Article

Rethinking Symbolic Violence on Social Media: Incels and Mentalisation

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Abstract
The aim of this article is to discuss the notion of symbolic violence and to foreground a psychoanalytic conceptualisation of the term. Having been popularised by Pierre Bourdieu and other thinkers, the term is routinely used to describe forms of violence that stop short of the physical. It remains under-theorised. Following a brief literature review, it is argued that psychoanalysis has much to add when it comes to conceptualising symbolic violence and how it plays out online. Peter Fonagy's theory of mentalisation is brought in to conceptualise symbolic violence as a particular form of externalised, distorted mentalisation. I finally apply the term to contemporary discussions and user exchanges on social media that are so often characterised by intense forms of symbolic violence. The misogynist incel community is presented as a case study via exemplary quotes. Incels display forms of symbolic violence that are characterised by vivid fantasies about other men and women which reveal a distorted, yet highly coherent and organised, symbolic world.

Keywords
symbolic violence, psychoanalysis, mentalisation, online misogyny, incels

Introduction

"Alone with your thoughts, yet in contact with an almost tangible fantasy of the other, you feel free to play", the psychoanalytic technology scholar Sherry Turkle (2011, p. 188) writes about the experience of using the internet and particularly social media. The sentence raises some fundamental points about contemporary online experiences which lend themselves to further psychoanalytic discussion: the importance of thinking, individuality, play, and a fantasy of the other that is so vivid it almost becomes tangible. Social media platforms have enabled such forms of playful communication and exploration of identities, but they have also enabled harm and a torrent of online abuse, harassment, bullying, sexism, racism, misogyny and other types of extremism which they struggle to keep at bay. Researchers have termed such behaviour "symbolic violence" or use related terms like "symbolic harm", "digital violence", "incivility, or "toxicity" (Recuero, 2024, p. 2).

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The term *symbolic* is commonly understood as designating something that is not real; as representing something; standing in for something or someone; or in contrast to the *actual* or *physical*. "From a psychoanalytic perspective, the symbol refers to all indirect and figurative representations of unconscious desire (symptoms, dreams, slips of the tongue, parapraxes, etc.)" (Gibeault, 2005, p. 1706). In more colloquial understandings, there is always a relationship between the symbol and that what is symbolised or what it refers to. We may be able to easily read an image of a heart as symbolising romantic love, for example. "Symbols reflect social arrangements, but they also affect social arrangements" (Nietz, 1993, p. 93) and this is particularly the case on social media.

As social media platforms grew over the last two decades, opportunities for symbolic violence increased too and in response user guidelines were tightened and often thousands of outsourced content moderators hired at low cost to moderate and remove content in violation of such policies (Gillespie, 2018). Many on the Right have bemoaned that such practices threaten free speech and one of the first actions by Elon Musk when he bought Twitter in 2022 (now renamed X) was to sack content moderators and staff responsible for regulation and oversight, and undo many policies relating to acceptable content, which resulted in a dramatic increase in hate speech, particularly racism and antisemitism. Possibly worried, or perhaps pleased, by policy changes under the incoming Trump administration, Mark Zuckerberg announced measures similar to Musk's in January 2025: effectively undoing fact checking and pushing for free speech because Facebook had allegedly become too biased (McMahon, Kleinman & Subramanian, 2024). In the case of X and Facebook, many saw a shift in favour of symbolic violence increasing.

Recuero (2024) has argued that symbolic violence and toxicity are strongly present on social media today. The term "symbolic violence" is used to analyse a wider range of content. The concept has been employed to analyse less overt forms of violence, such as particular kinds of humour, trolling, passive-aggressive discourses, and other mechanisms that reinforce and legitimise oppression (e.g. DeCook, 2018; Lumsden & Morgan, 2018; Nascimento & Bispo da Silva, 2021; Recuero, 2024). While these manifestations of hostility may appear less harmful than physical violence, they nonetheless constitute forms of violence because they set out to harm particular individuals and groups, for instance women. They also seek to, directly or indirectly, humiliate, repress, or damage their agency and subjectivity. Symbolic violence and related terms have not been clearly conceptualised or defined, Recuero argues (2024, p. 5). Most studies concentrate on the existence of symbolic violence online, for example through content or discourse analyses, rather than trying to unpack the term as a psychosocial formation which makes for particular actions embedded in specific social contexts and patterns, or a *habitu*s to put it in Pierre Bourdieu's terms (1990). Psychoanalysis is particularly suited for such a task because it consists of a unique theory of symbols and symbolism and shows how fantasy and reality shape each other.

Perhaps particularly relevant for this journal's aims and scope, the notion of symbolic violence seems to have acquired new importance and a status of common cultural currency. At a time when right-wing and racist commentators have decried a new age of *wokeness* and *cancel culture*, they diagnose unjustified pushbacks of so-called *snowflakes* and morally aggrieved individuals who seek to censor common sense and free speech in order to allegedly defend against uncomfortable truths or having to engage with opinions different from their own. The term *cancel culture* has been hotly debated in this context. One possible definition of the term is an act of stopping harmful or offensive behaviour by withdrawing a platform or other support for a particular individual or group (Krüger, 2024, p. 144). Such acts of *cancelling* are often demanded and communicated publicly by individuals on social media. As the #MeToo movement has shown, for example — the ability of oppressed, abused, or marginalized individuals to publicly name perpetrators on social media can be regarded as an important development of digital activism. Social media platforms are a means to achieve a sense of publicness and community for those groups. Individuals can often no longer get away with abusive and violent behaviour. In turn, many have disputed the very existence of cancel culture and have rightfully pointed out that many instances of deplatforming or cancelling are mere shifts in discourses, whereby voices that have always been marginalized are now claiming their rightful place on the discursive stage: BIPoC or LGBTQI+ individuals, for instance. Voices on the Left and Right have equally lamented that various groups, lobbies, mobs, or factions have placed a severe strain on free speech because of an allegedly omnipresent risk of cancellation. Others have pointed to the limits of free speech and the refusal to debate certain positions which actively propagate harm such as racism. At the same

time, many outlets have emerged in recent years that seek to give a platform to those who are allegedly being ignored or cancelled by the mainstream.

At the same time, and as a flipside to misguided diagnoses of wokeness and cancel culture, a widespread sensitivity to symbolic violence and harm can be observed which particularly plays out online: a sense and duty that individuals must be in touch with their particular socio-economic, sexual, ethnic, and bodily background so as to critically reflect on their privilege (for instance, being white, masculine-presenting, able-bodied, middle class, etc.) so as to pre-emptively reduce symbolic harm that may be caused because of one's identity – those constitute dynamics which, again, have been hotly debated as identity politics, which goes beyond the scope of this article. This form of consciousness also explicitly includes an awareness of the dangers that particular speech acts may bring and to what extent they should be moderated when engaging in dialogue with others. *Fragility* thus seems to be a symptom of the contemporary discourses and forms of relating. This includes both concerted efforts at reducing fragility and proclaiming alleged solutions such as resilience, self-care, allyship, etc. which have often become coopted by consumerism and also an opening up and disclosure of vulnerabilities and mental health on social media, particularly through *Generation Z* and other demographic labels for young people today, where suffering and experiences of symbolic and actual violence are openly shared and in many cases re-enacted or performed, for instance through Instagram posts or TikTok videos (Benzel et al., 2024). Against this backdrop of attempts to defend against and open up engagement with varying forms of symbolic violence, an exploration of its psychoanalytic dimensions seems useful.

The notion of (symbolic) violence may be frequently evoked and used in research across different disciplines, but it is often used as a starting point, for example for empirical analyses of hate speech online, rather than being more fully conceptually defined. Pradeep Chakkarath and Christian Gudehus have argued for a broader conceptualisation of violence "that includes contempt, humiliation, insult, disenfranchisement, distress, deceit, disempowerment, malice, ruthlessness, and so on" (Chakkarath & Gudehus, 2023, p. 1) — and, as I would add, a focus on its symbolic dimensions. The types of symbolic violence discussed in this article directly and indirectly cause harm to women and others. As shown later on, the kind of symbolic violence committed by incels is in line with the broad concept of HARM (hostility, anger, repression and malice) which Chakkarath and Gudehus introduce in the inaugural issue of this journal. Scholarship on online misogyny and the incel community, which is used as a case study in this article, has often approached the topic through a perspective of securitization and a narrow sense of violence (Johanssen, 2022c). While such themes are central to the topic, a broader focus on their symbolic dimensions may capture its inherent complexity, thereby contributing to making "previously marginalized aspects of our conflict-laden lives [...] more visible, understandable, and analysable in terms of their importance to the larger whole of human existence" (Chakkarath & Gudehus, 2023, p. 1).

The aim of this article is thus to discuss the notion of symbolic violence and to foreground a psychoanalytic conceptualisation of the term. Having been popularised by Pierre Bourdieu and other thinkers, the term is routinely used to describe forms of violence that stop short of the physical but remains under-theorised. Following a brief literature review, it is argued that psychoanalysis has much to add when it comes to conceptualising symbolic violence and how it plays out online. Peter Fonagy's theory of mentalisation is brought in to conceptualise symbolic violence as particular forms of externalised, distorted mentalisation (Fonagy & Allison, 2012). I finally apply the term to contemporary discussions and user exchanges on social media that are so often characterised by intense forms of symbolic violence. The misogynist incel community is presented as a case study via exemplary quotes. Incels display forms of symbolic violence that are characterised by vivid fantasies about other men and women which reveal a distorted, yet highly coherent and organised, symbolic world. Conceptualising and analysing symbolic violence in this way may add a level of complexity which includes seemingly contradictory elements that show how symbolic violence can function as a particular discursive formation which is driven by specific forms of mentalisation and psychodynamics.

Symbolic Violence: A Literature Review

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu wrote extensively about symbolic violence and particularly regarded it as designating set structures which condition forms of inequality and oppression.[1] Particular systems of meaning and values are imposed and reproduced by dominant and subordinated groups in society and often regarded as legitimate, *natural*, *unchangeable* or otherwise as simply in existence. Even though Bourdieu was not particularly interested in psychoanalysis, he alludes to how forms of symbolic violence are unconsciously reproduced when he writes that "symbolic violence does not operate in the register of conscious intent" (2003, p. 25) and that "the foundations of symbolic violence reside not in a mystified consciousness that needs to be enlightened, but rather in tendencies adjusted to the structures of domination of which they are the product" (ibid., p. 26). Naturally, symbolic violence here needs to be regarded in close conceptual proximity to the Bourdieusian notion of habitus as a linkage between social structure and individual action or a particular, "deeply embodied set of dispositions" (Samuel, 2013, p. 399) that are embedded in social conditions, relations and systems as well as class relations. Bourdieu also argued that the family plays a strong role in shaping a particular individual's habitus and there is thus a developmental aspect to this concept. Related to Bourdieu's conceptualisation of the field as a particular site where structure and agency are intertwined with the symbolic and material (1998), is his concept of *symbolic power* which essentially shows how arbitrary the conditions and constituting factors of particular fields are and what or who belongs to a field, in what ways, etc. "Symbolic power exists whenever the arbitrary nature of a field's structure and rules is forgotten, misrecognized as natural and therefore preconsciously accepted as the unthought premises of social interaction. In such conditions, the judgments of dominant agents are accepted—often in advance through anticipation—by dominated agents, even when those judgments are contrary to the agents' interest.", as Samuel summarises (2013, p. 401). As particular sites of domination, those suffering from inequality and oppression in a field often tend to accept such conditions. Bourdieu again uses implicit psychoanalytic language in the below:

> The practical recognition through which the dominated, often unwittingly, contribute to their own domination by tacitly accepting, in advance, the limits imposed on them, often takes the form of bodily emotion (shame, timidity, anxiety, guilt), often associated with the impression of regressing towards archaic relationships, those of childhood and family. (Bourdieu, 1995, p. 169)

It comes as no surprise that such conceptualisations have been critiqued as deterministic and leaving little space for resistance or agency (Jenkins, 1982). But it is nonetheless a useful starting point for this article, to draw on Bourdieu's understanding of symbolic power as essentially being able to make use of a particular field to one's own (or a group's) advantage. Bourdieu's notion of *symbolic violence*, then, may appear equally fatalistic as consisting of "both the objective hardship and the subjective experience of self-blame, hesitation, self-censorship" (Samuel, 2013, p. 402). For Bourdieu, symbolic violence is a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and recognition (more precisely, misrecognition), cognition, or even feeling" (2001, p. 1-2). It, on the surface, is a softer or more unnoticeable form of violence, which others may submit to. Before being subjected to or submitting to symbolic violence, it is enacted and reproduced by actors and conditions in a given field. Throughout history, many accounts of where symbolic and actual violence have been actively resisted would contradict Bourdieu's seemingly essentialist foundations, from the recent #MeToo to the #BlackLivesMatter movements for example. Beginning with Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence places a focus on the social and structural over the individual and psychological, something I seek to remedy by bringing in psychoanalysis later on. To paraphrase Jessica Benjamin (2018), symbolic violence is therefore not just something that is "done to" someone by a "doer". It is a complex psychosocial formation, situated between the individual and the social — and between activity and passivity (Lawler, 2004).

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[1] This topic is of course not limited to post-Bourdieusian literature but is also discussed in different contexts in other theoretical traditions. Thinkers such as Gramsci, Fanon, Foucault, Derrida and those of the Frankfurt School come to mind here. It is beyond the scope of the article to discuss those traditions in detail.

Other authors who have drawn on Bourdieu and further developed the concept of symbolic violence include Loïc Wacquant and his ethnographic studies on urban violence, inequality and poverty (2004, 2009), Beatrice Hansen (2014) and her critique of violence, to name a few. The term has also been used in the fields of feminist and gender studies; postcolonial studies; sociology and other disciplines. Of particular relevance for this article is how forms of symbolic violence articulate themselves on social media. At first glance, social media platforms may be seen as particular enablers of symbolic communication that is often disconnected from what is seen as reality or the real world. It may appear to outsiders that individuals can take on new symbolic identities or alter their personas online without effects on their actual selves. However, as anonymity has gradually but steadily declined ever since social media platforms became really mainstream from the early 2000s onwards, the symbolic and actual have become complexly intertwined online, because most individuals who use social media do so with their names and other identifying information being revealed. At the same time, efforts continue to conceal one's identity online through e.g. fake accounts, especially when it comes to symbolic violence, targeted harassments and *shitstorms*. In times of virality, where content may spread exponentially and rapidly on platforms, symbolic violence in the form of hate speech for example is aestheticised through memes, graphics, videos, or podcasts (deCook, 2018; Lumsden & Morgan, 2018; Johanssen, 2022a; Recuero, 2024). While many scholars have critically examined the dramatic increase in symbolic violence and harm online (which often results in physical harm), the actual psychodynamics of symbolic violence and its production are seldom discussed and conceptualised. Instead, and understandably, the effects and products of symbolic violence are analysed. A focus on the creation of symbolic violence can add further complexity.

In the field of psychoanalytic media studies, scholars have conceptualised the internet and social media in particular as sites of psychodynamics which all revolve around (conflicts and desires of) the symbolic. For Lacanians, the Symbolic Order is a crucial concept as, broadly speaking, a universal cluster of language and speech (the signifier), the law as well as norms and customs that determine a subject in social reality from birth. Slavoj Žižek (e.g. 1998), Jodi Dean (2010), Matthew Flisfeder (2021) have all, although in different ways, conceptualised social media as enabling particular relations between the subject and the imagined authority of the big Other which respectively revolve around the reproduction or dissolution of the Symbolic Order. For Flisfeder, social media activity is aimed at willing the big Other back into existence, even though the subject knows that the big Other does not exist. "In order to save her desire, the subject requires (at least the fantasy of) some figure of prohibiting agency whom she can transgress, whose gaze she wishes to impress. Today, we transpose this gaze onto the form of social media" (2021, p. 66), as he notes. In moments of transgression and rule-breaking, so the desire, the subject would be confronted with the big Other. Such moments are particularly exemplified by hate speech, harassment, *doxxing* (the revealing of someone's personal information online), cyberstalking, cyberbullying, or revenge porn – some of the most common forms of symbolic violence online today. With Lacan, we would conceptualise such forms as masochistic desires for punishment and to be brought back in line by the big Other (Johanssen & Krüger, 2022). But there is more to them, as will be discussed. It is particularly the fantasmatic nature of them which is of significance. In his recent, brilliant psychoanalytic account of social media, Steffen Krüger (2024) has analysed shitstorms. According to Krüger, shitstorms are particularly related to humour (and also seduction dynamics in the crowd) and to the ironic tone that is strongly prevalent on X. The aim of the shitstorm is also always to aggressively overwhelm the target person in a boundless wave of disinhibition and often to shame them. However, these dynamics are often negated in the shitstorm itself and the moral element is emphasized. Shitstorms often occur due to moral motivations, for example when a post that was meant to be funny goes completely wrong.

Shitstorms have also increased significantly in the age of the culture wars between the Left, Right and liberals. Social media, such as X, is structured by echo chambers and filter bubbles (Bruns, 2018; Chun, 2021) and increases the visibility of content that is particularly extreme and aimed at certain groups. The design of the platform is structured in such a way that, although one could in theory view all content, users are more likely to follow accounts that reflect their own preferences, political identity and so on, and they are algorithmically more likely to be recommended content that they supposedly want to see. In the case of X, its algorithms have been deliberately altered since Musk took over to increase the visibility of right-wing content and thereby strengthen political power (McMahon, Kleinman & Subramanian, 2024). Shitstorms are

therefore always signals to one's own community: 'Look, I'm doing the right thing and getting upset about the right issue!'. It is important to emphasise that there are different kinds of shitstorms and that a shitstorm triggered by right-wing extremists is not the same as one directed against sexist or racist statements. Nevertheless, as Krüger writes, it is often about morality and the strong belief of being in the right. These dynamics are intensified by the mass of users and often amplified by accounts with a wide reach. It is often well-known users on X who incite or start a shitstorm and then all inhibitions fall among their followers. Fundamentally, the point is to silence the user but also to make them realise that they have done something wrong.

The Bourdieusian notion of symbolic violence may arguably have very little to do with the type of violence I have so far alluded to, which is certainly not consciously affirmed or reproduced by those it is directed towards: women, people of colour, the marginalised. However, the structural dimensions are useful to hold onto as well as the softer or gentler aspects to this kind of violence that Bourdieu emphasised. As Xu writes, "unlike those violence types resorting to physical force, it being symbolic resides in the sense that it is established via the unnoticed domination without explicit force or coercion during the social habits that are manifest every day" (2019, p. 3). The forms of symbolic violence mentioned here have become *normalised* on social media today and this may increase further in the future, given the changes to Facebook and X outlined in the Introduction. Additionally, the technological dimensions of platforms and of algorithms in particular can be described as being symbolically violent by design for they aggressively, but unobservable to users, shape the user experience on platforms: what content is recommended on YouTube, what users see on their X timeline, how results on Google are ranked, which artists are suggested on Spotify, and so on is all decided by algorithms (Johanssen, 2019; Chun, 2021). Algorithms function in an invisible and unknowable way and users cannot but accept, even desire, their functionality because they make platforms work (Flisfeder, 2021). It has been widely documented that algorithms by design have increased political polarisation and pushed more extreme and divisive content to users on YouTube, X or Facebook for example (Chun, 2021) — while appearing gentle, functional and unavoidable.

From Symbol to Mentalisation

Before discussing and conceptualising symbolic violence from a psychoanalytic and psychosocial perspective, some groundwork is needed in relation to the psychoanalytic notion of symbolisation and Peter Fonagy's work on mentalisation. Freud famously placed some emphasis on symbols as being symptomatic of (the symptom may itself be a symbol) deeper layers and unconscious dynamics of someone's psyche and standing in for certain meanings, as in his dream theory for example (1981a). In dreams, there are manifest and latent dimensions and the imagery of dreams is often full of symbols which Freud argued could be deciphered because they stood for universal or easily understandable things (a cigar is a phallic symbol and this may have particular meanings in the context of one patient) or they were more complicated to understand at first but could be deciphered in the consulting room by patient and analyst. As Ernest Jones (1916) highlighted, what is symbolised is often repressed and thereby finds a distorted or modified expression. Of course, psychoanalysis is not just a theory and method of desymbolisation. "Freud's theory of the symbol cannot therefore be separated from a conception of symbolization, which bears out the fact that the psychoanalytic approach is more a tripartite theory of interpretation, where it is necessary to consider the subject who symbolizes, than a theory of translation seeking to proceed via the simple substitution of one term for another" (Gibeault, 2005, p. 1707). The symbol marks something that is both present and absent: it establishes an equation and thereby makes it real while remaining imaginary or constructed. The red heart is a symbol for love in certain contexts, it is not love as such. The teddy bear the infant creates as a transitional object has both objective and subjectively-animated qualities. For psychoanalysis, symbols are often cryptic and enigmatic. They are universal and not primarily cultural or socially constructed, yet are of course shaped by culture and the social but are more primordial and related to the primary process. "Spontaneous in origin and typically sensorial, the symbols create a concrete bridge between the body and the primary object world" (Blum, 2005, p. 1711). Related to the symbol is the process of symbolisation. An absent object is mentally represented by the subject and this activity essentially organises mental space and enables fantasising, both unconsciously and consciously. For Freud, the first instance of symbolisation is the baby's transition from need to drive as the baby forms fantasies and images through the experience of satisfaction at the breast of the caregiver, a process that involves delay,

waiting and anticipation (Freud, 1981b) during the patterns of breastfeeding. This is one of the acts that gives rise to mentalisation as the baby grows into an infant and toddler.

Against this backdrop, Peter Fonagy's theory of mentalisation sheds further light on internal processes and how they become symbolically articulated online. Mentalising is more than just thinking or cognition. It is an act of mental activity whereby the individual imagines what others might be thinking or feeling. Fonagy has written about this notion for decades and it can only be briefly unpacked here (see Fonagy, 1989, 1991; Fonagy et al., 1991; 1997; Fonagy & Target, 1996, 2000, 2007; Fonagy & Allison, 2012). "The basic suggestion was that the capacity for representing self and others as thinking, believing, wishing or desiring does not simply arrive at age four, as an inevitable consequence of maturation. Rather, it is a developmental achievement that is profoundly rooted in the quality of early relationships" (Fonagy & Allison, 2012, p. 12). Developed as part of different projects on borderline personality disorder as well as child analysis, Fonagy and colleagues drew parallels between types of thinking present in borderline patients and young children alike. It is a developmental and attachment-based theory which posits that the capacity to mentalise is formed in the interaction with "more mature and sensitive minds" (p. 13). Mental states are experienced as representations which link the inner and outer world. To put it a little simplistically, secure attachments lead to the capacity for mentalisation in babies and infants. The capacity of caregivers to think about their child is crucial here too and further contributes to forms of secure attachment (Fonagy & Luyten, 2009). If forms of attachment are insecure, for example because of maltreatment at home, the capacity to mentalise can be severely affected. A key dimension of mentalisation for Fonagy is affect regulation. With mentalisation comes the capacity to regulate emotions and affects, to discharge them internally or to turn them into actions. Gradually during infancy and up to the age of six, the child arrives at more complex forms of mentalisation which culminate in the ability to have an empathic understanding of the self and others, an emerging self-concept, and other characteristics (Fonagy & Allison, 2012, pp. 20-22). As Fonagy and Allison point out, there can of course be instances of "mentalisation failure" (ibid., p. 26) where someone may attack another's mentalisation while not mentalising themselves. Statements and accusations such as 'You are trying to drive me crazy' or 'You would be glad if I was dead' from the parent to the child indicate such failures for example. Such "statements only make sense in a non-mentalizing world" (ibid., p. 27) where mentalisation is hindered or dysfunctional. Different types of distorted, failed or dysfunctional forms of mentalisation have been conceptualised in the literature (e.g. Sharp & Venta, 2012). There is a risk of regarding the subject as an insular being which is part of particular attachment dynamics in theories of mentalisation that disregards the role of the social and culture in fundamentally affecting mentalisation. However, I argue that the discussion presented so far is nonetheless useful for further theorising a particular social problem of our time: symbolic violence and how it occurs online.

Symbolic Violence from a Psychoanalytic Perspective

A psychosocial perspective on symbolic violence needs to account for structural and psychological dimensions of this phenomenon. Drawing on Fonagy's work, it may be tempting to analyse particular forms of symbolic violence (i.e., hate speech, racism, sexism, misogyny) as individual pathologies. While this may be fruitful, it is impossible to do so without conducting in-depth interviews with perpetrators and such an approach risks disregarding the social dimensions of a phenomenon that is now so widespread that it begs the question to what extent it is enabled by the technological foundations of platforms rather than just the troubled minds of individuals. I return to this point in a moment. When we conceptualise symbolic violence as particular externalisations of mentalisation that is embedded in socio-technological structures, we pay first and foremost attention to how symbols, codes and acts of mentalisation are externalised and shared online. A process that is in a sense universal and encouraged by the workings of social media platforms and the appearance of the internet. Even though we now live in a so-called post-digital era where boundaries between the online and offline or virtual and real have become blurred because of the ubiquity of the internet. The world wide web and social media in particular nonetheless give off an aura of virtuality which seems deceptively uncoupled from outside reality. This characteristic encourages intense processes of mentalisation and their externalisation in users. The sole point of existence of most platforms today is the provision of user-generated content with which profits are made through targeted advertising: broadly speaking, users are encouraged to externalise their mental states. Such a world is therefore the quintessential formation of a symbolic universe that taps into universal processes of symbol formation, symbolism and not least

mentalisation which of course have strong unconscious dimensions. Platforms function similar (but by no means analogous to) the psychoanalytic notion of the container (Ogden, 2004). Through their design interfaces, they encourage users to impulsively empty themselves into them. "Drag photos and videos here," Instagram reads. "What's on your mind, Jacob?," Facebook asks. "Create," YouTube demands. "What's happening?," asks X. Such features afford particular forms of mentalisation, which are then creatively externalised and responded to by others. They remain on the symbolic level because they, like other media, are representations and depictions of (psychic) reality. They are also social in nature and rest on the desire to imagine what others might think of particular posts. They anticipate reactions from others in the form of likes, comments, shares, follows, etc. and if the desired responses do not follow, intense dissatisfaction is felt (Dean, 2010; Flisfeder, 2021; Johanssen & Krüger, 2022; Krüger, 2024).

It is a key aspect, and achievement of, psychoanalysis across all schools of thought that violence and aggression are regarded as fundamental aspects of human nature. For Fonagy (2003), physically violent individuals often have an incapacity to mentalise. He does not include the kind of symbolic violence discussed in this article. I argue that forms of symbolic violence hinge on mentalisation, however distorted it may be, and are in fact forms of creative destructiveness deeply embedded in social relations online due to the nature of social media just outlined. As discussed through an example in the next section, forms of symbolic violence require intense fantasising, symbol formation and mentalisation. Naturally, such forms of violence are not to be equated with secure forms of mentalisation, but they constitute the vivid mental construction of fantasies (and in many cases their reproduction) which require processes of mentalisation to be active. For Fonagy, there is a fundamental disconnect in acts of violence between internal states and external actions.

> The individual, having physical awareness of his bodily self, will 'know' that aggressive or violent action was committed by him. Yet the subjective experience of these acts will not be the same as it is for acts committed by individuals whose agentive self is intact. In individuals who commit aggressive or violent acts, the possibility of disconnecting internal state and action will lead to actions that are not curtailed by mentalization of their implications. (Fonagy, 2003, p. 36)

This disconnect between the internal and external is amplified online due to the internet's split nature which prioritises the symbolic and virtual, as discussed above. Symbolic violence of course also takes place outside the internet, but it is so widespread online because the other who it is aimed at as a victim can be even easier dehumanised than in a face-to-face encounter. The fantasy of the other is both decoupled and intensely attached to actual others. In a misogynistic post on X, for example, women are distorted through particular acts of mentalisation which imagine and reflexively take into account what response the users might elicit: from women themselves and from others. Such dynamics are explored through an example in the next section.

Case Study: Incels, Symbolic Violence and Distorted Forms of Mentalisation

The incel (short for involuntary celibate) community is a highly misogynist community, which has existed online for some time and rose to prominence from the 2010s onwards. Self-declared incels are active on various social media platforms as well as their own fora. Incels have for the most part never been in a romantic relationship with a cis woman. Their discourses are intensely sexist, misogynist and at times racist. The incel community is diverse, global and home to men of different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds (Johanssen, 2022a). Definitive demographic data does not exist. Incels adhere to the belief in a sexual hierarchy. At the top are, what they call, white *Chads*, alleged alpha males and the most attractive men in society, whom incels claim most women desire. The most attractive women, referred to as *Stacys*, embody conventional beauty ideals often portrayed in the media, such as tall, blonde supermodel-like appearances. According to incels, Chads make up 20% of men, yet they capture the attention of 80% of women. The remaining 20% of women, *Beckys*, are deemed willing to engage in relationships with the majority of men, whom incels label as *normies*, *betas* or *cucks*. At the bottom of this hierarchy are incels themselves, who see themselves as destined to be forever alone. They frequently reference biology and evolutionary theories, arguing that society operates under social Darwinism, where women select partners based on physical appearance and wealth to ensure the best genetic offspring. That

today's men have allegedly been undermined by women and feminism. It is women who hold sexual and reproductive power in society. Incels claim there are no women left who match their attractiveness level, or *looksmatch*, as they term it. Ranking is central to incel ideology, with individuals constantly evaluating themselves and others. For instance, they believe a woman rated as 3/10 should only be with a man of the same rank, not a highly attractive 10/10 Chad. Many incels discuss mental health issues, such as depression or autism, and have weaponised a kind of trauma language whereby they blame others for their suffering (Johanssen, 2022a, b). It is also a deeply masochistic community (Krüger, 2020). It is impossible to verify how many incels actually suffer from mental health conditions.

Incels have created a highly symbolic world and a universe full of symbols where archetype-like characters figure as embodying particular functions and characteristics. From their perspective, this fantasy world is highly coherent and closed off, while being publicly shared online. Outsiders are not permitted to engage with incels and are left in a position of bystanders, who observe the workings of an obscure and deeply toxic community which nonetheless functions as a kind of male support group. Like other subcultures online, incels make use of specific images, memes and other audio-visual material as insignia of their community. This means that the figures of the Chad, Stacy, or Becky are often depicted, for instance in the popular *Virgin vs. Chad* meme:

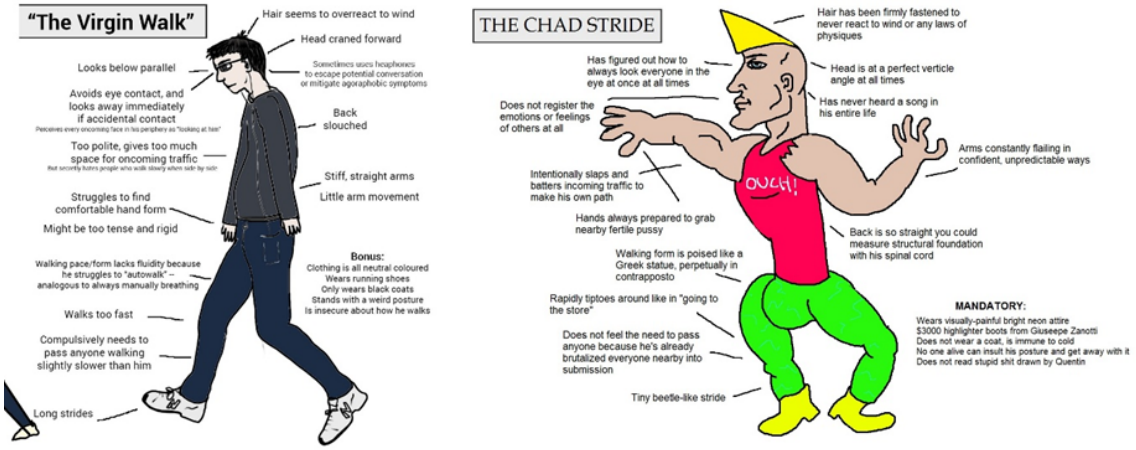

Figure 1, Source: https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1265119-virgin-vs-chad

The meme is also adapted to depict Becky and Stacy:

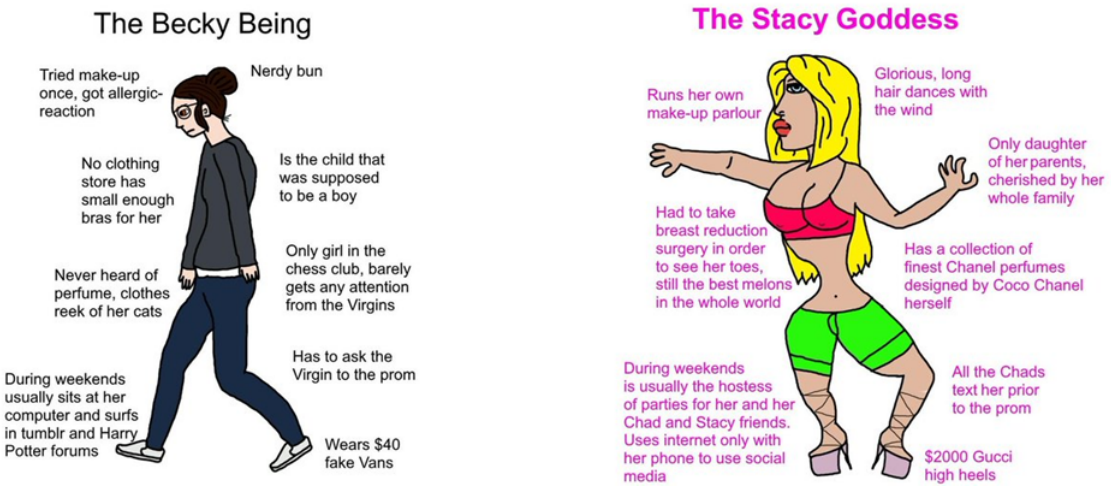

Figure 2, Source: https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1265119-virgin-vs-chad

Such depictions seek to symbolise the alleged universal qualities of different types of women. It can be said that incels engage in symbolisation whereby absent subjects from their lives

(attractive men and women) are brought into their imaginary world as objects of intense desire and hatred. They are turned into objects and mentally brought to life, constructed and subsequently externalised through posts, videos, memes, etc. The same dynamics are in place on the discursive level. In the following, some exemplary quotes from the forum https://incels.is are presented. They were gathered in December 2024[2]. One user writes:

> There comes a point where it's funny. You can't take anyone seriously. They're all just so stupid and predictable. Woman found a guy who has a good personality!? It turns out he's Chad 10/10. Women thinks a guy is creepy? He's unattractive. And ofc [of course] women are worshipped for whatever they do while men are constantly trashed. https://incels.is/threads/people-become-funny-when-youre-blackpilled-enough.700498/

> They have no honor, no discipline, no creativity, no knowledge.
> They behave like animals quite frankly.
> Sure they have their flesh holes, but after that what else is there left of them?
> If you removed their body, and all that was left was the 'soul', what would they have to offer genuinely?
> Honestly foids [derogatory term for women] don't deserve us, we are too good for them. We honestly mog [surpass] them in every category except for looks. (And the only reason for that is because they wear clown paint to cover up their facial abnormalities).
> Really women are inferior in every way, and no matter how hard they fight to get the upper hand on men, they will always be lesser than because that is how they were created.
> They're meant to serve men.
> https://incels.is/threads/women-have-no-redeeming-qualities.696785/

Such forms of symbolic violence constitute acts of symbolisation because they organise the individual incel's mental space and reveal the intense role fantasies play for them. They constitute forms of symbolic violence because they create harmful and hateful constructions of women. A particular psychic reality is created through mentalising and then externalising how women allegedly feel and what they allegedly do. The above narratives dehumanise women, yet they also make them come alive in a violent way. Women are mentally represented in those men's minds as "thinking, believing, wishing or desiring" (Fonagy & Allison, 2012, p. 12) particular things. They are made to embody specific mental states, "needs, desires, feelings, beliefs, goals, purposes and reasons" (ibid., p. 11) through those distorted acts of mentalisation, because in reality they do not embody those. Women have honour, discipline, creativity, knowledge, and so on. Abstract fantasies of women and men are constructed through such narratives. As with any form of symbolic violence online, those narratives are not just mere externalised thoughts or toxic opinions, they are relational and social because they are addressed to others and imagine what the other might think of them and how they might react. In another post, a user writes:

> Women don't desire a balding, short, fat, ugly faced guy or even if the guy is just 'normal' slim, slightly muscular, a complete average Normie - but if he has no job or a job that is crappy and lives in a 1 bedroom Apartment and has no car or a really shitty

[2] As this article is primarily theoretical and exploratory in nature, a small sample of ten forum threads was selected during December 2024. Specific narratives about women and men were selected for the purposes of this article and the many other themes that are present in the incel community (discussions of mental health, lived experiences, politics, popular culture) were seen as outside of the scope. They were analysed using qualitative content analysis. While the data collected here is taken from an incel forum, incels are also active on social media platforms like X or YouTube.

> 20 yo car that costs like 2k Max...well then most women would also say no.
> Because the Modern women is socially more powerful then the Modern Man.
> And the Modern Man past Highschool age, has no opportunities to meet people. […]
> Virgins in their 20s and 30s always existed. They were created from social rejection or self isolation or mental problems.
> An Incel is literally just a virgin.
> The only difference is virgin you are since birth, incel if your 18 or older and still a virgin. Also a GOOD LOOKING GUY (Chad) has the lowest chance of being a virgin. Because he is not INVOLUNTARY celibate. He gets sex by simply looking at women.
> He is a 6'5 white, gymmnaxxed, model with 500k instagram followers and drives a 250k Porsche who walks through the masses of Japan, Thailand, Korea, Peru, Columbia, Bangladesh, China and India and picks whatever women he wants.
> https://incels.is/threads/why-do-people-think-incel-women-hater.700649/

Others affirmatively respond: "There is basically no scenario where a woman's and my motives line up; we are born enemies.", writes one. Another adds: "Women hate me cause I'm ugly, they hated me first". Others claim that they do not hate women but were rejected by women and this led them to join the community. While the above post may raise some thoughts about hegemonic notions of beauty and what counts as desirable (Kay, 2021), the conclusions drawn are nonetheless misguided because the blame is placed on women. There are some similarities between incels and borderline states where individuals may not differentiate between fantasy and reality, and between the virtual and non-virtual in this case, and equate the two. This does not mean that incels have borderline traits but that their narratives reveal similar dimensions and, above all, a lack of empathy and regard for the other who is outside of their community. Incels themselves often discuss what Fonagy et al. (2011) have named key dimensions of borderline personality disorder: emotional dysregulation, impulsivity, suicidality, disturbed interpersonal functioning. They implicitly and explicitly identify those traits in themselves but often outrightly reject any form of therapeutic intervention. Instead, incels go to great lengths and efforts at constructing a symbolic universe in which figures are created and made to embody particular acts, feelings, thoughts and desires, which may very well have been influenced by those men's personal experiences with others but are exaggerated into universal, shrill types. Those fantasies acquire symbolic power, which remains within the incel community rather than being actual power and a haunting quality as they are endlessly circulated online.

What is striking about the fantasies about virgins, incels, Chads and Stacys that are created by incels is their vividness and plasticity. The fantasy of the other is "almost tangible", to quote Sherry Turkle (2011, p. 188) once more. Such fantasies are more than misogyny or symbolic violence in the conventional sense of the term is often used by researchers. They are, paradoxically, sophisticated, organised and creative acts of distorted mentalisation that requires significant psychic energy and mental activity. While the incel community is much more complex than this brief case study can show, the kind of symbolic violence enacted by its members is mostly devoid of self-critical introspection, or in other words: their ability to mentalise seems impaired. Others and society are blamed for the incel's predicament. Similarly to online racism or sexism, such narratives (unconsciously) serve another aim, apart from keeping the object of hatred alive in fantasy: affect regulation. While Fonagy writes the following about physical violence, it is equally applicable to symbolic violence:

> Certain individuals may have no resources other than violence to protect their self-representation that is crucially weakened by their impaired mentalizing capacity. Superficially, acts of violence may be perceived as cathartic, but I believe the restoration of equilibrium is less to do with drive discharge than

> to do with the acquisition of an inner gestalt, the creation of an inner peace – an odd kind of tranquillity. (Fonagy, 2003, pp. 42-43)

It is precisely through acts of distorted forms of mentalisation and their externalisation online that a momentary tranquillity can be achieved. The fantasies are no longer just in a person's unconscious or conscious mind, they are externalised and made reality, an act endlessly encouraged and repeated by and on social media today in general.

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to reconsider the notion of symbolic violence through a psychoanalytic discussion of mentalisation. I considered symbolic violence to be taking on externalised forms of distorted mentalisation through exemplary content from the incel community. My discussion is also applicable to other types of symbolic violence on social media which frequently overlap, such as racism, harassment or abuse. The conceptual proposition I have made may add complexity and depth to the concept of symbolic violence, while retaining its more social aspects which Bourdieu and Bourdieusians have emphasised. Further work in this area could proceed with detailed empirical studies both in terms of how symbolic violence may relate to mentalisation as a cognitive process, through qualitative interviewing with perpetrators for example. Scholarship could also analyse content that is symbolically violent.

In their discussion of the notion of HARM, Chakkarath and Gudehus argue that its conceptual openness does "not focus on the allegedly 'central' aspects of *violence*, as is common in sociology, or on supposedly 'fundamental' aspects of *aggression*, as is common in social psychology" (2023, p. 1). I would argue that there is some common ground between the kind of symbolic violence I have discussed and the HARM concept: both go beyond essentialist conceptualisations and focus on phenomena that appear to be situated at the margins but are of equal seriousness as physical acts of violence or aggression. Additionally, a psychoanalytic perspective (coupled with considerations of the social) on such phenomena opens up space for seeming contradictions which can potentially provide richer analyses by highlighting the (developmental) role of fantasy and symbolisation when it comes to the construction and enactment of worldviews and ideologies.

Further theoretical work in this area may draw on object relations psychoanalysis. Rather than presenting symbolic violence as something inherently destructive or dangerous, it can be argued by drawing on D. W. Winnicott (2005) and on the work of Peter Fonagy that it is a key aspect of human development and, perhaps paradoxically, harbours a sense of playfulness and creativity for the young infant, which, when erupting in later life in the sense I have written about, makes for wrongly channelled dynamics. For Winnicott, symbolic violence through fantasising is a crucial and "normal" part of infant development. "To use an object the subject must have developed a *capacity* to use objects." (2005, p. 119, italics in original), Winnicott writes. Object here refer to inner objects in the object relations tradition, meaning internalised others and their experiences. As he goes on to explain:

> The subject says to the object: 'I destroyed you', and the object is there to receive the communication. From now on the subject says: 'Hullo object!' 'I destroyed you.' 'I love you.' 'You have value for me because of your survival of my destruction of you.' 'While I am loving you I am all the time destroying you in (unconscious) fantasy'. (Winnicott, 2005, pp. 120-121)

This transition marks, for Winnicott, the beginning of fantasy. The subject is able to use the other because they have survived the destructive fantasies (Johanssen, 2022a). It also gives away omnipotent control of the fantasmatic other, because the other has survived the destruction and has continued to reciprocate, relate and care for the infant – without retaliating. In so doing, the other is able to assert their own autonomy and agency vis-à-vis the infant. Both form a shared reality. "In adulthood, destruction includes the intention to discover if the other will survive" (1988, p. 38), as Jessica Benjamin has written. Similar dynamics are in play in the context of symbolic violence, however with a dramatic difference: women do not form a shared reality with incels and neither do the victims of other forms of abuse online. They may have survived acts of

symbolic violence, but incels are stuck in a repetitive feedback loop where the only shared reality they form is amongst themselves. For Winnicott, aggression is not "reactive to the encounter with the reality principle, whereas here it is the destructive drive that creates the quality of externality" (p. 125). Aggression emerges in the complex interplay of the inner and outer worlds and is managed by the caregivers for the infant or analyst in the consulting room for the patient. In both ways, the individual has been given the capacity to use others, as Winnicott would say. Such acts of use are reciprocal in any relationship and they do not mean acts of exploitation, destruction or aggression. They refer to the opposite and the capacity to tolerate frustration, uncertainty, disappointment and difference. In good enough encounters between individuals, both have found each other and recognised that love will always bring vicissitude. In encounters where the other remains entirely absent or imagined in distorted form, acts of symbolic violence remain without closure. This leaves them as acts of symbolic violence which, after all, remain, as the colloquial expression goes, *mental*.

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