



Figure 1 Preview of the results of the Transformer-based multimodal clustering analysis on the main Italian and Anglophone Incel communities.

Unraveling the Incelosphere Aesthetics. Memes and Visual Culture across the Italian and the English-speaking Incel Communities

Despite being a global communicative phenomenon, memes and internet visual culture possess a distinct local value that can be influenced by national or regional culture, as well as the traditions of a particular community. In fact, the connection between memes and cultural and social capital within cybercommunities has been extensively explored in the literature (Nissenbaum & Shifman 2017; Denisova 2019). Understanding these local references and tracing transnational continuities is crucial for decoding processes of meaning-making that occur both within communities (inside-jokes) and on a broader scale. Based on these considerations, to the best of our knowledge, our study is the first aiming to contextualize the use of memes and visual culture within the Italian and English-speaking Incelosphere, an affinity space known for its misogynistic and anti-feminist attitude. To achieve this, we analyze a sample of 800 images randomly selected from a larger multimodal dataset of images and texts from two main Italian and English-speaking forums. Thus, we seek to answer three main research questions: How prominent are memes compared to other types of visual content within Incel communities? To what extent do these visual contents express transnational values, political opinions, and interests? And to what extent do they convey similar meanings and draw upon the same body of knowledge and cultural references? To address these questions, we adopt a mixed qualitative and computational methodology in the distant viewing theoretical framework (Hiippala 2021). Computationally, we employ both a transformer-based multimodal clustering technique (Radford et al., 2021), to group images based on their similarity, and a state-of-the-art computer vision technique (Carion et al., 2020) to automatically detect common objects in the images. We further integrate this analysis with a multimodal discourse analysis. Using the open-source platform Label Studio (<https://labelstud.io/>), we manually annotate the sample relying on four domain experts. Following a specific codebook developed for the purpose of this study, we examine the images along three main axes: *aesthetics* (genre and layouts), *gender identities* represented, and *references to the internet and popular culture*, considering also the juxtaposition of textual context and image (Yus 2019). Our findings show significant differences in terms of aesthetic influences between the two communities, supporting the idea that, although this is a growing global phenomenon, communication, and shared values within the Incel communities are deeply rooted in and influenced by the local contexts.

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