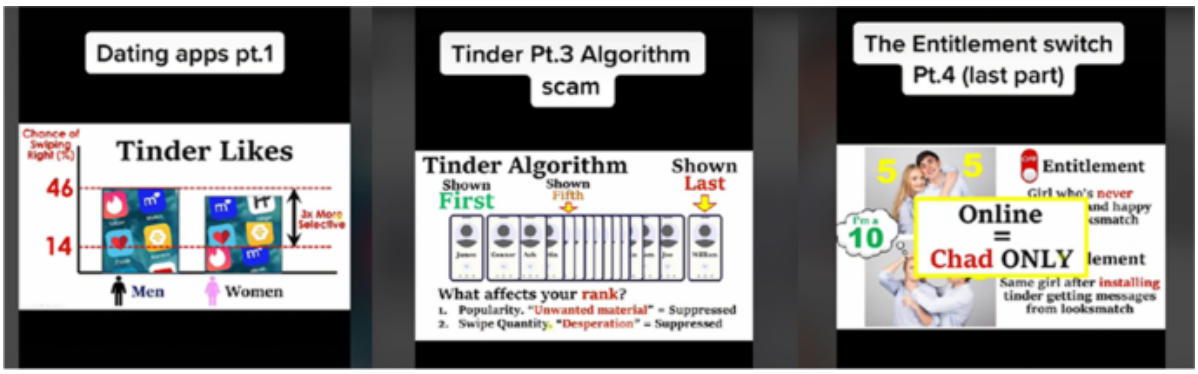

Fig. 2 Account2 sample of thumbnails and video style

Lookism and the Unjust Sexual Market

Account1's video content is unsurprisingly focused on lookism. Women are depicted as preferring men with traditional masculine characteristics, with handsome facial features and height above 6 ft. For example, in Video3 a typical pick-up artist meeting is depicted where a male dating guru presents an 'unattractive' man to an 'attractive' woman asking her if from a 'feminine perspective' she would be sexually attracted to this man. The woman instantly rejects the man. The overlay text argues "*The real problem here is that he's unattractive and she is repulsed by his presence...*" The hyperbolic choice of language for (mis)interpreting the woman's reaction as 'repulsed' at the man's mere presence is aimed at inducing a negative emotional reaction from the viewers. Subsequently, the message of this video and several videos on this account is not just exposing women's lookist nature but also their 'cruel rejection' methods and propensity to humiliate men that do not fit hegemonic masculinity standards. It is also noteworthy that the emphasis is on women's 'cruel rejection,' and not the actions of the PUA who has orchestrated this ritual of humiliation. Therefore, both the rejected man and the man instigating this event are absolved of responsibility.

Account2's videos seek to further the lookist claim by demonstrating through supposed 'facts' and 'evidence' that height and looks are the deciding factors for dating and therefore short unattractive men are disadvantaged. For example, in video4, titled "*Height matters pt.1*" and video5 titled "*Dating lies you've been told*" the creator aims to demystify common misconceptions about dating and expose several 'truths'. One of these is the "*brutal heightpill*" truth according to which the shorter a man is the more women will reject him. Pointing to a graph, the creator argues that a man is "*mostly safe*" if he is 5'10 where the rejection rate is only 15%. However, with every two inches, men's rejection rate increased to the point that men that are 5'4 get rejected by "*an insane 90% of women*". Other 'lies' exposed in these videos are the common sayings "*Just be yourself*" and "*Just be confident*" which are usually told to men who cannot get a date. The creator argues that men can only be themselves if they are attractive and that men's looks represent their confidence; thus, such advice is counterintuitive and false. It is notable that these claims are in direct opposition to the manosphere redpill ideology, which maintains improvement and confidence are the key to sexual and romantic success.

This was reflected within the comments sections, where debates around attractiveness and lookism represented the most frequently discussed theme. The commenters claimed women solely desire men that are traditionally good looking (i.e., attractive face/body) and tall. A recurrent argument was that men need to conform to women's strict aesthetic standards to qualify for sex and relationships "*it all basically comes down to how good you look*"; "*Step 1: be attractive Step 2: don't be unattractive*". Height was also a deciding factor in men's sexual or romantic success, with women portrayed as despising short men to the extent of regarding them as non-existent- "*Short guys literally don't exist to the average woman. it's sad*"; "*How sad they shamed and laughed*

at a man that can't control his height, this still goes on to this day and they say men are the toxic ones". Some commentators argued that a lack of desirable physical characteristics can be bypassed by men being financially successful as they can take advantage of what they termed women's 'greedy, shallow and self-interested nature',"*You just have to have a stack of hundos in your pocket doesn't matter if you are 5'0 money talks baby*"; "*I mean just chase the bag if ur under 5'8. If ur rich ur 6'3 in their eyes*".

Male Victimhood and the Belief that Women Are Privileged

Women's lookist nature is further framed within the videos as being conducive to a constant ritual of men's humiliation. This is evident in several Account1 videos. For example, one video showcases a woman on an online meeting shouting "*You are ugly as fuck*" to the man on the other end of the call; another video presents a woman verbally abusing a police officer because he was short "*Why did the police let this short man join? Who the fuck is he gonna hurt? Look at this munchkin, look at this baby ass bitch*"; and a third video of a man recounting his experiences with online dating stating that he was told he should kill himself because he is short "*Why is it ok for women to say—Oh you are 5 ft on a dating site? You should be dead!—that's ok?*". The actions of these individual women (presented without context) are used to represent all women. Yet, if faced with the overwhelming evidence of men's violence against women, would the same generalisation be made of men or would the #NotAllMen rear its defensive head? This is of course a moot point as such content has no place on this account or would be automatically discredited. Videos further contend that rejecting a man is not simply an example of women voicing their preferences, but instead, it is done maliciously to degrade unattractive and short men and to make them feel inferior. This supports the trope of male victimhood and the injustice supposedly directed at unattractive men from privileged, unreasonably cruel and discriminatory women. The message promoted by these videos is that unattractive men are the most disadvantaged group in society because of women, reflecting what Carian (2022) terms as inversive sexism. The victimhood narrative is further accentuated by emotional appeals as exemplified in some videos and overlay text. According to these, the habitual rejection and humiliation leads men to feeling dehumanised as suggested by a video with an insect staring at a wall over which sad music is played—the caption reads "*Non-chads after realizing only team tinder wants to date them...*". The insect represents unattractive men, or 'non-chads', who come to the realisation that women will never be interested in them and they will be forever dateless and celibate, demonstrating the hopeless perpetuity of the incel condition.

In Account2's video content, the unjust sexual and romantic marketplace and men's experiences of victimisation are 'evidenced' by (uncited) online dating surveys claiming

women are the ones who most discriminate based on looks "*Here is the truth about online dating. 90% of women would not swipe on themselves if they were a man. Meanwhile 90% of males would swipe on themselves if they were a woman*". The message of the videos contends that today's sexual and dating market is skewed against men and women hold all the power when it comes to dating, "*Men offer. Women get to decide whether they accept that offer*". The creator calls this the "*entitlement switch*" (as presented in video6), which delineates a phenomenon whereby women, influenced by the advent of online dating and the accrual of heightened privileges, presently perceive themselves as entitled to engage in relationships with men who surpass them in terms of attractiveness. In contrast, in previous instances, women would have been inclined to settle for partners possessing a similar sexual market value. This supposed 'entitlement switch' closely links with the notion of women displaying hypergamous tendencies, actively seeking and substantiating their belief in deserving partners of superior value to themselves. Whilst not overtly stated, the message implied by the content of these accounts is that men used to have unrestricted access to women, but this has now been revoked or diminished. The 'injustice' that these videos refer to relates to women's gains in rights and autonomy over their own choices and bodies. This has resulted in men's loss of privilege and threat to their hegemonic status in society, leading to what Kimmel (2013) terms aggrieved entitlement and the growing adoption and support of inversive sexism (Carian, 2022).

The theme of male victimhood was frequently mentioned and reinforced within the comments, where women's lookist nature was linked with men's experiences of 'injustice' and 'discrimination'. Short and unattractive men expressed their frequent rejection and the 'power' that women wield, because the characteristics that women desire were deemed unachievable. "*Who in the world believes that it's men who have the power of choice lmao*"; "*Women have all the cards today. Period*"; "*everyone the world over knows women gatekeep relationships*". The 'injustice code' thus legitimises men's claims to victimhood. Men are supposedly forced to live by women's high and impossible standards, whilst women reside in a place of sexual privilege controlling the sexual marketplace resulting in "*Unfettered Hypergamy*". As one commenter put it "*its like men are applicants and women are jobs, if we dont live up to the expectation/ requirements no job etc*".

Perpetuation of Rape Culture

Account1 further builds upon the notion of women's privileged status, arguing that it is not just women's entitlement that is problematic but also women's nefarious and hypocritical nature. This is 'evidenced' by women's supposed preference and idolisation of 'bad', abusive and even 'criminal' men, chosen at the detriment of 'nice guys' with less appealing physical characteristics. An example of this is Video2 titled "*Watch what it takes to get girls as a short guy!*" which presents a short man on a dating competition

show getting repeatedly rejected by all the women candidates. When questioned as to what it would take to pick the short man, the women stated they would only pick him if the other four candidates were convicted murderers. An overlay text appears on the screen informing the viewers that "*Even now they are lying. They would rather be with a tall murderer Chad than a manlet*". According to this video, women's immorality and lookist nature are so pervasive that they would prefer a good-looking murderer to a decent short man, but women are hypocritical and would never admit to this 'fact'. This is expanded by clips showcasing 'hybristophilia' (2023)—women's sexual attraction to mass murderers, violent criminals, rapists and even paedophiles. For example, two videos depict the adoration women have for Ted Bundy and Jeremy Meeks, two infamous and attractive convicted criminals. The text overlay on the Ted Bundy video states "*Chad can get hoards of women despite being a rapist and a murderer*".

Women's preference for abusive attractive men at the detriment of unattractive betas or incels is further implied in the most viewed video on Account1 (video1). In this clip, a woman is approached and kissed without consent by a young man characterised as a Chad, which the woman says she is happy with. The video then switches to a second clip in which a group of armed police agents break down a door and enter an apartment. The text added above this video reads "*Meanwhile... You'd go to prison for "attempted r**e*". The message of this video is that Chads have free access to women's bodies, yet betas or incels do not enjoy the same entitlements. This, according to the video, showcases women's hypocrisy and challenges the notion that consent is needed when engaging in sexual acts. Furthermore, the harmful subtext of this popular video suggests that women's claims of sexual assault should not be taken seriously. It implies that it is not the nature of the acts themselves that constitute sexual assault, but rather women's reception, which is influenced by the attractiveness of the perpetrator. It is therefore implied that women enjoy and even seek sexual assault or harassment when performed by attractive, Chad-type men, but reject, demonise and criminalise the same acts when enacted by unattractive men. This converges the concept of rape culture (Herman, 1989) with incel-specific beliefs as to women deserving and/or causing their physical or sexual abuse by Chad/alpha males. Whilst incels claim to despise and envy Chads (and their dominant sexuality), they also celebrate and glorify the same men when they engage in acts of physical or sexual violence towards women because they feel vicariously avenged through these acts (Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021)

Rape culture and justification of sexual assault are further amplified within the comments. Here, women are portrayed as a homogenous group rather than as individuals and described as hypocritical, liars and promiscuous. It is suggested that women's double standards and hypocrisy are most obvious when it comes to sexual advances—unattractive men are rejected and found ominous whereas the same type of behaviours are encouraged and desired by women from attractive men "*The difference between creepy and sexy is how attractive you are* "; "*women dont get mad at advances, they are just selective on who is doing it*". Additionally, commenters debated the importance of consent. Whilst a small number of comments argued that sexual assault has serious

repercussions, the consensus was that women's claims of sexual assault or harassment are subjective. According to this, Chads can have their way with women and do not need consent from women to engage in sexual behaviours with them. Attractive men are therefore viewed as having 'handsome privilege' entitling them to women's bodies and protecting them from repercussions "*That's called pretty privilege*"; "*Difference between flirting and assault is how attractive you are*". The notion of consent is used to support the trope of male victimhood, with commenters stating that unattractive men would be prosecuted for the same acts Chads/attractive men are entitled to "*Wait what happened to the "Me Too" outrage? Oh that's right... he's HOT so never mind.*"; "*Just goes to show, it's usually more about regret than consent....*"; "*If he was ugly it would be a felony*". The complicity of the criminal justice system is also implied by the commenters who claim that "*Different rules depending on attractiveness*" because "*if she didn't think he was attractive he'd be in prison now*". Whilst women are the primary instigators, the law is also seen as skewed against men, suggesting we live in a gynocentric society, where rape charges, convictions and even life in prison are ascribed by women based on looks - "*good looking pasts rape charges* ". Thus, women are seen as taking advantage of a system biased against men, and therefore, women's claims of sexual assault cannot or should not be taken seriously "*This is why women can't be taken seriously. It's good for one but not the other. You want change? Try being consistent.*"; "*If he was ugly it's sex assault and he would be classified as creepy that's why women are sick*".

The video content, along with the accompanying comments, contribute to the proliferation and normalisation of the fallacious belief that women derive pleasure from sexual assault. Furthermore, it portrays women as utilising allegations of sexual assault as a means to pursue legal action and discriminate against men deemed less desirable, taking advantage of the inherent biases within the criminal justice system. Consequently, these narratives not only reinforce the notion of male victimhood but also undermine the credibility of women and invalidate their lived experiences of sexual assault.

Discussion

Whilst the incelosphere has received considerable academic attention in recent years, less is known about the presence of the incel community on TikTok, except for occasional mentions of their infiltration on the platform in the media (e.g., Smith Galer, 2021). Whilst at the surface level, incel-specific content might appear to have a diminished presence on TikTok, and despite TikTok's Community Guidelines (2023) according to which, hateful content including gendered prejudiced speech and hateful ideologies are not permitted, our findings suggest that to evade content moderation, incel content on TikTok employs covert language to present, explain and diffuse misogynistic, harmful and established incelosphere tropes and theories. This is a departure from previous incel research examining community dynamics and discourse on more secluded forums and websites, where more overt ideological expressions, including mentions of and calls to violence and dehumanising language, were identified (Baele et al., 2019; Chang, 2020; Helm et al., 2022; Jaki et al., 2019). However, our findings support previous understandings of the blackpill itself, indicating that the same incel tropes (lookism, heightpill, Chads, etc.) are utilised on both fringe media and on TikTok, but that the style in which these are communicated diverge with content on TikTok to be more implicit, insidious and palatable.

The two accounts employed emotional and pseudo-scientific appeals to adapt and 'translate' the blackpill to a wider audience and used implicit language indicating that users might be actively toning down more extreme content to avoid removal. Emotional appeals were used to convey unattractive men's 'suffering' through videos depicting the rejection, humiliation and discrimination of men by women. Emotional appeals represent a manipulative communication method designed to evoke strong responses such as anger and resentment (Kaid & Johnston, 1991). Many videos within our sample (especially the Account1 videos) relied on emotion-based arguments to further the idea that unattractive men are discriminated against based on their looks, whilst women are entitled and privileged. Academic literature has found emotional language and manipulation to be a key aspect in furthering the successful rise of right-wing and far-right political parties and movements (Doroshenko & Tu, 2022; Schrock et al., 2018).

Similarly, the pseudo-scientific appeal presented by Account2 can be contextualised within the growing wave of right-wing populist manipulation of information and opposition to science (Edis, 2019; Eslen-Ziya, 2022), surrounding topics such as election and COVID-19 misinformation (Boutros, 2020; Pennycook & Rand, 2021). The pseudo-scientific framing of Account2 videos employed graphs, statistics and well-known 'facts'. Whilst these supposed facts lacked veracity and empirical accuracy,

their intentional framing as 'scientific' was aimed at providing legitimacy and support to incel tropes such as the 'heightpill,' 'handsome privilege' and women's entitlement. Pseudo-scientific theories are a fringe phenomenon per definition, lacking general social, scientific and political endorsement (Harambam & Aupers, 2014); however, they may traverse public acceptance whereby they are no longer considered alternative, untrustworthy and unscientific, but rather as unmasking truths about a situation, phenomenon or even the world. Confirming previous literature (Baele et al., 2019; Chang, 2020; Ging, 2017), the accounts aimed to expose women's privilege, unattractive men's victimisation at the hand of women and the immutability of the incel condition. These beliefs are fuelled by feminism's supposed negative societal impacts, the halo effect—where good-looking people are favoured, and the erosion of traditional and conservative values, which have provenance beyond online men's communities within the wider conservative and far-right theorising (de Zeeuw & Tuters, 2020; Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

The ideological interconnectedness between right-wing politics and manosphere groups has been established (Mamié et al., 2021; Rothermel, 2023). However, the appropriation of tools previously employed for furthering right-wing ideologies, in disseminating and gathering support for the blackpill ideology, is noteworthy. We argue that these same tools are essential for the process of normiefication (de Zeeuw et al., 2020). The implicit 'scientific' framing of blackpill beliefs and the emotional and pseudo-scientific appeals serve as a tool for the process of normiefication, where fringe beliefs and speech infiltrate the mainstream media and discourse. Disguising these beliefs as scientific claims and delivering these messages through emotional, hyperbolic language, introduces, explains and diffuses these beliefs beyond their native subcultural context to a more diverse audience, perhaps previously unfamiliar with these concepts. Through such delivery tools, incelosphere beliefs have the potential to extend beyond the stereotype of the young, nihilistic, perpetually online individual, especially if they align with and amplify common sociopolitical anxieties (de Zeeuw & Tuters, 2020).

Furthermore, technology is essential in the normiefication and normalisation of incel beliefs. The presence of these videos and their respective messages on TikTok serves as a gateway for incelosphere beliefs on mainstream social media. As highlighted by Ging et al. (2020) and Massanari (2017), this process is accelerated by the technological affordances of new media, allowing for the rapid amplification and dissemination of certain words and concepts through echo-chambers. Amplification in this setting is understood as how social media publics contribute to the attention paid to a message by elevating recipients' perceptions of the message's worthiness and importance (Zhang et al., 2018). The presence of incel content on TikTok has the potential to legitimise and gather an audience and support for these beliefs, by exposing these messages to users who may not have discovered this information otherwise (Zhang et al., 2018). Whilst the results of this study cannot be generalised to overall TikTok users, the data suggests a certain level of endorsement and normalisation of incel beliefs, evidenced by the high number of views, likes and confirmatory comments encountered. Whereas comments challenging the incel ideology and the content of the

videos were present (but not discussed within the current article), many comments supported the interpretations offered by the video creators. The comments further validated and legitimised lookism, female privilege and male victimhood, via recounting their own experiences of dating and rejection. Commenters trivialised sexual violence by claiming that women incite and deserve to be subjected to such acts, demonstrating the pervasiveness of a 'non-consent' rhetoric and the embracement of rape culture (Powell & Sugiura, 2018), linking blackpilled beliefs with normalised sexual violence (Kelly, 1987). This is conducive of what Jane (2017) terms as 'Rapeglish,' discourse portraying women as promiscuous and deserving of non-consensual sexual acts, often issued via rape threats. However, the language employed on TikTok can be understood as borderline (GIFCT, 2022), in the sense that it was sufficiently implicit to escape content moderation, yet apparent enough to be harmful and perpetuate rape culture.

The normalisation and popularisation of incel beliefs on TikTok, however, can be partially attributed to the interconnectedness of these beliefs with widespread and generally endorsed forms of sexism and misogyny. The 'real' and the virtual are not separate experiential realms (Lewis et al., 2017); there is a continuous flow of sexist and misogynistic beliefs adopted and further developed by the manosphere and incelosphere and returned to the mainstream via constant dissemination on social media. Therefore, many popular blackpill rhetorics predate the incelosphere. For example, the over-lexicalisation of female promiscuity (Russell, 2018), hypergamy (women seeking partners of higher financial means and/or status) and the 'halo effect' have provenance and are well-documented sexist societal tropes (Ging et al., 2020; Sugiura, 2021). These resonate with people because they are not brand-new but rather repurposed ideas adapted to fit the technological world and assert new linguistic hegemony. Their intersection coalesces to explain, justify and amplify, violence towards women both online and 'offline', within incel communities and independent of these (DeCook & Kelly, 2022).

The male victimisation narrative is useful to examine this convergence, exemplifying what Carian (2022) terms inversive sexism—the belief that women are privileged in society and that men are at disadvantage. Thus, feminist advances in gender equality, and progressive social movements are blamed for the unjust sexual market, women's privilege and men's supposed oppression and diminished status (Ging, 2017; Messner, 1998). Men's subordination claim emboldens incel's victimhood status and serves as a tool to reassert their hegemony in online spaces (Ging, 2017), demonstrating the role hybrid masculine practices play in justifying and enacting their misogyny. However, Carian's data indicates that whilst inversive sexism is endorsed by a unique population concentrated among young and lower-middle class women and men, it is not merely an ideology of a radical fringe group. Instead, the level of endorsement of inversive sexism is statistically indistinguishable from that of other well-documented forms of sexism (e.g., modern sexism; see Swim et al., 1995). The normalisation of incel misogyny should therefore not be considered in a vacuum but as a reflection of the upsurge in societal misogyny and harmful speech directed towards women (Chadha et al., 2020;

Lewis et al., 2017), which goes beyond online men's communities. We contend that the endorsement of inversive sexism by non-incel members and possibly TikTok users aids the acceptance and normalisation of incel beliefs on mainstream social media because it connects with and emboldens claims of women's privilege and male oppression.

The resulting generative harms are thus twofold. First, the presence of incel activity on mainstream media allows for the aggregation and popularisation of seemingly novel blackpill beliefs. Whilst the normiefication of incel beliefs does not necessarily lead to their acceptance, the generative harms emerging from this process encompass the repeated exposure of these ideas to the 'general' population, potentially leading to their normalisation and adoption into mainstream discourse. This process is described by Henry & Powell (2018) as technologisation, referring to the ways in which violence towards women is enacted and facilitated by communications technologies. The affordances of TikTok including the recommendation algorithms, the like and share features and the echo-chambers emerging from these features aid, amplify and distribute these messages to a wider audience (Doroshenko & Tu, 2022). Second, the intersection of incel beliefs with widespread sexism offers the incel ideology legitimacy, perpetuating misogynistic stereotypes and incitement of sexual violence towards women. This convergence can be exemplified through the perpetuation of rape culture, which is pervasive and extends beyond online men's communities and is indicative of the cultural normalisation, trivialisation and legitimisation of sexual harassment and assault (Herman, 1989). The prevalence and enduring nature of rape culture continues with 1 in 3 women globally in their lifetime experiencing sexual violence (WHO, 2021), the demonisation of outspoken survivors of sexual violence (Mendes et al., 2018), and the backlash against the #MeToo movement (Boyle, 2019). Our data demonstrates endorsement of victim-blaming attitudes, through the justification of sexual violence and delegitimisation of consent and sexual assault claims, which were deemed as subjective. The criminal justice system was also presented as biased against (unattractive) men in the data further validating incel's beliefs of a supposed gynocentric social order. The male victimhood trope is used to explain and legitimise hatred and advocation for sexual violence towards women as a punishment not only to avenge incels' supposed exclusion, but also as a repercussion for women's alleged superior status. Whilst incels' beliefs mirror rape myths, their presence and ideological dissemination on mainstream media generates further harms by confirming and legitimising rape culture, conducive of what Massanari (2017) terms as 'toxic technocultures'.

Furthermore, whilst our findings point towards covert expressions of gendered hate and justification of sexual abuse, the continuum of sexual violence (Kelly, 1987) indicates the dangers of less overt forms of abusive behaviours. Instances of routine low-level misogynistic abuse play a significant role in the desensitisation to and normalisation of abuse and harmful speech directed at women (Lewis et al., 2017). The harms emerging from exposure to such content on mainstream media have a cumulative effect, potentially influencing not only young men's perceptions of women but also women's perceptions of themselves (Lewis et al., 2017). The effects of such ide-

ologies on mainstream social media extend beyond the technological environment and produce generative harms that influence the internalisation of misogyny, the perpetuation of harmful gender stereotypes and sociocultural support of misogyny and gendered violence.

Conclusion

This article explored the presence, responses and implications of incel content on TikTok. We contend that whilst certain subcultural and overt forms of misogyny were once mostly contained on fringe forums, they are now mainstreamed beyond their space of emergence. Our findings evidence the role of normiefication and normalisation in mainstreaming the incel blackpill ideology by considering both technological affordances and emerging generative harms. We argue that the normiefication and normalisation of incel's ideology on mainstream social media can be formulated as bilateral. On the one hand, the normiefication of fringe anti-feminist theories and incel subcultural terminology is amplified by technologisation and propelled by commonly employed right-wing communication tools of emotional and pseudo-scientific appeals, which enable and facilitate their entrance and absorption into the mainstream media. On the other hand, the normalisation of incel beliefs is further reinforced by their convergence with widespread sexist beliefs. Therefore, whilst blackpill beliefs and incel terminology are unique to the incel subculture, their shared features with inversive sexism and widespread misogyny aids their absorption into the mainstream. This bilateral process is conducive to generative harms by reasserting male hegemony in digital spaces and reinforcing the support for misogyny, sexism and the justification of violence towards women. This framing is essential for investigating the sociocultural impacts surrounding the popularisation of misogyny that goes beyond the use of technology. Through the process of mainstreaming, incel beliefs have profound implications for internalising and amplifying harmful gender stereotypes and increased tolerance and support for gender-based violence.

As current literature on incel activity on TikTok is scarce and the platform continues to gain popularity, future research is needed to fully understand the magnitude and reach of mainstreaming incel ideology. As previously argued (Baele et al., 2023; Papadamou et al., 2020), research on incel communities should attempt to analyse them beyond their forums and across platforms to examine why mainstream online spaces are showcasing a growing acceptance of misogynistic, hateful speech and acceptance or endorsement of violence. Furthermore, the presence of counter-comments—comments that demystify and dismantle incel beliefs—in our data, that were beyond the scope of this article, warrants future investigation for establishing their role in the perpetuation or prevention in the mainstreaming of incel beliefs.

Data Availability

The manuscript has no associated data being deposited.

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