How Topics on Looksmaxxing Communities Shifted Through the Pandemic

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Executive summary

CCC COVID Briefing Papers are an ongoing series of short-form, open access reports aimed at academics, policymakers, and practitioners, which aim to provide an accessible summary of our ongoing research into the effects which the coronavirus pandemic (and government responses) are having on cybercrime.

In this report, we consider the two most active looksmaxxing forums (communities associated with incel groups which focus on cultivating personal 'good looks' to attract romantic partners): `lookism.net` and `looksmax.me`. We analyse around 9 million posts scraped as a part of our ExtremeBB dataset to pick out popular topics, and specifically topics emerging in response to the pandemic. Unsurprisingly, we find that discussion of *physique enhancement* highly dominated others. The topics trending during the pandemic, however, were less associated with enhancing outward appearance, presumably as the lack of face-to-face contacts during lockdowns eased people's desire to boost their appearance. We find that the volumes of posts and posters increased after the pandemic was declared, then remained pretty stable for next few months before showing a sharp but short-lived rise after the George Floyd killing, indicating that these nominally-innocuous ancillary forums remain tied to the reactionary politics of incels more generally.

Looksmaxxing and inceldom

Looksmaxxing is a discussion-forum term for techniques aiming at enhancing one's physical attractiveness. It ranges from non-invasive methods such as styling, workouts and health supplements (*softmaxxing*) to more extreme ones involving hazardous procedures like cosmetic surgery and injecting synthetic hormones (*hardmaxxing*). It also includes a number of controversial methods such as *bone smashing*, which involves using repeated trauma to grow bone calluses on the jaw or cheeks, and *whitemaxxing*, where persons of colour use skin-lightening products and even surgery in an attempt to look more white. Looksmaxxing has a strong relationship with incel subcultures, whose members are often depressed at being unable to find sexual partners and blame their appearance. We analysed those incel communities in Briefing Papers #5 and #9.

Volume of posts and posters

As depicted in Figure 1, we observe a rise in the volume of posts and posters when the pandemic was declared, though it was not as sharp and short-lived as often seen in other cybercrime and incel forums that we have analysed. Afterwards, it remained stable, although there was a dramatic but short-lived peak from June to October 2020, with an increase of *ethnicity* discussion, which may correlate with the 'Black Lives Matter' protests against police brutality following the death of George Floyd at the end of May 2020.
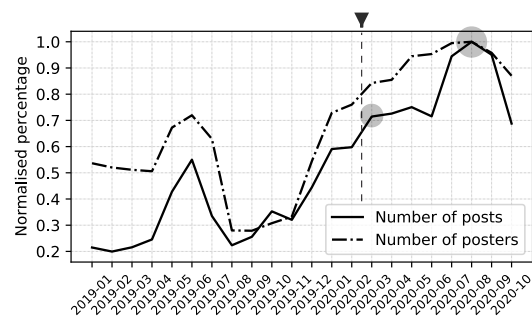

Figure 1: Volume of posts and posters

Discussion topics

Considering each forum post as a document in a collection, we applied Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) to explore clusters of keywords in the data; the implicit meaning of topics were then inferred by looking at this keyword distribution. The main topic of a post was assigned as the one with the highest probability based on its word distribution. To find an optimal model for the collection, we train a number of models ranging from 10 to 100 topics, then pick the best based on their coherence score, selecting a 50-topic model. The most popular topic is, as expected, *physique enhancement*. This accounts for around 18.5% of total post volume, 7 times more than the next most popular topic. Its top keywords (with corresponding probabilities) include:

$$0.090 \, \underline{fat} + 0.087 \, \underline{body} + 0.053 \, \underline{lose} + 0.043 \, \underline{muscle} + 0.037 \, \underline{weight} + 0.029 \, \underline{gain} + 0.019 \, \underline{lean} + 0.019 \, \underline{bf} +$$
$$0.017 \, \underline{cut} + 0.016 \, \underline{lift} + 0.015 \, \underline{train} + 0.014 \, \underline{shoulder} + 0.013 \, \underline{arm} + 0.013 \, \underline{skinny} + 0.012 \, \underline{leg}$$

The second most prevalent one is *ethnicity* with 2.7% of total volume, followed by *forum-related* (2.7%), and *softmaxxing* (2.6%). We also see discussions specifically focusing on extreme techniques such as *bone restructuring* and *plastic surgery* with 1.8% and 1.6% of posts volume, respectively.

Emerging topics in the pandemic

We now consider the topics which have significantly changed rank since March 2020 – when the global pandemic was declared (see Figure 2), finding that they are not specifically related to looksmaxxing techniques but are more general pandemic-related topics such as *conspiracy theory*, which jumped from rank #43 just before the lockdown in February 2020 to rank #11 at the end of the period. Perhaps understandably because of the shift to online activities, we see a surge of *sports video* discussions, which dramatically increased

Figure 2: The popularity shift of topics

from rank #25 on February 2020 to rank #2 on October 2020. Another big leap is that of *arguments*, where members engage in conflict, increasing 14 ranks from #34 to #20. *Ethnicity* – a popular topic at all times – climbed to its highest volume share after the George Floyd killing, then remained stable from June to September 2020 (ranked around #2 and #3).
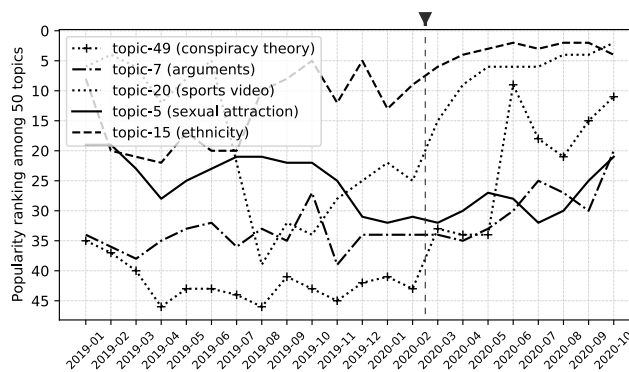
Conclusions

The composition of topics being discussed on looksmaxxing forums changed in response to the first lockdown in March 2020, in terms of both post volume and contents. This shows clear links between the (on the surface) innocuous discussions of personal improvement and an underlying reactionary and misogynist ideology, based in a colonial, white supremacist construction of 'attractiveness'. In subsequent briefing papers, we will monitor how these topics evolve during the second phase of lockdowns in late 2020 and around the US election in November 2020.