

# The Augmentation of Digital Violence during COVID-19: Incel Culture, Anon-IB, and Ideological Extremism

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## Abstract

The abrupt onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought devastating consequences to society as we know it. Connected to the obvious medical, societal, and economic changes, the pandemic also ushered in a world of isolation. Within this world, both media and violence are connected to imposed quarantine and confinement. During the pandemic, many studies indicated the rise of gender-based violence. For example, Mittal and Singh (2020) study the rise of quarantine violence in India. Equally disturbing is the rise of gender-based violence in digital spaces. Anon-IB is an image-based discussion board where anonymous images are posted. However, the board has become a hotbed for revenge porn and incel activity. Dutch police shut the site down in April 2018 (Vaas, 2018), but during the pandemic Anon-IB was able to find loopholes to restart itself. Users can also post headshots of a woman on the site and then ask for “wins,” which translates into nude photos. Anon-IB is location-based, and users often ask for photos of women in the surrounding area. The site also reaches an international audience. One example is a past thread from The University of Georgia in Tbilisi, Georgia. This paper discusses the rise of extreme online violence and revenge porn during the pandemic through a discourse analysis of Anon-IB. A discussion of incel culture will also be discussed, using the work of O’Malley et al. (2020) and others as a framework to discuss the internet’s role in ideological extremism and violence.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, violence, gender, incels, Anon-IB

## Introduction

The abrupt onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought far-reaching changes and modifications to everyday life. Along with medical, societal, and economic changes,

the pandemic also ushered in lockdowns. In short, isolation was imperative to stave the progression of the pandemic. Individuals were encouraged to isolate themselves for the common good of others, but with this isolation came an abundance of other issues. Within this new world of isolation, forced quarantine and confinement augmented both internet usage rates and gender-based violence. Although confinement was necessary to stop the spread of the virus, quarantine, coupled with the pandemic, bolstered many inequities—inequities already present in day-to-day lives. These inequities cross cultural lines, with one prominent example being that of gender-based violence. For example, Mittal and Singh (2020) studied the rise of quarantine violence in India in relation to COVID-19. As Mittal and Singh articulate, prior pandemics were also connected to a rise in domestic violence cases. In terms of COVID-19, the rates of domestic violence soared in many countries—these elevated rates highlight how domestic violence is not an isolated issue or one that is contained to one specific region or country. An abbreviated list of these countries includes China, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States. Mittal and Singh explicate how issues such as economic insecurity and elevated alcohol use exacerbate the stress of quarantine.

Furthermore, issues such as economic insecurity and alcohol use can also impact rates and instances of domestic violence, as the World Health Organization (WHO) reports. In addition, the fear of contacting COVID prevented many women from reporting abuse or leaving home to seek refuge at a local shelter, an issue that Mittal and Singh noted in India. Furthermore, “when under quarantine, women individuals are in close proximity to ... [their abusers] ... with limited to no freedom to go out, thus leading to an increase in gender violence at home” (Mittal & Singh, 2020). Whereas prior to the pandemic, women could escape during the day to work or to run errands, leaving during the day was no longer an option in a world held hostage by the pandemic-induced quarantine. Therefore, women were trapped at home with their abusers—abusers that were often consuming larger quantities of alcohol, as reported by the WHO.

As Mittal and Singh (2020) conclude, “the outcome of gender-based violence is long lasting for its victims.” How might these outcomes be mitigated during or after a pandemic? Mittal and Singh call for a more “holistic response model” during pandemics—this model must also account for gender-based violence connected to violence in the digital realm. Along with the increase in domestic violence during the pandemic, there was also a steady rise in the consumption of pornography (Awan et al., 2021) and in the sending of nude photographs (Abad-Santos, 2020).

Writing for the American media platform Vox, Alex Abad-Santos elaborates on how individuals were “sacrificing physical contact for the global good” during the height of the pandemic.

Moreover, individuals were “also meant to keep away from people we were having sex with or want to have sex with, unless we already live[d] with those people” (Abad-Santos, 2020). A lack of human interaction forced people to seek interaction through digital means, resulting in a heightened increase in sending and sharing “nudes” during quarantine (Iovine, 2020). Several non-academic sources covered this phenomenon during the pandemic, including popular website Mashable and news source *Miami Herald*. A standard pop culture reference, “sending nudes,” has become a staple in everyday vernacular, also infiltrating the meme world. When orchestrated between two consenting and trusting individuals, sending nudes can be seen as a healthy and resilient way to navigate pandemic-induced quarantine or expand and build on partner intimacy. However, the threat of photos being disseminated against one’s consent is often a source of anxiety, especially for women. Internet security issues and online hackers are the most obvious concern. In addition to this, revenge pornography, or “revenge porn,” is also a source of distress and concern. *Revenge porn* is defined as the “distribution of sexually explicit images or videos of individuals without their consent” (“State Revenge Porn Laws”, n.d.). *Revenge porn* is further defined by Oxford Languages online dictionary as “revealing or sexually explicit images or videos of a person posted on the internet, typically by a former sexual partner, without the consent of the subject and in order to cause them distress or embarrassment” (“Revenge porn”, n.d.). As I will delineate, revenge porn impacts women more than men. Additionally, societal structures and patriarchal mores dictate that nude photos of women are to be seen as sources of embarrassment and shame. These patriarchal mores transcend cultural lines, resulting in a hegemonic bias against the image of nude women’s bodies.

### **Freedom and Revenge Porn**

Once photos are sent, there is no guarantee as to what the receiver will do with the content intended for their eyes only. Moreover, studies show that revenge porn impacts women at much higher rates than men. For example, a study conducted by the University of Exeter highlights that almost three in four victims of revenge porn are women (Clarke, 2019). Kempton (2020) cites data from the Data & Society Institute, highlighting that “one in 10 women under the age of 30 have been victims of or threatened with having their private sexually explicit images shared with the public without their consent.” Connected to this is the stigma that women face over leaked nude photographs.

Nude photos of men are not met with the same reactions as those of women (Kempton, 2020). As the dissemination of nude photos has jeopardized the lives of many women, the consequences for men are not the same, primarily due to the ever-present male gaze and the objectification and subordination of women's bodies (Butler, 1993). Kempton also discusses Durham's work (2011), which "argued that sexual experiences online cannot be separated from real-life consequences" (Durham, 2011, as cited in Kempton, 2020). This connection between the online realm and real-life consequences is salient to my overall argument, especially since the boundaries between "real-life" and the digital have been blurred since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although attitudes are slowly changing, cultural bias surrounding nudity and women still exists. Movements like the SlutWalk attempt to reclaim violent ideologies like victim-blaming and "slut-shaming," but more work needs to be done. While there was an increase in sending nude photographs during the pandemic (White, 2020), the exchange is not equal, as gender-based power dynamics still exist. As discussed, the consequences for women if nude photos are shared are not the same as they are for men. Therefore, men embody more freedom when it comes to the sending and sharing of nude photographs. From the studies referenced, men are also less likely to become victims of revenge porn in the first place.

As Mittal and Singh (2020) discuss, the concept of freedom and subsequent lack of freedom for many women is strongly connected to gender-based violence. The authors reference the elevated lack of freedom women have experienced during the pandemic—and again, this lack of freedom is also directly connected to gender-based violence. As women were often trapped at home with their abusers during the onset and duration of COVID-19, they also lacked the means to alert others of their situation (Mittal & Singh, 2020). Constant surveillance from their abusers further removed autonomy, resulting in heightened violence within the domestic sphere (Mittal & Singh, 2020). Connected to the tangible reality of this violence is its digital counterpart.

Returning to the unauthorized circulation of nude photographs, a relatively unexamined aspect of the revenge porn world is the anonymous image-sharing website Anon-IB. When I began research for this article in April 2020, Anon-IB was fully accessible, and as I will explain, was still operating on a location-based platform. On this location-based platform, users could search for "wins" based on city, state, and also by university. "Wins" is a slang term for nude photographs, and the vast majority of "wins" shared on Anon-IB were those of women. Moreover, location extended beyond the United States. For example, a search for Georgia (my state of residence in the United States) revealed a past thread from The University of Georgia in Tbilisi, Georgia.

How is Anon-IB defined? Reddit poster u/minibagelxo defines Anon-IB as

[A]n anonymous image board where guys post “wins”/leaked pics of cam girls, or frankly any cute girl who puts themselves on the internet. IG girls, tiktok [sic] girls, Twitch streamers, your everyday normal girl ... [sic] anyone. It's a revenge porn cesspit. (u/minibagelxo, 2021)

Leaked photos can also include nude photographs sent via text, messenger, email, or other digital means. Other variations of photos posted include “everyday” photos, taken from social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter. Users of Anon-IB can post a photo they took from a victim’s social media profile and will ask for “wins” based on the photo. To explain, a user can post a photo taken from someone’s Facebook profile but can ask for nude photos of the same person. The goal is to see if any users in the geographic area recognize the person posted (again, the photo is usually of a woman). If a user of Anon-IB recognizes the woman in the photo, and if they happen to have any photos of the woman, they will then share those photos. Reddit user u/minibagelxo candidly discusses the anxiety of knowing your photos have been posted on the website, stating that “it’s been difficult not to check for updates” (u/minibagelxo, 2021). From an analysis of this one Reddit post, one can see the overt power that Anon-IB exerts. Constant worry and anxiety over exposed photos on the site would interfere with daily tasks, not to mention the profound impact on one’s mental health. Dutch police shut the site down in April of 2018 (Vaas, 2018), but during the pandemic, Anon-IB users were able to find loopholes to restart the site. The website’s closure in 2018 was a step forward, but the victory was short-lived as the site found increased activity and usage during the pandemic (Goldstein, 2020).

Furthermore, as incel (short for “involuntary celibate”) culture continues to rise in the wake of the pandemic (Vu, 2020), sites like Anon-IB seem always to find a way to reassert themselves into the collective digital consciousness. As Vu indicates, incels reacted favorably to life during the lockdown, reveling in isolation. Also of note is the uptick in “hostile and violent discourse” in certain incel forums during the pandemic (Vu, 2020).

## **Incel Culture and Violence**

A brief definition and discussion of incel culture is warranted here—a definition, from the Oxford online dictionary, is the following: “a member of an online community of young men who consider themselves unable to attract women sexually, typically associated with views that are hostile toward women and men who are sexually active” (“Incel”, n.d.). Although not all users of Anon-IB would be defined or characterized as incels, an analysis

of past comments on the site suggests that many users are entrenched in the violence that permeates incel culture. For example, users of Anon-IB described women as “worthless,” “stupid,” “sluts,” and “whores.” Establishing an individual or a group of people as “worthless” is often the first step of the justification of violence. In other words, if an individual is deemed as worthless, they lose the value of humanity and are no longer seen as a person worthy of life and respect. Thus, the women on Anon-IB, posted against their will, become objects and victims of ideological violence. As misogyny is allowed to run rampant on sites like Anon-IB, gender-based violence seems to become the norm and as something justifiable.

Although the term incel was coined in 1997,<sup>1</sup> incel culture became more prominent in mainstream media following the 2014 Isla Vista massacre, where Elliot Rodger killed six people and injured 14 others in Isla Vista, California. A self-proclaimed incel, Rodger became an “incel hero” following the massacre and his subsequent death (after the attacks, Rodger turned the gun on himself). For example, “in April 2018, a man from Toronto called Alex Minassian posted on Facebook: “‘The Incel Rebellion has already begun...All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger’” (Taylor, 2018). Shortly after this commending post, Minassian drove a truck down a crowded street, killing ten people (Taylor, 2018). Additionally, Rodger had left behind a manifesto of sorts—a document riddled with his hatred of women and his self-proclaimed disgust of still being a virgin (Taylor, 2018). I believe these “manifestos” left behind after an attack such as this one should be analyzed in rhetorical depth. By attempting to analyze the mindset of the perpetrator, perhaps lives can be saved in the future. In the case of Rodger’s manifesto, details regarding the mental state of the perpetrator could be gleaned, as well as insight into the mind of someone entrenched in incel ideology.

Taisto Witt writes about Rodger in their article titled “‘If i cannot have it, i will do everything i can to destroy it.’ the canonization of Elliot Rodger: ‘Incel’ masculinities, secular sainthood, and justifications of ideological violence” (2020). As Witt states, “online incel spaces have been observed referring to Rodger as ‘Saint Elliot’, or ‘The Supreme Gentleman’, and have been seen celebrating the anniversary of the Isla Vista killings as ‘Saint Elliot Day’” (2020). Ideological justification of extreme violence has become widespread. Another example is the online exultation of American domestic terrorist, white supremacist, and Neo-Nazi Dylann Roof, the man responsible for the attack on

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<sup>1</sup> The term “incel” is credited to a woman named Alana, who started a website for people struggling to find loving relationships. She named her website “Anna’s Involuntary Celibacy Project,” which is where the term originated from. The website was started with good intentions, but then the term was co-opted to mean what it does today.

Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston South Carolina, in the United States. Following the attack, Roof became trending on 4-chan and other dark corners of the web, where white supremacists and those that advocate for violence continue to flourish.

Furthermore, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) recognizes the image of Roof's infamous "bowl-cut" haircut as a registered hate symbol. Both Rodger and Roof were able to find ideological support for their violence and hate on the internet, both before and after the massacres they carried out. Additionally, Rodger and Roof are still revered today by incels and white supremacists alike. O'Malley et al. (2020) identify how "the risk of violence stemming from incel communities and their online operational practices suggests they may resemble other ideologically motivated extremist groups." The connection here is salient to individuals like domestic terrorist Dylann Roof and the Christchurch killer Brenton Harrison Tarrant.

## **Violence and Anon-IB**

Returning to Anon-IB, another critique of the site is the claim that photos of underage minors are posted on the site. Without any real regulation, there is no way to track the ages of women featured in photographs or track their whereabouts. Many women in the photos might also be victims of human trafficking, an issue deserving more widespread attention and funding. In the United States, the lack of attention to human trafficking and policy is an issue addressed by Anthony DeStefano in their book *The War on Human Trafficking: U.S. Policy Assessed*. Certainly not an issue isolated to the United States, other scholars (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017) have framed human trafficking as a global health concern. Goździak and Bumo (2008) assessed essential data and research on human trafficking in their bibliography of research-based literature, highlighting significant trends and identifying gaps in what is currently known regarding human trafficking.

Moreover, there are now Master's programs dedicated to the study of human trafficking, with main programs located in both the UK and the United States ("5 Mater's Programs Focused on Human Trafficking", n.d.). As I stated, the main reason Anon-IB is currently shut down<sup>2</sup> is the use of purported photos of minors. Minors are often victims of human trafficking (Moore et al., 2017), so there is a strong correlation with the probability that trafficked minors have been posted on Anon-IB. The posting of minors, coupled with human trafficking, exposes even more gender-based violence relating to the existence and use of Anon-IB.

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<sup>2</sup> The website has constantly shifted from being shut down to available, as hackers and posters find ways around imposed shutdowns.

Noteworthy, too, is the constant flux and change of Anon-IB, which I reference above. As I have mentioned, Anon-IB is location-based, meaning that one can search for “wins” and leaked photos from a specific geographic region. During the beginning and height of the pandemic, the website was active and accessible following its shutdown in 2018. With increased time at home, it can be deduced that those already inclined to frequent the website had more time to do so. In March 2021, there was a small breakthrough as the website was shut down again. A comment on #TheFappeningForum, dated March 26, 2021, read, “Yeah [sic] that website keeps getting taken down and back up again. Sadly [sic] never found anything like it, as I can never find anything decent on 4chan” (Mediumdck, 2021). This was in response to another poster to the forum stating that Anon-IB would not load for them—this same poster asked if there was another similar or alternate site. Although limited in capacity, these posts highlight the obsession many users have with Anon-IB. *The Fappening*<sup>3</sup> is a website similar to Anon-IB—advocating for disseminating leaked nude photographs of celebrities. Again, the site primarily focuses on obtaining and circulating photos of women celebrities—yet another example of the unfair power dynamic regarding how nude photographs are perceived.

Moreover, as I was making final edits to this essay, I uncovered a Twitter account with the handle @OfficialAnonIB. I am not sure if the Twitter account is specifically connected to the website—moreover, there are only two tweets, both from August 19, 2011. If anything, this suggests the longevity of the website, as the tweets date back to 2011. One tweet specifically mentions “jailbait,” which is an obvious reference to minors. The mere mention of minors in this capacity exposes more significant issues surrounding Twitter and what is allowed to be posted on the site. I have already explicated issues surrounding gender-based violence, minors, and Anon-IB, but this also opens up questions regarding Twitter. If Twitter can ban certain accounts yet allow for the celebration of the exploitation of minors, then Twitter, arguably, has some issues that must be addressed. If ideology-based violence is left to propagate on Twitter without any mediation, then this violence will continue to increase at amplified levels. Shutting down Anon-IB is a step forward, but how can it be guaranteed that it will continue to remain closed down? In addition, if hate-based accounts are allowed to remain on Twitter, incels and other members of extremist-based groups will continue to find a welcoming community within online spaces. How might this impact the future? Additionally, if another pandemic were to grip the world with a longer enforced lockdown time, how might groups be combatted that would again use the lockdown to further their extremist causes?

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<sup>3</sup> “Fappening” is also a euphemism for male masturbation.



## Connections to Broader Ideological Violence

Pandemics aside, the internet has long been a vehicle for violence, allowing extremism to hide under anonymity, especially in pockets of the dark web. 4chan and other “chan” forums have played a prominent role in circulating hate on the internet, especially with right-wing extremist groups and the alternative right, or the “alt-right,” as they are colloquially called. Stephane J. Baele, Lewys Brace, and Travis G. Coan delineate the rise of these “chan” sites in their article titled “Variations on a Theme? Comparing 4chan, 8kun, and Other chans’ Far-Right ‘/pol’ Boards.” Baele et al. (2021) open their paper discussing Brenton Harrison Tarrant’s attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. Tarrant posted on 8chan before the massacre, alerting others that an attack was imminent (Baele et al., 2021, p. 65). 8chan was shut down following the terror incident, but not until August 2019, after another shooting had already taken place by John Earnest and Patrick Crusius (Baele et al., 2021, p. 65). Chans are one area of the internet where violence and extremism have been allowed to thrive, yet they are just one piece of the larger puzzle discussed in this paper. What is important to realize is the interconnectedness of these areas of the web. Chan sites, Reddit, and Anon-IB, have all been hosts to racial-based violence, ethnic-based violence, and gender-based violence.

Comments on Anon-IB reflect the same ideology of violence reflected on the chan sites—a topic explored by Blyth Crawford, Florence Keen, and Guillermo Suarez-Tangil in their paper “Memes, Radicalisation, and the Promotion of Violence on Chan Sites” (2020). The authors introduce a “dataset of the most popular memes shared within and between a variety of boards on chan sites used by the far right” (Crawford et al., 2020). Perhaps their most relevant connection to my own research is their analysis of explicit and violent memes, and the circulation of these memes. Drawing on research by Hodge and Hallgrimsdottir (2020), Crawford et al. explain how “shock memes” “frame violence as inherently thrilling.” The authors discuss how these memes are used by extremist groups like Proud Boys<sup>4</sup> to attract and garner followers, which is a concept I discuss in my own dissertation on the rhetorical construction of white supremacy and resentment rhetoric. As I explicate, since their creation, memes have long been used by extremist groups to garner and maintain followers (Adams, 2020).

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<sup>4</sup> The Southern Poverty Law Center defines the group Proud Boys as the following: “Established in the midst of the 2016 presidential election by VICE Media co-founder Gavin McInnes, the Proud Boys are self-described ‘Western chauvinists’ who adamantly deny any connection to the racist ‘alt-right.’ They insist they are simply a fraternal group spreading an ‘anti-political correctness’ and ‘anti-white guilt’ agenda” (“Proud Boys,” n.d.).

Additionally, within an Accelerationist<sup>5</sup> framework, memes function to gain followers fast, a concept described at length in *A Fair Hearing: The Alt-Right in the Words of Its Members and Leaders* (2018). In other words, the more times an individual is exposed to a meme with a violent theme, the more they might be willing to accept the meme. The alt-right hopes to draw what they deem as “moderates” or Libertarians into their folds through this tactic. Crawford et al. (2020) reference De Cook (2018), by concluding how the circulation of certain memes embody “an ideology that consists of symbolic and physical violence that is particularly attractive to young men in the West.” The notion of symbolic and physical violence and its connection to masculinity is also seen in the above-mentioned group Proud Boys. By focusing on hyper-masculinity and misogyny, members of the Proud Boys place their value above that of women. Harkening back to the comments on Anon-IB, this is related to the dehumanization of the women whose photos were posted without their consent. When consent is removed, violence is enacted on the victim against their will. As gender-based violence was on the rise during the pandemic, the effects of gender-based violence in the digital realm are important and worthy of scholarly inquiry. Awareness is the first step, as is recognizing behavior that might lead to attacks.

## Conclusion

Through an analysis of the location-based website Anon-IB, I have articulated several parallels between Anon-IB and other pockets of the internet where ideology-based violence has been multiplying. Also connected to this is the volatile world of incel culture, a culture that has been gaining traction and followers since before the Isla Vista attack carried out by incel “hero” Eliot Rodger. The complexity of the incel world has also been exacerbated by the global COVID-19 pandemic, which has augmented gender-based violence in both the tangible and virtual worlds. Moreover, the concept of the manosphere explored by Gottel and Dutton (2016) and Ging (2017) explicate how there is a large, interrelated network of anti-women groups on the internet. These groups essentially advocate for violence against women, and the revenge porn site Anon-IB is one of many examples of this violence. As I have articulated, the violence perpetrated on and by Anon-IB impacts women on many levels. Any woman could be a victim of Anon-IB; furthermore, minors have also been posted on the site. The purported posting of minors is why the site is currently shut down, but there is no guarantee that another site with the same intentions as Anon-IB will not be created.

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<sup>5</sup> Accelerationism, a concept coined by philosopher Nick Land, originally dealt with capitalism and the acceleration of capitalism to create radical change. White nationalists and other groups have adopted the term to refer to social collapse and the creation of a white ethnostate.

Anon-IB currently not operating is a positive step, but there needs to be more regulation to ensure that other copycat sites are not created. The posting of minors is a despicable action, as is the posting of any woman without her consent. Revenge porn is violence, as it projects digital intimidation onto its victim. This digital intimidation can filter into the victim's workplace, schooling, and interpersonal relationships. As I stated above, awareness is the first step, but scholarship must be met with engagement on the legal level as well. According to the Cyber Civil Rights Initiative, 48 states in the United States, the District of Columbia, and Guam have laws in place against revenge porn ("48 States + DC + One Territory Now Have Revenge Porn Laws," n.d.). However, there are "legislative gaps" in these laws (Mania, 2020), indicating that more work needs to be completed on the legal end to ensure that justice is met for the victims. From an international standpoint, countries such as Germany, France, Malta, Japan, and Australia are implementing laws, but there need to be more laws in place in more countries ("Revenge Porn Laws across the World," n.d.). As more laws are put into place with stricter punishments, perpetrators will hopefully be deterred from engaging in revenge porn and using sites like Anon-IB. Alarmingly, perpetrators in the past have been able to escape prosecution through legal loopholes (Mania, 2020). With the increased exposure of revenge porn and its connection to gender-based violence, it is the goal that these legal loopholes will be closed. Connected to this is the goal that more countries will take gender-based violence and revenge porn more seriously.

Additionally, social media sites such as Twitter should be more cautious in how their platform engages in and encourages other forms of ideological violence. This article has discussed how ideological violence perpetuated and augmented on the web is interrelated. Additionally, in the wake of a pandemic-induced lockdown, continued research needs to take place on the role of lockdowns on gender-based violence in both the home and digital spaces.

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