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Landwhales, femoids and sub-humans

Dehumanising metaphors in incel discourse

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Incels, or involuntary celibates, are a community of typically heterosexual
young men who wish to, but do not, have sexual and romantic relationships
with women. As a community, they have previously been characterised by
their hatred for women and violent acts against members of society who
they believe prevent them from having relations with women. In this paper,
we highlight the pervasiveness of metaphor in incel communication, so far
unaddressed in the budding studies of incel language. Specifically, using a
sample of circa 22,500 words from the banned incel Reddit forum r/
Braincels, we focus on how members of this community use metaphoric
expressions to dehumanise gendered social actors, both as individuals and
as groups. We discuss our findings against the backdrop of metaphor
approaches to language, gender, and sexuality, and the relevance of dehu-
manising metaphorical rhetoric for online misogynist groups.

Keywords: incels, online community, dehumanising metaphors, gender and
sexuality, social actors

1. Introduction

'Incels' ('involuntary celebates') – an online community of men who wish to, but
do not, have sexual relations with women (Heritage & Koller, 2020) – form part
of a wider online network of groups called the 'manosphere', which is brought
together by a belief that feminists control society and that men must take action
to resist such control (Krendel, 2020). Incels have been brought into the cultural
consciousness following several violent killings and subsequent media coverage,
but the extreme, reductive interpretations of gender relations found in the manos-
phere have also drawn academic interest to the features and functions of language

used within these groups. In particular, it has been suggested that their extensive, unique vocabulary is central to creating a sense of common identity (Marwick & Caplan, 2018), which calls for better understanding of such rhetoric as a factor in online misogynist ideologies (Cottee, 2020).

Indeed, the emerging body of research into the language used in the manosphere points to a specific lexis pertaining in particular to social actor representation (see e.g. Krendel et al., 2022; Wright, 2020). While distinct realisations of this lexis have been noted in the different sub-communities (Krendel, 2020), insights into the language used by incels are still fairly limited. In a corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis of an incel subreddit, Heritage & Koller (2020) argued that incels conceptualise men on a hierarchical scale, from *chads* (i.e., conventionally attractive men), followed by *manlets* (short men), incels themselves, *cucks* (short for cuckolds), and lastly *faggots*. Bogetic's (2022) corpus-based study of the incel.is forum similarly observed sets of figurative references for gendered social actors, like *rice-bitches, cucks*, or *mongrels*, intersecting with a 'scientifisation' of notions of higher and lower categories of both men and women. Elsewhere, Jaki et al. (2019) identified a range of misogynist and otherwise degrading terms, including metaphors, like *femoids, manlets* and *vermin*, pertaining to the construction of in-groups and out-groups in social actor representation. This is also echoed by the work of Prażmo (2020) on *femoid* as a dehumanising metaphor.

What is notable in the examples that these studies present, but is rarely made explicit in the literature,[1] is that the representation of social actors in incel online fora draws heavily on metaphor. More specifically, the degrading metaphors seen in the varied metaphorical representations of people as *rice-bitches* or *femoids* appear to suggest a form of hate speech based on a dehumanisation that targets women, but also other social actors. Metaphoric dehumanisation has indeed been highlighted in much recent research on online hate speech more generally (Musolff, 2015) and also argued to have a role in reinforcing hate groups' identity (Marwick & Caplan, 2018), although it has not been given much space in post-structuralist studies of language, gender and sexuality, which overall have limited intersection with studies of metaphor in discourse. Indeed, only a handful of studies appear to consider the use of metaphor by incels to dehumanise women (see Prażmo, 2020, 2022; Scotto di Carlo, 2023). Even those studies, however, do not extend to investigating how incels use metaphor to talk about themselves.

In response to this lack of research, we assume that dehumanisation in online interactions among incels ties in with existing patterns of metaphoric misogyny and hate speech identified elsewhere. However, we also expect it to reveal the

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1. Bogetic (2022) is one exception, albeit with a more narrow focus on race.

specific conceptualisations in these increasingly influential hate groups. Thus, we investigate the following research questions:

RQ1: How do members of an incel online community use dehumanising metaphors to construct gendered social actors and relations between them?

RQ2: How, and in how far, do these conceptualisations reflect incels' ideologies of gender and gender relations?

The second research question in particular aims to investigate relationships between metaphor (and its discursive and conceptual potentials) and the construction of ideologies that inform (collective) incel identity/ies. More broadly, we take an interest in advocating for a more prominent focus on metaphor in scholarship on gender, sexuality and discourse.

2.   Metaphor and dehumanisation

This study is grounded in discursive approaches to metaphor, in particular critical metaphor analysis (Charteris-Black, 2004; Koller, 2004; Musolff, 2004). Underpinning our research is the notion that metaphor provides ways of conceptualising social actors (see van Leeuwen, 2008), which has implications for the (re)production of ideologies concerning social groups. Two wider areas of inquiry inform our analysis and discussion: dehumanising metaphors, and synergies between metaphor and gender studies.

2.1   Dehumanising metaphor

Research into dehumanising metaphors has a long history, especially in political discourse. Scholars in this field have demonstrated that such metaphors are used in order to represent immigrants as threatening and harmful, most often as ANIMALS or FLOODS (e.g. Musolff, 2015; Taylor, 2018). The framework of the 'Great Chain of Being', which debases people to 'lower' ranks of animals, plants or disease-carrying organisms, is commonly employed in racist discourses (Musolff, 2015). There are indications that similar patterns work in gender-based hate groups, including the manosphere, and may be of particular relevance in their development towards more extreme discursive representations (Lilly, 2016). Indeed, the interplay of metaphoric language and conceptualisation, dehumanisation and misogyny, may be a central axis of not only the language use of incels, but also of their self-image and ideology.

Research has shown that dehumanising metaphors are used to negatively evaluate perceived outgroups by denying them attributes that distinguish humans from animals or objects (Leyens et al., 2003). However, psycholinguistic work emphasises the impact of content (metaphor meanings) and context (metaphor user, target, group context) on people's perception of such metaphors. Research dealing specifically with animal metaphors suggests that these are not perceived as offensive simply by virtue of likening humans to animals; in experimental settings, offensive interpretations were found to occur only when (i) metaphor content involved more disliked animals (e.g. snakes, rats) and an explicitly dehumanising presentation of the target, and when (ii) the context of the metaphor involved a hostile tone, intergroup reference, and interestingly, female rather than male targets (Haslam et al., 2011).

Dehumanising metaphors have also been discussed with respect to their persuasive effects. In another psycholinguistic study, dealing with the perception of dehumanising metaphors relating to gendered characters, participants who read metaphors positioning women as *predatory animals* were found to be more likely to exhibit agreement with hostile sexist attitudes than readers who read about women as *prey* (Tipler & Ruscher, 2019). The evolutionist, biologist conceptualisation of men as 'naturally' active and women as 'naturally' passive, which is at the core of such findings, has from a very different, sociolinguistic, perspective been identified as a major conceptual pattern of sexist discourse. In a study on one manosphere group known as the 'Pickup Artists', Denes (2011) traces how this conceptualisation is solidified via metaphors referring to humans, particularly women, as animals or machines. Denes argues that such metaphorical representations contribute to essentialising the understanding of a 'passive' and 'natural' female sexuality, to the point of creating a problematic script for interpreting consent. This points to a number of concerns around the wider use of dehumanising metaphors for gendered social actors.

2.2   Metaphor and gender

Gender is a theme present from the very inception of cognitive-linguistic metaphor research (Lakoff, 1987), as well as later discourse-oriented approaches (e.g. Koller, 2004). The central assumption behind this line of work is the subtle socio-cognitive impact of metaphors, which can "highlight and make coherent certain aspects of our experience" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.156), affecting how we think and talk about gender, how metaphor can have a gendering function and how speaker gender may influence metaphor use. Our focus in this paper is the first of these links between metaphor and gender, i.e. how metaphor is used by

members of a particular online community to talk about gendered social actors and what such language use allows us to infer about their gendered ideologies.

To date, rich scholarship in cognitive semantics has described how gendered social actors use metaphor (e.g. Stefanowitsch & Goschler, 2009), how metaphors can be used to masculinise or feminise entire social domains (e.g. Koller, 2004), and, crucially, the kinds of metaphors used to describe gendered social actors (e.g. Kövecses, 2008). Metaphors to refer to women have been reported from various languages, showing the tendency to use a wide variety of dehumanising, objectifying metaphors (e.g. "*plaything*") and ANIMAL metaphors, like livestock ("*cow*") or cute and loveable animals ("*bunny*") (Lopez-Rodriguez, 2009). Metaphors that conceptualise women have been a popular research topic; even if such approaches potentially work to essentialise difference, empirical research shows that differences in meaning are determined by subtle contextual factors (Charteris-Black, 2012; Hegstrom & McCarl-Nielsen, 2002).

Yet, post-structuralist research on language, gender and sexuality, along with queer linguistic research (Motschenbacher, 2011), which approaches gender as contextual, performative, and constructed within the dynamics of discourse and power, has paid comparatively little attention to metaphor. Also, while earlier metaphor research has identified representations of romantic and sexual relationships, including misogynistic and abusive ones, and the gendered ideologies they reflect as conceptually rich and important to research (Barcelona, 2001; Kövecses, 2008), this kind of inquiry has not yet fully developed in social-constructionist gender studies. Individual accounts of interest can nevertheless be found, like López-Maestre's (2015) description of expressing desire via metaphors of HUNTERS and PREY. It has also been noted that the metaphors used to talk about women are often, as Kimmel (2013, p.183) put it, "words of violence and injury – to men. Women are *ravishing* or stunning; a *bombshell, dressed to kill*, a *real femme fatale*"; such metaphoric conceptions have been argued to contribute to a culture that justifies the use of violence against women to "even the playing field" (Kimmel, 2013, p.183). Whatever their impact, there are indications that these metaphorical links between women and violence, or between relationships and violence, are potentially amplified in the manosphere and on incel platforms in particular (see Farrell et al., 2019).

These existing lines of work, as well as the gaps in them, motivate our own analysis. In particular, for work on sexuality-based online communities, nonnormative groups, or communities like incels that break gender (hetero)normativity in complex ways – adopting a form of heterosexual manhood defined by *not* having sexual relationships with women – metaphoric representations reflect how gendered social actors (selves and others) are conceptualised and what wider ideologies held by the group they help to express.

3.   Data collection and metaphor identification

Data for the study were collected from Reddit using the Python Reddit API Wrapper (PRAW).[2] The corpus contains a random sample of ten of the top 200 most upvoted threads (including the original post and user comments on that post) from the now banned r/braincels subreddit, a subforum dedicated to discussions of involuntary celibacy. Upvotes and downvotes provide Reddit users with a simple mechanism for rating a thread based on its perceived value to a specific subreddit; more upvotes may indicate a greater perceived value to a community. Each thread was saved in a separate file, with the sample of ten threads comprising a total of 22,562 words.

3.1   Metaphor identification procedure

Before we started identifying linguistic metaphors in the sample, we decided that we would disregard metonymy[3] (e.g. referring to social actors by specific body parts) but include similes (e.g. *Women treat me like* shit). To ascertain linguistic metaphors in the data, we implemented a modified version of the MIPVU procedure (Steen et al., 2010). MIPVU works on the lexical level and identifies metaphors based on the contrast between contextual meanings, i.e. the meaning of a word in a text under investigation, and their more basic contemporary meanings (more concrete, or physical in nature). If the contextual meaning of a word can be explained in relation to the basic meaning, the lexical unit is marked as a metaphoric expression. In the present study, we checked ambiguous cases in the online version of the Oxford English Dictionary.[4]

We modified the MIPVU procedure to account for three variations we discovered in our data. The first decision concerned marking cases of compounding and affixation. This was found to be a major pattern of linguistic innovation in the data, whereby new morphological combinations create new, locally relevant concepts – for example, misogynist neologisms like *110 pounds of fem*shit *meat* or more established terms like the evaluative classification sub*humans*. In examples of this type, it is affixes and parts of compounds rather than the whole words themselves that carry metaphoric contextual meaning. Put differently, the mor-

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phological segments map semantic features from more basic meanings and take on senses within the local discourse that are productively combined with various word stems.

Second, we allowed single letters in acronyms to be marked as metaphorical. The decision was prompted by the repeated acronym "LDAR" (lay down and rot) in our data, where the locally meaningful concept of rotting (doing nothing and having no purpose, usually indicating depression and self-loathing) becomes part of a new coinage. As a typical feature in written computer-mediated communication, acronyms convey meanings that are important to a community. Finally, we went beyond MIPVU and allowed for metaphors to involve multi-word units, not only within verb phrases (*even after getting brushed off*) but also in noun phrases (e.g. *You're a worthless piece of shit*).

Overall, we find these modifications productive for applying the MIPVU procedure to other, especially online communities, where metaphors can be encoded into community specific jargons (such as acronyms and affixation-based neologisms) used in digital communication. The modifications also reflect our broader stance on metaphor identification and analysis, namely, that analytical choices should be made and adapted in response to the features of data under investigation, rather than set in stone as part of universal guidelines.

Once we had modified the metaphor identification procedure, each file was coded independently by two of the authors. Inter-rater reliability scores were good or excellent for all ten texts, with Cohen's kappa ranging from 0.625 to 0.96 (for more information on Cohen's kappa see McHugh, 2012). After we had agreed on all the metaphors in each file,[5] including similes, we focused on the metaphors which referred to human social actors which were then grouped into the following categories: men, women, and incels (including the posters themselves) as a subgroup of men. We then further divided these social actor categories into whether or not they denoted collective or individual actors (for example, *men* or *man*) and whether they referred to generic or specific actors (for example, *all women* or *these women, a man* or *that dude*). We then focused on dehumanising metaphors referring to social actors, which were found to occur as nouns (e.g. *Fucking dumb bitch*), entailment of verbs (*Clearly baiting him*), adjectives (*sweet creatures*), and pronouns (*If a slut…thinks it's entitled*). Dehumanising metaphors were identified by distinguishing between domains and any frames and subframes on the one hand and targets on the other. While the concepts of 'framing' and 'frames' have a diverse history of use in metaphor studies (cf. Bogetic, 2019; Semino et al., 2018), here we use the term 'frames' to refer to structures at a lower level of abstraction than domains, a distinction found to be discursively relevant in the data as

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5. Where we disagreed, the coding agreed on by two of the three coders was accepted.

well. In this approach, adapted from Kövecses (2017), generic domains give rise to more specific, and hence less schematic and conceptually richer, frames and sub-frames, which are in turn realised in specific instances of language use to refer to a particular social actor as the target. For example, the domain NON-HUMAN BEING features six different frames, of which the one that includes most metaphoric expressions, namely Animal, comprises six subframes, e.g. whale. This latter sub-frame is linguistically realised as, for example, *deformed landwhales* to refer to physically large women as a target. For each domain, we ensured that the comparison being made could not also be a characteristic for a living human. For example, *twisted woman* was not considered a dehumanising metaphor, because people can twist their bodies, while metaphors such as *incels are hate-filled monsters* were included as dehumanising. The procedure detailed above yielded 130 dehumanising metaphoric expressions. Where one clause included two realisations, these were counted separately (e.g. *He owned that bitch*), even if they were of the same domain and frame.

4.   Findings

4.1   Quantitative findings: Patterns of references to gendered social actors

When we look at the metaphor target domains, most dehumanising metaphors in our sample are used to refer to women (52.24%), corroborating previous findings about the prominence of women as a social actor category in both incel discourse in particular (Heritage & Koller, 2020) and the manosphere more widely. Both Krendel (2020) and Krendel et al. (2022) show that the most key gendered social actor across manosphere communities is *women*. This social actor category is fairly evenly divided between collective and individual reference, with women as a group being referred to 54.97% and references to a woman as an individual accounting for 46.03%. When dehumanising metaphors are used about women as a collective, generic reference (e.g. *the first thing that foids want in a man*) represents the majority of metaphors (73.17%), whereas for an individual woman the majority of references (70%) are specific (e.g. "*Fuck that bitch*").

   Incel(s) represent the second largest social actor category for dehumanising metaphors, which accounts for 26.87% of all dehumanising metaphoric realisations and are more likely than other social actors to be referred to as individuals (69.44%). Individual incels are overwhelmingly referred to through specific reference (92%), mostly with regards to incels who are not the poster/commenter (60.87% of specific cases), for example through pronouns such as *you*. Where dehumanising metaphors refer to incels as a collective, they mostly serve to

denote generic collectives (90.91%) who are referred to through first and/or third-person plural pronouns (*incels admit we're <u>subhuman</u>*). That these metaphors are used by incels to talk about themselves and other incels provides some insight into the ways in which community members self-identify, reflecting wider issues in self-positioning and self-image.

Men are the third most prominent social actors identified and account for 20.9% of all dehumanising metaphors in the sample. Men are mostly dehumanised as individuals (60.71%), especially specific individuals (82.35%). Like incels (a particular type of men), men in general are written – and arguably thought – about in more individual and specific terms than women.

The quantitative findings suggest that members of the incel community under investigation mostly dehumanise specific rather than generic social actors. The one exception to this tendency is incels' dehumanisation of women, which is directed both at specific individuals and generic groups. The analysis above also suggests that the main focus of dehumanisation through metaphor, and indeed the focus more generally, in the sample is women. While men are also subject to dehumanisation, albeit to a lesser extent, incels' dehumanisation of themselves and other in-group members is a distinctive social practice.

We have presented the quantitative findings and provided detail on the qualitative aspects of dehumanisation in a table, which can be found at [doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/Y24W8].

4.2   Qualitative findings: Dehumanising metaphors and social actor representation

The analysis shows that female social actors are dehumanised most frequently and with the most variety. While all gendered social actors – women, incels and men – are referred to with dehumanising metaphors from all five top-level domains and with 17 (woman/women, incel(s)) or 13 (man/men) different frames, the relevant metaphors for woman/women comprise eleven subframes, compared to five and three for incel(s) and man/men, respectively. These representations become clearer when we look at the most prominent metaphorical source domains (4.2.1), and specific metaphor scenarios (4.2.2).

4.2.1   Metaphoric representations of social actors: Dominant source domains

Gendered social actors are referred to, explicitly or in entailment, using dehumanising metaphors from several generic domains: NON-HUMAN BEING (real or imaginary), OBJECT, SUBSTANCE, IMAGE and (VALUE) SCALE. While many of these

reflect productive source domains for personal reference, the realisations in incel discourse reveal a specific form of dehumanising metaphoricity.[6]

Non-Human Being

The domain NON-HUMAN BEING contains metaphorical representations of various frames related to (non-human) living beings, both real and imaginary, the most prominent of which is ANIMALS. The result is not entirely surprising, given what we know about the productivity of this domain, especially in representations of gendered social actors in relationships, and in the language of romance (López Rodriguez, 2009). Notably, we observe that animal metaphors are used to demean and offend (mostly women, but also particular men). In explicit comparisons, their realisations exclusively involve pejorative representations, such as *vermin, bitches*, but also less conventional examples, such as *I only ever matched with bots and deformed* <u>*landwhales*</u> *(usually with kids)* or *Damn that dude looks like a literal* <u>*meerkat*</u>. It should nevertheless be noted that the type-token ratio is telling when accounting for the prominence of the ANIMAL frame, since a third of these metaphorical expressions involves the single, formulaic insult of *bitches.*

The segment of ANIMAL representations that derives from metaphorical entailments reflects an important further dimension of presenting male-female relationships as a chase, in expressions of *baiting, chasing, fishing.* Interestingly, the animal roles here get mapped onto both men and women, as WOMEN get chased like animals, but MEN can also get baited, or fished (see metaphoric scenarios discussed in 4.2.2).

The metaphorical frames of MONSTERS and COMPUTER GAME CHARACTERS are deployed in demeaning representations of incels, sometimes in creative morphological metaphorical extensions like *I am an* <u>*ogrecel*</u>. The presence of COMPUTER-GAME CHARACTERS as a source domain in conceptualising incels as inferior suggests some shared knowledge between the gaming and incel communities, especially when interdiscursive references assume that an recipients will understand gaming acronyms (*We're* <u>*NPCs*</u> [non-playing characters] *in Chad's MMOs* [massive multiplayer online game]).

Finally, the domain of NON-HUMAN BEINGS also features mechanistic representations of women through the frequent, community-specific terms <u>*femoids*</u>, or <u>*foids*</u>, which refer to women as robots. These representations suggest an entrenched concept of women as machines, and thus not at all human (this also resonates with the findings of Prażmo, 2020, 2022). This does not happen for

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6. We will, however, disregard the generic IMAGE domain, as it has only one frame which is in turn realised by only one lexical item (*meme*).

other, male social actors in our corpus: there are no cases of constructions such as **chadoid* or **manoid*.

Object

The OBJECT domain shows the difficulties in domain classification, given the different levels of generality on which metaphors function. Amongst the objectifying dehumanising metaphors, we find conventional realisations of OBJECTS-GENERAL, like *stuff, thing*, as well as various concrete – again, mainly pejorative – uses of OBJECTS-SPECIFIC like being *only a plaything*, or *built like a fridge*.

Moreover, it is important to note that many of the specific objectifying metaphors also draw on handling and other actions done to objects; they include varied representations of *smashing* (in the sense of having sex), *wrecking, picking, getting* (mainly as getting women). These verbal metaphors create entailments for social actors, e.g. if someone can be *smashed*, they are a breakable object. A further specification is the OBJECT-COMMODITY source, seen in phrases such as *buying* a person or someone having or not having *value*. This dehumanising metaphor also appears to reflect broader manosphere ideologies attached to the idea of an *SMV* (sexual market value; see Ging, 2019, p.649): conceptualising women, incels and men as commodities (e.g. *Learn to sell yourself*) betrays a 'neoliberal economic ideology to sexual relationships' (Van Valkenburgh, 2018, p.97).

Finally, a distinct conventionalised source domain in this discourse is that of OBJECT-MACHINE. It is used to represent (dis)functionality, like an incel's *body breaking down*.

Substance

The source domain SUBSTANCE in part reflects the productivity of this kind of representation when talking about social actors in general, as in the conventional *spoiling*, or *sticking to*, someone. Their more specific realisation in incel discourse involves repeated references to *rotting*, i.e. referring to incels in general, or one's own incel life, as pointless rotting (away) and inactivity (*I pretty much spent my entire 20s rotting away in bed*). In this metaphor, the person is reduced to a substance with no purpose or agency, whose decomposition over time is gradual and unavoidable. An established in-group take on this metaphor is the abbreviated LDAR (*Lay Down and Rot*), which is used four times in our data in different threads. In one instance, a user employs it to advise another user against trying to mingle with people and women: *the only thing you can do to spare your sanity is to LDAR*.

The FOOD frame involves mostly single occurrences of metaphoric expressions, the conventional ones being *bitter, sweet* (or rather, *not sweet*) or a *treat*, but also more creative ones like *getting only leftovers of women from other men*.

This frame can be seen as a further development of the conventional metaphors WOMAN IS FOOD and the related HAVING SEX IS EATING, which have been amply documented across languages (see Koller, 2022).

The frame with the highest number of formulaic metaphoric expressions is that of EXCREMENT, reduced practically to the single insult token *shit*. Still, some innovative use and morphological play is seen here as well, as in the repeated reference to *femshits*. Here, an evaluative reference to female social actors is created via a novel metaphorical blend.

Value Scale
Finally, one distinct category of metaphoric expressions that is deeply entrenched in this discourse rests on conceptualising social actors along a scale. This can be a vertical scale, on which a certain type of man, like *übermensch*,[7] is placed higher up for his value, while others, typically incels, are conceptualised as existing on a scale of desirability. This scale can be numeric (between 0 and 10), with the extremes of this scale representing complete undesirability (0) or desirability (10), for example, *we are both sub8 subhumans* or *Can't wait for state-required euthanasia for all sub-5 male*s. Metaphors of this kind afford constructions of – and identifications with – worthlessness and inhumanity, and are associated in the community with nihilistic fantasies of (self-)destruction and eradication. By contrast, those who meet expectations of masculinity (and are, hence, desirable) are elevated to above-human status and discussed in terms of characteristics that are desirable but unachievable for incels. Again, this adds to the notion that masculinity is conceptualised in terms of a hierarchy (see Heritage & Koller, 2020). The related frame of POINTS ON A SCALE is used to conceptualise women as points on a 1–10 scale, for example: *6 or 7 is acceptable, 5 is smash-able but with regret*. The VALUE SCALE metaphor to rank women by desirable has also been found in the discourse of another manosphere group, namely so-called pick-up artists (Dayter and Rüdiger, 2019).

Overall, while the source domains of NON-HUMAN BEING, OBJECT, SUBSTANCE and VALUE SCALE may at first glance appear unrelated and conventional, their realisations in this online community are connected and highly specific. What conceptually connects them overall is a pronounced emphasis on representing the negative and the unwanted: the animals are not sweet or powerful animals, as referenced in other studies on male-female representations (e.g. García, 2021), but the ugly, undesirable ones, like *landwhales* and *vermin*; the objects are merely

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7. While *Mensch* is a gender-neutral term referring to a human, the co-text of its use and the context of incel beliefs strongly suggest that *übermensch* refers to a man (*A superior white übermensch will take your virginity*).

those that can be *wrecked* and *smashed*, have low value (as in *you'll be nothing more than a <u>plaything</u>*) and are robotic in nature; organic substances refer to *rotting*, food *leftovers* and *excrement*; and points on a scale are mostly about being too low on a scale to qualify as human. Together, the metaphors contribute to a dehumanised, deeply negative view of human beings, not only in misogynist references to women, but also to incels themselves, corroborating emerging findings on mental health issues reflected in incel discourses online (Hoffman et al., 2020).

4.2.2   Beyond source domains: Metaphor scenarios

Finally, the overall workings of the metaphors observed is more fully understood when we consider the wider scenarios that they create across the discourse. The concept of metaphor scenarios (Musolff, 2006) is particularly useful in capturing the wider mini-narratives in a discourse that are created by focal domain elements and mappings, thus linking the conceptual side of metaphor with usage patterns in discourse. The above discussion already suggests that the specific source domains motivate concrete scenarios, featuring actors, actions and evaluations (Koller & Ryan, 2019) on the level of discourse.

We should note first that not all source domains in our data are elaborated into scenarios, even if they include some high frequency lexical items. Some manifest as terms of abuse that are either in general usage (e.g. *bitch*) or specific to the manosphere, and in particular the incel community (e.g. *foid*). In two instances, racist references are made to a specific group of people in more general terms, representing mixed-race people as animals, such as *vermin*. Other source domains have frames that do not develop into a scenario: people as images, specifically memes, and people as non-human beings, in particular video game characters. These source domains illustrate an overlap between the manosphere and gamer communities, but are only realised either formulaically (e.g. *He's a <u>meme</u> in human form*) or infrequently (*We're the custom <u>characters</u> they made as a joke*). However, there are two metaphor scenarios that clearly emerge from the data. One is hunting (*bait, chase, fish*) and the other is obtaining (*getting, picking*), especially purchasing (*buying*), objects and commodities. In the latter scenario, the purchased commodity has a monetary or market value that can be ranked on a numerical scale. A successful hunt or purchase leads to ownership or at least possession, but more often to physical destruction (*slay, smash, wreck*) of the hunted animal or bought object. These scenarios map onto the attempt to establish a sexual relationship and, if successful, having sex. The scenarios point to a discursive commodification of sexual and gender relationships. The idea of buying and picking a sexual partner could be read as an extension of neoliberal practices that inform even the metaphoric thinking of community members and how they understand relationships of sex and desire.

An important aspect of metaphor scenarios, especially when they involve such simplified binary representations like 'man/woman', 'incel/non-incel' as in the discourse analysed, is that of transitivity, involving a social actor who *picks, buys, gets* another social actor. However, the analysis shows that the metaphor scenarios built through gender representations in the incel discourse do not strictly follow the pattern of 'man as subject' and 'woman as object' that we might expect based on other research on gender and sexism (for example, López-Maestre, 2015). Women are also mentioned as those who *get* or *pick* men, especially when emphasising men's powerlessness in the process; women can keep *fishing*, while men get *baited* like fish or hunted animals. The same is noted with violence-based terms, as seen in this exchange: *You would <u>smash</u> any of them, as would anyone on this board."; But they wouldn't <u>smash</u> us anyway so whats your point you stupid cuck?*

Incels themselves, though men, are often stripped of agency, presented as those who no woman will *take* or who cannot *sell* themselves. The evaluative aspect in the scenarios in fact interacts with this agentive aspect, reflecting incels' self-image, the hierarchies of men and value levels of women, with the positions of valuing or being valuated not reserved for any one group of gendered social actors. Similarly, the element of physical destruction that often underlies the hunting and obtaining/purchasing scenarios is neither related solely to some stereotypical male violence, nor to the conceptualisations of women's attractiveness as a form of metaphoric violence against men, as observed by Kimmel (2013, p.183). In incel discourse, the notions of hunting and obtaining/purchasing, as well as violence, underlie male-female relations as a whole, but are constructed in ways that naturalise men's entitlement to sex and attention from women, whether it is the men or the women who are the agents in the process.

5.   Discussion and conclusions

This paper has investigated some of the ways in which the incel community metaphorically represents gendered social actors. While the metaphoric language observed is often creative, producing new metaphors and extending previously introduced ones, these metaphors still contribute to a rather uniform construction of gendered relationships as oppositional, competitive and contentious. Investigating dehumanisation patterns in particular, and considering the wider ideologies of gender that they reflect, shed light on these patterns.

An analysis of dehumanising metaphor was found to be productive for exploring how the incel community constructs gendered social actors and gendered relationships, especially when systematic attention was paid to metaphor

content and context (see Haslam et al., 2011). We find that incels' diverse metaphors are connected by shared pejorative content, expressing a bleak view of all human nature and human relationships. Contexts of use further show that although incels use a greater number and variety of dehumanising metaphoric expressions for female social actors, male social actors and incels themselves are also dehumanised. In other words, incels do not only use dehumanising metaphors for out-groups, but also for in-group members. These combined patterns of generalised dehumanisation, and the self-directed dehumanisation and self-loathing, call for more nuanced understanding in the future, no least as warning signals for mental health problems.

Addressing how these conceptualisations are connected to more widely spread discourses of gender, we got further insights into incel discourse, in ways that problematise the tendency to exoticise incels as if they were ideologically unique. Incel gender ideologies clearly draw on wider patriarchal models (e.g. naturalness of women's subordination to men, women as possessions or playthings) and on increasingly prominent far-right anti-feminist discourses (e.g. excessively sexualising, or exaggeration the power of, women). Still, there are also aspects of misogynist ideology that are specific to incels, which are found to be grounded in a combination of dehumanisation with self-victimisation and a hierarchical understanding of masculinity. Specifically, in creating such hierarchies, the metaphoric representations work to essentialise an idea of masculinity as a matter of rank; incels themselves are conceptualised as located on the lowest ranks of this hierarchy, in an inherent subaltern position, with no possibility of moving 'up' or changing their situation. While this creates specific discourses of victimisation, these are located within wider patriarchal and misogynistic gender ideologies.

Finally, two broader implications merit attention. First, the findings point to a prominent role of metaphor in constructing the shared vocabulary and worldview of online hate groups, a point that may deserve more attention in research on hate speech in the future. Our analysis supports the growing body of work showing that hate speech is significantly grounded in linguistic-conceptual, metaphoric processes (Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Musolff, 2015), where dehumanisation in particular may be a central mechanism. Rather than solely a matter of language and hate speech rhetoric, metaphor here offers a unique path for tracing the problematic patterns of thought as they solidify within hate groups.

Second, in adopting our approach we have emphasised a need for metaphor research and gender and language research to more firmly intersect. While much existing work has explored gender conceptualisations via metaphor, it is worthwhile going beyond identifying conceptual patterns, towards more locally-grounded, empirical analyses of ideologies as they emerge in the dynamics of

in-group interactions. Methodologically, the time is right for such approaches: empirical research is now facilitated by systematic metaphor analysis, which we found most useful when fine-tuned to the specific data of a study. More broadly, bringing the methods of discursive metaphor study more directly into the post-structuralist research on language, gender and sexuality – with its focus on contextuality, performativity and power relations – will be invaluable for untangling emerging and growing discourses of misogyny and gender discrimination.

Author contribution statement

KB: Manually co-identified 2/3rds of the metaphors, identified adaptations for the MIPVU procedure, co-wrote the content for each section, and formatted the paper. FH: Manually co-identified 2/3rds of the metaphors, identified adaptations for the MIPVU procedure, ran the inter-rater reliability statistics, co-wrote the content for each section, and formatted the paper. VK: Manually co-identified 2/3rds of the metaphors, identified adaptations for the MIPVU procedure, co-wrote the content for each section, and formatted the paper. MM: Collected the larger corpus of 200 threads and reviewed/proofread the paper.

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