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Mainstream Symbols and Misogynistic Extremism: Cultural Narratives and the Challenge of Deradicalizing Incel Ideology

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Abstract
Incel ideology is increasingly cited as a driver of misogynistic violence, yet its cultural foundations and implications for deradicalization remain insufficiently studied. This study analyzes incel discourse on incels.is and shows how symbols, myths, and nostalgic narratives drawn from mainstream culture shape and normalize gendered grievances. Incel rhetoric does not construct a separate ideology but adapts familiar cultural narratives that frame women as possessing disproportionate social and sexual power. This reliance on widely circulated narratives contributes to radicalization pathways by presenting misogynistic claims as culturally legible, rather than extremist. In turn, it complicates deradicalization because interventions cannot be directed only at fringe beliefs, instead, they must confront misogynistic narratives that are not confined to extremist spaces and that circulate through ordinary cultural repertoires. This article argues that effective responses require attention to these broader contexts that enable misogynistic grievance to move between mainstream and extremist settings.

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Introduction[2]

Extreme misogyny has gained increasing visibility in both public and academic discourse, as acts of misogynistic violence have been linked to a range of ideological influences (Solea & Sugiura, 2023; Miller-Idriss, 2025). Some perpetrators explicitly engage with incel (involuntary celibate) communities, while others draw on broader digital misogyny. Incel ideology centers on a typically male identity, grounded in the belief that structural inequalities, physical appearance, and biological determinism prevent them from achieving sexual or romantic relationships (Brooks et al., 2022). Certain incel communities portray women as holding disproportionate social and sexual power, which fuels resentment, and in extreme cases justifies violence.

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Incel ideology draws on mainstream cultural symbols, myths, and narratives such as the red and blue pill framework from *The Matrix,* archetypes like Chads [conventionally attractive men] and Stacys [conventionally attractive women], and stereotypes about female sexual behavior. These symbols not only reflect existing cultural ideas but also serve as mechanisms that can facilitate radicalization by providing adherents with a coherent worldview, reinforcing in-group identity, and normalizing grievances and hostility toward women (Coufal & Wedel, 2025). At the same time, the embedding of these narratives in broader culture complicates deradicalization, as exposure to these symbols extends beyond forums and persists in everyday media, popular culture, and social discourse. Increasingly, research has shown that male misogynistic beliefs relate to violent extremist attitudes among men (Rottweiler et al., 2021, Rottweiler et al., 2025). Existing literature falls short in explaining radicalization pathways and deradicalization efforts for misogynistic extremists (Rothermel & Kelly, 2024). This paper addresses this gap by examining how incel ideology, while grounded in broader cultural narratives, fosters grievances and pathways toward violence, and why such pathways resist standard deradicalization interventions.

By placing incel ideology within its cultural context, this study examines how it facilitates pathways to radicalization and why it poses challenges for intervention and deradicalization efforts. This shift in focus is important, as "by continuing to focus on what makes the community 'extreme', the risk is ignoring what makes it similar to the mainstream, thus contributing to the belief, often spread by mainstream media, that misogyny is only a problem of specified individuals and their specific circumstances, rather than also linked to institutionalized misogyny, ingrained in the fibers of society" (Tranchese and Sugiura, 2021; 2728). Understanding these dynamics is critical for designing effective strategies to prevent the escalation of misogynistic extremism and to support disengagement from radicalized beliefs. This paper draws on a dataset collected from the incel forum incels.is in September and October 2023, analyzing patterns of language, symbolism, and narrative construction to illuminate the cultural mechanisms underpinning both radicalization and the persistence of extremist ideology, and consequences for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). In doing so, I aim to answer the following two research questions:

1. How do cultural symbols, myths, and narratives facilitate radicalization pathways among misogynistic incels?
2. How does the embedding of misogynistic ideology in mainstream culture complicate deradicalization efforts?

This paper proceeds as follows. First, I provide a brief review of misogyny and extremism, before discussing the ideology underpinning incel communities. To trace how these mechanisms operate, it is necessary to begin with the wider misogynistic context that shapes incel belief formation. Then, I provide a brief data and methods section. Subsequently, I discuss each of the mechanisms outlined in the introduction, and their correspondence with radicalization, before discussing how these radicalization mechanisms provide barriers for deradicalization and disengagement. I end with brief implications and concluding remarks.

Misogyny and Extremism

Misogyny manifests in several ways: through the objectification of women, stereotypes based on traditional gender roles, sexist jokes, or unequal treatment in social, professional, or cultural interactions. Misogyny is rooted in cultural narratives, historical myths, and social hierarchies (Bennett, 1991; Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016), and, as a result, provides the ideological terrain on which incel beliefs are cultivated. Dobash and Dobash (1984) identified patriarchal violence as an enduring feature of Western tradition, while Manne (2018) described misogyny not merely as an individual psychological condition, but as a broader social force that disciplines women who deviate from or violate patriarchal norms. Llanera (2023) further underscores misogyny as an environmental and structural mechanism embedded in social institutions and cultural practices. Following this line of thought, I conceptualize extreme misogyny as a structural and ideological expression of male supremacy, one that fosters gender-based violence, and provides the conditions for incel ideology to emerge. The focus of the present analysis is solely on Western society and the Western cultural context, but misogyny has been part of many historical and contemporary societies and is present in various religious traditions around the world (Holland, 2006). These deep roots enable the reproduction of incel ideology through existing narratives. Incel

ideology, then, can build upon the foundation of these misogynistic sentiments and does so using certain symbols, myths, and nostalgic narratives. Because incel ideology draws on familiar cultural narratives rather than fringe beliefs alone, attempts at deradicalization need to confront ideas that are already normalized within mainstream gender culture. This is precisely what complicates intervention.

Recently, scholars have examined the relationship between violent extremism and misogyny in a variety of ideologies (Phelan et al., 2025). This relation does not just exist within the realm of violent extremism, but misogyny can also predict willingness to engage in interpersonal violence (Rottweiler et al., 2025). At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the analytical and political limitations when drawing a boundary between extreme and non-extreme versions of misogyny. Sugiura (2021) cautions against creating a strict boundary between extreme and non-extreme versions of an ideology, as it "creates an artificial dichotomy between the deviant fringe and mainstream ideologies that, in actuality, are based on the same assumptions" (74). In doing so, separating extreme forms of misogyny from non-extreme forms can disregard more subtle forms of misogyny underpinning incel ideology. Survey-based research finds that most self-identified incels do not endorse violence (Moskalenko et al., 2022a; 2022b). However, these studies rely on a narrow definition of violence that risks reinforcing the dichotomy Sugiura (2021) critiques, by treating misogyny as non-extreme when it does not manifest in physical violence. Following Sugiura's (2021) line of inquiry, extreme misogyny thus exists on a continuum. As such, Rottweiler et al. (2025) demonstrate that intensified misogynistic narratives can predict support for interpersonal and extremist violence, which demonstrates how misogyny can justify violence against women. Within this continuum, misogynistic extremism can best be understood as a worldview which legitimizes or encourages harm, coercion, or violence against women. Incel ideology represents one such variety on this continuum.

The incel community is not a monolith: it contains a variety of ideological perspectives. Their beliefs differ based on the platform they use, the content they engage with, and the level of misogyny they promote (Solea & Sugiura, 2023). Nonetheless, certain shared tenets create some ideological cohesion. These shared beliefs operate as drivers of radicalization by framing grievances as systemic injustices and normalizing potential violent responses. First, incels believe they are entitled to sexual relations, and that sex on demand is

a basic human right, one that is withheld by women who, they argue, deny them intimacy in favor of more attractive men. This aligns with the concept of hypergamy, where women are believed to prefer men with greater physical attractiveness or resources (Baele et al. 2021). Incels perceive themselves as excluded from this system, reinforcing a sense of grievance and reinforcing adherence to in-group norms. Second, incels fixate on appearance through the lens of "sexual market value" (SMV), where those lacking conventional attractiveness are deemed disadvantaged (O'Malley et al., 2022). This hierarchical framework magnifies perceived social exclusion. Third, incels argue that women hold disproportionate social power through their choices in sexual and romantic relationships, producing a gendered power imbalance that reinforces resentment. Within the community, traditional values and patriarchal family structures are idealized, with deviations framed as societal threats (Baele et al., 2021). Fourth, incels blame feminism for empowering women with agency, further framing societal changes as personal deprivation. Some respond to this perceived injustice with calls for mass violence (Abdulla, 2022; Thorburn et al., 2023; Baele et al., 2021). Their worldview legitimizes entitlement and frames violence as a justified reaction to perceived social disorder (O'Donnell and Shor, 2021). These shared beliefs create an ideological framework in which personal grievance is interpreted as a structural injustice, which enables a progression from cultural resentment to legitimized hostility and makes violence appear as a rational expression of grievance.

Although not all men within this ecosystem engage in violence, individuals in the broader manosphere and the incel community have been linked to extremist acts. Violent incidents exemplify how culturally embedded narratives, when combined with grievance and perceived entitlement, can accelerate radicalization pathways. The 2014 Isla Vista killings, among other attacks in the UK, Australia, and Canada, demonstrate this dynamic. The contradiction of failing to achieve patriarchal ideals while still internalizing them legitimizes grievance-driven violence.

Data and Methods

This study uses a case study design to examine incels.is as a digital environment in which radicalization processes are produced, circulated, and reinforced. In this context, the case is

the platform itself, including the narrative structures and community dynamics, rather than a single thread. Case study methodology is well-suited for analyzing bounded online subcultures where meaning emerges through repeated interaction across many posts. To analyze how users construct narratives relevant to radicalization and deradicalization, I employ conventional content analysis (CCA) (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). CCA is appropriate for studying extremist communities because it enables the identification of emergent meaning-making structures in contexts where ideology is diffuse and culturally embedded. Instead of imposing predefined categories, CCA allows themes to develop inductively, making it useful for identifying symbolic repertoires, mythic explanations, and nostalgic imaginaries. These are all mechanisms central to radicalization and deradicalization research.

A review of recent scholarship identified incels.is as one of the most active contemporary incel forums (Matter et al., 2024), with nearly 37,000 members and over 21 million posts. Incels.is is also one of the most consistent contemporary incel spaces. It has remained active, while earlier forums such as 8chan, 8kun, and the r/Incels subreddit have disappeared. Further, women are not allowed on this forum, which also shapes the dynamics of how incels view themselves within the community. Its scale and persistence make it a valuable site for examining how narratives are articulated and validated. The sampling strategy was designed to capture threads where users articulate gendered narratives, which are central to incel ideology and male supremacy. The following two selection criteria were used:

- Engagement threshold: threads required at least five responses to ensure the presence of collective meaning-making, a key factor in online radicalization.
- Topical relevance: threads were drawn from the platform's "toxic femininity" tag, which concentrates discussions where users explicitly frame women as threats, articulate antifeminist grievance, construct narratives of male victimhood, and discuss general threats to their perceived status. This tag does not represent all incel discourse but provides a varied subset for analyzing mechanisms relevant to radicalization and deradicalization.

These selection criteria were used to ensure that the dataset was large enough to capture variation in misogynistic narratives. This sampling strategy is not intended to generalize across the full range of incel discourse, but to closely examine one significant narrative thread. Other themes frequently discussed on the forum, such as self-improvement, suicidal

ideation, or general interests fall outside the scope of this study but could be explored in future work.

Using the Octoparse scraping tool, I collected all threads under this tag between September and October 2023, resulting in 1194 threads with an average of sixteen responses. Posts ranged from October 2019 to October 2023. Data were analyzed using conventional content analysis following Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) iterative process. The CCA process followed several iterative steps: reading documents, identifying and coding key concepts, and grouping those codes into broader themes. All coding was conducted manually. As the sole coder, I ensured consistency through repeated returns to earlier posts to check for coherence and stability in the coding scheme. Each thread was read closely, then read again to identify key concepts, thoughts, feelings, and sentiments. This process produced three overarching themes: symbols, myths, and nostalgia, and each theme was further divided into implicit and explicit forms. Implicit expressions referred to indirect or subtle use of these narrative elements, while explicit expressions involved direct, openly articulated references. Together, these three mechanisms demonstrate the cultural processes through which incel ideology gains coherence and becomes resistant to deradicalization and disengagement efforts.

Although incels.is is publicly accessible, this study follows established ethical guidelines for internet research. No usernames are included or retained. Explicit or harmful content is described at a high level. All data were stored securely and used solely for research purposes. Finally, given the misogynistic and extremist nature of the content, reflexive practices were used to manage emotional impact and maintain analytical clarity. My positionality as a researcher studying misogynistic and extremist content required ongoing attention. Throughout the coding process, I revisited earlier coding to ensure that emerging themes reflected the data, rather than my expectations. This practice helped maintain interpretative rigor and minimize projections when analyzing gendered and emotionally charged material.

JOURNAL FOR DERADICALIZATION

Spring 2026
No. 46
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The Role of Symbols, Myths, and Nostalgia in Radicalization

This section does not outline radicalization pathways but examines the cultural mechanisms that give incel ideology its coherence, and can serve as gateways into incel ideology, resulting in radicalization. These mechanisms later become barriers to deradicalization.

Symbols

Symbolism is inherent and essential to culture; only participants within a culture share these symbols' meaning (Foster, 1994). Thus, symbols are not decorative elements of extremist discourse, but mechanisms that translate grievances into emotionally resonant, cognitively manageable forms (Miller-Idriss, 2018; Pankowski & Witkowski, 2023). In short, symbols can visually represent conspiracy theories or extremist ideologies and their underlying narratives. Furthermore, symbols can serve as propaganda and shortcuts to refer to certain biases or negative feelings (El Ghamari, 2023). In incel communities, symbols drawn from mainstream culture, such as gendered archetypes and religious imaginary, serve as cultural repertoires that make misogynistic claims appear intuitive, rather than extremist. These symbols do not create a new ideological universe, instead, they format familiar cultural narratives in ways that render misogynistic grievances legible and morally justified.

The notion of the red, blue, and black pill is one of the most recognizable symbolic systems in incel discourse. This pill-symbolism is borrowed from the movie *The Matrix and* is used to describe ideological realizations about gender and society. "Taking the red pill" signifies the belief that women hold disproportionate social and sexual power, while "taking the blue pill" represents remaining unaware of these dynamics. The "black pill" intensifies this worldview into fatalism: the conviction that women are exclusively attracted to conventionally attractive men and that incels can never change these circumstances (Baele et al., 2021; Baele et al., 2024). These symbols can serve as a way to reinterpret personal dissatisfaction as systemic oppression, creating a cognitive opening and making individuals more receptive to radicalization (Horgan, 2005; Wiktorowicz, 2005). This symbolic system also naturalizes the belief that incels face only two options: accept their fate or pursue violent attempts to change society (Perliger et al., 2023).

Archetypes such as Chads, Stacys, Beckys, and Brads function as a shorthand for gendered hierarchies. Chads represent dominant, sexually successful men, while Stacys embody sexually autonomous women whose ability to choose partners threatens incel expectations of female submissiveness. These archetypes dehumanize women and reinforce heteropatriarchal binaries. Incels simultaneously aspire to be like Chads and resent them, a dynamic that becomes clear in one user's statement that "in a perfect world, we'd all be Chads who easily slay and are currently in happy relationships" (incels.is, 2020). This reflects a sense of resentment, which has been identified as a driver for intergroup conflict (Rouda, 2024). Because these archetypes draw on familiar tropes, such as the jock, or the cheerleader, they feel culturally legitimate and easily recognizable. This mainstream resonance lowers the threshold for adopting extremist narratives and ideas (Miller-Idriss, 2018), lowering the threshold for adopting extremist gender hierarchies and worldviews.

Incels also draw on religious and moral symbols, such as calling women "Jezebel succubus devils" (incels.is, 2023), to frame women's sexuality as corrupt and dangerous. These symbols reinforce the belief that women's values lie in reproductive purity and domestic obedience. When women deviate from these expectations, incels use religious imagery to condemn them, framing women's autonomy as evidence of moral decline. This framing of women's rights contributes to feelings of resentment and hostility, feelings that can be drivers of intergroup conflict and radicalization (Moghaddam, 2005; Rouda, 2024). Incels also frequently interpret women's sexual autonomy through the lens of "sexual market value," as demonstrated by one user's claim that "OF/porn normalization is the reason most males on this site are here… women now hold the higher ground" (incels.is, 2022). Similarly, hypergamy [the notion that women marry someone much more attractive, leaving those who identify as incels behind] is framed as natural law, with one user asserting that some of the stories female authors write, are about wealthy male protagonists, that "prove the red pill law of hypergamy" (incels.is, 2023). Another user concludes that "it was a mistake to give foids [derogatory term for women] equal rights in the west" (incels.is, 2023). This example links symbolic narratives of hypergamy to explicit anti-egalitarian politics. In doing so, incels use symbolic language to naturalize gendered hierarchy and frame women's autonomy as a threat to men. The use of this dehumanizing language is another driver often identified in radicalization processes (Moghaddam, 2005).

Spring 2026
No. 46
ISSN: 2363-9849

Across these symbols, incels rely on mainstream culture to construct a worldview in which male grievances appear natural and inevitable. This symbolism, then, can simplify causality, and transform personal frustration into ideological certainty (Pankowski & Witkowski, 2023). As these symbolic repertoires circulate in mainstream culture, they complicate deradicalization efforts. Interventions cannot just focus on "extremist" beliefs alone when the cultural materials incels weaponize are embedded in everyday gendered narratives (Miller-Idriss, 2025; Ging, 2019).

Myths

Myths play an important role in radicalization processes because they have the power to legitimize extremist groups and provide stories that can explain social change or assign blame (Brown et al., 2020). Some scholars argue that myths create an understanding about political events and contribute to the meaning of legitimacy and illegitimacy (Kirke, 2015). A myth can consist of stereotypes or chivalric stories (Neal and Youngelson-Neal, 2015). Myths do not need to be true; they need only to be perceived as credible and culturally familiar (Brown et al., 2020). Rouda (2024) states that "in order for a narrative to drive towards conflict, it must feature certain characteristics […] a mythological past in which the ingroup had the unchallenged right to the threatened resource (4). Incel ideology heavily draws on cultural myths about gender, sexuality, relationships, and social order. These myths frame women's autonomy as a historical aberration, men's entitlement as natural, and contemporary gender relations as evidence of societal decline.

A foundational myth in incel ideology is the belief that before the sexual revolution of the 1960s, every man had access to a female partner (Zimmerman et al., 2018). Incels claim that feminism and sexual liberalization disrupted this "natural" order by empowering women to choose partners more selectively. This myth reframes women's autonomy as a violation of men's rights, and positions incels as victims of modernity (Zimmerman, 2024). Within this narrative, the sexual revolution becomes an important turning point: the moment when women's empowerment allegedly produced male oppression and status threat. Incels also view themselves as victims of "lookism," the belief that physical attractiveness determines their position in the social hierarchy (Gheorghe, 2023). Chads and Stacys occupy the top of this hierarchy, while incels see themselves as structurally excluded from romantic and sexual

Spring 2026
No. 46
ISSN: 2363-9849

relationships. This narrative is reinforced through posts such as “List of Privileges Women Have” (incels.is, 2023), and “Even after ER’s [referring to the Isla Vista attacker in 2014] shooting foids still made it about themselves” (incels.is, 2023). These posts frame women as universally privileged and men as universally disadvantaged. Incels use this victimization as part of their collective identity, resulting in an oppressive outgroup and an oppressed ingroup, creating a cognitive opening for radicalization and intergroup conflict (Rouda, 2024; Horgan, 2005; Moghaddam, 2005).

Incels also draw on myths of heroic masculinity, idealizing “alpha” men as strong, dominant figures who overcome adversity. They position themselves as oppressed by society and imagine violent resistance as a form of a heroic reclamation of power (Hoffman et al., 2020; Baele et al., 2021; Ben-Am and Weimann, 2020). The myth also reinforces hypermasculine ideals: strength, dominance, and the right to women. Violence becomes a pathway to reclaim lost status (Cockerill, 2019). At the same time, heroic myths often provide moral justification for violence by framing this violence as a resistance to a perceived unjust social order. Within incel narratives, this is often related to a righteous struggle against an unjust social order brought upon them by feminism and women more broadly (Meiering et al., 2020). Another recurring myth in incel ideology is the belief that men have the natural right to women’s bodies and time. This is evident in posts where users express entitlement to women’s attention or sexual availability, and frustration when women refuse (incels.is, 2023). In one thread, a user described a situation involving a woman experiencing suicidal ideation and framed her refusal of sexual access as selfishness (incels.is, 2023). Another commenter responded by comparing her refusal to wasting a valuable resource, reinforcing the idea that women’s bodies are property to be claimed (incels.is, 2023). This myth positions women’s consent as an obstacle to male entitlement and frames sexual access as a male right. Such narratives are central to misogynistic radicalization because they portray sexual coercion as a restoration of “natural” gender hierarchy (Rouda, 2024).

Across these myths, incels draw on culturally familiar narratives to explain their perceived marginalization, and they legitimize misogynistic grievance. Myths of the sexual revolution, lookism, heroic masculinity and sexual ownership provide simplified stories that create ideological certainty based on perceived grievances. These myths are rooted in mainstream cultural narratives, which, similar to symbolism, complicates deradicalization

efforts. Interventions must address not only extreme beliefs, but also broader cultural repertoires that misogynistic incels weaponize (Miller-Idriss, 2025).

Nostalgic Narratives

Extremist ideologies often rely on nostalgic narratives that evoke stability, order, prosperity, and a “golden past” to legitimize contemporary grievances (Gabriel, 2021). Nostalgic narratives contribute to an ideology’s strength, as those who adhere to ideologies or conspiracy theories see this not as nostalgia, but as the truth (Travis, 2023). In incel discourse, nostalgia functions as a narrative that reframes modern gender equality as societal decline and positions male entitlement as historically grounded. Incel ideology draws heavily on nostalgic stories about a pre-1960s social order in which men were guaranteed romantic and sexual relationships, women were economically dependent, and gender roles were rigidly enforced. This imagined era is often contrasted with the present, where women’s empowerment is framed as a cause of male exclusion. This nostalgic frame naturalizes male entitlement and casts feminist gains as dangerous changes from this idealized past (Baele et al., 2021). In doing so, these nostalgic narratives serve as anchors which simplify complex social changes into a causal story of decline, and legitimize resentment towards women’s autonomy (Travis, 2023). Within this narrative, mass violence is sometimes framed as a way to fight back against perceived oppressors, reflecting a broader pattern where nostalgia for a hierarchical past fuels justification for reactionary violence (Wilson, 2022).

McLean et al. (2020) discuss a narrative in which gender “reifies women’s position as caregivers, which includes being in positions of lesser economic power” (117). This narrative has long been dominant, but feminist movements challenged these assumptions, calling for equality and the dismantling of traditional role patterns (Malinowska, 2020). In contemporary Western societies, shifting gender dynamics and women’s increased autonomy are perceived by incels as evidence of societal decline. This belief is reflected in posts that contrast “modern women” with idealized women of the past. One user wrote: “The only thing a modern woman has to offer is her disgusting, used body… Women in the past were actually interesting, nice, and smart so they didn’t have to do this” (incels.is, 2021). Across the forum, users repeatedly claim that women who adhered to traditional gender roles were superior, while contemporary women are framed as corrupted by modernity. Further, incels idealize the traditional family

Spring 2026
No. 46
ISSN: 2363-9849

structure in which men work, and women remain economically dependent, caring for children and the household. They argue that women's entry into the workforce and increased independence have destabilized gender relations and reduced women's willingness to engage in relationships with "low status" men. This narrative is reinforced by the belief that women are obligated to provide sexual and emotional labor to men, and that withholding sex constitutes a violation of men's natural rights (O'Donnell & Shor, 2021; Baele et al., 2021). This myth draws on long-standing patriarchal narratives in which gender roles are fixed, violence is justified and legitimized, and masculinity is viewed as an "entitlement to power" (Cockerill, 2019: 116-118).

Incel ideology is, in part, a response to feminist gains: on one hand, incels argue that women have become too equal, or even privileged; on the other, they lament declining marriages and birth rates (Abdulla, 2022). As women have gained access to education, employment, social mobility, and have gained more autonomy, incels interpret these developments as threats to male status and as evidence of eroding traditional gender norms (Lindner, 2022). One user articulated this backlash explicitly: "Modern feminism really centers around one thing, and that is preventing ugly males exhibiting their sexual needs [...] it's all only for Chad" (incels.is, 2021). This narrative serves two purposes. First, it creates an ingroup, and an oppressive outgroup, which can be an important driver in radicalization processes (Habib et al., 2022). Second, it creates a nostalgic "longing for an idealized past associated with traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity" (Burns et al., 2024: 2). Nostalgia can serve as a tool for recruitment, and collective nostalgia can "restore a sense of shattered identity and create a sense of belonging and meaning" (Reyna et al., 2025: 132). Thus, in this sense, nostalgia can serve as a radicalization mechanism, in which it delegitimizes gender equality and creates a shared sense of belonging. By drawing on familiar stories about gender, family, social order, and masculinity, incels transform personal frustration into a coherent ideological worldview. Here, nostalgia serves as sustaining force to portray the incel movement as a countermovement to feminist gains.

Taken together, these symbolic, mythic, and nostalgic mechanisms do not simply contribute to radicalization they also shape the conditions under which deradicalization must operate. Because these cultural repertoires are drawn from mainstream gendered narratives,

they cannot be addressed through ideological correction alone. The next section examines how these mechanisms become barriers to disengagement and deradicalization.

Deradicalizing Misogynistic Incels

The literature has shown that there is no shortage of radicalization models, and the same is true for deradicalization and disengagement efforts. While there is no one model or "deradicalization pathway," deradicalization programs are often described by successful and unsuccessful efforts (Koehler, 2016). Marsden (2015) asks us to consider what success looks like in these deradicalization and disengagement efforts. Assessments of successful deradicalization and disengagement processes depend on how deradicalization and disengagement themselves are defined. In its broadest sense, deradicalization refers to the exit and reintegration of extremists into the general community. As such, deradicalization reflects a change in ideology, psychology, and behavior (Horgan and Braddock, 2010; Silke et al., 2021). As a result, scholars often differentiate between deradicalization and disengagement, where disengagement refers to a process in which individuals change their behavior, resulting in a decrease in violent participation. Disengagement does not necessarily reflect a change in belief or ideology (ibid.). Effective deradicalization interventions must be tailored to the individual's radicalization pathway and the psychological factors sustaining the ideological commitment. A range of practical methods have been developed to support this process, including the establishment of social networks, access to education and vocational training, the facilitation of non-violent experiences that foster self-awareness, personal agency, and the provision of alternative perspectives. These may involve direct engagement with victims, exposure to competing worldviews, or reinterpretation of ideological narratives (Koehler, 2016). When successful, such interventions either introduce participants to new values, political frameworks, and behavioral options, or weaken the conviction in the absolute primacy of the ideologically framed grievance (Thorburn, 2023; Bjørgo and Horgan, 2009). More importantly, however, the effectiveness of these tools depends on the perceived credibility of the alternatives offered. This means that participants must see these new pathways as viable and real (Koehler, 2016; Silke et al., 2021).

JOURNAL FOR DERADICALIZATION

Spring 2026
No. 46
ISSN: 2363-9849

A large part of the deradicalization and disengagement scholarship draws on radicalization processes and the push and pull factors associated with radicalization (Bjørgo, 2009). Push factors are often related to societal or environmental circumstances that are perceived as negative, such as economic hardship or disillusionment. Pull factors attract individuals toward an extremist ideology by offering a more satisfying alternative to the current condition (ibid). Other factors often cited are a sense of belonging, or the need to be part of a community (Sciarone, 2024). As a result, it makes sense that deradicalization and disengagement efforts focus on offering community, developing support systems, providing a community with long-lasting bonds, and creating fulfilling circumstances.

In their work, Silke et al. (2021) develop the Phoenix model, which relates to three catalysts for changes in ideology, psychology, and behavior: actor, psychological, and environmental. The actor catalyst draws upon family and friends, formers, and program interventions, the psychological catalyst draws upon disillusionment and mental health, and finally the environmental catalyst draws upon prison. Alongside this, identity transformation is the foundational factor in the disengagement and deradicalization process. This has implications for misogynistic incels, whose ideological commitments are sustained by explicit beliefs, but also by the cultural repertoires that provide identity cues, narratives, and emotionally satisfying interpretations of gender relations. This corresponds with findings from r/incelexit, a Reddit message board where incels themselves find a way out of inceldom (Gheorghe and Clement, 2025). This exit does not occur through ‘ascension,’ which refers to the practice of leaving inceldom through a status change in romantic or sexual relationships, but rather, through self-improvement strategies and community engagement (DeCook and Kelly, 2022; Gheorghe and Clement, 2025). Though these strategies are useful, Koehler (2025) states that deradicalization programs can unintentionally create new grievances and raising expectations society cannot meet. When examining the discourse of misogynistic incels, it becomes clear that their grievances are focused on the need to be part of a community in which they feel they are entitled to women’s bodies, time, and relationships, and the need to feel masculine in a society that makes these men feel emasculated. Kimmel (2018) points out that these “young men feel entitled to a sense of belonging and community, of holding unchallenged moral authority over women and children, and feeling that they count in the world and that their lives matter” (26-28). Thus, deradicalization efforts must avoid

Spring 2026
No. 46
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reinforcing entitlement-based expectations which, when remain unmet, produce new grievances.

While deradicalization and disengagement efforts acknowledge the role of gender more frequently, they do not consider the ways in which these efforts are rooted in male supremacist and misogynistic thought. More recently, scholars have begun to note that counter-extremist frameworks themselves may be shaped by the same gendered assumptions as the ideologies they seek to counter. Rothermel and Kelly (2024) find that this is especially the case across four themes: community, sex, victimhood, and masculinity hierarchies (545). Thus, deradicalization in the context of misogynistic incels is not merely operationally difficult, but structurally constrained. Unlike other forms of extremism, incel radicalization is anchored in misogynistic beliefs that are not external to liberal democratic societies but embedded within them. This creates a fundamental problem for deradicalization: the ideological foundations it seeks to dismantle are continuously reproduced by the very social and cultural environments to which individuals are meant to be integrated. As a result, deradicalization efforts risk addressing only the most extreme manifestations of male supremacy while leaving its normative core intact.

If incel radicalization is anchored in cultural narratives that feel emotionally true and socially familiar, then deradicalization faces the challenges of disrupting not only beliefs but the interpretive frameworks that make those beliefs meaningful. The preceding sections showed that incel radicalization is not anchored in formal ideology but in a dense cultural framework of symbols, myths, and nostalgia that structure how adherents interpret their lives, grievances, and social and gender hierarchy. This requires examining how deradicalization intersects with these same cultural mechanisms. Because of this, success in deradicalization and disengagement needs to address the roots upon which incel ideology, misogyny, and male supremacy draws, instead of relying on reducing violent behavior or moderating overt misogynistic expressions. At the same time, these cultural mechanisms function as deradicalization barriers in three ways. First, they embed incel ideology within familiar cultural tropes, making it appear less like extremism and more like common sense. Second, they transform individual frustrations into collective narratives of victimhood and status loss, reinforcing the emotional certainty that sustains ideological commitment. Third, they provide adherents with explanations for social change, framing gender equality as decline and

feminism as a threat. These structures shape how misogynistic incels respond to or resist deradicalization interventions. Thus, deradicalizing misogynistic incels requires more than correcting explicit beliefs or reducing harmful behaviors.

Symbolism as a deradicalization barrier

Symbolic repertoires pose a distinct challenge for deradicalization because they embed incel ideology within culturally familiar forms, making misogynistic worldviews feel intuitive rather than extremist. Symbols drawn from mainstream culture, such as the jock or the cheerleader, or some meme formats, do not look extremist. They feel ordinary and humorous, which makes the underlying ideology harder to recognize. Miller-Idriss (2020) describes this when she notes that extremist ideas become harder to identify when they appear in "aesthetic packages" that do not match people's expectations of what extremism "should" look like (63). The familiarity of the message, and the familiarity of the forms softens the perceptions of the content. For misogynistic incels, this means these misogynistic worldviews are easily accessible and culturally resonant. At the same time, symbols must be understood in the context of their usage. A symbol does not have to be inherently extremist, but it becomes extremist when deployed within a particular community and interpretive frame (Miller-Idriss, 2020). This is exactly what happens in incel spaces, for example with the 'Chad' and 'Stacy' symbolism, or the cheerleader and jock mainstream archetypes. In the dataset analyzed here, forum participants consistently invoke these symbols to communicate social hierarchies and romantic entitlement, demonstrating how culturally familiar imagery is mobilized to normalize extremist interpretations. Counter-narratives must challenge the belief-system, as well as the frameworks that structure how misogynistic incels interpret social reality. Within these incel spaces, these symbols acquire specialized meanings that only the ingroup recognizes. Thus, this contextual meaning-making is what needs to be disrupted in deradicalization and disengagement efforts.

One such factor occurs when new symbols emerge, while frequently used ones fade or change meanings. This dynamic further creates a barrier to deradicalization and disengagement, as practitioners need to continually adapt interventions to changing symbolic repertoires. Miller-Idriss (2020) suggests that local engagement is necessary to understand what these symbols mean to participants, and how they function in recruitment and

radicalization. Braddock's (2020) findings reinforce this challenge from a narrative-persuasion perspective. He recognizes that the meaning embedded in extremist or terrorist narratives need to be addressed by counter-narratives. If this is not the case, counter-narratives will be perceived as arbitrarily and ineffective (Braddock, 2020: 84). This challenge becomes more pronounced when interventions rely on gendered assumptions about what men 'need' during disengagement efforts. Scholars have emphasized the gender dimension in radicalization and deradicalization (Sciarone, 2024; Cook, 2020; Kimmel, 2018), but Rothermel and Kelly (2024) point out that these efforts often point misogynistic incels toward spaces rooted in male supremacy. In their work, they state that some P/CVE experts believe the manosphere to be a place where men can create 'male bonds' and can thus play a role in deradicalization. By proceeding to use the spaces that can serve as echo chambers and inform radicalization pathways, male supremacist narratives continue to be part of deradicalization and disengagement efforts.

The Phoenix model (Silke et al., 2021) emphasizes that deradicalization and disengagement require a shift in identity, yet symbolic repertoires obstruct this. Symbols can provide identity cues and a sense of belonging, which is why interventions need to move beyond correcting explicit beliefs, and disrupt the frameworks that make misogynistic symbolism feel intuitive. As symbols continue to change, practitioners need contextual literacy, especially in cases when ordinary cultural references carry extremist meaning. In doing so, they must specifically avoid relying on mainstream masculinity tropes to inadvertently reinforce the hierarchies incel ideology draws upon. Effective deradicalization and disengagement require alternative identity resources that replace the symbolic repertoire incel ideology uses. In practice, this means that deradicalization programs need to monitor evolving meme repertoires and create alternative narratives that provide participants with non-hierarchical models of identity and belonging.

Myths as a deradicalization barrier

Myths complicate deradicalization by offering totalizing explanations that transform personal frustration into collective grievance and status threat narratives. Myths function as "a thought structure, usually in story form, that organizes and inculcates part of a culture's belief system" (Williams, 2003: 97), shaping perceptions of political events and defining notions of

legitimacy and illegitimacy (Kirke, 2015). They often draw on stereotypes or romanticized narratives such as chivalric tales (Neal and Youngelson-Neal, 2015), and extremist ideologies or conspiracy theories co-opt these forms by presenting coherent stories that link disparate events into a unified narrative. This narrative structure organizes individual experiences into a story with a clear beginning, middle, and end (Münch, 2016). As Miller-Idriss (2018) explains, myths "present themselves as natural and uncontested" (92). Incel ideology draws upon enduring cultural myths about gender and sexual entitlement and thus perpetuates "historical and classical myths in the societies around them" (Brown et al., 2020). Incel rhetoric revolves around the mythic belief that before the sexual revolution of the 1960s, there was a female sexual partner for every man (Zimmerman et al., 2018; Zimmerman, 2024). In the dataset analyzed here, these myths frequently appear in forum posts that link romantic frustrations to a broader narrative of societal decline, reinforcing the perception that current gender dynamics are historically illegitimate.

These narratives are further reinforced by a perceived status threat, which can be a powerful motivator of radicalization (Sciarone, 2024). Because myths often create unified and cohesive stories of perceived reality, deradicalization and disengagement efforts require disrupting these narratives. Thus, these myths organize grievance into one storyline, creating a stable framework which often resists alternative explanations. By transforming individual frustration into a coherent collective grievance, myths make counter-narratives less persuasive, because deradicalization must contend not only with beliefs but with a compelling storyline. Deradicalization and disengagement efforts need to directly challenge these coherent narratives. Braddock (2020) notes: "although terrorist groups often frame their narratives as accurate reflections of real-world events, there is often significant deviation between what they say and what actually occurs" (88). Based on the previous discussion, interventions need to challenge these historical myths by moving beyond factchecking or rationalizing individual claims and create counter-myths, where opportunities are created for "young people to engage in heroic acts" (Gregg, 2023: 155). In doing so, these counternarratives and countermyths create new opportunities for individuals that might redirect them.

Similarly, the perceived status threat and changing social dimensions within incel culture generate a compelling storyline grounded in a mythical past of belonging and

traditional, binary gender roles. While disrupting these narratives is essential, this becomes difficult when a less extreme version of the same idea, the normalization of traditional role patterns, remains embedded in mainstream dominant culture. The emotional and social appeal of these myths further complicate deradicalization, as they offer not only explanations but validation for personal grievances. In doing so, individual frustrations are situated within culturally familiar frameworks. As long as incel myths weave personal grievances into a unified story of status loss and traditional gender order, counter-narratives struggle to gain traction, revealing how these cultural myths obstruct deradicalization through their narrative resonance. Thus, these myths remain part of discourse not only because they offer coherence, but because they draw on culturally dominant ideas about gender and status. This, in turn, creates a barrier that is reinforced by their broader social legitimacy and everyday resonance. This means that interventions need to challenge historical myths about gender relations and introduce alternative narratives that directly challenge grievances surrounding status loss.

Nostalgia as a deradicalization barrier

Nostalgic narratives hinder deradicalization by framing gender equality as a decline and idealizing hierarchical pasts in which male dominance appeared natural and uncontested. In doing so, these narratives create an emotionally satisfying, but historically inaccurate past (Gabriel, 2021). These nostalgic narratives offer a sense of stability that contemporary gender relations are perceived to disrupt. The imagined, nostalgic, past feels morally grounded and culturally familiar, and because of this, nostalgia becomes an interpretative lens through which misogynistic incels can experience social change as personal loss. In the material analyzed here, this is reflected in appeals to "traditional values" and "natural" gender hierarchies, through which gender equality is framed as deviation rather than progress. By framing gender equality as a fall from an imagined past, nostalgia provides the justification for grievance-driven responses. Kimmel's (2018) work on violent men demonstrates how nostalgia increases this sense of loss. Even outside misogynistic incel contexts, he finds that men understand their political commitments as efforts to restore a world in which authority and manhood were once secure. This 'need' to go back to a different time aligns with incels' narratives that interpret gender equality as a threat to a rightful social order. Therefore, nostalgic narratives offer satisfying accounts of status loss that make change feel threatening.

This is what renders nostalgia a barrier to deradicalization: it transforms structural gender change into a morally charged story of decline that is resistant to reframing through inclusive narratives. When deradicalization frameworks focus primarily on men's insecurities or grievances, they risk reinforcing the nostalgic sense of crisis and loss by treating distress as an understandable reaction to changing gender norms, instead of interrogating the patriarchal assumptions that shape it (Rothermel and Kelly, 2024).

In their work, Rothermel and Kelly (2024) develop this point further by showing that these grievances often emerge in response to a changing dynamic, in the sense that hierarchical gender relations in families, relationships, and labor markets are changing (Kimmel, 2019). Nostalgia then amplifies these tensions by showing that this social change is a crisis, it is a loss of stability, a loss of safety, a loss of power, and a loss of status. By aligning this loss with antifeminist narratives, this portrayal of gender equality becomes an automatic harm to men. This framing does not only legitimize resentment, but it also silences progressive possibilities that accompany an alternative gendered order (Rothermel and Kelly, 2024). As a result, deradicalization must contend with explicit misogynistic beliefs, alongside the emotional pull of patriarchal expectations that define manhood through dominance and entitlement. Unlike explicit misogyny, nostalgic narratives are difficult to contest without appearing to dismiss men's lived experiences, which further complicates disengagement efforts.

These dynamics raise a central question: how should deradicalization and disengagement efforts address nostalgia? Rothermel and Kelly (2024) argue that the grievances expressed by radicalized men are not unique to extremists, as they reflect broader cultural understandings of entitlement and access within Western patriarchal societies. Effective interventions must therefore acknowledge that nostalgia draws on shared cultural narratives, not fringe ideology. Building on this, Reyna et al. (2025) suggest that deradicalization can counter exclusionary nostalgia by fostering positive nostalgic memories with outgroup members and creating inclusive nostalgic experiences that do not rely on hierarchical gender roles. This means that nostalgia must move away from narratives about a perceived 'golden past' and towards egalitarian forms of belonging. In practice, this means avoiding narratives that focus on restoring traditional gender roles and creating a space in which non-hierarchical models of belonging and masculinity are central.

The three mechanisms operate together. Symbols make misogyny legible, myths make it logical, and nostalgia makes it desirable. Because nostalgia frames gender equality as a personal loss and as a threat to a perceived rightful status, it can also increase the susceptibility to more explicit grievance-based and misogynistic narratives (Bates et al., 2024). In this context, this means that practitioners need to recognize when symbolic repertoires move towards extremist narratives. Research shows that this escalation becomes visible when individuals start to express changes in attitudes through speech, by using incel-coded language, by implicitly or explicitly expressing sympathy for incel-adjacent or misogynistic views, justify violence, withdraw socially, or when they articulate the desire to regain a perceived lost status (Bates et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Misogynistic symbols, myths, and nostalgic narratives are not created in isolation, they are part of a historical trend in which male supremacy has been naturalized and upheld. Incel ideology appropriates these tropes in a manner that distorts and strengthens these narratives. These narratives are rooted in male supremacy and center men’s dominance and frame women’s empowerment as a societal crisis. Misogynistic incels believe there is an ongoing war against traditional norms and that feminism is one of the root causes of their lack of personal relationships with women. On incels.is, users appeal to “traditional values” and a shared cultural memory that supports rigid gender roles. Gender equality is perceived as a threat to a supposed “natural order”, which, in incel ideology, is defined by male supremacy and female submission. Because incel ideology can radicalize through mainstream cultural repertoires, deradicalization and disengagement efforts face barriers.

At the same time, the scope of these claims must be understood in light of this study’s empirical limitations. This study relies on data drawn from a single tag within one online forum, which necessarily constrains the generalizability of its findings. While this focus allows for close analysis of a specific discourse, future research should extend the dataset to include additional forums and more accessible platforms, such as Reddit, in order to assess the broader circulation and variation of incel narratives. Moreover, although online forums and social media provide valuable insight into ideology formation and community dynamics,

interview-based research with current and former misogynistic incels would offer a complementary perspective on individual worldviews and on the processes through which individuals disengage from the ideology.

Deradicalization and disengagement research underscores the importance of disrupting these narratives rather than reinforcing them. Braddock (2020) warns against reinforcing themes that appear in terrorist narratives and emphasizes the need to disrupt analogies that sustain meaning making. Empirical work on disengagement shows that the process often begins when individuals recognize that the ideologies they subscribed to were harming themselves or others they cared about, “when they noticed some flaws in the logics of these belief systems” (Thorburn, 2023: 17). Thorburn (2023) also notes that “friendly and warm relationships with others were eye opening” and that critical reflections on manosphere figures played a central role in disengagement (18). In western cultures where “misogynistic attitudes are endemic to begin with, and with male internet users frequently and involuntarily shown manosphere content targeted to them through algorithmic systems, it is unsurprising that many teenage boys and young men are influenced by this content as they strive to develop their own masculine identity” (Thorburn, 2023: 19). These findings highlight the difficulty of countering narratives that are already normalized.

The implications for P/CVE are substantial. Deradicalization cannot target extremist beliefs alone because these beliefs are not fringe. The cultural repertoires misogynistic incels draw on are widely available and socially legible, and interventions must address the mainstream narratives that they weaponize. The boundary between mainstream and extremist misogyny is porous. This underscores the need for cultural and institutional change and reveals the challenges of countering narratives that are already normalized within gender culture. Deradicalization must therefore move beyond belief correction to address cultural meaning-making, requiring a new framework for understanding incel disengagement and deradicalization. Therefore, the results point to two overarching recommendations First, to address the systemic aspects of radicalization, deradicalization, disengagement, and broader P/CVE programs must reflect on how their own strategies may be informed by, and inadvertently reproduce, the male-supremacist notions of anti-feminism, misogyny, male superiority, and entitlement upon which incel ideologies are built. Rethinking and challenging these notions within P/CVE programming requires centering the systemic roots of male

supremacism and questioning narratives of male crisis, gender hierarchies, and relationships as rewards for conformity (Rothermel and Kelly, 2024). Only by addressing these broader cultural conditions can deradicalization and disengagement efforts meaningfully counter the narratives that sustain incel ideology. Second, Rottweiler et al. (2025) note that the links between "patriarchy, misogyny, domestic abuse and mass murder" (287) are deeply rooted in misogyny. This highlights that harms associated with misogynistic extremism are already a part of a cultural context that normalizes grievances and entitlement. By showing how symbols, myths, and nostalgia transform misogynistic grievances into a coherent story and ideological certainty, this study demonstrates P/CVE efforts must move beyond belief correction and confront male supremacist logics that make misogynistic extremism socially legible.

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