



# Seeing through the black-pill: Incels are wrong about what people think of them

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## ABSTRACT

Incels (involuntary celibates) are an online subculture of men who form their identity around their perceived inability to form sexual or romantic relationships. Many incels have a nihilistic perspective of the self, strong misogynistic beliefs about women, and importantly share the view that society hates them. This novel study explores the gaps between incels' perceptions of themselves and what wider society actually thinks about them. Using survey data from 135 incels and 449 non-incels, we found that incels overestimated how much society blames them for their problems and underestimated how much society sympathizes with them. Notably, however, higher levels of feminist identity among non-incels were linked to decreased sympathy and heightened animosity towards incels. Both incels and non-incels alike, regardless of feminist identity, agreed that incels pose a danger to themselves. Further analysis revealed that only incels' perception of societal blame was predicted by loneliness, which suggests that incel identity itself exerts a more pervasive influence on their distorted beliefs about society than individual differences in loneliness. We discuss how real-world hostility towards incels may partially fuel their distorted views about society and how our findings might inform therapeutic approaches to promote healthier social integration.

## 1. Introduction

"I think most of society hates us."

Incels participant in a qualitative interview (Daly & Reed, 2022).

Incels (involuntary celibates) are an online subculture of men characterized by misogynistic attitudes and self-loathing, rooted in their perceived inability to form sexual or romantic relationships (Speckhard et al., 2021). Involuntary singlehood is linked to low emotional well-being (Apostolou et al., 2024), and incels report high depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Costello, Daly, et al., 2024; Costello, Pennycook, & Rand, 2024; Costello, Rolon, et al., 2024; Costello, Whittaker, & Thomas, 2024; Delaney et al., 2024).

Research shows that incels have some cognitive distortions. Regarding female mate preferences, for example, they overestimate the importance of physical appearance and financial resources, and underestimate attributes like kindness, intelligence, and humor (Costello, Rolon, et al., 2024). These findings suggest that incels' worldviews are shaped by misperceptions not only about themselves but also about others.

## 2. The current study

Online rhetoric suggests that incels feel marginalized by society, a feeling confirmed from qualitative research (Daly & Reed, 2022). Despite extensive online discourse and media discussions, to date there has been no formal research about societal perceptions of incels and how accurately incels perceive them. This explorative study seeks to fill that gap by examining three key research questions: (1) What do people think about incels? (2) How accurate are incels in their perceptions of society's views of them? (3) How do incels' perceptions of themselves differ from societal views?

We also explore which individual differences among incels, such as loneliness and tendencies for interpersonal victimhood, may be associated with their misperceptions. Loneliness is a well-documented issue among incels (Costello et al., 2022); for example, a 2018 incels.co poll found only one-third reported having friends (Jeltsen, 2018). This isolation likely fuels misperceptions, as incels rely on nihilistic online echo chambers which may reinforce their distorted views (Costello, Whittaker, & Thomas, 2024). Networking with other incels is also linked to displaced aggression and rumination (Costello, Whittaker, & Thomas,

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2024), depression, and worsening opinions of women – of which incels are self-aware (Costello et al., 2022). Incels' misperceptions about how society sees them may then remain unadjusted by experience, further cementing their bleak worldview.

Incels' victimhood mindset is encapsulated by their 'black-pill' philosophy, a belief that there is nothing they can do to improve their romantic prospects (Glance et al., 2021). Two relevant dimensions of incels' tendency for victimhood (Costello et al., 2022) are their *need for recognition* and *ruminatation*. Incels have a preoccupation with having the legitimacy of their grievances acknowledged and may feel that society fails to sufficiently validate these concerns. Furthermore, incels often ruminate on feedback that confirms their negative self-view (Rousis et al., 2023) and identify wider society as their *enemy* (Whittaker et al., 2024). Incels with a stronger sense of victimhood may hold firmer beliefs about society's views of them.

Of course, "society" is not a homogenous set and people's views on incels likely vary. Feminist identity may be one source of this variation. Incels identify feminists as their main enemy (Whittaker et al., 2024), and the misogyny in incel spaces may make feminists less sympathetic to them. Research also shows that stronger feminist beliefs are linked to greater acceptance of harm to men if it is seen as benefiting women (Graso et al., 2023), suggesting that feminists may have less sympathy for incels (e.g., Carian et al., 2023). Together, these findings lead us to investigate a final exploratory question: (4) What individual differences, such as loneliness and victimhood, are associated with incels' misperceptions, and how does feminist identification shape non-incels' perceptions of incels?

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Participants

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling from social media platforms (X, formerly known as Twitter, and the Incels.co forum) without compensation. The lead author initially promoted the study by posting a link to the survey on their professional X profile, describing it as 'Exploring attitudes and behaviors around sexuality, wellbeing, and identity.' These posts were subsequently shared and reposted by other users, facilitating additional recruitment. To ensure targeted recruitment of this niche and typically hard-to-reach community, links to the survey were also posted on the Incels.co forum, a primary online space for self-identified incels. This approach enabled direct engagement with incel participants while simultaneously recruiting non-incels from broader social media audiences. After removing incomplete responses, the final sample included 135 male incels ( $M_{\text{age}} = 27.94$ ,  $SD = 7.26$ ) and 449 non-incels (332 men:  $M_{\text{age}} = 32.52$ ,  $SD = 9.89$ ; 117 women:  $M_{\text{age}} = 30.61$ ,  $SD = 9.28$ ). For this study, the term *society* refers to the responses of non-incel participants, offering an approximation of broader societal attitudes towards incels.

#### 3.2. Materials and procedure

Participants provided informed consent before completing a demographics questionnaire, which included a yes-no item assessing incel identification. Incels rated how they believed society views them, while non-incels rated their own opinions about incels, using seven items: (1) [Society thinks incels/Incels] only have themselves to blame, (2) [Society has/I have] sympathy for incels, (3) [Other people/I] want incels to succeed romantically, (4) Incels want other incels to succeed romantically, (5) Incels are a danger to society, (6) Incels are a danger to themselves, and (7) Incels hate women. Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Items 1, 2 (reversed), 3 (reversed), 5, and 7 were averaged to create a

composite animosity score ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ).<sup>1</sup>

Individual difference measures included loneliness ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ; Hughes et al., 2004), interpersonal victimhood ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ; Gabay et al., 2020), and feminist identification, assessed with a single-item scale (1 = Definitely Not to 5 = Definitely Yes). Participants received a debrief at the study's conclusion. The [redacted for peer review] ethics committee approved all procedures.

#### 3.3. Data analysis

Linear regressions examined group differences across the seven perception items and the composite score, using (a) group (incel male [0], non-incel male [1] and female [2]), (b) feminist identification, and (c) their interaction as predictors. Standardized beta coefficients were calculated for each predictor. To explore individual differences in incels' misperceptions, regression analyses were also run for incels only using loneliness and interpersonal victimhood as predictors. Misperception scores were calculated by subtracting mean non-incel scores from incel scores, with positive values reflecting overestimation. All analyses reported adjusted  $R^2$  values for model fit. Diagnostic checks confirmed that the assumptions of linear regression were met. Post-hoc power analyses based on adjusted  $R^2$  values revealed high statistical power ( $>0.97$ ) across all regression models.

### 4. Results

Observing the distribution of responses across the seven societal perception items (Fig. 1) indicated potential group differences between incels and non-incels, particularly for the questions related to sympathy and blame. Regression analyses (Table 1) show that incels overestimate societal blame and underestimate sympathy, with feminist identification moderating these effects. Higher feminist identification was associated with greater blame and animosity towards incels, especially among women (see Fig. 2). A notable exception to this pattern was agreement across groups that incels are a danger to themselves, highlighting shared concern for self-risk. Perceptions of incels as hating women varied, with feminist identification correlating with stronger agreement among non-incels (Table 1 and Fig. 2).

Loneliness significantly predicted perceptions of societal blame among incels but did not account for broader misperceptions of societal views. Tendencies for interpersonal victimhood showed limited predictive power (Table 2).

### 5. Discussion

Incels are a notoriously hard-to-reach population due to their distrust of academic researchers and primary data from self-identified incels remains scarce (Costello, Daly, et al., 2024; Costello, Pennycook, & Rand, 2024; Costello, Rolon, et al., 2024; Costello, Whittaker, & Thomas, 2024). This study therefore represents a significant contribution towards the understanding of incel psychology, drawing on a rare primary dataset to investigate a potential perception gap between incels' and society.

There were three key findings. First, societal views of incels were broadly sympathetic or neutral in most cases. Second, incels tended to overestimate societal blame and underestimate sympathy. Third, incels somewhat agreed with non-incels about the dangers they represent to society and themselves and the extent to which they hate women.

Individual differences of loneliness and tendencies for victimhood played a limited role in predicting incels' misperceptions, though loneliness was associated with their perceptions of societal blame. Finally, feminist identification correlated with decreased sympathy and support for incels' romantic success, increased levels of blame, and much higher

<sup>1</sup> Items 4–6 were not included as they did not reflect animosity.

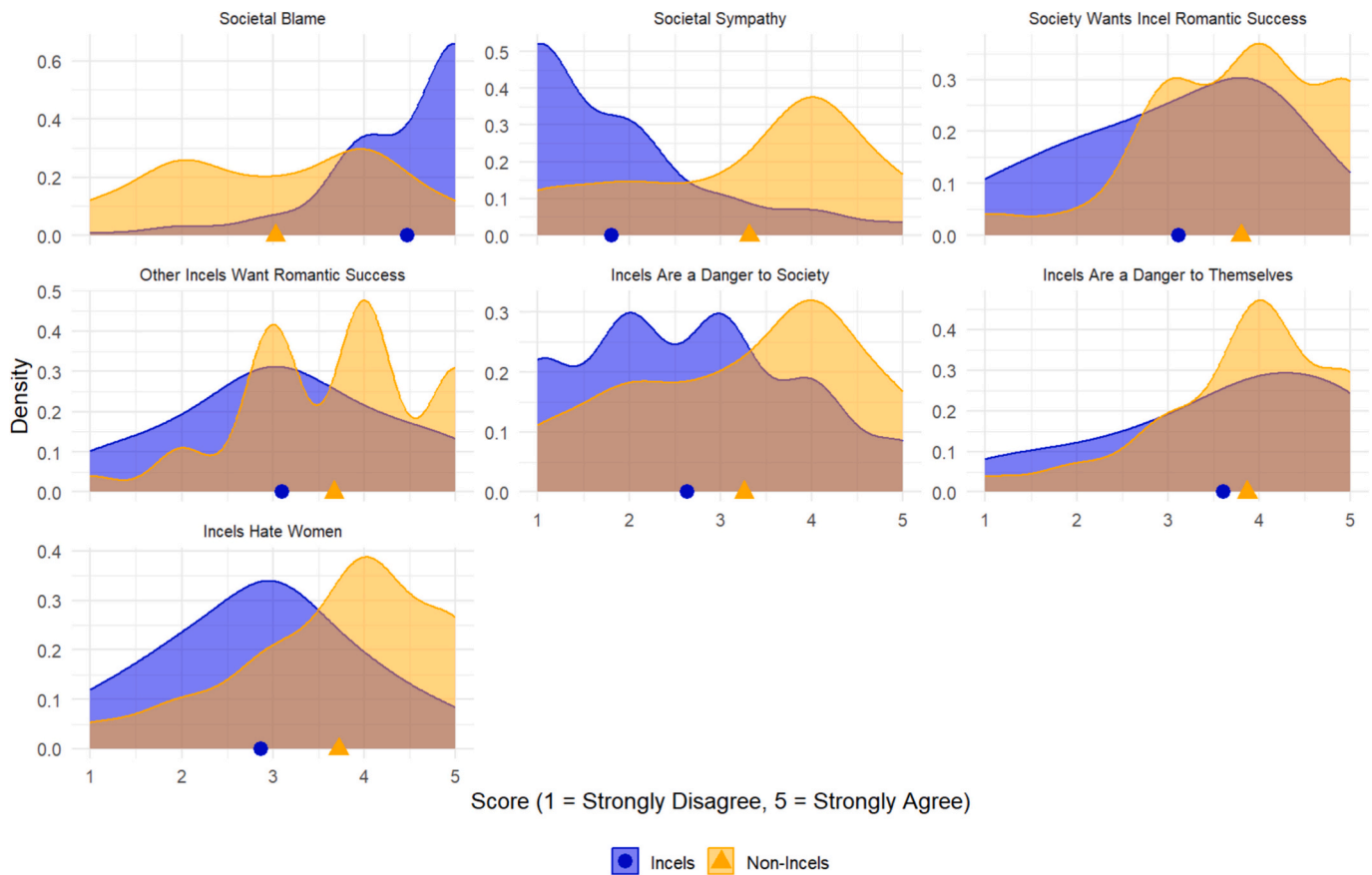


Fig. 1. The distribution of responses across seven societal perception items, comparing incel (blue) and non-incel (orange) participants. Shapes on the x-axis reflect average (mean) scores.

Table 1  
Standardized beta coefficients ( $\beta$ ) and  $R^2$  values for the effect of feminist identification on incels' misperceptions.

Item	Non-incel men	Non-incel women	Feminist	Non-incel male $\times$ feminist	Non-incel female $\times$ feminist	Adjusted $R^2$
Society thinks incels only have themselves to blame	-0.66***	-0.68***	-0.08	0.08	0.36*	0.25
Society has sympathy for incels	0.95***	0.85***	0.19	-0.48***	-0.65***	0.26
Others want incels to succeed romantically	0.61***	0.74***	0.23*	-0.33*	-0.79***	0.14
Other incels want incels to succeed romantically	-0.14	-0.14	-0.33**	0.55***	0.64***	0.08
Incels are a danger to society	0.04	0.07	0.23*	0.14	0.20	0.18
Incels are a danger to themselves	-0.06	0.16	0.17	0.12	0.01	0.09
Incels hate women	0.15	0.18	0.20*	0.17	0.19	0.20
Overall animosity score	-0.52***	-0.50**	-0.11	0.50**	0.75***	0.18

\*  $p < .05$ .  
 \*\*  $p < .01$ .  
 \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

levels of overall animosity towards incels, particularly among women. Simply put, incels appear to be wrong about general society's view of them but seem less mistaken about the view of feminist sub-sections of society. Incels may overestimate how representative these views are of broader societal opinions.

5.1. Do incels and non incels agree that incels hate women?

Extensive research shows that misogyny is a key feature in incel discourse (e.g., Halpin et al., 2022). Primary data reveal incels score high on hostile sexism and view women, particularly feminists, as their primary adversaries (Whittaker et al., 2024). There is also accumulating evidence that low self-perceived mate value is also positively associated with misogyny (Bosson et al., 2022; Grunau et al., 2022; Walldén et al., 2024). Interestingly, in our data, incels did not differ significantly from

non-incels in agreeing with the statement that “incels hate women.” However, feminist identification correlated with stronger agreement among non-incels, suggesting feminists may be more attuned to incels' misogyny.

5.2. Do incels and non incels agree that incels are a danger to themselves and others?

Both incels and non-incels agreed on the extent to which incels are a danger to themselves. Although, with 20 % of incels reporting daily suicidal thoughts (Whittaker et al., 2024), the severity of this issue may still be underestimated. Addressing incels' mental health challenges could reduce harm both to themselves and others (Costello, Whittaker, & Thomas, 2024).

Although there have been several high-profile spree-killings, the vast

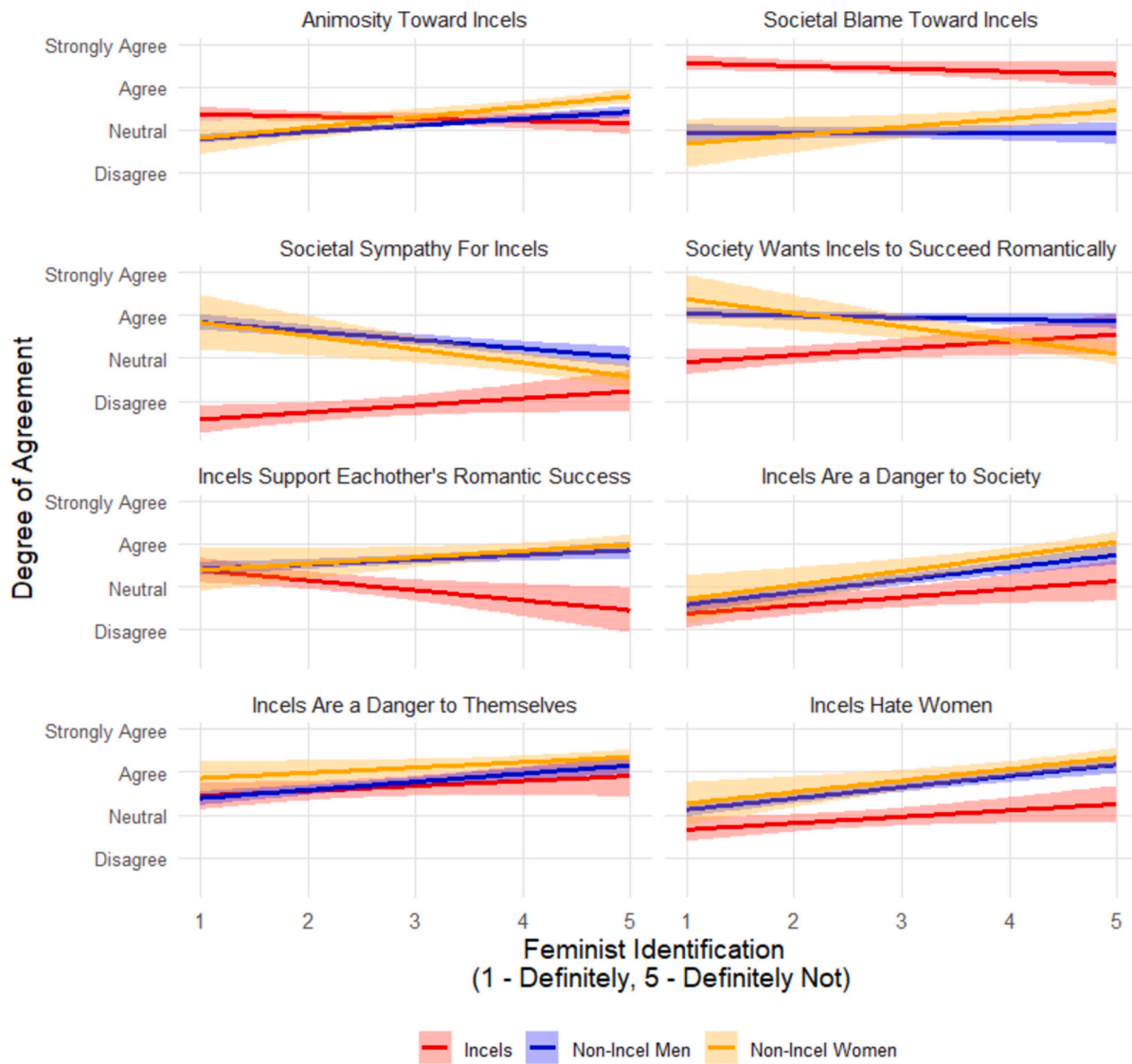


Fig. 2. The relationship between feminist and the degree of agreement on various societal perception items, including the composite animosity score towards incels, for non-incel men, non-incel women, and incels.

Table 2  
Predictors of misconceptions about societal views among Incels.

Item	R <sup>2</sup>	TIV (β)	Loneliness (β)
Society thinks incels are to blame for their own problems	0.15	0.19	0.28*
Society has sympathy for incels	<0.01	0.05	-0.002
Society wants incels to achieve romantic success	0.02	0.08	-0.17
Incels support eachother's romantic success	0.06	0.27 <sup>†</sup>	-0.17
Incels are a danger to society	<0.01	0.01	0.07
Incels are a danger to themselves	0.13	0.23 <sup>†</sup>	0.19
Incels hate women	0.09	0.24 <sup>†</sup>	0.10

<sup>†</sup> p < .10.

\* p < .05.

majority of incels are not physically violent (Costello & Buss, 2023). In our data, feminist identification was associated with heightened perceptions of the societal danger incels pose, even though incels and non-incels did not differ significantly in their views on this issue. Feminists may perceive incels' pervasive misogyny as a broader societal threat in and of itself. Notably, feminist identification was linked to reduced

sympathy for incels overall, reflecting how incels' misogynistic tendencies may repel feminist-identified individuals.

5.3. What might explain incels' underestimation of societal sympathy?

One possible explanation for incels' overestimation of societal blame and underestimation of sympathy may be their high levels of rejection sensitivity (Whittaker et al., 2024). Although it is important to recognize that incels do legitimately face some significant hostility, for example, 86 % of incels report experiences of bullying (Moskalenko et al., 2022) compared to 33 % of the general population (Lereya et al., 2015). Some online spaces, like the *r/IncelTears* subreddit, promote ridicule of incels (Dyrel, 2020). Notably, the subreddit had to introduce a rule against encouraging incel suicide, reflecting the hostility incels face online.

Lookism research also suggests less physically attractive people face genuine discrimination (Minerva, 2017), and incels often report lower self-rated attractiveness (e.g., Costello, Rolon, et al., 2024). Some academic critiques are even dismissive of incels' significant mental health struggles (e.g., Carian et al., 2023). This combination of psychological predisposition, bullying, and real-world hostility may reinforce incels' distorted belief that society overwhelmingly rejects them.



#### 5.4. Insights for interventions

Incels massively underestimated societal sympathy and support for their romantic success, and overestimated overall animosity, including the extent to which society blames them for their own problems. These findings are cause for optimism, as it suggests that their bleak worldview—that society hates them—is mostly inaccurate. This also implies that there may be public support for interventions, such as date coaching or therapy, to help incels (Costello et al., 2022; Costello, Daly, et al., 2024; Costello, Pennycook, & Rand, 2024; Costello, Rolon, et al., 2024; Costello, Whittaker, & Thomas, 2024; Li et al., 2020).

While incels may overestimate societal hostility, their perceptions of societal animosity appears to be more true of feminist subgroups. Feminist identification was associated with greater blame, reduced sympathy, and heightened animosity, particularly among women. Although some scholars advocate for feminist-led approaches to incel intervention (Carian et al., 2023), the mutual animosity between incels and feminists raises questions about the efficacy of such efforts. Evidence suggests that deradicalization is most effective when led by individuals seen as “credible insiders” (Ellefsen & Sandberg, 2022). Former incels who have disengaged from these communities, such as members of the *r/IncelExit* subreddit, may serve as more effective role models (e.g., Burns & Boislard, 2024).

Public awareness campaigns informed by our findings could also play a role in reducing the stigma associated with being an incel. These campaigns could highlight that incels' perceptions of societal hostility are often exaggerated and that many people *do* sympathize with their struggles. Such campaigns could also address the widespread misconception that all incels are violent misogynists, and instead emphasize the diversity within the group (Costello & Buss, 2023). Destigmatizing this population may also encourage more incels to seek help and disengage from toxic online spaces.

Emerging technologies, such as AI-based therapeutic tools, also hold promise (e.g., Goel et al., 2024). Brief conversations with GPT-4 have been shown to reduce entrenched conspiracy beliefs by approximately 20 % (Costello, Pennycook, & Rand, 2024). Such approaches could potentially help correct distorted thinking among incels.

Individual differences in loneliness only predicted incels' perceptions of societal blame, and interpersonal victimhood showed limited predictive power. Instead, incel identity itself and its accompanying cognitive distortions—particularly their “black-pill” philosophy—may play a more central role in the development of misperceptions. At the same time, fostering real-life social connections remains crucial. Loneliness correlates with incels' perceptions of societal blame, suggesting that promoting friendships outside of toxic online spaces could mitigate at least some of these distortions. Real-world connections may reduce the reliance on online echo chambers that reinforce incels' bleak worldview.

Finally, while our sample of non incels appears broadly sympathetic to incels' romantic success, incels themselves may not foster similar support within their community. The black-pill philosophy discourages romantic pursuits, and co-rumination among incels can reinforce beliefs that romantic efforts are futile (Costello, 2023; Rousis et al., 2023). Challenging these internalized beliefs should be a priority for interventions.

#### 5.5. Limitations and future directions

This study has several limitations. First, our recruitment strategy relied on snowball sampling through social media platforms, which may have introduced bias. Individuals recruited via social media may be more familiar with incels or have stronger opinions about them compared to the general population, potentially skewing the results. While this approach allowed us to reach both general and niche online communities, it may have limited the diversity of our sample, particularly among non-incel participants. Future studies should employ

broader and more representative sampling strategies to capture a wider range of societal attitudes and reduce potential biases associated with social media recruitment.

Second, we did not account for non-incel participants' prior interactions with incels, which may influence perceptions. Negative interactions with incels, who are known to be antagonistic (Daly & Nichols, 2024), may contribute to perceptions of them as socially distant or uncooperative, which could, in turn, reduce sympathy. Individuals are more likely to blame people for their own hardships when they are perceived in this way (Boyer et al., 2024).

Third, the cross-sectional design limits our ability to assess changes in perceptions over time. Longitudinal research could explore whether exposure to more sympathetic societal views influences incels' beliefs. Finally, consistently high loneliness among incels (see Supplementary materials) may have caused ceiling effects, limiting the variability needed to detect and stronger relationships.

## 6. Conclusions

This study reveals significant perception gaps between incels' beliefs about societal attitudes and the actual views of broader society. Incels overestimate societal blame and underestimate sympathy. Among non incels, higher feminist identification correlated with decreased sympathy and support for incels romantic success, increased levels of blame, and much higher levels of overall animosity towards incels. The effects of feminist identification were particularly pronounced among women. Addressing incels' cognitive distortions through therapeutic and social interventions could foster healthier self-perceptions and social integration within this vulnerable and potentially dangerous group. Helping incels disengage from toxic forums and develop real-life friendships may counteract their bleak narratives.

### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**William Costello:** Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Andrew G. Thomas:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis.

### Declaration of competing interest

None.

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### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2025.113041>.

### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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