



Hierarchized masculinity, appearance, and radicalization: The role of physical appearance in the incel movement

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ABSTRACT

Incels (short for “involuntary celibates”) are men who struggle to form romantic and sexual relationships. Operating within the manosphere, they share a male supremacist ideology marked by glorification of violence, entitlement to sexual access, and masculine dominance hierarchies. Prior research has emphasized harmful displays of masculinity and heteropatriarchal structures within incel networks, including their links to extremist violence, but has paid less attention to the salience of appearance and masculine hierarchies and their role in sustaining perceived exclusion. This article analyzes incel discourse, focusing on how aesthetic capital constructs masculine hierarchies and functions as a form of currency through “lookism” and related terminology. The findings indicate that while misogyny and pro-violence attitudes are foundational to the incel movement, appearance-focused discourse upholds and amplifies perceptions of victimhood, reinforcing patriarchal, anti-feminist worldviews. Appearance thus emerges as a central marker in incel rhetoric that is tied to the dominance hierarchies that define incel status.

KEYWORDS Incel movement; involuntary celibacy; aesthetic capital; physical appearance; masculinity

Content warning

This article portrays derogatory language central to the discourse under study. The language appears in direct quotes from online incel communities and is presented solely for scholarly purposes. The words and phrases reflect the discourse under analysis, not the author’s or journal’s own language or viewpoint.

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Introduction

In contemporary hyper-visual culture, appearance holds such centrality that cultural sociologists increasingly conceptualize it as a form of capital (Kuipers, 2015; Kukkonen, 2021; Mears, 2015) related to and exchangeable with other forms of capital (Sarpila et al., 2020). Capital, power, and status are entwined, turning appearance into a power resource—but as a result making appearance a source of inequality for those unable or unwilling to utilize it to their advantage (Kukkonen, 2021). Appearance-based hierarchies also manifest themselves in new forms that are discernible in the demonstrated values of certain groups within the manosphere. The “manosphere” refers to the phenomenon of widespread misogyny and anti-feminism across a range of social media platforms, creating a loose online network consisting of male-centered media such as incel forums, Men’s Rights Activist (MRA) communities, and “pickup artist” (PUA) groups (Krendel et al., 2022).

“Incels” (short for “involuntary celibates”) operate within the manosphere, sharing a male supremacist ideology characterized by the glorification of violence against women, entitlement to sexual fulfillment, and masculine dominance hierarchies (Baele et al., 2021; Ging, 2019; Zimmerman, 2024). Acts of violence by self-identified incels such as Elliot Rodger in 2014 and Alek Minassian in 2018 have received widespread media coverage, making the incel phenomenon publicly known (Cottee, 2021; Hoffmann et al., 2020). Rodger’s act became a focal point, sparking the emergence of a new subgroup within the manosphere consisting of sexually marginalized, angry men. He blamed his lack of sexual experiences for his “lifelong suffering,” framing his actions as punishment for women (Rodger, 2014), while Minassian’s attack referenced similar incel grievances. These events spotlighted radicalized beliefs (Baele et al., 2021) and drew public attention to the incel movement, demonstrating how perceived heterosexual disadvantage could be employed as a justification for misogynist extremism (for a discussion, see Cottee, 2021; Hoffman et al., 2020).

Compared to other groups within the manosphere, incels introduced a more radical belief system known as the Black Pill, which holds that women’s sexual choices, driven by hypergamy, condemn men with “inferior” physical traits to permanent exclusion from sexual and social spheres (Baele et al., 2021; Hoffmann et al., 2020), a view exemplified by Rodger and Minassian. This demonstrates how extremist acts can stem not only from political or religious motives but also from personal frustration over lacking “normative” sexual experiences, fostering entitlement to heterosexual interaction and a sense of victimhood. In this context, radicalization becomes a process through which individuals, driven by these perceived grievances, become increasingly sensitive

to extremist ideologies and even motivated to use violence against symbolic targets, believing this will bring about the desired change (Doosje et al., 2016). Beyond the terrorist acts of self-proclaimed incels (Cottee, 2021), research has mainly focused on their misogynistic and violent ideology (Baele et al., 2021; Hoffmann et al., 2020; O'Donnell & Shor, 2022) and on constructions of masculinity and femininity (Ging, 2019; Menzie, 2022). Although some studies briefly address appearance (e.g., Daly & Reed, 2022; Hintz & Baker, 2021; Menzie, 2022), little attention has been paid to how masculine hierarchies and incel victimhood are shaped through masculine beauty work.

While the Red Pill ideology, a precursor to the Black Pill, advises men on how to reclaim their “sexual market value” through self-improvement (Ging, 2019; Pettersson et al., 2025), the Black Pill offers a more fatalistic outlook. It embodies a nihilistic, misogynistic worldview in which identifying as an incel entails permanent confinement to the lowest rungs of the social and sexual ladder, in contrast to the Red Pill's focus on change and agency (Cottee, 2021; DeCook & Kelly, 2022). Radical ideologies identify a perceived major problem in society (Doosje et al., 2016); for the Black Pill, this problem is women's role as the “gatekeepers” to sex. Perceived unchangeable incel status often fuels resentment, intense hatred against those who are “sexually successful,” and, in many cases, rationalizations for violence (Hoffmann et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2024). Physical appearance underpins this perceived immobility, structuring status within incel ideology (Baele et al., 2021; Zimmerman, 2024); incels perceive themselves as a marginalized group that is discriminated against because of their looks (Andersen, 2023). A user poll on incels.co finds that over 86% of the respondents identified appearance as the main obstacle to finding a partner (Incels.co, 2020). Therefore, utilizing the literature on physical appearance and inequality (e.g., Kuipers, 2015; Kukkonen, 2021; Mears, 2015) offers a complementary perspective on incel discourse, extending aesthetic capital theory to explore how bodily aesthetics are linked to masculine value within incel ideology.

This study investigates the appearance-based masculine hierarchies underlying incel discourse and how they sustain perceptions of inequality and social exclusion. While there are multiple ways to self-identify as an incel (DeCook & Kelly, 2022), this study focuses on a discussion board dominated by blackpilled ideas and speech. It emphasizes a sense of social and sexual stagnation, which fosters incel identification (O'Malley & Helm, 2022), while rigid social categories reinforce extremist worldviews and blame-attributing narratives that justify hate (Baele et al., 2021). Across the broader manosphere and incel rhetoric, genetic determinism and superficial evolutionary psychology suggest that social position is fixed by genetics (Ging, 2019), yet the extent to which appearance moderates

interpretations of assumed genetic outcomes and, thus, social positions remains unclear.

Offering both empirical and theoretical contributions by integrating aesthetic capital theory with research on incel status negotiation, this study uses discourse analysis to examine how incel terminology constructs the importance of appearance, reframing it as a resource (RQ1), and how aesthetic capital intertwines with sexual exclusion and masculine hierarchies (RQ2). The findings suggest that an intense focus on appearance both shapes and sustains narratives of involuntary celibacy and victimhood, revealing appearance reframed as a resource that, intertwined with sexual exclusion and masculine hierarchies, reinforces a nihilistic and often violent ideology.

Appearance as a resource and form of inequality

In contemporary Western society, attractiveness and beauty, often termed aesthetic capital (Sarpila et al., 2021) or bodily capital (Mears, 2015), are recognized factors of social stratification (Berry, 2008; Mason, 2013) and are regarded as forms of capital consisting of valuable resources, related to and exchangeable with other forms of capital (Kuipers, 2015; Kukkonen, 2021; Neveu, 2018; Sarpila et al., 2021). While Bourdieu's theory of capital acknowledges the bodily dimensions of class, it does not focus on aesthetics or appearance-related practices (Neveu, 2018, p. 366). Yet aesthetic appearance is noted to have potential beyond the traditional (social, cultural, and economic) forms of capital (Kukkonen, 2021), yielding privileges and wealth (Anderson et al., 2010). Physical features comprising attractiveness are considered "emerging cultural capital," demarcating symbolic boundaries (Kuipers, 2015) and utilized for social and cultural distinctions (Anderson et al., 2010), as well as accumulating sexual capital (Martin & George, 2006).

Attractive people are generally seen as more socially desirable (Anderson et al., 2010; Sarpila et al., 2020), with men often receiving greater appearance-related advantages and encountering fewer social constraints in leveraging their looks (Kukkonen & Sarpila, 2021; Mears, 2015; Sarpila et al., 2020). Online interactions amplify the focus on appearance- and aesthetic-based stratification (Hakim, 2018), commonly called "pretty privilege," while broadening opportunities to utilize aesthetic capital (Sarpila et al., 2020; Shilling, 2004). Though less constrained by norms, men face more limited societal approval for accumulating aesthetic capital (Sarpila et al., 2020), which may lead to the perception of appearance-based advantages as immutable.

Appearance is realized as capital within interpersonal interactions, in which appearance benefits are typically gained through passive accumulation rather

than purposeful exchange (Kukkonen et al., 2023). Attractive individuals tend to be favored in the distribution of cultural and economic capital (Kukkonen et al., 2023; see also Kwan & Trautner, 2009). However, while some suggest that appearance is a “natural” determinant of perks and penalties, most research indicates that the benefits of looks as capital are shaped by unequal social norms and vary across fields and markets (Kuipers, 2015; Mears, 2015), with these advantages being gendered—benefiting men more than women (Sarpila et al., 2020). Evolutionary psychologists contend that attractiveness influences mate selection and reproductive success, linking appearance outcomes to biological rather than cultural factors, suggesting that beauty reflects a universal preference (Kukkonen et al., 2023), a view that is masculinized and simplified in the manosphere to craft a misogynist, heterosexist lexicon (Ging, 2019).

Intimate relations are often perceived as a particularly salient domain for the conversion of aesthetic capital. However, research shows that compatibility, homogamy, and cultural fit often outweigh looks in shaping partner selection (Martin & George, 2006; McClintock, 2014); such factors are dismissed in manosphere discourse, where attractiveness is framed as decisive (Andersen, 2023). Black Pill narratives, for example, assert that men’s “sexual market value” is “determined by things men cannot easily improve, such as looks,” and the Incels Wiki even claims that “women enjoy non-consensual sex if the rapist is an attractive man” (Incels Wiki, n.d.). This reconfiguration of looks within the manosphere underscores a research gap: While appearance has been theorized in relation to gender and inequality, its role in online masculinities and extremist subcultures remains overlooked. Analyzing incels demonstrates the capitalization of appearance in these contexts and advances appearance scholarship by elucidating the functioning of aesthetic capital within radical digital environments.

Appearance, masculinity, and incels

Physical appearance is central to incels (Hintz & Baker, 2021; Incels.co, 2020), with research suggesting it shapes incel ideology, including misogyny and masculine hierarchies (e.g., Hoffman et al., 2020; Menzie, 2022). Incels consider conventionally attractive men to hold the top positions in sexual competition (Ging, 2019; Hoffman et al., 2020). In this context, a manly appearance functions as a status symbol, securing sexual and romantic benefits and linking masculinity to socio-sexual capital (Menzie, 2022).

Traditionally, men are socialized to view their bodies as functional rather than aestheticized (Kuipers, 2015; Sarpila et al., 2020), but they are not immune to aesthetic ideals (Brausch & Muehlenkamp, 2007; Hakim, 2018). Men’s body image and appearance satisfaction relate closely to gender expression

(Blashill, 2011), with ideals rooted more in normative masculinity than aesthetics (Kuipers, 2015). The unattainability of these ideals can cause anxiety, inadequacy, and other psychological challenges (Brausch & Muehlenkamp, 2007; Wienke, 1998). Similar issues appear among incels (Hintz & Baker, 2021); however, emphasizing mental health alone risks pathologizing misogyny and overlooking its broader ideological roots (Kelly et al., 2024).

Societal changes and shifting gender dynamics shape appearance work (Kwan & Tautner, 2009), as declining traditional roles lead men to increasingly pursue self-worth through aesthetic body practices, linking appearance to social value (Hakim, 2018). In today's performance culture, beauty and the body signify self-discipline, while deviation from hegemonic norms appears morally or "evolutionarily" deficient, making embodied stratification appear "natural" (Mason, 2013). These beliefs, though appearing biological, are culturally constructed and sustain unequal gender relations through relational practices (Jokinen, 2003; Messerschmidt, 2019). Within this context, gender identity is negotiated through social discourse, shaping prevailing ideals of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In the mansphere, hegemonic masculinity is redefined through tropes such as victimhood and "beta" identities, blending non-normative traits with traditional ideals while relying on patriarchal structures, creating hybrid masculinities that allow men, including incels, to negotiate masculinity across different cultural contexts (Ging, 2019).

Masculinity shapes men's body image and appearance assessments (Blashill, 2011), closely tying them to the aesthetic capital they hold (Kuipers, 2015; Kwan & Tautner, 2009). Men's capacity to embody hegemonic ideals depends on available social, cultural, and economic resources (Brittan, 1989). When such resources are limited, some men may turn to violence or other deviant behaviors to assert their masculinity (Krienert, 2003; Messerschmidt, 2013), as seen in incel misogyny (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). Capital is therefore interchangeable, and its absence can drive men to pursue masculinity through unconventional means, yet its influence in radicalized networks remains unclear.

Masculine aesthetic capital—physical traits seen as also signaling "masculine mental qualities"—is a resource through which masculinity is performed and negotiated (Wienke, 1998). Hegemonic ideals like muscularity and height signal strength, autonomy, and leadership and are increasingly visible on social media as a sign of achievement and adherence to the Protestant work ethic extending to bodies (Bogaert & McCreary, 2011; Hakim, 2018). In incel discourse, these traits are seen as essential for romantic success, reflecting culturally desirable masculinity and hierarchical gender norms (Daly & Reed, 2022; Hintz & Baker, 2021). This pursuit of masculinity is intertwined with heterosexual norms (Fleming & Davis, 2018), with male and female sexuality hierarchically

and dichotomously differentiated, an effect amplified in the incel community, contributing to symbolic boundary-drawing that positions women as an out-group (Andersen, 2022). In this context, women are seen as “sign-bearing capital,” a resource men can appropriate to enhance their symbolic value, raising questions about the ownership of women’s bodily capital and inequalities in capital conversion processes (Mears, 2015; Menzie, 2022).

Building on the concepts of aesthetic capital and masculinity, much of the literature emphasizes their roles in social mobility but overlooks how they are applied or interpreted in extreme contexts such as incel communities. Examining aesthetic capital in incel forums provides a critical case for exploring the boundaries and distortions of appearance as capital, further complicating the cultural and social dynamics of bodily and masculine value.

Research design

Objectives of the study

Appearance research and studies on appearance as capital have previously examined appearance-related inequalities (e.g., Kukkonen, 2021; Kukkonen et al., 2023; Kwan & Trautner, 2009), but interpretations of the growing meaning of appearance have not been thoroughly studied in the context of modern online hate networks. Less attention has been given to how appearance as a resource ties to rising male supremacy and the narratives of misogynistic incels or how its growing importance in mainstream culture shapes extremist subcultures.

Therefore, this study examines how incel ideology constructs and maintains a focus on appearance while also examining whether appearance yields instrumental value and how aesthetic capital is portrayed in the context of masculine dominance hierarchies, sexual marginalization, and victimhood. Accordingly, the following research questions were formulated:

How does the terminology arising from incel ideology reframe the concept of appearance as capital and as a resource within the community (RQ1)?

How is appearance-related capital perceived to be entwined with sexual exclusion and masculine power hierarchies within the incel community (RQ2)?

Data

To assess how appearance and masculine categories within incel rhetoric are entwined, this study uses textual data retrieved from the incels.is discussion forum. Incels.is was chosen as the primary data source because it hosts ideological incel discussions and is strictly moderated, reducing the presence of non-incels

or spectators. The incels.is website (incels.is) was established in late 2017 and had gained more than 21,000 members and over 10,000,000 posts by July 2023, making it a major platform and gathering place for incel-minded men. While research acknowledges that different incel forums engage in varied discussions and present differing perspectives (Lounela & Murphy, 2023), incels.is is prominently focused on blackpilled ideas and rhetoric (O'Malley & Helm, 2022; Zimmerman, 2024). While this discourse may not capture the views of all individual incels—some of whom may turn to the platform primarily for community rather than ideological alignment—it reflects the dominant themes and issues discussed on incels.is, providing insight into the ideological focus of this particular community. The board is published alongside the Incels Wiki, which is similarly grounded in blackpilled ideology, further reinforcing the prevalence of these perspectives within this space. Thus, in this article, the term “incel ideology” is used to refer broadly to the shared assumptions underpinning both Red Pill and Black Pill perspectives, with particular emphasis on the deterministic and fatalistic elements of the Black Pill, focusing on discourse rather than individual belief.

This study analyzed 60 targeted threads from six subcategories reflecting typical forum themes, including men's hierarchy, appearance pressures and ideals, dating culture, and misogyny. Threads identified as trolling or without replies were excluded. During the data collection period, the incel platform underwent multiple domain changes due to service providers removing pages for offensive content. The chosen discussion threads were published on incels.me, incels.co, and incels.is between May 23, 2018 and January 10, 2020. They were collected during the immersive period on the platform, during which the platform was read and followed weekly between November 18, 2018 and February 20, 2020. After data collection, the platform was browsed regularly.

Analyzing multiple subcategories enables a comprehensive portrayal of the forum's discussion culture. Threads in these subcategories were evaluated to broadly represent the world of incels in terms of both content and rhetoric. The subcategories examined were BlackPill (ideological conversations), LifeFuel (hope-inducing topics), SuicideFuel (discussions provoking suicidal thoughts), NSFW (content not safe for work), RageFuel (rage-inducing themes), and Serious (in-depth topics).

Method

After collection, the discussion threads were analyzed using NVivo (CAQDAS), which enables the storing, classifying, and coding of qualitative data (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). From the data, vocabulary and expressions related to the following topics were coded: appearance (such as *height*, *plastic surgery*, *rate my face*, *ugly*), Black Pill concepts on masculine appearance traits (e.g., “I'm a

manlet framecel”), as well as hierarchical views (e.g., *“he still looks beta as fuck after surgery”*), perceived impacts of appearance on sexual outcomes (e.g., *“he’s not slaying anything other than landwhales”*), and beliefs about the benefits or uses of appearance (e.g., *“true confidence comes from looks”*). All quotes in the analysis are presented as they were initially written, including spelling, grammatical, and stylistic choices.

The advantages of internet-based discourse analysis lie in the continuity and versatility of the conversation and the fact that the researcher has not influenced the course or content of the discussions, constituting what is often referred to as “natural data.” The opinions expressed in the conversations generated further discussion, providing detailed insights into the values shared by the community (Holtz et al., 2012). However, internet data should not be utilized for research for only practical purposes: dealing with sensitive internet data requires ethical discretion. The data contained no personal details, as incels.is is an anonymous platform; only nicknames served as identifiers. While anonymity facilitates freer expression and enhances discussion authenticity, it also limits research, as demographic factors cannot be identified and opinions cannot be independently verified (Holtz et al., 2012). Nevertheless, strong social control on the forum discourages “fake” users (i.e., non-incels); it can therefore be assumed that most active participants identify as men who are aligned with the board’s principles and thus broadly represent the incel population.

The boundary between private and public in internet research is often ambiguous and context-dependent (Franzke et al., 2020). While the forum contains sensitive discussions, it is openly accessible and does not require account creation or fabricated participation; thus, it can be considered a public space. The forum participants were aware of the forum’s accessibility and were encouraged by the board rules to use proxies or VPNs to protect their privacy. In such contexts, research ethics guidelines hold that direct consent is not required when individual personal identifiers are absent and data are large-scale or contributors cannot be reached (Holtz et al., 2012).

The use of sensitive online material requires particular ethical consideration. Although the forum discussions are anonymous, there are still risks of identification through screen names or references to people and places. To mitigate this, identifiable details and avatars were excluded from the analysis, and quotes are reported only by discussion thread number. Researchers must also navigate the ethical tension between giving visibility to hate ideologies and advancing scientific knowledge. This study seeks to advance understanding and provide analytical tools while avoiding the legitimization of incel ideology or victimhood, a concern noted in the field (Kelly et al., 2024). In this context, quotes are included not for sensational effect but to critically examine the discourse—often derogatory or discriminatory, it is central to incel identity and ideology, enacted

in online textual spaces and embedded directly in language. Examining this language critically allows scholarship to reveal its operation and consequences without legitimizing it. Incel culture magnifies existing misogynistic norms, showing how language is used to reinforce coercive forms of masculinity.

Findings

After analyzing the data collected through the incels' online platform, several key findings emerged. These findings offer a window into the ideological worldview of incel men and shed light on the meaning of appearance in incel identity construction while demonstrating how appearance builds and maintains masculine hierarchies within the incel community and Black Pill ideology. Appearance-related topics were mainly discussed in the Serious and RageFuel areas; however, appearance was also an inseparable part of the discussions on NSFW, RageFuel, Serious, LifeFuel, and SuicideFuel. The prominent themes that emerged in the analysis were as follows: 1) appearance as a resource, 2) the connection between appearance-based resources and hierarchies, and 3) the relationship between other forms of capital and aesthetic capital (compensation). Based on the data, incels consider appearance a form of capital realized through masculinity and social status. Incel men struggle to gain or exploit not only aesthetic capital, which they seem uninterested in accumulating, but also other compensable forms of capital, deepening their sense of marginalization while enforcing the cynical Black Pill ideology.

Appearance as capital in the incel community

Appearance was a frequent theme in the data in various contexts, particularly in relation to masculinity, sexual and social success, and malaise related to sexual exclusion. Appearance functions as capital in multiple social contexts (Kukkonen, 2021). In the context of the incel community, it operates through heterosexual success and the performance of hegemonic masculinity. In the incel discourse, women's partner selection is framed as governed by natural selection, with "alpha males" favored due to their perceived "genetic superiority," emphasizing physical appearance.

In the data, appearance as a usable asset, as capital, consisted of different tangible and intangible resources such as attractiveness ("any personality becomes attractive if the person is physically attractive," S6, "Handsome = goes to heaven (all kinds of pleasures, adventures, and having it easy at life in general," S7), facial features such as a masculine chin ("a recessed chin is an objective incel death sentence," RF7), the body ("any type of body game is over if you have a [feminine] type of physique," NSFW2), height ("[women are] so ignorant that they

believe that small tits are a universally unattractive feature like a man being short,” RF10), hair (“the only time I’ve seen women into bald men is when the man is Chad and masculine as fuck,” RF10), and even features that are not usually visible, such as the penis (“8 inches or death is the norm these days,” NSFW1).

The capital perspective is further emphasized in discourses related to the practice of “maxxing”—improving a certain trait to increase one’s “sexual market value”—and “mogging,” overpowering another individual through the display of one’s assets. In maxxing, the accumulation of aesthetic capital is pursued through the exchange of other resources, accentuating how aesthetic capital can be “invested in” in different ways to cultivate more of said asset. Forms of maxxing include beard growth (“beardmaxxing”) (“Beardmaxxing is 110% LEGIT—Guy went from incel to getting worshipped by ethnic foids,” LF1), and exercise-based body modification (“gymmaxxing”), among other practices (the term “foids” is derived from “female + humanoid” and is a derogatory way to refer to women). Mogging highlights how aesthetic capital emerges in relation to the amount others possess, linking it closely to social status and masculine standing. However, due to the fundamental nature of perceived innate hierarchies, maxxing is generally not believed to lead to liberation from sexual marginalization (“Gymcelling in general is a cope,” NSFW 2). Unlike financial or social capital, appearance as capital is considered somewhat permanent and beyond one’s control. This perception is reinforced by fallacious genetic and evolutionary interpretations of its role in conversions and social distinctions (“bad genes come in bad packages,” S3). Discussions indicate that appearance can confer advantage, whereas efforts to enhance it (e.g., grooming) are socially constrained (Sarpila et al., 2020).

Framing (hegemonically) masculine appearance as biologically or evolutionarily determined rather than culturally constructed enhances its perceived desirability and reinforces the influence of the masculine ideal. Sexual marginalization is considered a result of non-masculine characteristics and failure to meet masculine norms. Users frequently discuss how these traits affect sexual experiences and seek peer feedback on perceived deficiencies, often sharing suggestions or affirmations regarding these traits (“rate my face.—honestly, am I chad or sub-human? I need closure and I need an honest answer,” NSFW 5). The importance of rigid masculine ideals is framed not merely as influencing romantic success but as existentially consequential (“I see my disgusting large pores, my recessed maxilla, my recessed chin, and I want to bludgeon myself to death,” S3).

Appearance is an asset that defines the masculine hierarchy, as women are depicted as highly vain and positioned as the “gatekeepers to sex,” ultimately being portrayed as the antagonists in this structure (“women being the selectors [of genes] is to the detriment of the species because women select for the most shallow traits,” BP3). While the incel interpretation of evolutionary theory includes

sex being reserved only for good-looking men (“in today’s world anyone that doesn’t have elite male supermodel looks is considered subhuman by women,” NSFW5), it also constitutes a fulfillment of masculinity (“[An ugly male can be happy] Only if he forgets about love and sex. there are lots of fun things in this world but our biology makes us slaves to our sex drive,” S7).

Within the data, sexual liberation and social change after the 1960s, along with the conditions of modern-day anomie, foster incels’ perceived lack of aesthetic capital in the “mating market.” Incels attribute the current focus on appearance to expanded women’s rights, claiming that aesthetic resources would have been less crucial in past relational contexts (“the sexual revolution has unleashed the true unchecked nature of the female. This is too much,” S4; “Yes, because giving [women] liberty showed that all they wanted was to run toward chads dick. Sometimes i wish arranged marriage still existed in my country,” S4). Women’s freedom to choose their partners is perceived as a competing resource that limits incel men’s access to sexual and social capital (“It’s only in the modern era of dating and courtship coupled with women economic and social privileged position that women get to pick partners freely. I think this is actually the reason why [their choices] are so bad,” BP3). Such discourses both restore a sense of masculinity and establish gendered distinctions based on “masculine-coded” achievements, reinforcing misogyny through blame-attributing narratives that subjugate women in a seemingly less extreme way than direct violence (Kelly et al., 2024).

Aesthetic capital and gendered power dynamics

In the data, sexual marginalization and incelism are frequently framed as determined by evolutionary and genetic factors (“you have lost the genetic lottery. Now you must suffer for the rest of your life,” S3), portraying sexual inequality as inevitable and natural yet unacceptable. According to incels, women prefer ultra-masculine men, or “Chads,” who typically embody the Western hegemonic masculine ideal of whiteness, looks, and power (“Women are only attracted to different types of alpha males. Or those with refined bone/muscle/etc. structure. Or ones with alpha traits. They don’t want anyone who doesn’t have competitive dominant advantage,” RF9). “Alpha males” are seen as possessing various resources that can be converted into heterosexual success and erotic capital, as women are thought to actively seek men who provide benefits, including status enhancement, financial support, and protection. By disregarding less masculine “beta males,” women are held responsible for sexual stratification. Incels attribute celibacy not only to losing the status battle due to limited resources but also to being “personally victimized” by women’s sexual choice: “[The Sexual Revolution] is the entire reason incelism is so widespread

nowadays. Although you could argue it was inevitable, since cucks in power will give women rights, leading to them obeying their nature and only going for Chads,” S4]. These superficial misinterpretations of evolution are also typical of the broader manosphere, where similar gendered and reductive claims are recycled (Ging, 2019), strategically creating the illusion that these ideologies are grounded in rational and scientific principles (Andersen, 2023).

Aesthetic capital is tied to hierarchical status and sexual success, serving as a key determinant of position within the masculine hierarchy, while also being linked to perceived personal qualities such as confidence (“True confidence comes from looks and how well ppl treat you,” LF3) and sense of self-worth and is associated with positive mental qualities (“as a Chad you receive positive feedback all the time. Women want you.—and as a result of that you get really self-confident but you are not successful because you are self confident but you are self confident because you are successful because you are good looking. I think it works this way,” S6; “Looks are EVERYTHING. Personality RESULTS from looks,” S6).

The discursive relationship between suicidal thoughts and dissatisfaction with appearance is pronounced in the online discussions, shaping how incels perform their identity and victimhood online (Kelly et al., 2024). Perceived lack of aesthetic resources is a significant factor influencing suicidal thoughts (“Seeing myself in the mirror from the front is absolutely awful—it mainly fills me with rage and acute suicidal ideation,” S2), derived from the Black Pill. Consistent with prior research, negative body image is linked to suicidal ideation in both men and women (Brausch & Muehlenkamp, 2007), demonstrating men’s susceptibility to appearance-related rumination, as observed among incels. The term “mentalcel” (celibate because of mental health) often appears in threads that justify the underlying reasons for incelhood. However, it is regarded as a rationalization (“Mentalcel = arrogant incel who refuse to accept that he is ugly,” BP7). Terms like these help incels construct an identity and perpetuate victim narratives, interpreting involuntary celibacy as resulting from ableism (see also Hintz & Baker, 2021; Kelly et al., 2024) and ultimately masking the roots of incelhood embedded in structural misogyny and male supremacist ideas. While experiencing mental health issues is relatively common, few individuals adopt extremist ideologies, highlighting that the path to such beliefs is shaped by more than just individual struggles.

Struggling to negotiate and accumulate aesthetic capital

In incel discourses, perceived deficiencies in appearance and masculine traits are seen as non-compensable barriers in sexual relationships (“A below average looking male will never be genuinely attractive to a woman no matter how much

money or status he has,” BP6), inseparably linked to the lack of erotic capital. Appearance is considered the main cause of celibacy (“Lookism is the god of the secular world.—ugly = goes to hell (frustration, despair, loneliness, inceldom, having to wageslave your ass off, etc),” S7), with the belief that it is an unchangeable trait, further solidifying the permanent nature of inceldom.

Despite the fatalist view of appearance, interactions also revolve around improving and leveraging appearance. Participants often express contempt for “Chads” and “alphas” utilizing appearance to secure social and erotic success (“I wouldn’t mind rejection as much if females stayed virgins and rejected all the Chads too,” S4). The paradox whereby cultivating appearance is stigmatized but leveraging it is normalized (Sarpila et al., 2020) is reproduced in Black Pill discourse. However, previous research has also demonstrated that perceived unattractiveness is often associated with critical attitudes toward using physical appearance to advance other areas of life (Kukkonen et al., 2023).

The data reveal various strategies to compensate for lacking aesthetic capital. Economic capital could be converted to sexual resources (Mears, 2015); however, rooted in sexist gender stereotypes—often framed as natural through misguided biological reasoning or the symbolic value of women—paid sex is viewed as inferior to sexual access gained through looks. Money and other resources are thought to depend on appearance (“Obviously money doesn’t increase height, so height must increase money. If you were better looking, you would be successful AND be getting puss,” BP6). However, it could be used to improve one’s looks through different procedures or even surgery (“Most of us here can only reach normie and chadlite levels with surgery maxx,” S5) or alternatively, as an asset to get women (“[An ugly male could be happy] if u get rich and famous but that’s one in many millions,” S7). However, as looks are considered biologically fixed, compensations are mostly dismissed (“if sex is all we need than I could just moneymaxx, but love and affection and being truly wanted is more important. A lot of moneymaxxed oldcel can go to some shithole country and get unlimited sex. Does that mean that he’d finally be happy? I fucking doubt it,” S7).

This framing is a hyperbolic intensification of aesthetic capital, where the body becomes a fixed currency and any deficit is imagined as both immutable and disqualifying. Unlike the flexible models of appearance work outlined by cultural sociologists (e.g., Hakim, 2018; Kuipers, 2015; Kwan & Trautner, 2009), incels perceive looks as an inherited fate rather than a modifiable asset. Where others see appearance as modifiable through labor and choice, incels view it as biologically fixed. This perception fundamentally alters how they approach their own sense of worth in the social sphere. The belief in the immutability of aesthetic capital fosters a fatalism that permeates much of their discourse (for fatalism, see also Petterson et al., 2025), framing physical appearance as an

insurmountable barrier. This reinforces perceived isolation and shapes engagement with societal norms around masculinity and worth. Consequently, incels often pursue various strategies to navigate the constraints imposed by their perceived lack of aesthetic capital.

Such compensations are frequently perceived as pitiful or emasculating when they fail to confer status. The appropriation of women's bodily capital is tied to symbolic masculine capital (Mears, 2015), and inability to capitalize on this practice is viewed by incels as deviating from masculine norms. This reinforces gendered power structures by perpetuating the commodification of women's bodies as tools to elevate masculine status, maintaining the symbolic misogynistic hierarchy that still places women lower ("JFL at being incel and going to strip club and spending some shekels on wasted [women]. OP, you're cuckold as hell," RF3; "Escortcels are stupid cucks who need to kill themselves. 'But i get sex so im not a cuckold for paying her' stfu faggots you are the definition of cuckold—paying a woman for something that other men get for free," S2). Aesthetic capital is regarded as non-substitutable ("gaining money and status cannot be considered a means for incel tier guys to genuinely ascend as it fails to increase their attractiveness to women," BP6; "We just gotta cope the best we can tbh—There really is no other way. You will not change who you are," S7), interlacing the lack of resources with subordination within the masculine hierarchy.

The incel forum, then, offers a site where the dominant logics of aesthetic capital are not only reproduced but also distorted into a fatalistic and biologically essentialist worldview. Rather than engaging appearance as a malleable or strategic resource, as much of the literature suggests (e.g., Kuipers, 2015; Kukkonen, 2021; Mears, 2015; Neveu, 2018; Sarpila et al., 2021), incel discourse frames it as an inescapable determinant of social failure. This rearticulation doesn't just reflect appearance-based inequality but rather amplifies how incels experience and interpret disadvantage through racialized, classed, and masculinist logics. In doing so, incels underscore the constraints of aesthetic capital theory, which overlooks how perceptions of disaffection and marginalization, rather than structural exclusion, can shape misaligned social positioning.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that appearance plays a central role in creating, sustaining, and renewing incel ideas, particularly within blackpilled online environments. This justifies, naturalizes, and normalizes their perceived suffering and exclusion, creating a cycle with no clear exit from incelhood. The discourse surrounding appearance as a reflection of masculine (or feminine) attributes and capabilities is employed as a rhetorical device, reinforcing traditional gender norms

and legitimizing the perception of women as sexual commodities and symbols of masculine status. Positioning appearance as inherent and as the key determinant of status strengthens the perceived legitimacy of this discourse, with incels viewing themselves as victims of women, whom they accuse of serving as the upholders of an appearance-based hierarchy. This supports victimhood narratives and naturalizes anti-feminist discourses while disregarding the social roots and structural misogyny that shape these views.

Although incels reject the pursuit of hegemonic masculinity, they still seem to position themselves in relation to it. Contrary to red pillers, who actively pursue this ideal, incels frame themselves as victims of a system that rewards those who attain it (Zimmerman, 2024). This offers incels an additional avenue for the legitimization of perceived marginalization.

By framing their discursive identity around perceived deficits—particularly in appearance and sexual capital—incels downplay other forms of capital and view their agency as insufficient to overcome incelhood (see also Menzie, 2022). Consequently, threats to masculinity may prompt overcompensation through harmful expressions, including misogyny and assertions of male superiority (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020), reinforcing masculine norms when conventional opportunities to achieve them are limited (Krienert, 2003), as observed in the incel community. In the current study, threats to masculinity are found to arise not only from social changes such as the rise of women's rights but also from broader societal trends, including expectations to meet masculine appearance ideals and the comparisons these provoke. The connection between masculinity and appearance (Blashill, 2011; Kuipers, 2015) positions aesthetics as a tool for expressing masculinity, such that lacking aesthetic capital equates to diminished masculinity. Falling short of these standards is interpreted as a deficiency in both personal and socially prescribed masculinity. For men, the significance of aesthetics is often overshadowed by normative masculinity and racial boundaries, meaning that appearance norms are more about moral and gendered expectations than purely aesthetic considerations (Kuipers, 2015). This dynamic is mirrored in the incel community where appearance functions as a key form of capital and a fundamental marker of masculinity.

The hostile ideology of the incel network represents a perceived lack of social, sexual, and other resources, manifested as exclusion from intimate, social, and sometimes educational or occupational spheres. For men with limited access to traditional forms of capital, appearance has become increasingly important across socioeconomic backgrounds, with men emphasizing beauty and body work in response to neoliberal precarity (Hakim, 2018). Research shows men benefit from attractiveness in acquiring other forms of capital (Kukkonen et al., 2023; Kwan & Trautner, 2009), which may explain why incels

view physical appearance as crucial for male success. Appearance is viewed as critical but immutable—a perception reinforced by societal disapproval of men actively cultivating aesthetic capital (Sarpila et al., 2020), which obscures the labor behind appearance and frames handsomeness as inherent rather than earned.

Although appearance can be strategically leveraged as capital (e.g., Anderson et al., 2010; Berry, 2008; Sarpila et al., 2020), misogynistic incels overemphasize its importance in ways that serve their ideological ends, using it as a discursive strategy. This strategy portrays relationships as transactions of appearance-based capital, despite partner selection being predominantly shaped by compatibility across traits such as personality, values, and socioeconomic background (McClintock, 2014). While incels seek to leverage women as a form of symbolic capital (Menzie, 2022; see also Mears, 2015), women's conversion of their own resources is framed as illegitimate. This asymmetry reinforces male entitlement, sustains narratives of victimization, and legitimizes misogynistic attitudes within the community. Acknowledging the broader context would challenge the network's emphasis on physical appearance as the primary determinant of romantic and sexual outcomes, undermining its ideological narrative.

Although the incel network positions itself as separate from mainstream societal values by promoting its own ideology, it remains deeply interconnected with and influenced by the broader social context. The anti-feminist ideas expressed in manosphere discourse reflect an intensified form of the gender-essentialist narratives found in mainstream culture (Krendel et al., 2022), further contributing to the circulation of discriminatory and anti-democratic ideas into the mainstream (Kelly et al., 2024). The identity formation of incels also revolves around symbolic boundary work (Andersen, 2023) and the ideals of traditional agentic masculinity, accentuating the normative influence of patriarchal gender systems (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Pettersson et al., 2025). The emphasis incels place on aesthetic capital mirrors societal norms that judge individuals by appearance, with these pressures magnified within the forum's discourse. This radical focus on aesthetics reflects both its practical role in the incel community and the broader societal importance assigned to physical looks.

In this sense, the incel phenomenon represents an extreme manifestation of broader cultural strains, reflecting the deep-seated misogyny and gendered expectations pervasive in society (DeCook & Kelly, 2022; Kelly et al., 2024), where ideas about worth and appearance are amplified and selectively distorted, creating a framework that both mirrors and diverges from mainstream aesthetic capital discourse. Aesthetic capital theory assumes that individuals gain or lose societal rewards based on appearance (Kukkonen, 2021). Although the concept of aesthetic capital is critical in understanding incels' perceived marginalization,

it must be acknowledged that incels selectively adopt and adapt these ideas, embracing certain aspects that emphasize appearance as a determinant of social value while rejecting its transformative potential—showing the limits of conventional theory when applied to ideological groups that distort and resist mainstream cultural norms while remaining constrained by them.

The selective adoption and distortion of societal ideals are not unique to incels. Parallels can be drawn between incels and “nerdy men” exhibiting “geek masculinity,” who selectively embody aspects of hegemonic masculinity (e.g., valuing reason over emotion) while rejecting conventional markers of success such as sexual or athletic achievement (Ging, 2019; Kendall, 2011). Both groups portray themselves as socially marginalized despite often being culturally and racially privileged (Ging, 2019; Saptura & Boyle, 2020). This performative sense of marginalization underscores how subcultural masculinities can selectively adopt and distort societal norms, reinforcing perceptions of deficit and exclusion (Ging, 2019), a dynamic that resonates with the incel emphasis on aesthetic capital and Black Pill ideology.

This aligns with prior findings that incels construct a shared identity grounded in a victim narrative (Baele et al., 2021; Lounela & Murphy, 2023; Pettersson et al., 2025) and a joint perception of unattractiveness, maintaining status boundaries and separating them from other men and women (Andersen, 2023) while also distinguishing “true” incels from “false” incels (Pettersson et al., 2025). Along with their strict social categories, in-group/out-group thinking facilitates radicalization and violent ideation as well as feelings of insecurity and humiliation (Doosje et al., 2016). Drawing on prior research, this study demonstrates that appearance, appearance ideals, and disappointment in one’s appearance can intersect with radicalization processes in extremist online groups by reinforcing social distinctions based on aesthetic capital and fostering hostility toward those perceived as possessing aesthetic capital transferable into erotic, romantic, or social capital. The complexity of incel ideology, alongside its real-world consequences, underscores the need for research that seeks to understand the phenomenon without legitimizing its narratives of victimhood (Kelly et al., 2024). While not a comprehensive explanation, appearance theories provide a valuable supplementary lens for examining incels. This study adds to the literature on modern hate networks and highlights how social strain, driven by underlying cultural ideals and dynamics, shapes the appeal of extremist online networks and the harmful subjectivities of those engaging in them.

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Ethics approval statement

The research presented in this manuscript falls outside the scope of activities that would necessitate formal ethical review as per the guidelines of University of Turku. I understand the importance of ethical considerations in scientific research and the responsibility of authors to uphold the highest ethical standards. If you have any further questions or require additional information regarding the ethical aspects of this study, please feel free to contact me.

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Corrected Proof