

Analysis of the Impact Mechanism of Gender Inequality Perception in Internet Use — Reflection from the Subjective Inequality Dimension

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Abstract: This paper delves into how internet usage impacts the perception of gender inequality. The study background lies in the 20th Party Congress report's emphasis on cyberspace governance and the internet's deep social penetration. The paper notes that the internet has transformed information dissemination and social interaction, and significantly influenced individuals' gender - inequality perception. Notably, in certain online groups like incel (involuntary celibate) groups, the perception and expression of gender inequality are increasingly prominent. Their hostility and prejudice towards women in cyberspace affect both individual gender - equality perception and social order. Through empirical research, this paper uncovers the intricate relationship between internet use and gender - inequality perception. It finds that internet use affects individuals' subjective inequality perception through mechanisms such as enhancing social comparison, influencing fairness perception, shaping attribution processes, and strengthening group identity. Specifically, information exposure disrupts fairness perception, triggering external attributions that, through group identity, solidify into extreme views. This complex interaction mirrors the formation and reconstruction of individuals' cognitive patterns and social beliefs in the modern digital age, amidst vast information and social - structural changes.

Keywords: Internet use, gender inequality perception, subjective inequality, incel group, influence mechanism

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background and problem statement

In the digital era, the internet has been deeply integrated into all aspects of social life, emerging as the core platform for information dissemination, social interaction, and cultural exchange.

Nevertheless, with the extensive adoption and deep penetration of the internet, gender cognition and understanding within cyberspace have undergone profound transformations. Notably, within certain specific online groups, the perception and expression of gender inequality have become increasingly conspicuous. Among these, the extreme actions of the incel group (involuntary celibates) directed towards women have attracted widespread global attention. In China, similar misogynistic communities have also emerged. These groups express hostility and prejudice towards women in

cyberspace. Their actions not only affect individuals' perceptions of gender equality but also disrupt social order.

This paper explores how internet use impacts the perception of gender inequality from the dimension of subjective inequality. The aim is to uncover the intricate relationship between internet use and the perception of gender inequality through empirical research, thereby providing theoretical support and practical guidance for promoting gender equality in cyberspace.

1.2. Research objectives and significance

The primary objective of this study is to delve deeply into the intrinsic connection and mechanism between internet use and the perception of gender inequality. In the contemporary digital age, the internet has permeated every facet of social life, becoming a crucial domain for information dissemination, social interaction, and concept formation. The phenomenon of misogyny in cyberspace, as an extreme manifestation of gender inequality, reflects the distorted understanding of gender relations by certain groups.

Consequently, analyzing this phenomenon and revealing the role of subjective perception bias in the impact of internet use on the perception of gender inequality holds great theoretical and practical significance for understanding and resolving gender - related inequality issues.

Theoretically, by comparing incel groups at home and abroad, this study contributes to breaking through cultural and regional boundaries, offering a novel perspective for cross - cultural research on gender inequality. Practically, this research endeavors to provide a theoretical foundation for formulating effective gender - equality policies and practical support for gender - equality governance in cyberspace.

2. Core concepts and introduction to the incel group

2.1. Internet use and gender inequality perception

The internet, as a vital platform for information dissemination and exchange, has not only revolutionized people's social interaction patterns but has also subtly shaped the perception of gender inequality. Internet use is a multi - dimensional concept, encompassing various aspects such as network access, usage frequency, and types of online activities [1]. In this context, the perception of gender inequality refers to individuals' subjective understanding and evaluation of gender differences and the resulting unfair phenomena in society.

Within the network environment, the manifestation of the perception of gender inequality is often complex, influenced by multiple factors such as information acquisition channels, group identity, and individual gender concepts. The unique characteristics of cyberspace render the perception of gender inequality distinct from that in traditional social spaces. It may be exacerbated by information dissemination and interaction processes or amplified by network - based group identity mechanisms.

2.2. Definition and characteristics of the incel group

"Incel" (involuntary celibate) specifically denotes a group of men who experience isolation and a sense of loss in emotional relationships. This group is active in online communities, where they exchange experiences of difficulties in establishing sexual relationships. Previous research has revealed that Incel culture contains numerous misogynistic elements and may potentially incite violent behavior. Moreover, several violent incidents associated with this community indicate that the Incel community may share similarities with other extremist groups in terms of ideological motivation [2].

The term originated from a website established in 1993, which aimed to provide a communication platform for lonely individuals. However, over time, this group has gradually evolved into a socially marginalized group of men who are anti - feminist and harbor strong hostility towards women [3]. Members of the Incel group often attribute their emotional difficulties to gender inequality in social gender roles, particularly in male - female interactions. They believe that women's selectivity and the social gender structure oppress men.

Within this group, many individuals express their emotions through online forums and social media, thereby forming a unique culture and value system. Incel group members generally believe that men should have the right to win women's favor. When this expectation is not met, they develop resentment and, in some cases, even advocate violence against women [4]. For example, in 2015, an Incel member initiated a random shooting incident near the University of California, Santa Barbara, resulting in multiple casualties. Subsequently, similar incidents occurred within the Incel group, triggering a copy - cat effect [5]. For example, On April 23, 2018, Alek Minassian deliberately drove a van into pedestrians in Toronto, Canada, killing 10 and injuring 15. Prior to the attack, Minassian posted on Facebook expressing support for an "Incel revolution" and admiration for Elliot Rodger, perpetrator of the 2014 Isla Vista killings [6]. In China, while academic research on Incel communities remains limited, analogous online groups exhibiting misogynistic attitudes and behaviors mirroring Incel perceptions of gender inequality have been documented. In China, although research on the Incel group is not yet comprehensive, similar groups exist on the internet. These groups exhibit misogynistic and hateful behaviors that are highly similar to the gender - inequality perception and attitudes of the Incel group.

International research on Incel communities predominantly focuses on their gender inequality frameworks and digitally propagated ideologies. Bimber's regression analysis of 1996–1999 internet usage data revealed statistically significant gender disparities, demonstrating that approximately 50% of the digital divide correlated directly with gender [7]. Similarly, Gross et al. identified persistent gender biases in large language models like ChatGPT, showing how AI-generated content perpetuates and amplifies outdated, exclusionary gender stereotypes [8]. Glace et al. conducted a content analysis of 400 top-voted posts from the r/Braincels subreddit, uncovering how Incels perform a hybridized masculinity—positioning themselves as subordinate to women while denigrating other men as weak [9]. Complementary studies by Daly and Reed and Helm et al. examined high-engagement comments on r/Incels, analyzing how Incel communities facilitate misogynist extremism through digital platforms [10,11].

In contrast, domestic scholarship on Incel groups remains sparse, with limited empirical linkages to gender inequality perceptions. Media reports indicate that on August 28, 2023, Chinese doctoral student Qi Tailei allegedly murdered his advisor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Qi's social media activity revealed pronounced loneliness and anti-female sentiments consistent with Incel behavioral archetypes [12]. Nevertheless, such cases have not catalyzed systematic academic inquiry into Incel dynamics in China. Existing Chinese research emphasizes the formation and reinforcement of gender role stereotypes in online communities.

Existing domestic and international research provides a robust theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding the relationship between internet usage and perceptions of gender inequality. Notably, while international studies on Incel communities have achieved considerable depth, they exhibit a paucity of in-depth investigations into the mechanisms linking internet engagement to structural gender inequities. Conversely, Chinese research on Incel-related phenomena remains nascent, characterized by limited empirical studies that directly correlate such groups with perceptions of gender inequality. This disciplinary asymmetry underscores the need for cross-contextual analyses to bridge theoretical frameworks and address region-specific manifestations of digital gender dynamics.

3. Subjective inequality and related theoretical foundations

3.1. Definition of subjective inequality

Subjective inequality refers to the perception of individuals or groups regarding unequal phenomena in social relations. This perception does not necessarily mirror objective social facts but is more dependent on individuals' psychological and social cognitive processes. In contrast to objective inequality, such as income disparities and differences in educational opportunities, subjective inequality is based on individuals' cognitive and emotional experiences [13].

The term "subjective inequality" emerged from research on social inequality and is used to describe people's views on various inequalities and unfairness in social stratification and mobility. The core of the perception of subjective inequality lies in relative deprivation. This theory posits that people's dissatisfaction does not stem from absolute poverty but rather from having insufficient gains compared to a reference group [14]. Subjective fairness perception, which is closely related to subjective inequality, is an individual's evaluation of the fairness and reasonableness of resource allocation, opportunity acquisition, etc., in society or an organization [15]. When individuals perceive subjective inequality, they typically feel unfairly treated in the distribution of social resources and opportunities, which directly impacts their sense of fairness [16].

Although research has shown that network media can mitigate relative deprivation and enhance personal fairness perception by expanding the scope of social comparison, for specific groups like incels, internet use may exacerbate their subjective perception bias of gender inequality. Therefore, the relationship between internet use and the perception of subjective inequality in the Incel group is more intricate and warrants further investigation. The exacerbation of subjective inequality may increase the Incel group's hostility towards society, affecting their mental health and social behavior, which is a crucial aspect of this study.

3.2. Gender perspective on subjective inequality

In gender studies, subjective inequality presents unique characteristics and manifestations. Fan Xiaoguang's book *The Self in the Mirror: Subjective Inequality in Chinese Society* reveals the subjective understanding of fairness among different groups and, through rigorous empirical analysis, defines two dimensions of subjective inequality, providing an incisive analytical framework for understanding male subjective inequality [17].

The first is the status - quo dimension, which focuses on men's perception of their own power and authority. In the context of the continuous development of modern gender - equality movements, the traditional gender - power structure is undergoing profound changes. Some men are acutely aware that their traditional dominant positions in families, workplaces, and society are being eroded. For example, men's dominant role in family decision - making has relatively weakened, and they face increased competition from female counterparts in career advancement. These changes often trigger men's "sense of deprivation" and give rise to specific subjective perceptions of gender inequality.

The second is the attribution dimension, which mainly concerns how men attribute their failures or dissatisfaction to women. In this attribution pattern, men often ascribe challenges in their career development and emotional relationships to the rise of women and changes in gender roles, overlooking complex factors such as macro - economic structures, industrial adjustments, and workplace gender discrimination. For instance, some men attribute their setbacks in the job market to competition from women while failing to adequately consider the impacts of economic trends and industrial restructuring. This one - sided attribution not only deepens their subjective perception of gender inequality but may also intensify gender opposition, potentially undermining social stability and harmony.

3.3. Related theoretical foundations

The theoretical underpinnings of subjective inequality primarily originate from sociology, psychology, and economics. Here are some of the main theoretical perspectives:

Social Comparison Theory: Proposed by Festinger, this theory posits that individuals have an inherent tendency to assess their abilities and viewpoints [18,19]. In the absence of objective standards, people tend to evaluate themselves by comparing with others. In the internet age, social media has amplified the social - comparison effect, increasing its frequency and intensity, thereby influencing the perception of subjective inequality. Upward comparison (with those who are better - off) may lead to relative deprivation and dissatisfaction, while downward comparison (with those who are worse - off) may enhance happiness and satisfaction.

Equity Theory: Adams suggested that individuals evaluate the ratio of their inputs (effort, skills, education) to outputs (rewards, recognition, promotion) and compare it with others' input - output ratios [20]. When individuals expect their input - output ratio to be lower than others', they may feel unfairly treated, which impacts the perception of subjective inequality. The transparency of information and display effects on the internet may heighten individuals' sensitivity to input - output ratios, thus influencing the perception of subjective inequality.

Attribution Theory: Weiner pointed out that individuals tend to explain and attribute the causes of events, categorizing attributions of success or failure into three dimensions: locus of control (internal or external), stability (stable or changing over time), and controllability (whether controllable by the individual) [21]. Overall, attributions can be divided into self - attribution (or personal attribution) and interpersonal attribution (or others' attribution), with corresponding motivations called personal motivation and social motivation [22]. When individuals attribute their unfavorable situations to external factors (such as discrimination and unfair systems), they are more likely to experience subjective inequality. Internet information dissemination and public - opinion guidance may influence individuals' attribution of event causes, thereby affecting the perception of subjective inequality. For example, the Incel group tends to attribute their emotional difficulties to women's selectivity and the social gender structure, reinforcing their sense of subjective inequality.

Social Identity Theory: Proposed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, this theory explains the psychological basis of group relationships, discrimination, and prejudice [23]. It posits that individuals form part of their self - concept by classifying themselves into different social groups (e.g., race, nationality, gender, occupation) and develop a sense of identification with their own group. The basic processes include social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. When individuals are overly zealous about their own group and excessively emphasize inter - group differences in pursuit of self - esteem, it may trigger inter - group prejudice, conflict, and hostility [24]. The Incel group establishes group identity through online communities, reinforces negative perceptions of women, constructs an alien and detestable "other," and enhances the positive image of their in - group and each individual's self - esteem.

4. Analysis of the impact mechanism

In the current era of widespread internet penetration, internet use has had a profound impact on individuals' perception of subjective inequality. The extensive use of the internet has not only restructured information dissemination but has also shaped the Incel group's subjective perception of gender inequality through mechanisms such as information exposure, data transparency, attribution bias, and reinforcement of group identity, fueling the development of extreme gender ideologies. This section will conduct an in - depth analysis of these mechanisms, drawing on examples from domestic and foreign Incel communities.

4.1. Information exposure and social comparison

The internet, especially social media platforms, has significantly broadened individuals' information horizons, enabling them to access global information and diverse life - style displays, thereby increasing the likelihood of social comparison [25]. Social media amplifies upward social comparison through algorithmic recommendations and user - generated content (UGC). It exposes individuals to more information, intensifying the frequency and strength of social comparison.

Incel community members on platforms such as Reddit (e.g., "r/Braincels") are often exposed to content from "sex - market dominants." For example, Snoswell et al.'s analysis of two Reddit communities (high/low misogyny) found that members frequently cited cases of "highly attractive men interacting with women" and attributed their own difficulties to genetic inferiority through the "Red/Blackpill" theory. They believe that "80% of women are monopolized by 20% of men," thereby reinforcing their sense of relative deprivation [26].

These Incel members, who are often emotionally frustrated and single, experience heightened social comparison when seeing others share romantic moments and high - end social gatherings on social media. This frequent and intense comparison easily triggers relative deprivation, making them feel disadvantaged in relationships and life, thus significantly enhancing their perception of subjective inequality [27].

Upward comparison also has a significant psychological impact. In some domestic Incel - related online groups, members are prone to severe self - cognition deficiencies when comparing their monotonous lives and limited social interactions with others' seemingly perfect lives showcased on social media. This leads to questioning the fairness of society, reducing their happiness, and making them more sensitive to overall social unfairness [28].

4.2. Data transparency and fairness perception

Internet technology has restructured social - comparison paradigms through quantifiable visibility mechanisms. The increased transparency of personal achievements and others' performances enables easier comparison of inputs and outputs, as influenced by equity theory. While internet technology allows individuals to quantify "input - return" relationships more conveniently, information bias can lead to imbalances in fairness perception [29].

Specifically, digital platforms convert this process into quantifiable data indicators (e.g., interaction frequency, economic investment), transforming the "emotional labor - emotional return" exchange into a linear model (e.g., the ratio of messages sent to replies received). Theoretically, increased transparency should enhance social reciprocity. However, the interaction of algorithmic - recommendation mechanisms [30] and selective information exposure systematically deviates fairness perception from objective reality.

When systems repeatedly push "low - input high - return" heterosexual success stories, the relative deprivation generated by comparison is algorithmically amplified, forming a "systemic unfairness" cognitive loop [31]. Petré's research indicates that 72% of quantitative narratives in Incel forums involve selective data truncation, such as ignoring social - skill defects and emphasizing economic impacts [32]. These quantitative narratives reinforce the perception of "systemic exploitation."

Cognitive filtering mechanisms on social media exacerbate imbalances in information reception. Alessandro et al.'s study of 12 million users on Facebook and YouTube found that online users tend to select information consistent with their beliefs, forming polarized groups with similar views, i.e., the "echo - chamber effect." [33] Content - promotion algorithms may intensify this effect by considering user preferences, limiting exposure to unexpected content.

Similarly, the "perfect - relationship - information cocoon" constructed by domestic Incel groups on short - video platforms is essentially an algorithmic reinforcement loop based on initial behavioral

tags (e.g., frequent viewing of misogynistic content). This selective exposure makes them more one-sided and extreme in assessing social justice, further fueling the formation of subjective inequality perception. They believe the entire society is extremely unfair in allocating emotional resources, intensifying their inner discontent.

4.3. Attribution processes and external factors

Internet discussions and public - opinion dissemination significantly influence individuals' attribution of their social status and situations [34]. From a social - psychology perspective, individuals' attribution of their social status and situations is not only constrained by personal cognitive frameworks but is also shaped by the collective logic of network public opinion [35]. Internet communities foster extreme gender ideologies by attributing personal setbacks to structural oppression. Chinese scholar Guo Xinghua's empirical study shows that urban residents' relative deprivation is often accompanied by a preference for attributing to structural oppression, which is exponentially amplified in online communities [34].

From the attribution theory, when Incel groups face frustrations such as romantic failures and social isolation, they typically attribute their failures to external factors. In foreign Incel communities on platforms such as Reddit and 4chan, many members attribute their emotional difficulties to "social discrimination" and "gender inequality." They believe that women are biased against them in romantic choices and that society has not provided them with fair opportunities. They simplistically attribute romantic failures to "female mate - selection discrimination" or "lookism." This attribution style heightens their sensitivity to their situations, becoming fertile ground for extreme gender ideologies. They constantly vent such attributions online, attracting like - minded individuals and forming a negative public - opinion atmosphere.

The influence of online communities on Incel groups cannot be underestimated. In domestic Incel communities, members reinforce external causal interpretations through interactions, excessively attributing social issues to a specific gender, namely women. For example, they entirely blame women's "picky" and "materialistic" attitudes for their inability to find partners [36]. This one - sided attribution not only intensifies their perception of social inequality but also fuels hatred and hostility within the group, promoting the formation of extreme gender ideologies.

By theorizing "gender inequality," they attribute male difficulties to "women's preference for high - status men," constructing a pseudoscientific narrative that "80% of women are monopolized by 20% of men" and citing "social Darwinism" to support their views. This external attribution forms an "echo - chamber effect" within the community, excluding diverse explanations.

4.4. Social identity and group belonging

The sense of community belonging in the internet environment significantly impacts individuals' identification and self - awareness. The social - identity theory is prominently manifested in Incel groups. In foreign Incel communities, members form a strong group consciousness through their shared identity as "involuntary celibates." They interact and support one another within the community, strengthening their identification with the in - group and developing a strong rejection of the out - group, particularly women.

In these communities, members discuss negative views on women, regarding them as the root cause of their difficulties. For example, well - known Incel forums are rife with derogatory and abusive language towards women, distorting women's normal mate - selection standards into oppression against men.

Group resonance further strengthens individuals' stances on extreme gender ideologies. Reddit's Incel communities reinforce identity boundaries through terminology (e.g., "cel," "femoid") and

symbols (e.g., "red/blackpill"), dehumanizing women with terms such as "roastie" for sexually experienced females. In domestic Incel groups, members deepen their collective sense of injustice through interactions on platforms like Douban and Tieba, forming an "us vs. them" mindset. For example, on Chinese online platforms such as Douban and Tieba, Incel communities employ self-deprecation as a cultural strategy to construct a collective identity centered on victimhood under perceived female oppression. Taking Tieba as an exemplar, members adopt self-diminishing labels like "鼠鼠" (shushu, rodent-rodent) and "卢瑟" (Luse, phonetic transliteration of "loser") to reinforce their marginalized status. This discursive strategy operationalizes the transposition of structural societal contradictions—such as class rigidity and hyper-consumerism—into gendered conflict, constructing an imagined narrative of "female privilege" to rationalize the group's peripheral position.

From a sociological lens, this stigmatization constitutes a contemporary manifestation of symbolic violence. By equating "无孩爱猫女" (childless cat-loving women) with anti-natalist symbolism, attackers engage in dual negation: (1) deploying feline imagery as an animalizing metaphor to erode female agency, and (2) weaponizing accusations of "anti-marriage and anti-fertility" to reinforce traditional familial ethics. Notably, China's total fertility rate plummeted to 1.01 in 2023[37], while urban pet (dog/cat) consumption surged by 7.5% year-on-year to 300.2 billion yuan in 2025 [38]. Attackers strategically juxtapose these datasets to fabricate a causal link between "cat ownership and declining fertility," thereby displacing accountability for structural issues like housing unaffordability and childcare costs onto women.

Psychologically, this discourse reflects a modern reconfiguration of the scapegoat mechanism. Incels attribute their romantic failures to the narrative that "women prioritize cats over marriage," sustaining psychological equilibrium through the humiliation trope of "human inferiority to felines." Crucially, this stigmatization renegotiates traditional gender boundaries. This discursive practice transcends mere online subcultural performativity; it embodies a cultural neurosis within digital-era gender politics. As the rhetoric of human-animal antagonism intensifies, it risks catalyzing complex sociopsychological transformations. These phenomena not only illuminate microcosmic fissures in contemporary Chinese society but also serve as harbingers of latent systemic risks. The semantic distortion of originally neutral terms further underscores this mechanism. The term "小仙女" (little fairy), once a benign descriptor, has been reappropriated to satirize women as "excessively demanding, materially obsessed yet intellectually vacuous"—a label that parallels Western Incel culture's "Stacy" archetype but accentuates moral condemnation of material vanity. The ritualistic repetition of these symbols within closed online communities constitutes a cognitive restructuring ceremony—solidifying group identity through otherization and sublimating persecution complexes into collective psychological capital.

In summary, internet use profoundly influences individuals' subjective inequality perception through mechanisms such as enhancing social comparison, promoting fairness perception, influencing attribution processes, and reinforcing group identity, thereby affecting the extreme gender ideologies of Incel groups. During internet use, information exposure leads to imbalances in fairness perception, triggering external attributions that ultimately solidify into extreme ideologies through group identification. This complex interactive relationship reflects the process of cognitive pattern and social belief formation and restructuring in the modern digital environment as individuals face massive information and social structural changes. Therefore, it is essential to recognize this phenomenon to guide correct values and online public opinion and promote social harmony and understanding.

5. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the impact mechanism of gender inequality perception in internet use, it becomes evident that the internet, as a platform for information dissemination and social interaction, not only to some extent amplifies the perception of gender inequality but also reinforces this perception within specific groups. Taking the incel group as an example, the internet provides a platform for them to form a shared understanding of gender inequality and further spread this understanding through network effects. However, this perception of gender inequality does not objectively represent an existing social issue but is continuously magnified through subjective cognition and group interaction mechanisms. Future research can further explore strategies to guide the alleviation of this reinforcement process of inequality perception in cyberspace and promote the formation of more equitable and diverse gender ideologies.

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