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REVIEW

Why Incels Capture Attention: A Cultural Attraction Theory Perspective

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Abstract

Incels (involuntary celibates) are an online subculture whose members define themselves by a perceived inability to form sexual or romantic relationships. Despite rare but high-profile instances of ideological violence, most empirical research shows that they struggle primarily with poor mental health rather than engage in organized extremism. Yet the group commands disproportionate academic, political and cultural attention, illustrated most recently by Netflix's *Adolescence*, which quickly became the platform's most-watched mini-series of all time and sparked intense political discussion despite being fictional. The incel motif recurs in artistic depictions across film and musical lyrics and has also entered common parlance as a popular insult directed at men. Why are incels so captivating? Drawing on cultural attraction theory and evolutionary psychology, we argue that incel narratives resonate with evolved cognitive biases that make them particularly "sticky." These include biases towards sex and status related content, moral violations, negativity, coalitional threat, protectiveness of women, and morbid curiosity toward dangerous young men. Incels also qualify as minimally counterintuitive, violating gendered expectations by centering their identity on male sexual exclusion. These features render incel discourse especially memorable and transmissible. We conclude by considering the implications of this cultural virality for media, policy-makers, and public discourse, highlighting the risks of letting cultural attraction rather than empirical accuracy shape responses to the problems incels face and represent in society.

Incels (involuntary celibates) are an online subculture whose members define themselves by a perceived inability to form sexual or romantic relationships (Ging, 2019). Central to incel ideology is the "black-pill" belief that physical attractiveness is the primary determinant of male mating success, and that women overwhelmingly pursue only a small minority of extremely physically attractive men (Baselice, 2024; Costello et al., 2023). Because physical attractiveness is seen as largely immutable, incels view their own romantic prospects as effectively fixed and non-improvable. In response to the misogynistic rhetoric in their community and some rare but high-profile instances of ideologically motivated violence (Costello & Buss, 2023), the prominence of incels has grown markedly in recent years, in academic, political, and cultural discourse.

The scholarly literature on incels has exploded with remarkable speed, spanning psychology (e.g., Costello et al., 2022), sociology (e.g., Puhrmann & Schlaerth, 2024), criminology (e.g., Andersen, 2023), political science (e.g., Zimmerman, 2024), media studies (e.g., Solea & Sigiura, 2023), and gender studies (e.g., Ging, 2019). At the time of writing, the most widely cited article on incels by has accrued 1,757 citations in six years (Ging, 2019). This unusually high citation volume for work on a niche online subculture illustrates how broadly the topic has attracted scholarly attention across fields.

In popular media, incel-themed narratives have appeared in numerous high-profile television programs such as *Criminal Minds*, *Law and Order*, and the British soap-opera *Eastenders*, as well as documentaries produced by major outlets including the BBC's *Inside the Secret World of Incels* and Channel 4's *The Secret World of Incels*. The topic has also reached mainstream publishing, with the New York Times best-selling book *Men Who Hate Women: From incels to pickup artists, the truth about extreme misogyny and how it affects us all* (Bates, 2021). Some of the world's largest podcasts, including *Diary of a CEO* and *Modern Wisdom*,

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have also devoted entire or substantial portions of episodes to the discussion of incels.

Most recently, Netflix's *Adolescence* (a dramatization of incel themes according to the writers) quickly became the platform's most-watched mini-series of all time (Hailu, 2025). The show tells the harrowing fictional story of 13-year-old Jamie, who is arrested for fatally stabbing his classmate, Katie. Told through continuous real-time takes, the narrative unfolds across Jamie's interrogation, the police investigation, and his psychiatric evaluation, gradually revealing his misogynistic anger, which the show hints is shaped, in part, by exposure to harmful online content associated with incel ideology.

Adolescence in particular has had a substantial impact on political debate about the incel community. Despite being an entirely fictional work, it has penetrated the highest ranks of political life, prompting a roundtable discussion between the writers and the UK Prime Minister, and government-backed plans to show the series in every secondary school in the UK (Costello, 2025). Several parliamentary committees (e.g., Women and Equalities Committee) have conducted formal oral evidence sessions focused on incels, including one with the writers of *Adolescence*.

This level of academic, political, and cultural visibility is striking when we consider the relatively small size and level of violence from incels. At the time of writing, the largest online incel forum has around 30,000 active members globally, many of whom are likely journalists, researchers, or other observers. Yet incels command a level of cultural attention that is wholly disproportionate to their size and level of threat (Costello & Buss, 2023). To put this threat in context, estimates suggest incel violence has resulted in ~50 deaths worldwide (Hoffman et al., 2020). By contrast, Boko Haram, an Islamist terrorist group of ~15,000 members, has killed an estimated 350,000 people since 2002 (Amnesty International, 2015; Reuters, 2023).

The disparity between the incel community's relatively small size and limited record of violence, and their outsized cultural visibility, raises two pressing questions. First, *why* are incels so interesting to us? Second, what might the consequences be of elevating such a marginal community to such cultural prominence? We argue that the extraordinary cultural fascination with incels can be explained by *cultural attraction theory* (Sperber, 1996) and *evolutionary psychology* (Buss, 1995a, b). By outlining the cognitive mechanisms that render stories about incels culturally attractive, we aim to explain their outsized visibility and to highlight the risks of letting cultural virality, rather than empirical accuracy, shape public discourse and policy.

Cultural Attraction Theory and Evolutionary Psychology

Why do certain cultural narratives captivate public attention and persist in collective discourse, while others fade quickly? *Cultural attraction theory* offers a compelling answer. Originally developed by Sperber (1996), and expanded by different scholars in the cultural evolution tradition (e.g., Boyer, Morin), this framework posits that the stability of cultural items is not primarily due to faithful imitation or direct teaching. Instead, cultural items are reconstructed at each stage of transmission, and their stability arises when individual reconstructions tend to converge on similar outputs. This convergence often occurs because cultural representations align with universal features of human cognition, as highlighted by evolutionary psychology (Buss, 1995a, b).

According to this view, some cultural representations are more likely to be remembered, shared, and reconstructed because they align with evolved cognitive preferences. These preferences, shaped by natural selection, bias humans toward information that is socially, morally, sexually, or emotionally salient. Cultural evolution is therefore not a process of random diffusion, but one shaped by systematic cognitive constraints, where certain representations are more likely to "stick". Cultural attraction theory has been used to explain a wide range of phenomena, from the spread of imaginary worlds in fiction (Dubourg & Baumard, 2022; Dubourg et al., 2023) to the memorability of mythic narratives (Buskell, 2017).

Acerbi (2019a, b, 2019b) applied the cultural attraction theory framework to the digital domain, suggesting that online environments are subject to the same cognitive biases. The spread of information online both of misinformation and accurate information, is influenced by factors such as negativity, perceived threat, moral outrage, disgust, or the presence of minimally counterintuitive elements. Content that is emotionally charged or morally polarized, for example, tends to propagate more effectively than neutral or balanced information (Brady et al., 2017).

In this paper, we argue that incel discourse is culturally successful because it resonates with a suite of cognitively attractive content features and attentional biases humans possess. These include evolved sensitivities to sexual behavior, moral violations, social threat, tribal psychology, and negativity, as well as an attentional bias to monitor stories about potentially dangerous unpartnered young men, and people's general protective tendency towards women. Finally, incels present an unexpected identity pattern, which constitutes minimally counterintuitive information. We explain how, together, these features render sensational

narratives about incels more memorable, emotionally resonant, and transmissible.

Why Incel Stories "Stick"

Having introduced the incel phenomenon, its cultural salience, and the framework of cultural attraction theory, we now examine in detail how incel narratives draw on specific cognitive and attentional biases, beginning with two of the most evolutionarily significant domains for human psychology, sex and status.

Sex and Status Related Content Sexual reproduction is the engine of evolution and genetic continuity, making mating one of the most important domains to humans (Benenson & Markovitz, 2024; Darwin, 1871; Dawkins, 1976; Kenrick et al., 2010). Given the profound fitness consequences, sexual themes occupy a central place in human culture and are among the most universally attention-grabbing. Humans all around the world compose poetry and songs about love (Jankowiak & Fischer, 1992), and analyses of Billboard Top 100 songs reveal that the vast majority concern love, sex, or relationships (Hobbs & Gallup, 2011). Humans have also evolved to pay close attention to who is considered high status and why, because status (i.e., an individual's relative standing in the eyes of others) historically governed access to mates, resources, and allies (Buss et al., 2020; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001).

At its core, the incel identity is all about sex and status, and specifically sexual exclusion and frustration. Sexual frustration itself is a recurring theme in cultural narratives. From Jim Morrison's song lyric "Women seem wicked when you're unwanted" to Robert De Niro's iconic portrayal of an alienated, sexually frustrated man descending into violence in the movie *Taxi Driver*, the popularity of these artistic depictions highlight how widely recognizable such struggles are, even outside of incel spaces. Although incels represent an extreme case, empirical data suggests that their struggles may resonate with people, because *poor mating performance* is fairly prevalent. A cross-cultural study across 14 countries (N=7,181) found that about one in four participants reported poor mating performance, with more than half facing difficulties in starting or maintaining a relationship, and nearly 13% identifying as involuntarily single (Apostolou et al., 2023, 2024). This suggests that the circumstance of inceldom may tap into concerns many people can relate to, further amplifying the narrative's cultural resonance.

Humans are deeply invested in stories about who is mating with whom, and, importantly, who is not mating at all. Such evaluations double as assessments of status, since mating success functions as a key dimension of social prestige and self-esteem, especially for men (e.g., Schmitt & Jonason, 2019). One's mate (and therefore lacking the ability to attract one at all one) functions as a public signal of social rank (Winegard et al., 2013, 2017). Given the link between sex and status, it is unsurprising that *incel* has entered public discourse as a cutting insult towards men (Costello, 2020, 2023). The insult notably pertains almost exclusively to men rather than women because male status and self-worth are more tightly linked to an ability to access sex (Buss et al., 2020; Schmitt & Jonason, 2019). This is likely because across evolutionary history, men have exhibited far greater variance in reproductive success than women. Many men leave no offspring behind, whereas most women eventually reproduce (Betzig, 2012). This asymmetry makes male sexual exclusion especially salient and reputationally damaging.

Empirical data support this perspective. In a 14-country study (N=2,751) on status criteria, Buss et al. (2020) found that male sexual inexperience reliably lowers men's perceived status, whereas being a virgin actually raises women's status (d=0.81) and sexual experience boosts men's status more than women's (Buss et al., 2020). High sexual activity is judged more favorably in men than in women, while low sexual activity is judged more negatively in men than in women (Weber & Friese, 2025). Although neither sex prefers long-term partners with extensive sexual histories (e.g., Thomas et al., 2025), the reputational costs of inexperience fall disproportionately on men.

That inceldom has become a symbolic shorthand for failed masculinity illustrates the enduring centrality of mating success to the social evaluation of men. From a cultural attraction perspective, this blend of sex, status, and stigma helps explain why incel narratives resonate so strongly. They are both memorable and emotionally charged, ensuring their persistence in public discourse as iconic art and an enduring insult.

Minimally Counterintuitive Identity Minimally counterintuitive concepts are representations that mostly conform to our intuitive ontological categories but include a small, unexpected violation (Boyer, 2001; Norenzayan & Atran, 2003). Such concepts are memorable because they balance familiarity (which aids comprehension) with novelty (which sustains attention and motivates sharing).

The incel identity fits this pattern. The familiar component is that incels are ostensibly ordinary young men. The unexpected element lies in how they diverge from widely shared expectations of what "men" are like in many cultural contexts, i.e., sexually assertive (Eaton & Rose, 2011)

and status-striving in pursuit of mates (Von Rueden et al., 2011). Popular culture has long depicted shy, awkward, or romantically unsuccessful men (e.g., The 40-Year-Old Virgin movie), so the archetype itself is intuitively understood. What is novel is that incels openly embrace, and often even fuse their identity with their sexual ineptitude (Rousis et al., 2023).

When so much of male status and self-esteem hinges on success in the mating domain (Buss et al., 2020: Schmitt & Jonason, 2019), voluntarily adopting an identity organized around sexual failure constitutes a surprising inversion of intuitive expectations. It is precisely this combination of a recognizable archetype with an unexpected self-identification that enhances the incel identity's memorability and cultural transmission.

Moralized Disgust and the Greater Protectiveness of Females Theory Moral disgust likely evolved because the costs of associating with cheaters, exploiters, or aggressors were historically high, making it adaptive to feel moral revulsion toward individuals who threatened cooperation and group stability (Chapman et al., 2009; Chapman & Anderson, 2013). From this perspective, moral disgust functions as both a psychological avoidance mechanism and a powerful tool of social condemnation.

A major trigger of moral disgust is harm to vulnerable individuals, and one well-documented pattern is that people often show heightened concern for harms directed at women (Graso & Reynolds, 2024 for a review). The *harm hypothesis* and the *greater-protectiveness-of-females theory* propose that this tendency has both evolutionary and sociocultural roots, tracing, in part, to physical and reproductive sex differences (Stewart-Williams et al., 2024). Men are typically larger and much stronger (Puts, 2010), making women more physically vulnerable. Women rather than men incur the greater biological costs of reproduction, their survival is more consequential for offspring survival (Sear & Mace, 2008), and they are the more valuable reproductive resource (Trivers, 1972). These asymmetries are hypothesized to guide individuals and groups toward greater protectiveness (which often manifests as control) of women (Stewart-Williams et al., 2024).

The extent to which women are protected, of course, varies substantially across cultures, suggesting that cultural norms strongly shape how this bias is expressed. Moreover, in many societies, norms framed as "protective" can themselves be sources of harm, functioning to paternalistically restrict women's autonomy (Stewart-Williams et al., 2024). In contemporary contexts at least, people are less willing to harm women than men (FeldmanHall et al., 2016), are more punitive toward those who victimize women (Curry et al., 2004), and are less willing to accept harm befalling women (Graso et al., 2023). Building on moral typecasting theory (Gray & Wegner, 2009), research also shows that women are more readily perceived as victims and men as perpetrators (Reynolds et al., 2020). Across six studies in four countries, *harm* was judged more intentional, more painful, and more blameworthy when directed at women, and male actors were assigned harsher punishment even when identical actions were described (Reynolds et al., 2020).

Incels violate this widely shared belief that women are to be protected. They espouse misogynistic rhetoric and explicitly identify women and feminists as adversaries (Costello et al., 2025a, b). This makes them an especially potent trigger of moralized disgust, thereby amplifying attention to and transmission of incel-related narratives. This helps explain the cultural impact of *Adolescence*. The plot centers on a teenage boy killing a female peer, an exceptionally rare pattern of violence in the UK compared to much more common male-on-male knife crime (Costello, 2025). A fictional depiction of a teenage boy killing another teenage boy would likely have attracted far less attention. By portraying an attack on a girl, the show activates strong moral-disgust responses and amplifies its cultural reach.

Negativity Bias Incel discourse aligns with the well-established *negativity bias* (i.e., the tendency for negative information to be more attention-grabbing, memorable, and influential than positive information (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). From an error management theory perspective (Haselton & Buss, 2000), the asymmetry of negativity bias is adaptive. Missing out on a positive opportunity usually leaves future opportunities intact, but failing to notice a genuine threat can impose catastrophic, irreversible costs such as injury or death. For this reason, humans have a general bias to treat negative information as more salient than positive, making "bad" psychologically stronger than "good" (Baumeister et al., 2001), which ensures that negative stories attract disproportionate attention. A recent meta-analysis finds that most media and academic portrayals of incels are, unsurprisingly, highly negative (Maier, 2022).

Coalitional Tribal Psychology Media portrayals and academic articles often frame incels as an organized, agentic collective posing a group-level threat to women and feminism in particular (e.g., Hoffmann et al., 2020). This framing activates our evolved ingroup–outgroup tribal psychology (Cosmides & Tooby, 2010). At the same time, incels often behave performatively antagonistically, provoking condemnation they then use to "verify" that society as a whole hates them (Costello & Thomas, 2025; Daly & Reed, 2022; Rousis et al., 2023). In this way, both incels and wider society engage with each other as monolithic groups rather than as

individuals, creating a feedback loop that entrenches tribal perceptions. This reciprocal attribution of group agency reinforces the coalitional threat framing, heightening attention and transmission of incel narratives.

The tragic case of the Toronto van killer (who in 2018 used a rental van to kill ten people in Toronto) illustrates how coalitional tribal psychology and negativity bias can amplify extreme incidents into cultural archetypes. Media coverage has repeatedly highlighted his Facebook post declaring "The Incel Rebellion has already begun!" while giving far less attention to the judge's verdict saying that he fabricated his "incel rebellion" narrative to maximize notoriety (Minassian, 2021). By propagating the "incel rebellion" myth, the media reinforces the impression of a coherent, violent movement, even though most incels do not communicate offline and the community does not collectively organize or advocate violence (Cottee, 2020; Costello et al., 2025a, b).

From a cultural attraction perspective, this framing of the rare but sensational cases of incel violence exemplifies how evolved biases toward out-group threat and negativity interact with media dynamics to make incel narratives especially transmissible.

Potentially Dangerous Sexless Young Men Attention toward incels may also reflect evolved biases to monitor recurrent ancestral threats. From an evolutionary perspective, incels might be expected to typify the well-documented "Young Male Syndrome," whereby unpartnered young men are disproportionately prone to risky and aggressive behavior in pursuit of status and mating opportunities (Blake & Brooks, 2022). Sexual violence, particularly from unfamiliar, unpartnered men, would have posed especially high ancestral costs to women, including obligatory parental investment in offspring whose genetic quality or paternal investment could not be assessed (Perrilloux et al., 2012). Consistent with this perspective, women are far more fearful of sexual violence from strangers than from acquaintances, even though the latter is statistically much more common (Buss, 2017). This asymmetry may reflect somewhat of an evolutionary mismatch, whereby women's psychology is better calibrated to ancestral contexts, where strangers represented a greater risk (Tooby & Cosmides, 1990).

As for the negativity bias, error management theory (Haselton & Buss, 2000) suggests that selection favored a "smoke-detector" strategy in which threat-detection systems are hypersensitive to cues of danger, because the costs of a false alarm are low compared to the catastrophic cost of missing a true threat. *Morbid curiosity* (i.e., the tendency to seek information about dangerous, threatening, or aversive phenomena) can be understood within a similar adaptive logic (Scrivner, 2021). Attending to frightening stories provides a low-cost way to gather information about rare but potentially devastating dangers. Extensive cross cultural ethnographic data suggests that storytelling in forager populations serves this precise function, providing low-cost instruction about how to recognize and avoid dangerous encounters (e.g., Scalise Sugiyama, 2021). The ubiquity of this pattern suggests it is an evolved feature of human psychology.

This perspective helps explain the seemingly paradoxical finding that, although men are the more aggressive sex and might be expected to be most interested in violent content, true-crime media, particularly stories of male serial killers, are consumed disproportionately by women (Vicary & Fraley, 2010). By contrast, men show greater interest in stories of warfare and coalitional violence (Scalise Sugiyama, 2017; Tooby & Cosmides, 2010), reflecting sex-differentiated selection pressures (Buss, 1995a, b).

In short, women's heightened vigilance toward incel narratives likely reflects evolved attentional biases toward ancestrally dangerous categories of men. Yet contemporary incels are far less violent than might be predicted based on ancestral patterns. This may be because of the *Male Sedation Hypothesis* (i.e., that modern environments provide alternative outlets such as pornography, online forums, and video games, that channel frustration into less dangerous domains (Costello & Buss, 2023). The result is somewhat of an evolutionary mismatch. Our threat-detection systems remain hypersensitive to the cues incel stories activate, even though the actual level of danger is, for whatever reason, comparatively low. Nonetheless, from a cultural attraction perspective, these biases help explain why sensational narratives about incels are especially memorable, transmissible, and resistant to correction.

Cultural Productivity and Memetic Packaging A further reason incel discourse commands attention, is that incels are a highly culturally productive community. Despite incels primarily communicating within their own forums and private Discord servers, and the fact that their specialized jargon often functions to exclude the wider public (Costello et al., 2025a, b; Daly & Nichols, 2024), they coin new terminology, create and maintain detailed online wikis, and circulate a large volume of memes and stylised narratives. Several incel-origin terms, such as "blackpilled" (a nihilistic belief that improvement is impossible), "Chad" (a sexually successful man, often visually represented through the Gigachad meme), "beta" (a lower-status man), "cope" (comforting oneself with a false belief rather than accepting reality), and "looksmaxxing" (attempts to enhance one's

appearance), have now diffused across online culture more broadly.

At the same time, cultural productivity alone cannot account for why some subcultures' terminology spreads widely while most remains confined. Many online groups generate specialized slang, yet only a small fraction of that lexicon diffuses beyond its origin. From a cultural attraction perspective, incel terminology becomes salient not simply because it is produced in large quantities and promoted aggressively, but because the underlying representations that the jargon encodes are already culturally attractive, for the reasons explained above. Linguistic features nevertheless play a role. Terms such as "blackpilled," "Chad," "cope," or "looksmaxxing" are compact and easy to repurpose, and this facilitates circulation. But the prior attractiveness of the underlying ideas means that even less streamlined labels would have had some transmission potential. Cultural productivity and cultural attractiveness therefore reinforce one another. Prolific production provides a supply of concepts, while the cognitively and socially attractive terms within that supply are preferentially repurposed in wider online culture.

Implications

Our paper began with a puzzle. Why does a numerically small and relatively low-threat community such as incels command such disproportionate cultural visibility? Drawing on cultural attraction theory and evolutionary psychology, we argued that incel discourse resonates with a suite of evolved cognitive biases, such as negativity, moralized disgust, tribal threat detection, and morbid curiosity about dangerous unpartnered men, that make these narratives especially memorable and transmissible. Having outlined *why* stories about incels "stick," we now turn to the implications of this cultural virality for public discourse, policymakers, and journalists.

First, it is important to recognize that women's aversion to incels is understandable, even if modern incels do not represent the same level of danger that ancestral counterparts might have posed. From an error management perspective, treating a group defined by misogynistic rhetoric with caution is adaptive, even if evidence shows that only a minority of incels produce hostile content (Jaki et al., 2019). Misogyny serves as a shared psychological mechanism underpinning various forms of male violence, including violent extremism, interpersonal violence, and violence against women (Rottweiler et al., 2024), so the costs of mistakenly trusting a dangerous man could be catastrophic. Given that incel spaces *do* contain misogynistic rhetoric, and the media often present the community as a monolithic tribal out-group, it is unsurprising that women are wary. This wariness, however, may represent a degree of evolutionary mismatch, where psychological mechanisms calibrated to ancestral dangers produce exaggerated threat perceptions in modern contexts.

Policymakers and educators should acknowledge the historical and theoretical reasons to be concerned about incels (Blake & Brooks, 2022), while also communicating the empirical reality that most modern incels are not violent (Costello & Buss, 2023). Such an approach could reduce unnecessary moral panic (see also Cottee, 2020). Future research should also investigate why modern incels are less violent than we might expect based on ancestral patterns, with one possibility being that evolutionarily novel online environments buffer against otherwise dangerous impulses (Costello & Buss, 2023). If so, political and journalistic panic about the dangers of online worlds may be directionally misguided, as the internet might in fact serve as a "safety valve" that channels male sexual frustration into less harmful outlets.

Second, when incels are invariably framed by the media as a collective and hostile outgroup, it likely fuels their own narrative that society despises them (Costello & Thomas, 2025). This tribal framing can create a feedback loop. Incels already display unusually strong identity fusion with their ingroup, which predicts endorsement of violence and online harassment (Rousis et al., 2023). By behaving antagonistically, they elicit condemnation from society, which they interpret as confirmation that society victimizes them, thereby justifying further antagonism. By engaging with incels as a homogenous enemy group, media and policymakers risk reinforcing the very dynamics they aim to reduce.

Third, distorted portrayals risk unfairly obscuring the reality of incels' lived experiences. Empirical research consistently shows that most incels are not violent, not aligned with far-right extremism, and instead struggle with poor mental health, including depression, anxiety, loneliness, and autism (see Costello, 2025 and Costello et al., 2024 for reviews). Approximately 20% of incels report experiencing daily thoughts of suicide (Costello et al., 2025a, b). Yet these realities lack the same cognitive appeal as stories about a group-level threat to women, and so they are overshadowed in public discourse. The very cognitive attraction rules that explain the cultural virality of the incel narrative also explain why these misrepresentations persist.

The aforementioned Netflix drama *Adolescence* illustrates this problem vividly. Despite being a work of fiction, the series has been repeatedly described as a "documentary" by Prime Minister Starmer, led to the leader of the opposition being accused of a "dereliction of duty" for failing

to watch it, and has inspired government-backed plans to screen the show in every UK secondary school (Costello, 2025). The strengths and weaknesses of a TV show would not normally merit policymaker attention, but *Adolescence* is different precisely because it resonates so powerfully with our evolved cognitive biases. Its cultural virality is unsurprising, but the danger lies in mistaking verisimilitude (i.e., the convincing appearance of truth) for actual evidence. Policy decisions must be grounded in sober, evidence-based research (e.g., Whittaker et al., 2024) rather than guided by highly emotive dramatizations. Fiction may help stimulate dialogue, but it cannot substitute for empirical reality. Recognizing when attention is being disproportionately captured by content that is cognitively attractive, policymakers, journalists, and educators should actively *counter-balance* these distortions.

Finally, there are implications for media coverage of the rare cases of incel-inspired violence. Research on mass killers shows that many "cruise for a cause," seeking ideologies that will maximize their notoriety (Lankford, 2016). The intense media focus on incels may therefore inadvertently make the ideology more attractive to such individuals, as was the case with the Toronto van killer. To mitigate this risk, the Institute for Research on Male Supremacism (2023) call for "no notoriety protocols", which urge media outlets to avoid amplifying perpetrators' names and manifestos (see also Lankford & Madfis, 2018).

In short, these insights highlight the need for restraint and responsibility. Journalists, policymakers, and academics should resist the pull of sensationalism and prioritize accuracy over virality. Responsible reporting should emphasize the diversity and complexity of incels' lived experiences rather than reinforcing the most cognitively attractive, but less representative, narratives. Only by grounding responses in evidence rather than sensationalism can we avoid unnecessary moral panic and promote appropriate interventions that address the very real problems at stake.

Conclusion

Stories about incels spread because they align with evolved cognitive biases, not because they accurately reflect the group's reality. Recognizing this distinction is essential, because exaggerating incels as a monolithic threat risks reinforcing their sense of persecution, obscuring their real struggles, and fueling counterproductive moral panics. A more responsible path lies in grounding responses in evidence, not sensationalism.

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