Playing the Blame Game: Public Perception of Incels' Neutralization Arguments

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Abstract

Incels, involuntary celibates, are a community of men using online forums to exchange predominantly misogynistic opinions on modern women. To neutralize their arguments and avoid responsibility, Incels commonly condemn their condemners by assigning blame for their lack of romantic relationship to feminists. This study focuses on how the general public perceives forum posts made by members of the Incel community. Utilizing a repeated measures design, 108 participants were presented with four fictious forum posts and asked for their blame attribution as well judgements of morality, acceptability and harm perception. The posts differed in their message frame, containing a self-blaming rhetoric or condemning the condemners and expressed either medium or low severity of derogatory language. Compared to a self-blaming message, participants assigned higher responsibility to the Incel when he was blaming feminists. They also judged the posts to be less socially acceptable and perceived higher intentional harm done to feminists. These effects were higher when the Incel used more derogatory language in his arguments. This study therefore demonstrated that by condemning their condemners, Incels do not seem to convince outgroup individuals of their blamelessness. However, the effect of such rhetoric on the ingroup is not yet known. Thereby, this study provides insight into the communication of Incels and how their arguments are perceived while also underlining how further research can utilize these findings to expand the understanding of the continuously growing and polarizing Incel community.

Keywords: incel, neutralization, condemn the condemners, self-blame, blame attribution

Playing The Blame Game: Public Perception of Incels' Neutralization Arguments

When she established "Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project" in 1997, female student Alana had no idea what her online community would eventually turn into. Struggling with romantic relationships and intimacy, Alana decided to create a space for people to come together and connect through their challenges in the modern world of dating (Hoffman et al., 2020). Eventually, Alana managed to establish a successful relationship in her life and consequently left the community. She did not find out until years later that her project had been turned into an extremist ideology enacted by a network of men who identify themselves as Incels (Hoffman et al., 2020).

With up to 60,000 members worldwide, Incels, involuntary celibates, are a community of men characterized by a lack of sexual relationships and a shared hatred for modern women and the men dating them (O'Malley et al., 2022). Today, Incels have become one primary group in the manosphere, different communities defined by misogyny and hate speech (Zimmerman, 2022). On forums like Reddit and 4chan, they engage in shitposting, the act of posting offensive content with the intent to polarize and provoke, to relieve a strong-felt anger at the world and express their hatred towards the female gender and especially feminists for being the primary cause of their condition (Daly & Reed, 2022). Their posts are characterized by self-victimization to justify not only controversial opinions, but also real-world terrorist attacks, as in the case of Elliot Rodger who murdered six people and himself in the name of the Incel network. Before his crime, he posted a manifesto of 133 pages detailing his actions explicitly as martyrdom for the Incel ideology. Ever since then, a number of individuals have copied his actions, showing that this group presents a growing threat for society (Hoffman et al., 2020). Even though the Incel movement is becoming a pressing issue, online and offline, law enforcement has so far often failed to recognize this form of misogyny as a terrorism threat that has the potential to go beyond letting some steam off on the internet (Bates, 2020).

Researchers have identified significant facets of the Incel ideology and what arguments they use to justify their standpoint to the public (e.g., Bates, 2020; Hoffman et al., 2020; Sparks et al., 2022). Their online engagement is often characterised by a self-justification which either focuses on the Incels' own flaws and faults (Bates, 2020), or blames external parties, specifically feminists, for their situation (Daly & Reed, 2022). However, previous research has not yet identified how these arguments are perceived by the public and what influence they have on people's opinion on Incels.

The Incel Community

Examining the demographics of the Incel community can help to understand their behaviour and the arguments they make to justify their misogynistic viewpoints. A majority of members are White, young and male, many of them still live at home and almost all of them lack fulfilling relationships, both romantic and platonic, in their offline reality (Hoffman et al., 2020). Mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety, are also common, with prevalence rates in different forums up to 95%. Other diagnoses, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder or personality disorders, are additional common characteristics (Sparks et al., 2022).

These listed predispositions are often coupled with experiences of social exclusion that result in a lack of meaningful social identity (Papandreou et al., 2025). Because it is an intrinsic human desire to improve self-esteem and create social identity through group membership (Hoog, 2016), the Incel community serves this purpose for many of its members. In interviews with Incels, Papandreou et al. (2025) found that being an Incel was a defining feature of the interviewees' social identity, as it provided them with the meaningfulness they were previously missing. Moreover, experiences of social rejection have shown to make an individual more vulnerable to becoming radicalized (Renström et al., 2020). Incel communities often identify this vulnerability coupled with a desire of social belonginess in these men and lure them in to extend their network further and spread increasingly extremist viewpoints (Bates, 2020). Lastly, Sparks et al. (2022) argue that these factors in combination

with a lack of positive experience with women make it difficult for Incels to interact with people outside their community, leading to even deeper engagement with it.

Incels and Women

Members of the Incel community commonly blame the female population for their condition (Hoffman et al., 2020). They often claim that women have become too superficial in their choice of partners, paying attention solely to physical appearance and status, rather than character (Halpin, 2022). Therefore, some Incels believe that they are not able to find and maintain relationships with the opposite gender because they do not fulfil the standards of attractiveness that these women have set (Hoffman et al., 2020). Simultaneously, women are often viewed as "both the ultimate object of sexual desire and oppressive agent" (Daly & Reed, 2022, p. 17). Despite their hatred for them, Incels usually crave relationships with women. Some even state that they have a justified claim to a woman who fulfils their needs. The idea of a "Sexual Marxism", a society in which women are systematically distributed among men in order to resolve the issue of Inceldom, is popular among members of the community (Halpin, 2022).

The extremity of Incels' opinions on the form of relationship they desire and their hatred for women has shown to differ. Some Incels express frustration about their inability to form meaningful relationships, stating that women are too picky in their selection of mates (O'Malley et al., 2020). They believe that women immediately reject Incels due to their unattractiveness while Incels themselves are looking for genuine connection (Maxwell et al., 2020). Others attack women more directly and aggressively, using derogatory and even violent terms to explain why they deem the female gender weak and devoid of intellect (O'Malley et al., 2020). These kinds of arguments often revolve around sexuality and violence, stating that women will engage in intercourse with any man who meets their standards of attractiveness (Maxwell et al., 2020) or even expressing sexual and rape fantasies inspired by pornographic material (Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021).

In conclusion, there are different degrees of violence and misogyny within the Incel community, with some voicing extremist views and attacking the female gender and others mourning the perceived hopelessness of establishing romantic relationships with women (Maxwell et al., 2020). However, regardless of the extremity of their opinion, most Incels commonly assign the blame for their predicament to an outside party. Daly and Reed (2020) have shown that it is often feminists that Incels attribute responsibility to which represents a behaviour that can be explained using attribution theory.

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory is concerned with the reasoning individuals assign to behaviour or events (Schmitt, 2015). A number of theories have developed over time, one of them being Kelly's Covariance Attribution theory which argues that individuals attribute meaning to either external or internal causes (Kelley, 1973). External attribution refers to causes outside of the individual's control while internal attribution deems the individual responsible for the situation. To influence other people's perception as well as one's own self-image, people can fall prey to a number of attribution biases or utilize attribution strategies (Schmitt, 2015).

One of such biases is the self-serving bias. In an attempt to protect one's self-esteem, Schmitt (2015) states that one's own negative behaviours are often assigned to external causes while positive consequences are attributed to internal reasonings. Although some of Incels' frustration is expressed through self-victimization, stating that they are too unattractive to appeal to women, many of them also externalize who is at fault for these circumstances. According to those Incels, women are to be blamed for not choosing to be in relationships with them and prioritizing superficial characteristics like physical appearance (Sparks et al., 2022). Early studies on the self-serving bias show that this external attribution style serves to improve or maintain an individual's self-esteem and avoid responsibility for negative consequences (Bradley, 1978). These findings might explain why, in their online posts, Incels

often blame feminists in order to neutralize their arguments and shift the responsibility away from themselves.

Neutralization: Condemning the Condemners

Sykes and Matza (1957) argue that, in order to maintain one's self-image as a morally righteous and socially accepted person, individuals who are engaged in criminal activity enact a number of neutralization techniques. These techniques aim to minimize or shift the blame for one's action to other parties in order to justify them and avoid responsibility for the consequences (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Furthermore, Costello (2000) found that individuals blaming an external party for their offence were able to sustain a positive self-esteem, as they were not only neutralizing their actions to outsiders, but also to themselves. Additionally, neutralization attempts to create social acceptance as well as a status of morality for arguments and actions that would otherwise be denounced by the general public (Vysotsky & McCarthy, 2016). Research by Nadler (2012) has shown that if an individual is perceived as moral and socially accepted, outsiders' perceptions of blame are more likely to be attributed to external factors instead of their character or internal motivations. Similarly, if a person's character or the actions they have taken are perceived as immoral, they are more likely to be blamed for their actions by others (Nadler, 2012).

One technique to establish such morality and avoid responsibility, condemn the condemners, is focused on turning the initial critique around and raising suspicions about the criticizing group or individual and their motive for critique (Sykes & Martza, 1957). By framing their messages in a way that attributes responsibility to the criticizing party, individuals attempt to influence their public perception and avoid blame (Vysotsky & McCarthy, 2016). Arguments utilizing condemn the condemners might focus on plainly stating the accusations are wrong or revolve around attacking the condemner directly and aggressively (e.g., Moretti-Fernandez, 2015). Groups or individuals using this strategy often

present themselves as the ones really revealing the truth about corruption, stating their critics are wrongfully accusing them and have no right to make such claims (Sykes & Matza, 1957).

Incels utilize the technique of condemn the condemners in their argumentations by specifically targeting feminists. They call for a shift back to conservative traditions and a life the way it was prior to the feminist movement (Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021). As Sparks et al. (2022) state, feminism was what gave women the freedom to embrace their individuality and sexuality and make their own decisions regarding the choice of their partner. In the eyes of Incels, this transition to women's liberation has led to Incels being excluded from being chosen as a life and sexual partner (Hoffman et al., 2020). Arguments against feminism do not only revolve around women having become too superficial in their dating but also state that liberation is only pretence and even going so far as to say that women, especially feminists, secretly enjoy being abused by men (Tranchese & Suguira, 2021). Here, it is important to mention that Incels explicitly express that they cannot be blamed for these circumstances but have fallen victim to a dysfunctional society. This argumentation can be linked directly to the strategy of condemn the condemners which sets out to express that the condemners are the oppressive force and that the condemned are wrongfully accused (Sykes & Matza, 1975).

The literature review by Weißmüller et al. (2025) shows that members of organizations engage in strategies like condemn the condemners to neutralize their actions to the public. Previous research has not yet satisfactorily proven the effectiveness of this strategy but finds that actors are motivated to uphold a certain degree of morality and social acceptance with the desire to lead outgroup members to assign an external blame attribution (Weißmüller et al., 2025). Likely driven by these motivators, Incels attempt to convince themselves as well as others that feminists are responsible for their condition and challenges.

Incels in the Eye of the Public

Regarding the impression of Incels on members of the public, research has presented ambivalent opinions. Laplante et al. (2024) explored how individuals perceive online posts

made by the Incel community. They found that participants were divided in their thoughts on whether the community poses a danger to society or only serves as a social network for struggling individuals. Participants who voiced understanding for Incels expressed empathy for them and showed a lower tendency to condemn the community as a whole. One participant stated that the stereotype of the violent Incel is not representative of the community, but an image created due to terrorist attacks of a handful of extremists (Laplante et al., 2024). Public opinion and risk assessment of the Incel community therefore seem to be undecided. Some perceive them as challenged individuals looking for social group membership, posing no danger, while others remark how it is this engagement with the group that polarizes beliefs and leads the community to extremist beliefs (Laplante et al., 2024).

In line with these opposing opinions of the public as well as the varying opinions expressed by Incels, it can be said that the severity of misogynistic language that Incels employ in their postings also varies. An insight into the aggressively misogynistic language of the manifesto of Elliot Rodgers gives rise to the assumption that it is the violent and attacking type of Incels who pose the highest risk to society (Rodger, 2014). However, a study of Whittaker et al. (2024) found that, nowadays, a majority of the Incel community do not support acts of violence against women or the men that Incels perceive as threat. Yet, it is worthwhile to explore how language serves to express Incels' opinions and argumentations.

Severity of Language

Online and offline, language gives voice to an individual's opinion. Craig and Blankenship (2011) found that expressing extreme, in the case of the present study, misogynistic language also resonates with extreme viewpoints. Through the internet, people are becoming increasingly radicalised and the previously small relationship between extremist opinions and consequential action-taking is starting to strengthen. Therefore, aggressive expressions do not only indicate an extremist opinion but can also result in destructive behaviour (Williams & Tzani, 2022). It is henceforth expected that an Incel using more

severely misogynistic language in his argumentation will be perceived as being more intentionally harmful to feminists. As a consequence, increased harm perceptions and harm intentions can result in the argument being perceived as immoral, as discussed by Schein and Gray (2017). They argue that this dynamic is driven by an innate human desire to avoid harm and perceiving an action as harmful is therefore detrimental to its morality. The present study therefore expects that in response to messages utilizing more misogynistic language, individuals will perceive Incels' arguments as more immoral.

Severity has also shown to influence blame attribution. The more severe an action is perceived to be, the more blame is generally attributed to the actor. This so-called defensive attribution results from the fact that while mildly offending actions are usually judged to be normal, highly severe actions are not. In addition to that, severe actions are seen as more connected to the individual, not something that happens to them accidentally, leading to a higher likelihood of an internal blame attribution (Robbennolt, 2000). Similar findings were observed by Nadler (2012) who states that judgements of blame and severity of the offending action are related. The more harm an action is perceived to have caused, the higher the likelihood that an individual will attribute the blame to the person rather than to external influences (Nadler, 2012). Concluding from these findings, the present study hypothesizes that a more misogynistic language of Incels will reduce judgements of morality and harm perception as well as an external blame attribution.

The Present Study

To date, there has been little exploration on how the public perceives the statements by Incels and the factors that make their neutralization attempts successful. The present study aims to investigate the influence of the neutralization technique condemn the condemners which Incels use to justify online harassment against feminists and how a manipulation of severity of misogynistic language impacts blame attributions assigned by members of the public. By doing so, this study contributes to the ever-evolving research on the relatively new

phenomenon of Inceldom and sheds light on public reactions and impressions of this community. By aiming to answer the research question "*What is the relationship between public opinion on Incel arguments of varying derogatory language and condemn the condemners?*", the present study investigates the following hypotheses:

H1a. When the Incel blames himself for his difficulties, he will elicit higher internal blame attribution than in messages containing condemn the condemners. This effect will be higher for messages of higher severity of misogynistic language.

H1b. When the Incel utilizes the neutralization technique condemn the condemners in his argumentation, it will lead to higher external and feminist blame attribution than an argumentation that does not contain neutralization. This effect will be higher in cases of lower severity of misogynistic language.

H2. Using the neutralization technique condemn the condemners in his argumentation, the Incel will be assigned higher morality compared to messages not containing neutralization, especially in cases of lower severity of language.

H3. When the Incel uses condemn the condemners in his argumentation, his argument will achieve higher social and individual acceptance. This effect will be higher in cases of lower severity of language.

H4. In cases of low severity of language, using the neutralization condemn the condemners will result in less harm done to feminist and lower harm intention attributed to the Incel, compared to messages of medium severity of language.

Methods

Design

This study utilized a within-participant 2x2 experimental design with Message Frame (External Message Frame vs. Internal Message Frame) and Severity of Language (Medium vs. Low) as independent variables.

In the Internal Message Frame condition, the Incel enforced a state of self-deprecation and blamed himself for lacking the characteristics that would make him attractive to modern women. In the External Message Frame, the neutralization strategy condemn the condemners was tested. The Incel expressed explicitly that feminists were responsible and to be blamed, concluding that it was the rise of feminism that justified his argument.

The Severity of Language was manipulated in terms of the degree of aggressive language the Incel expressed to articulate his frustration with women and lack of sexual and romantic relationships. To avoid ceiling effects, severity was manipulated to either represent medium or low severity. This also aligns more with actual Incels' posting behaviour, as Whittaker et al. (2024) have found that majority of Incels usually stray from extremely aggressive or violent language.

Four dependent variables were measured to determine the impression of the forum posts, namely Blame Attribution, Morality, Acceptability and Harm Perception.

Ethical approval was acquired by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences of the University of Twente (no. 250628).

Participants

To partake in this research, participants had to be over 18 years of age. For sampling, snowball and convenience strategies were used, utilizing the researcher's social network. Participants could also be recruited through SONA, an online system allowing students to access studies to fulfil mandatory Test Subject Hours, which granted them 0.25 credits. Additionally, the survey was posted on the Reddit forum re/SampleSize which allows researchers from several disciplines to share their studies with a variety of users. Lastly, a few participants were collected through Surveyswap.com, a website connecting researchers to exchange their studies with each other.

The original sample consisted of 141 participants, 33 of which were excluded because they exited the questionnaire without having completed it, resulting in a final dataset of 108

participants. Ages ranged from 18 to 65 with a mean of 27 ($SD = 10.9$). Most participants were female ($N = 68$, 63%), 31 (29%) were male, six (6%) were non-binary and three participants (2%) preferred to not disclose their gender. A majority of individuals were German ($N = 57$, 53%), 14 (13%) were Dutch and 35 (33%) were of another nationality, mainly American, British, Polish and Italian. A total of 84 (78%) participants had previously been in a romantic relationship, 24 (22%) had not. Lastly, majority of the sample self-identified as a feminist ($N = 66$, 61%) while 42 (39%) did not, and four (3%) participants indicated that they identify as Incel.

Materials

This study investigated public reaction to neutralization attempts of Incels in fictional forum posts. These posts were written by the researcher and inspired by existent content created on Incel forums on Reddit. All materials were available in English and German, as this enabled non-English speakers to participate, allowing for a greater sample size and for more people to participate in their own language. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four themes. These themes revolved around topics discussed in the Incel community and were divided into dating, sexuality, women's expectations and male discrimination. Each theme consisted of four forum posts representing the four conditions, resulting in 16 total posts. The forum posts for each condition are provided in Appendix A. Additionally, the study's introduction and debrief can be found in Appendix B.

Internal Message Frame

When the framing of the forum posts followed an internal frame, the Incel assigned responsibility for his condition to his own person. The severity of language expressed itself in the language the Incel used to refer to himself and was either of low or medium severity.

In the low severity condition, the Incel voiced general dissatisfaction with his situation and questioned the reasons for why he ended up in his predicament. He also questioned whether there would be anything he could do to get better. The following post serves as an

example: "*I think I seriously need to get my life together. Does anyone have any tips what I can do to improve my appearance so that I can at least attempt to fulfil women's standards?*".

An internal message frame of medium severity of language contained the Incel blaming himself in explicit self-derogatory terms, as the following example demonstrates: "*Ugly and miserably, I wish I could finally escape this misery called my life. I can never fulfil a woman's standards and be a suitable partner and it is all my fault for never getting my ass up. Today's women expect better and I've dug my own hole, I truly deserve to suffer for being such a damn loser*".

External Message Frame

Posts with an external message frame articulated the Incel's belief that feminists were to be blamed for his condition. Low or medium severity of language was expressed in the terms the Incel used to describe feminists.

The low severity condition showed more neutral language used to argument the Incel's standpoint. An example of this severity read: "*Tried to ask a girl out today and she just completely iced me out. Is this what modern dating has led to? No wonder if I am rejected all the time if feminism is teaching girls to hate on guys who just want to ask you on a date*". In this condition, the Incel criticizes the feminist movement, but does not condemn it outright.

Iin the medium severity condition, the Incel expressed more misogynistic and derogatory language, as seen in the following example: "*Nowadays, women literally have to do nothing, she can even be ugly and it is still okay that she expects a 10/10 guy who feeds her crying mouth with money and givers her children who grow up to be little bitches just like her*". The Incel disapproves of feminists and actively objectives the female gender.

Measures

The dependent variables were measured with singular items created by the researcher. All measures were statements tested on a 5-point-Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). As each participant was exposed to multiple forum posts,

measurements were kept short and limited in number. To account for the limitations of such measures, each condition was tested with multiple posts.

Blame Attribution

Blame Attribution investigated the party to which participants assigned the most responsibility for the poster's expressed difficulties. To do so, participants were presented with three possible attributions which allocated responsibility either to an internal, external or feminist party. Three single items were created, each measuring one attribution. Firstly, "I think the poster is to blame for the situation he describes" expressed an internal attribution while "I think the poster's situation can be explained by factors out of his control" referred to external attribution. Additionally, the item "I think feminists are to blame for the situation the poster describes" measured blame attribution to feminists which represented the party the Incel identified as the condemners.

Morality

The dependent variable Morality measured the participant's moral perceptions of the Incel's behaviour. The item used to measure this construct read: "I think the arguments that the poster makes are morally correct." A higher score on this item resonated with a judgement of greater morality.

Acceptability

Acceptability measured whether the participant found the argument socially and personally appropriate. For this purpose, two items were created: "I think the arguments that the poster makes are socially acceptable" and "Discounting what anyone else thinks, I believe the poster's arguments are acceptable". The first item was presented first and aimed to measure the extent to which the participant deemed the argument socially acceptable while the second focused on the individual's personal opinion, regardless of social acceptability. This way, effects of neutralization were measured two-fold, focusing on both personal

opinion as well as perception in the context of societal standards. High scores on both items resonated with higher Acceptability.

Harm Perception

The dependent variable Harm Perception measured the extent to which the participant judged the poster's behaviour as harmful as well as whether they believed the poster to have caused harm intentionally. To test this, two items were created: "This post causes harm to feminists" and "I believe the poster intended to cause harm to feminists". The behaviour was perceived to be harmful or intentional if the two items showed a high score.

Sexist Attitudes

Previous research has identified that sexist viewpoints lead to higher support and legitimization of acts of violence against women (Agadullina et al., 2022). Considering this relationship, sexism was added as a covariate. By doing so, it was possible to account for the potential that participants' responses were not only influenced by the different conditions, but also by their sexist attitudes. Including this covariate therefore reduced the risk of drawing faulty conclusions. Sexist attitudes were measured using the short form of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996). The ASI measures two forms, namely Hostile and Benevolent Sexism. Hostile Sexism describes a negative and derogatory impression of women while Benevolent Sexism views women in a more traditional sense, as a figure in need of manly protection and care. Example items include: "Women exaggerate problems they have at work" for Hostile Sexism and "Every man ought to have a woman whom he adores" for Benevolent Sexism. In the short form, the original scale of 22 items was shortened to 12 but both sub-scales were retained. Rollero et al. (2014) showed good reliability for the short version and argued satisfactory similarity to the original scale. The present study demonstrated comparable results, with a satisfactory Cronbach's alpha of .77 for Benevolent Sexism and .92 for Hostile Sexism.

Procedure

To partake in the research, participants were given the link to a Qualtrics survey. Firstly, they were informed of the purpose of the research, how their data would be processed and that they could terminate their participation at any time. In an attempt to avoid biased results, it was not specifically mentioned that the research would address Incel behaviour, but individuals were notified that they might be faced with disagreeable opinions in order to prevent any potential harm.

After giving their informed consent, participants were forwarded to the first step of the study which introduced the short version of the ASI. Once they completed all items, they were presented with the study design and instructed to express their impression of the forum posts by answering the items measuring the dependent variables. This study utilized a repeated measures design, so each participant was exposed to all four conditions and viewed four of the 16 possible forum posts which were randomly drawn from one of the four themes, including dating, sexuality, women's expectations and male discrimination. The order in which these posts appeared was randomized for each participant. In accordance with the study design, they were confronted with arguments of medium or low severity, utilizing either an internal or external message frame. After each post, the dependent variables were measured.

Lastly, socio-demographic information, including feminist self-identification, was inquired. Finalizing the questionnaire, participants were debriefed on the purpose of their participation and a short description of Incels was given. Afterwards, they were asked whether they identified as Incel. For further inquiries, the researcher's E-Mail address was provided, and a repeated consent finalized the participation.

Data Analysis

This study's data was analysed using the statistic program R version 4.4.3. Eight mixed effects models (LMM) were built to examine the relationship between the independent variables Message Frame and Severity and the dependent variables Blame Attribution,

Morality, Acceptability, and Harm Perception. Even though Blame Attribution, Acceptability and Harm Perception contained multiple items, they were treated individually during analysis. As each item focused on a different part of the construct, summarizing them would have likely provided insufficient results. For analysis, the packages lme4 and lmerTest were used and Satterthwaite's estimate degrees of freedom was utilized. The covariate Sexist Attitudes was added as a fixed effect and participants as well as theme were included as random effect. This was done to account for effects that were influenced not by the conditions, but by participants and their allocation to a theme. Doing so was important as this study's design led to multiple data points from the same individual and theme. Significant interaction effects were examined through simple effects testing using emmeans. Lastly, in an exploratory analysis, self-identification as feminist was added as predictor to each model in order to investigate its effect on the relationships. For all tests, the significance level was set at $p < .05$.

Results

Descriptives

Table 1 represents the means and standard deviations of all dependent variables and the covariate Sexism. Furthermore, Table 2 displays the correlations between the dependent variables. It is notable that Morality was significantly related to all of the variables while Feminist Harm showed the lowest number of significant correlations.

Table 1

Mean and Standard Deviation of All Dependent Variables and the Covariate Sexism.

	M	*SD*
Internal Blame	3.55	1.22
External Blame	2.75	1.17
Feminist Blame	1.64	1.03
Morality	1.96	1.04

Social Acceptance		2.05	1.13
Individual Acceptance		1.99	1.15
Feminist Harm		3.11	1.47
Harm Intention		3.22	1.57
Sexism		2.13	0.76

Note. Likert-Scale of 1 (*strongly disagree)* to 5 (*strongly agree)*.

Table 2

Correlation Matrix of the Dependent Variables and the Covariate Sexism.

	IB	EB	FB	M	SA	IA	FH	HI	S
IB	-								
EB	**-.38**	-							
FB	**-.35**	**.47**	-						
M	**-.37**	**.31**	**.59**	-					
SA	**-.32**	**.26**	**.45**	**.81**	-				
IA	**-.38**	**.30**	**.55**	**.86**	**.79**	-			
FH	**.27**	-.02	.01	-*.21*	-.14	-.19	-		
HI	**.35**	-*.22*	-.09	**-.29**	-*.24*	**-.30**	**.66**	-	
S	-.13	**.30**	**.67**	**.50**	**.36**	**.52**	-.07	-.19	-

Note. IB = Internal Blame, EB = External Blame, FB = Feminist Blame, M = Morality, SA = Social Acceptance, IA = Individual Acceptance, FH = Feminist Harm, HI = Harm Intention, S = Sexism

italics = Significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)

bold = Significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

Inferential Analyses

Linear mixed effect models were used to test the main effect of the fixed factors Message Frame and Severity on the dependent variables Blame Attribution, Morality, Acceptability, and Harm Perception, respectively. Additionally, Theme and Participant were added as crossed random effects to account for differences between and within participants. Table 3 shows the standard deviations for the relationship between as well as within participant and between Theme. It can be observed that the random effects do contribute to explaining variance in the outcome. Sexism was added as covariate in each model and its significance was determined by testing its beta weights.

Table 3

Within-Participant, Between-Theme and Between-Participants Standard Deviations.

	$SD_{residual}$	SD_{theme}	$SD_{participants}$
Internal Blame	0.953	0.093	0.591
External Blame	0.757	0.133	0.622
Feminist Blame	0.663	0.154	0.519
Morality	0.789	0.203	0.386
Social Acceptance	0.808	0.119	0.587
Individual Acceptance	0.864	0.223	0.396
Harm to Feminists	1.016	0.193	0.812
Harm Intention	1.038	0.271	0.533

Blame Attribution

Analysis of the mixed effects models showed a significant main effect of Message Frame on Internal, $F(1, 321) = 84.41$, $p < .001$, External, $F(1, 321) = 67.87$, $p < .001$, as well as Feminist, $F(1, 321) = 22.01$, $p < .001$, Blame Attribution. Table 4 highlights that Internal Blame Attribution was higher in response to External Message Frames than Internal Message

Frames. Comparatively, External and Feminist Blame Attribution were rated higher when participants were presented with an Internal Message Frame than an External Frame.

Severity demonstrated a significant main effect on Internal Blame Attribution, $F(1, 321) = 16.31$, $p > .001$, as well as External Blame Attribution, $F(1, 321) = 14.50$, $p < .001$, but not on Feminist Blame Attribution, $F(1,321) = 1.90$, $p = .169$. Comparing Low and Medium Severity, forum posts of Medium Severity elicited higher Internal Blame Attribution. For External Blame Attribution, messages of Low Severity showed higher scores than those of Medium Severity (see Table 4).

There was no significant interaction effect between Message Frame and Severity for Internal, $F(1, 321) = 1.02$, $p = 0.313$, or Feminist, $F(1, 321) = 0.05$, $p = .052$, Blame Attribution. However, a significant interaction was observed for External Blame Attribution, $F(1, 321) = 6.75$, $p = .009$. As displayed in Figure 1, the results showed lower scores on External Blame Attribution in response to the External Message Frame than the Internal Message Frame for both Low Severity ($p < .001$) and Medium Severity ($p > .001$). External Blame Attribution was therefore higher when participants were presented with the Internal Message Frame than the External Frame, regardless of its Severity. However, an External Message Frame elicited lower External Blame Attribution when it was of Medium Severity than Low Severity ($p < .001$). This indicates that participants allocated less external blame attributions when the External Message Frame was of Medium Severity than when it was of Low Severity. Figure 1 displays that Internal Message Frames were perceived similarly across both levels of Severity ($p = .35$).

Sexism had no significant influence on Internal Blame Attribution, $b = -.13$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = .184$, however it showed to be significant for External Blame Attribution, $b = .29$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = .003$, as well as Feminist Blame Attribution, $b = .73$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < .001$. These results demonstrate that participants that endorsed sexist beliefs to a greater extent also attributed more blame to external parties as well as feminists.

Table 4

Mean and Standard Deviation of Blame Attribution Grouped by Message Frame and Severity

	Dependent Variable					
Message Frame	Internal Blame		External Blame		Feminist Blame	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Internal	3.12	1.07	3.09	1.05	1.49	0.86
External	3.97	1.21	2.40	1.18	1.79	1.16
Severity	Internal Blame		External Blame		Feminist Blame	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Low	3.37	1.21	2.91	1.11	1.69	1,08
Medium	3.74	1.19	2.58	1.20	1.60	0.99
Interaction Terms	Internal Blame		External Blame		Feminist Blame	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Low/Internal	2.99	1.03	3.15	0.98	1.47	0.86
Low/External	3.74	1.26	2.68	1.18	1.90	1.23
Medium/Internal	3.27	1.09	3.04	1.11	1.51	0.87
Medium/External	4.20	1.11	2.13	1.11	1.69	1.09

Figure 1

Interaction Effects of Severity and Message Frame on External Blame Attribution
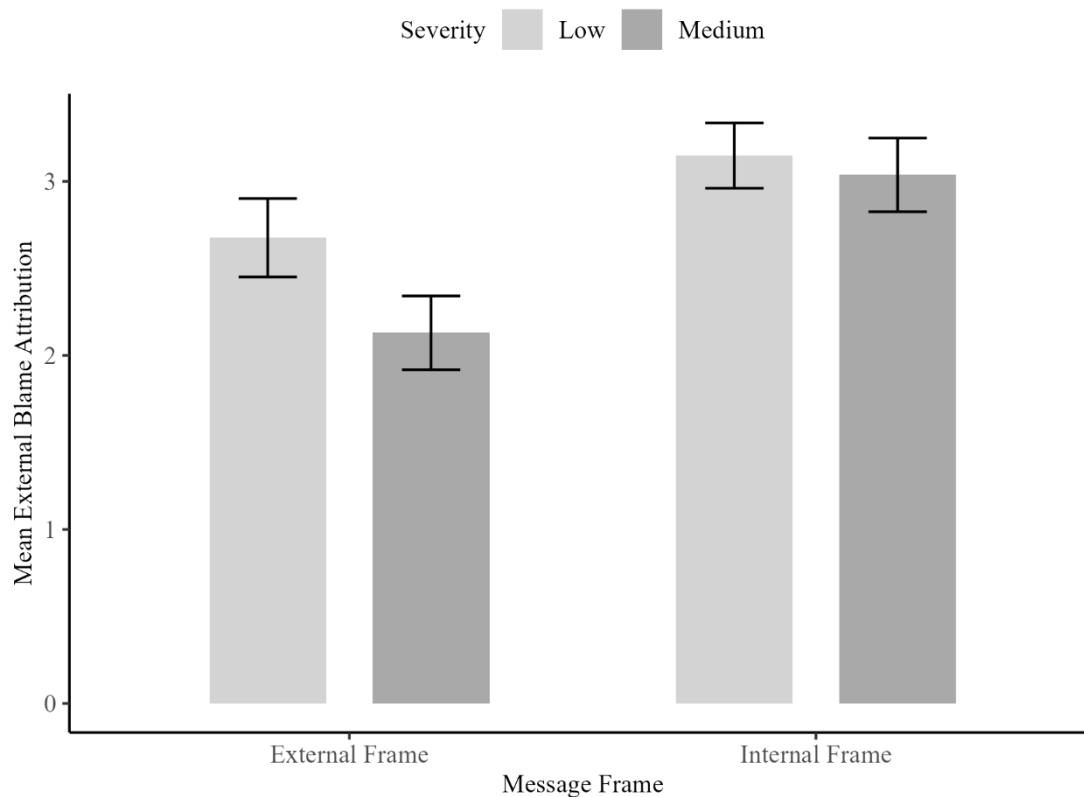

Morality

Message Frame showed to have a significant main effect on Morality, $F(1, 321) = 114.03$, $p < .001$. Table 5 highlights that forum posts containing an Internal Message Frame were judged to be more moral than its External counterpart. The main effect of Severity of Language on Morality did not turn out to be significant, $F(1, 321) = 2.71$, $p = .101$, but there was a significant interaction effect of Message Frame and Severity, $F(1, 321) = 8.23$, $p = .004$. Figure 2 shows that an Internal Message Frame led to higher Morality than an External Message Frame for Low ($p < .001$) and Medium ($p < .001$) Severity. This indicates that in response to the Internal Message Frame, posts were perceived as more moral, regardless of Severity. Furthermore, posts with an External Message Frame and Medium Severity were judged significantly less moral when compared to the same Message Frame of Low Severity ($p = .002$). This effect was not evident in the Internal Message Frame condition ($p = .39$),

indicating that participants did not give significantly different responses to the Internal Message Frame when they were presented with Low or Medium Severity. Lastly, Sexism was significant, $b = .456$, $SE = 0.072$, $p < .001$, indicating that participants of higher sexist beliefs also deemed the Incel's message more moral.

Table 5

Mean and Standard Deviation of Morality Grouped by Message Frame and Severity

	Dependent Variable	
Message Frame	Morality	
	M	*SD*
Internal	2.36	1.05
External	1.55	.861
Severity	Morality	
	M	*SD*
Low	2.02	1.02
Medium	1.89	1.06
Interaction Terms	Morality	
	M	*SD*
Low/Internal	2.31	1.03
Low/External	1.72	0.93
Medium/Internal	2.41	1.07
Medium/External	1.38	0.76

Figure 2

Interaction Effects of Severity and Message Frame on Morality
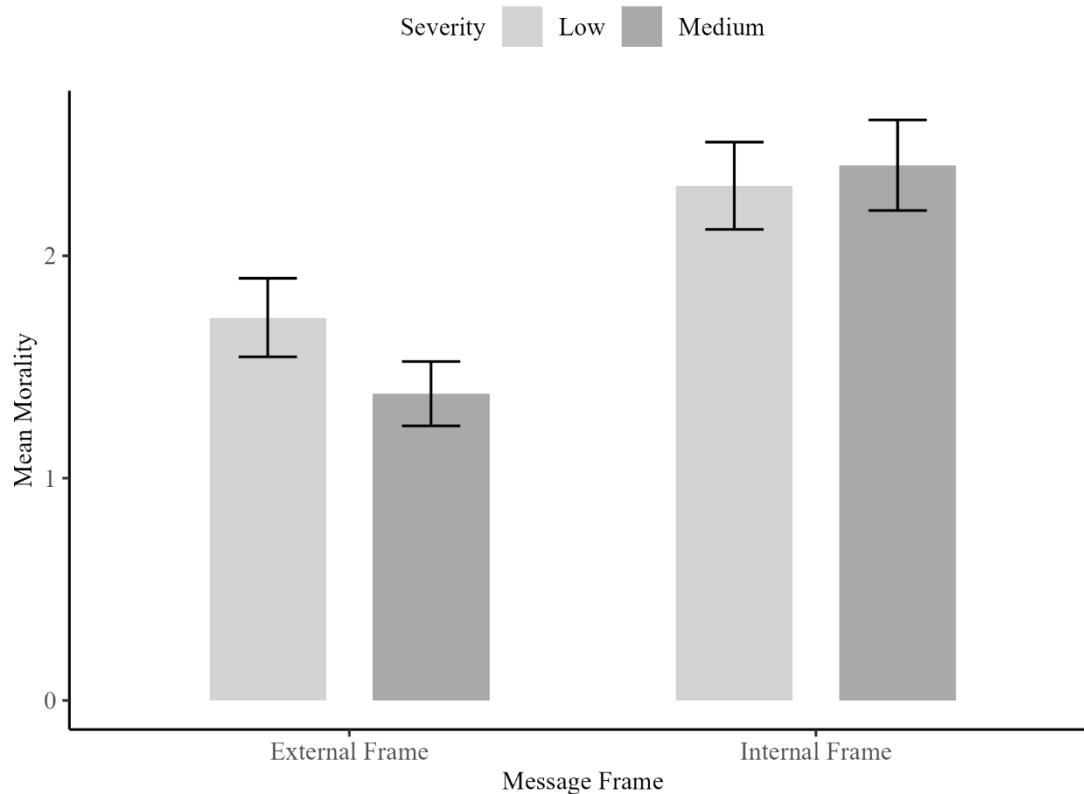
Acceptability

Message Frame showed to have a significant effect on both Social, $F(1, 321) = 123.95$, $p < .001$, and Individual Acceptance, $F(1, 321) = 136.49$, $p < .001$. As shown in Table 6, an Internal Message Frame was deemed more socially and individually acceptable.

Severity had a main effect on both variables, with $F(1, 321) = 5.95$, $p = .015$ and $F(1, 321) = 4.01$, $p = .046$ for Social and Individual Acceptance, respectively. Table 6 depicts that posts of Low Severity elicited higher Acceptability than those of Medium Severity.

Additionally, there was a significant interaction effect for Social Acceptance, $F(1, 321) = 5.96$, $p = .02$). Figure 3 demonstrates that an Internal Message Frame led to higher Social Acceptance than an External Message Frame for Low ($p < .001$) and Medium Severity ($p < .001$). Internal Message Frames were therefore perceived as more socially acceptable, no matter whether they were of Low or Medium Severity. Moreover, messages expressing an

External Message Frame of Medium Severity were perceived significantly less socially

acceptable compared to External Messages of Low Severity ($p > .001$). As portrayed in Figure

3, Internal Message Frames were judged similarly socially acceptable across both levels of

Severity ($p = .93$). For Individual Acceptance, the interaction effect between Message Frame

and Severity was not significant, $F(1, 321) = 1.78$, $p = .18$.

As covariate, Sexism had a significant effect on both Social, $b = .375$, $SE = 0.091$, $p < .001$, and Individual Acceptance, $b = .515$, $SE = 0.076$, $p < .001$. Participants harbouring

higher sexist beliefs therefore believed the Incel's arguments to be more acceptable.

Table 6

Mean and Standard Deviation of Acceptance Grouped by Message Frame and Severity

	Dependent Variables			
Message Frame	Social Acceptance		Individual Acceptance	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Internal	2.49	1.15	2.48	1.18
External	1.62	0.94	1.51	0.88
Severity	Social Acceptance		Individual Acceptance	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Low	2.15	1.15	2.08	1.18
Medium	1.95	1.10	1.91	1.11
Interaction Terms	Social Acceptance		Individual Acceptance	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Low/Internal	2.49	1.17	2.51	1.19
Low/External	1.81	1.03	1.65	1.01
Medium/Internal	2.48	1.12	2.45	1.17
Medium/External	1.43	0.79	1.37	0.71

Figure 3

Interaction Effects of Severity and Message Frame on Social Acceptance
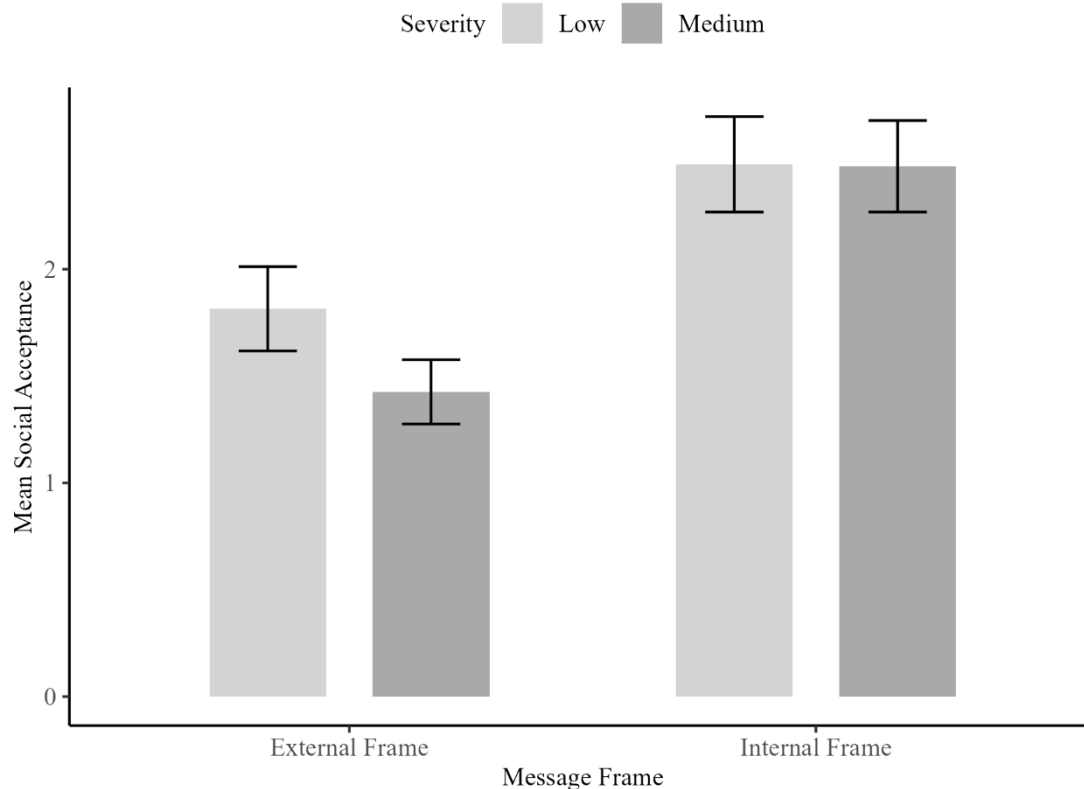
Harm Perception

The analysis found a significant main effect of Message Frame on participants' judgement of harm done to feminists, $F(1, 321) = 182. 28, p < .001$, as well as Harm Intention, $F(1, 321) = 399.51, p < .001$. Participants judged messages of External Message Frame to be more harmful to feminists as well as more intentional than those of Internal Message Frame, as demonstrated in Table 7.

There was no significant main effect of Severity on Feminist Harm, $F(1, 321) = 0.989$, $p = .321$. However, Severity showed to be a significant influence on Harm Intention, $F(1, 321) = 7.49, p = .007$. Table 7 shows that posts of Medium Severity were judged to be more intentionally harmful than those with Low Severity.

A significant interaction effect was observed for both Feminist Harm, $F(1,321) = 8.35$, $p = .004$, and Harm Intention, $F(1,321) = 8.54, p = .004$. A visualization of the interaction effect for Feminist Harm and Harm Intention can be found in Figure 4 and 5, respectively.

They demonstrate that an External Message Frame led to higher Feminist Harm and Harm Intention than an Internal Message Frame for both Low ($p < .001$ for Feminist Harm and Harm Intention) and Medium ($p < .001$ for Feminist Harm and Harm Intention) Severity. In sum, participants judged messages containing an External Message Frame as more intentional and harmful to feminists than messages of Internal Message Frame, regardless of whether the message was of Medium or Low Severity. Moreover, in response to the Internal Message Frame, posts of Low and Medium Severity were perceived similarly intentional ($p = .18$) and harmful ($p = .89$). However, for messages utilizing an External Message Frame, Low and Medium Severity elicited different responses in Feminist Harm ($p = .006$) and Harm Intention ($p < .001$). Figures 4 and 5 show that, compared to External Message Frame of Low Severity, the same Message Frame of Medium Severity was perceived as more harmful and intentional.

Sexism had no significant effect on harm done to feminists, $b = -.131$, $SE = 0.123$, $p = .289$, but it had a significant effect on Harm Intention, $b = -.245$, $SE = 0.097$, $p = .013$. Participants endorsing higher sexist beliefs therefore found the Incel's arguments to be less intentionally harmful.

Table 7

Mean and Standard Deviation of Harm Perception Grouped by Message Frame and Severity

	Dependent Variable			
Message Frame	Feminist Harm		Harm Intention	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Internal	2.45	1.31	2.22	1.30
External	3.77	1.32	4.22	1.11
Severity	Feminist Harm		Harm Intention	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Low	3.06	1.41	3.08	1.54

Medium	3.16	1.53	3.36	1.58
Interaction Terms	Feminist Harm		Harm Intention	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Low/Internal	2.55	1.33	2.23	1.37
Low/External	3.58	1.31	3.94	1.20
Medium/Internal	2.36	1.29	2.21	1.24
Medium/External	3.96	1.32	4.50	0.93

Figure 4

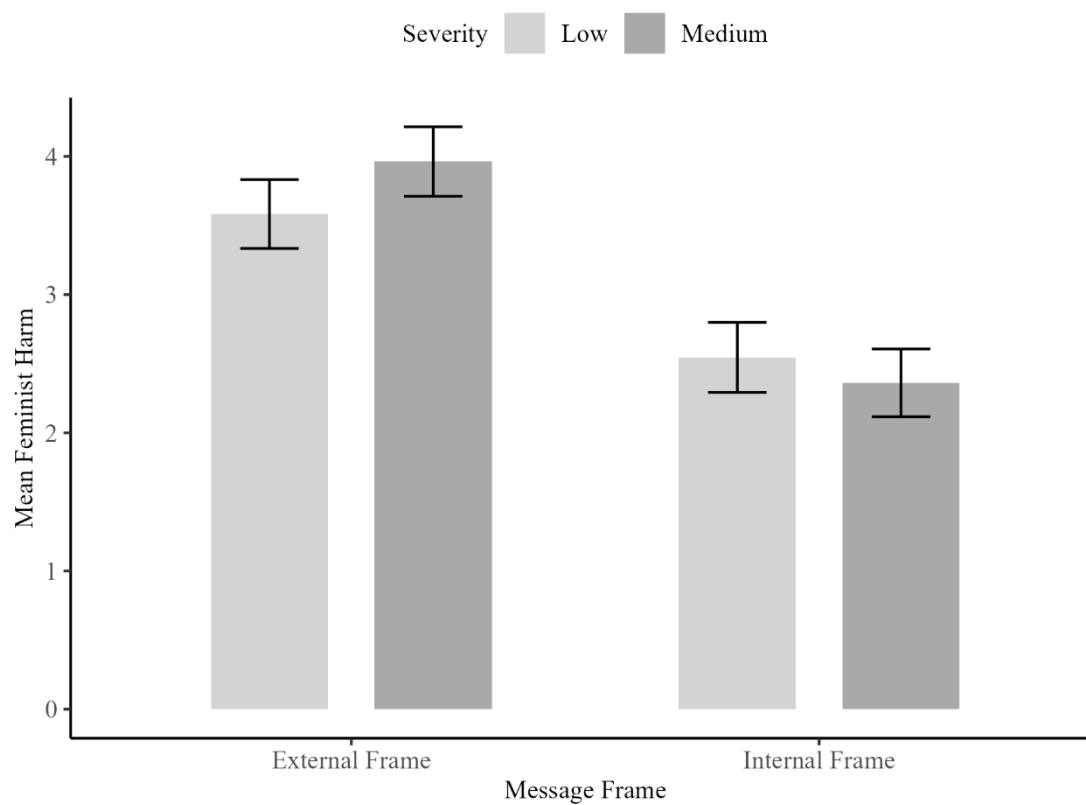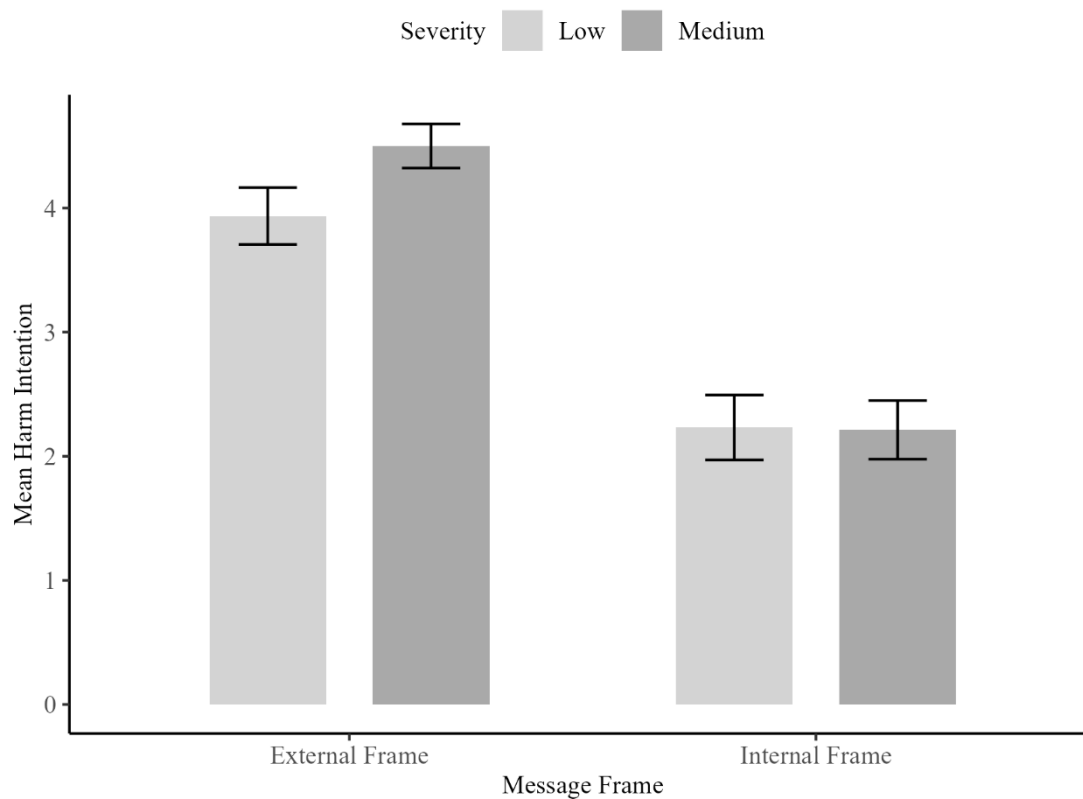*Interaction Effects of Severity and Message Frame on Feminist Harm*

Figure 5

Interaction Effects of Severity and Message on Harm Intention

Exploratory Analyses

An exploratory analysis was conducted to investigate the effect of feminist self-identification on the dependent variables. To explore this, the variable was added as a predictor to the main model. The results showed numerous interactions and some main effects of feminist self-identification that can be compared to the effects of the original model. A full overview of the analyses can be found in Appendix C.

When feminist identity was added to the main model, the main effect of Message Frame and Severity on Internal ($p = 07$; $p = .09$) and External ($p = .83$; $p = .33$) Blame Attribution, Individual ($p = .42$; $p = .11$) and Social ($p = .12$; $p = .64$) Acceptability as well as Feminist Harm ($p = .13$; $p = .57$) were no longer significant. For Morality, the main effect of Severity failed to reach the threshold when feminism self-identification was added ($p = .42$). A main effect of feminist self-identity was found for Harm Intention. Observing the grouped

means showed that participants who identified as feminists accredited higher Harm Intention to the Incel than those who did not ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.57$ vs. $M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.51$; $p < .001$). There were significant interaction effects of Message Frame and Feminist Identity on Internal ($p < .001$) and External ($p = .01$) Blame Attribution, Morality ($p < .001$), Social Acceptance ($p < .001$) and Feminist Harm ($p < .001$). An External Message Frame was associated with higher Internal Blame Attribution and Feminist Harm than an Internal Message Frame for both feminists ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.09$ vs. $M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.08$; $p = .03$ for Internal Blame Attribution; $M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.15$ vs. $M = 2.64$, $SD = 1.39$; $p < .001$ for Feminist Harm) and non-feminists ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.28$ vs. $M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.04$; $p < .001$ for Internal Blame Attribution; $M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.36$ vs. $M = 2.17$, $SD = 1.11$, $p < .001$ for Feminist Harm). Moreover, participants responded with lower External Blame Attribution when exposed to an External Message Frame than to an Internal Message Frame when they identified as feminists ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 1.07$ vs. $M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.04$; $p = .002$) as well as when they did not ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.28$ vs. $M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.06$; $p < .001$). Lastly, lower perceptions of Morality and Social Acceptance to the External Message Frame than to the Internal Message Frame were expressed by feminists ($M = 1.41$, $SD = 0.83$ vs. $M = 2.36$, $SD = 1.10$, $p < .001$ for Morality; $M = 1.48$, $SD = 0.95$ vs. $M = 2.51$, $SD = 1.23$, $p < .001$ for Social Acceptance) and non-feminists ($M = 1.77$, $SD = 0.87$ vs. $M = 2.36$, $SD = 0.97$; $p < .001$ for Morality; $M = 1.83$, $SD = 0.89$ vs. $M = 2.45$, $SD = 1.01$; $p < .001$ for Social Acceptance).

Feminists and non-feminists did not differ significantly in their responses to External or Internal Message Frames when their External Blame Attribution, Morality and Social Acceptability were measured. However, in response to an External Message Frame, feminists, compared to non-feminists, reported higher Internal Blame Attribution ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.0$ vs. $M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.28$; $p = .001$) and higher Feminist Harm ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.15$ vs. $M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.36$; $p < .001$) in response to an External Message Frame.

Discussion

This study investigated public perception of Incels' forum posts that either contained the neutralization technique condemn the condemners or an internal, self-blaming message frame. Severity of language was manipulated by varying the aggression and degree of frustration expressed in the post. Blame attribution, morality, harm perception and acceptability were measured to explore the influence of the neutralization. The findings showed that when Incels used condemn the condemners to blame feminists for their difficulties rather than blame themselves, participants assigned higher internal blame attribution to the Incel. They also reported lower levels of morality, social and individual acceptance as well as higher perception of intentional harm done to feminists. Additionally, messages of higher language severity led to lower morality and acceptance as well as higher internal blame attribution, harm perception and intention. It can be concluded that, compared to an internal message frame, the neutralization technique condemn the condemners did not have the expected effect on blame attribution and public impression of the Incel.

The Effect of Condemn the Condemners

Prior to this study, it was expected that using condemn the condemners in Incel forum posts would result in higher blame attribution to external parties, higher morality as well as social and individual acceptance. Additionally, it was hypothesized that the neutralization would lead to lower perceived harm to feminists and harm intention. These hypotheses were informed by literature stating that neutralization techniques are used by individuals to justify their actions to outsiders as well as to sustain a positive self-esteem (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Condemn the condemners has shown by previous research to be one technique that serves this purpose by shifting responsibility to the criticizing party (Costello, 2000). In the light of these arguments, this study showed surprising results. When the Incel assigned blame to feminists, participants attributed more responsibility to the Incel and perceived his actions as less moral

and acceptable as well as more harmful. Additionally, more severe language was associated with an increased negative effect of condemn the condemners on morality, acceptability as well as harm intention while also resulting in higher internal blame attribution.

The observed effect of condemn the condemners might have been the result of the Incel expressing viewpoints that were not shared by majority of the participants. In addition to the low sexism scores reported in the present study, its sample size included many individuals who identified as feminists. Maruna and Copes (2005) found that if a person has a pre-established opinion, it is likely to impact their judgement of anything relating to it. In addition, Holthuizen (2024) discussed how identification with the attacked group is likely to lead to negative impressions of the attacker. Bagci et al. (2021) drew similar conclusions when they compared groups of differing meat consumption and found that a higher ingroup identification led to more negative impressions of the outgroup. Feminist identity was therefore a probable influence in participants' decision-making, leading them to express more negative impressions of the Incel's arguments because they identified with the group that he was attacking.

Group identification does not only inform judgement but is also an important indicator of a person's self-identity. If an ingroup is perceived to be under attack, the person assumes higher threat, as their own identity is also attacked (Riek et al., 2006). The low scores of sexism and the high number of self-identified feminists in the present sample give rise to the assumption that participants perceived such a threat. This is further underlined by the exploratory analysis which showed that, compared to non-feminists, feminists judged messages in which the Incel was attacking them as more harmful and accredited higher blame to the Incel. Considering these findings, it might be interesting for future research to further examine the influence of feminist self-identification on perception of misogynistic content, especially in regard to the exploration of how individuals with less feminist viewpoints judge the Incel phenomenon. In conclusion, feminist self-identification might have been an

important indicator of participants' self-identity, leading them to perceive attacks against them as more personal. Having established that, it is worthwhile to also discuss the rhetoric the Incel used to shift blame away from his person and how that might have contributed further to an internal blame attribution and more negative impressions.

Shifting the blame to an outside party, as done in condemn the condemners, is only successful if it seems authentic and if the blame-shifting individual provides awareness of their own responsibility in the matter. If blame is attributed to external forces without apparent reason except in order to get out of an uncomfortable situation, it is no longer approved by society (Maruna & Copes, 2005). The present study supports this argument by demonstrating that participants found forum posts expressing a higher degree of misogyny or self-deprecation to be less socially and individually acceptable. They might have perceived these posts as such irrational blame-shifting, believing that the Incel does not provide sufficient and socially acceptable reasons for attributing responsibility to outside forces, especially when using more severe language. Additionally, Daly and Nichols (2023) found that Incels often express viewpoints that are noticeably exaggerated and therefore not considered authentic. It might be that participants recognized this and disregarded the arguments as attention-seeking instead of genuine opinions.

As previously mentioned, condemn the condemners is used to justify actions to external parties, but also to oneself and the ingroup (Sykes & Matza, 1957). This study demonstrated that shifting the blame to external parties did not persuade outgroup individuals to adjust their opinion and blame attribution. However, it did not investigate the dynamic and influence of condemn the condemners on the ingroup. In their research, Vysotsky and McCarthy (2016) found that neutralization techniques contribute to an increasing polarization within hate groups. Because ingroup members convince each other that controversial arguments are acceptable through neutralization, these arguments become increasingly extreme and eventually, nothing is off-limits. Neutralization therefore has an important impact

on ingroup communication and polarization. Exploring its effectiveness in the context of
Incels presents an avenue for future research to attain further insight into the dynamics and
communication of such an online community.

In conclusion, this study shows that the neutralization technique condemn the
condemners did not succeed in influencing participants to attribute blame for the Incel's
difficulties to an external party. Instead, the participants assigned more responsibility to the
Incel himself. Even though previous studies show the effectiveness of this neutralization, pre-
determined opinions, feminist self-identity and disregarding the arguments as inauthentic
might have influenced participants in their decision. However, these findings do not yet
explain why a self-blaming message frame was associated with participants assigning more
blame for the Incel's condition to external parties.

The Effect of Internal Blame

The observed effect of condemn the condemners compared to an internal message in
which the Incel blamed himself suggest that his arguments were viewed differently even
though the focus of his post remained the same. If a person's action is believed to be
influenced by external forces, other individuals view those actions more positively, as they
see their behaviour as less stable and unlikely to be recurrent. As a result, misconduct is not
perceived as intrinsically motivated but rather influenced by unique outside influences (Davis
& Gold, 2011). This might have been the case in this study, as participants accredited higher
external blame when the Incel blamed himself which suggests that his behaviour was
perceived as less stable and therefore more influenced by external forces. These arguments
are further supported by the finding that lower severity of language showed a higher external
blame attribution. The extremity of one's language informs the extremity of the person's
viewpoint (Craig & Blankenship, 2011) and individuals with extreme viewpoints are
perceived as more intrinsically motivated and responsible for their actions (Caroll & Payne,
1977). Incels expressing low severity of language might have elicited higher external blame

attribution than those using more severe rhetoric, as they were perceived as less convinced of and deliberate in their argumentation, leading participants to deem them less responsible. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that this study demonstrated that a self-deprecating message led to higher external blame attribution, as participants likely perceived the Incel as less intrinsically motivated and responsible for his condition.

The heightened external blame attribution might have been influenced by the participants viewing the Incel's post as an attempt to open up and acknowledging his desire to discuss challenges openly. Barekt-Bojmel et al. (2016) examined public reactions to self-deprecating Facebook content and found that users belittling themselves induced a positive response in others. These findings are also supported by the present study. In addition to the external blame attribution, it demonstrated that participants deemed it more acceptable and moral when the Incel blamed himself instead of feminists, demonstrating a positive impression of self-deprecating content. Furthermore, the connection between morality, harm perception and blame attribution was also drawn by Pizarro and Tannenbaum (2012). They discussed how individuals assign higher morality and external blame to an action when it is not perceived to be intentionally harmful. This relation was also drawn by Gray and Wegner (2008) who found that people claimed that electroshocks hurt them more when they were given on purpose than when they were seemingly accidental. Based on these studies and the present findings, it can be concluded that it might have been the self-derogatory nature of the internal message frame that elicited more positive impressions in the participants.

Implications

This study's findings demonstrated that the Incel, when presenting as a victim, was able to steer blame attribution and public perception in a desirable direction. While Ritterfield (2024) discusses Incels' self-victimization as deliberate strategy, Watson et al. (2022) discuss that such behaviour can also arise from the actor's own conviction, meaning that they intrinsically believe their actions to be justifiable by their arguments. Whether deliberate or a

result of self-deception, the present study shows that self-victimization seemed to work best when the Incel attributed blame to himself instead of an external party. By doing so, he accepted a self-presentation as a "victim of his own doing". This behaviour can be linked to the influence strategy supplication identified by Watson et al. (2022) which involves the individual presenting as the powerless victim of the situation in order to change an outsider's attribution and be perceived as a person deserving of help rather than punishment. This self-presentation can, as the present study shows, have a positive effect on outgroup individuals because participants' impressions changed even when the opinion of the Incel did not. It shows how self-victimization can succeed in shifting responsibility and how outsiders, even when they usually support different opinions, can be influenced by such a strategy and consequently assign more blame to an external force.

By showing that self-blame can induce an external blame attribution in participants, this study can be viewed in the broader context of forgiveness and apologies. As Davis and Gold (2011) argue, accepting responsibility and expressing internal blame attributions can induce a higher likelihood of forgiving a person for their disagreeable actions. The internal message frame might have been successful in inducing this proposed likelihood of forgiveness, leading participants to report a more positive impression of the Incel. Future research could explore this further and investigate how effective a self-blaming rhetoric is in eliciting forgiveness for the Incel's opinions, especially in regard to individuals who do not usually express sympathy or willingness to forgive for members of this community.

This study also provides implications relevant for the general context of message perception and neutralization. It shows that a self-blaming language can influence blame attribution as well as impression in the perceiver. Further, it highlights the importance of severity of language and provides further evidence into what extremity of language elicits in the individual. The exploratory analysis additionally explored the effect of feminist self-identity on the relationship. Future research could investigate other characteristics that might

influence judgement of Incel arguments. For example, Schmid et al. (2023) found political views to be influential in perceptions of hate speech which could also relate to the Incel phenomenon, especially in light of expanding the exploratory analysis which already deemed feminist self-identification significant. Exploring the influence of such and other characteristics on neutralization arguments can help attain more knowledge on the perception of Incel content while also providing further insight into neutralization in general.

Limitations

The forum posts presented to the participants were fictional posts created by the researcher. In their discussion on using vignettes in relation to discrimination against the queer community, McInroy and Beer (2021) conclude that this research method is efficient in working with sensitive topics. However, Erfanian et al. (2019) also highlight the difficulty of using fictional material to represent real-world scenarios. The researcher does not identify as Incel and therefore, it might be that Incels would express themselves differently in real life. To counteract this, the material of this study was based on extensive analysis of existent Incel content, and the four themes presented to the participants were genuine topics discussed on Incel platforms. Comments made by Incels on these platforms were used as templates for this study and reviewed multiple times to ensure realistic representation.

As this study used a repeated measures design where each participant judged the same items in response to four forum posts, it involved single-item measures. These have been proven to be beneficial in repeated measures designs, as they allow for quicker administration and consequently, higher retainment of participants (Allen et al., 2022). However, using single-item measures lowers content validity, and is therefore considered more sensitive to measurement errors. Additionally, it introduces the difficulty of representing the theory of a construct with only one item (Allen et al., 2022). Measuring participants' judgements with singular items likely provided this study with a larger sample size but might have also lowered its validity. However, these limitations were counteracted as much as possible by

creating different themes of forum posts and ensuring that judgements were similar across different stimuli.

Lastly, as previously mentioned, a majority of participants self-identified as feminist. As discussed, this identity was one probable influence in determining participants' judgement. The high number of feminists might have affected the data in providing results that are less generalizable to individuals with other viewpoints. In her research on coercive behaviour, Schomaker (2024) provides results contradicting previous studies and discusses how her diverse sample could have been of influence. The limitation of the present study therefore provides an avenue for future research, as using a more diverse sample size in studying the perception of Incel behaviour could increase generalizability and provide further insight.

Conclusion

This study investigated the public impression of forum posts made by Incels. Participants' judgements in response to posts containing either an internal, self-blaming message frame or the neutralization technique condemn the condemners were measured. Compared to an internal message frame, posts expressing condemn the condemners elicited a higher internal blame attribution and harm perception as well as lower levels of morality and acceptability. The results demonstrated that blaming feminists for their condition does not seem to convince the public of the Incel's blamelessness, but it is not yet known how such rhetoric influences ingroup communication and what effect it has on the continued polarization within the Incel community. What was initially created for discussions on normal difficulties in the dating world has turned into a community of men with misogynistic ideology that is located right in the heart of our society. This study provided valuable insight into the public perception of this online community which can inform future research and help attain further understanding of the ever-expanding Incel phenomenon.

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AI Statement

During the preparation of this work, I used ChatGPT to re-frame my original debrief form in a more objective manner. I used this tool because it provided me assistance in presenting participants with a neutral explanation of the Incel community. Additionally, the informed consent form contains some expressions suggested by ChatGPT which were adjusted to fit the present study. After using this tool, I thoroughly reviewed and edited the content as needed, taking full responsibility for the final outcome. For the main body of this thesis no artificial intelligence tools were used.

Appendix A

Theme 1: Asking a Girl Out

Medium Severity and Internal Attribution

Shit man, I can't even talk to a girl anymore. All I do is stutter and act like an idiot. No wonder that girls are rejecting me all the time, I wouldn't want to date a loser like me either. I'm doomed to a life of celibacy just because I am too stupid to do even the simplest things. I am so fucked and it's all my fault.

Medium Severity and External Attribution

Here I am, trying to ask a girl out and she's straight-up being a bitch about it. Nowadays, you have all these females poisoned by feminism and ganging up on you for stupid reasons when all you want is to get some. I don't get why feminism is preaching "liberation" when you're putting all men in a cage.

Low Severity and Internal Attribution

Talked to a girl today and got turned down again. Is there something seriously wrong with me?? I understand that maybe I am not that attractive but at this point, I am starting to feel hopeless, like I am doomed to a life of being lonely and single. What shall I do??

Low Severity and External Attribution

Tried to ask a girl out today and she just completely iced me out. Is this what modern dating has led to? No wonder if I am rejected all the time if feminism is teaching girls to hate on guys who just want to ask you on a date.

Theme 2: Women and Their Expectations

Medium Severity and Internal Attribution

Ugly and miserable, I wish I could finally escape this misery called my life. I can never fulfil a women's standards and be a suitable partner to her and it is all my fault for never getting my ass up. Today's women expect better, and I've dug my own hole. I truly deserve to suffer for being such a damn loser.

Medium Severity and External Attribution

Nowadays, women literally have to do nothing, she can even be ugly, and it is still okay that she expects a 10/10 guy who feeds her crying mouth with money and gives her children who grow up to be little bitches just like her. Thanks feminists, hope you're having fun ruining the lives of perfectly decent men.

Low Severity and Internal Attribution

I didn't think I was that unattractive but then I noticed that women won't even look in my direction. I think I seriously need to get my life together. Does anyone have any tips what I can do to improve my appearance so that I can at least attempt to women's standards?

Low Severity and External Attribution

So, now you're blaming me for wanting a healthy relationship with a nice girl? Maybe I'm not some handsome, tall superstar but feminists really make you believe that you're super unlovable if you're not some 6'3 guy with a sixpack. Make it make sense, seriously.

Theme 3: Sexuality

Medium Severity and Internal Attribution

As it seems like sex will be forever off the table for a loser guy like me, I will never feel like a real man. A real man would get the women, as it should be. But no, it's probably better, any woman would be ashamed to get in bed with me. Just imagine what my children would be like, just copies of their good-for-nothing father.

Medium Severity and External Attribution

Women should finally accept what the natural order tells them and stop listening to these stupid feminists. For decades, it was the women's role to satisfy men, why are women nowadays acting like such prudes? All you do is whine and bitch about it while I'm not even getting any. I have the right to have sex with the females I want but instead, feminism is ruining everything.

Low Severity and Internal Attribution

It's just so stupid because I really just want to have sex with a woman once and my ugly looks and nonsense brabbling mouth is preventing me from getting any girl to see me sexually at all. If I could feel the touch of a women, I would be so happy. But I guess I need to accept that it will not be possible for me, and it's all my own doing.

Low Severity and External Attribution

Is feminism not all about making everyone happy? Then, tell me feminists, why am I still not getting any women in my bed when it's literally biological instinct that a man wants sex with women? I don't get why you have become so picky about everything when you could so easily make a man happy.

Theme 4: Male Discrimination

Medium Severity and Internal Attribution

I was stupid enough to think that I could exist among all those normal people, all these career women and handsome businessmen. They will find out that I have no value, nothing to offer. In this society, I am no man, I am a weakling, I never toughened up. I was lazy. And now, I need to pay the price.

Medium Severity and External Attribution

Newsflash, feminists are stealing your jobs and radicalizing innocent women! I'm not going to sit by and let some bitch brag about a job she only got because of her breasts. Especially not a job I was way more qualified for. Get real, ladies, you are trying to fit in where you don't belong, and feminism is lying to you.

Low Severity and Internal Attribution

I need to keep up. Society and women are getting so much more powerful, in no time, it will be me who is just playing the secretary. I'm too soft, I know that, I need to toughen up. Force myself to bury any weaknesses and pretend I'm not some weakling who cries during his lunchbreak.

Low Severity and External Attribution

There are so many women at my job nowadays and I'm just wondering, is there still anything

that I, as a man, can bring to the table? It will probably not take that long and feminists will

tell you that the world is so much better without men in higher positions. What about natural

hierarchies?

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Dear participant,

this survey is conducted for a master's thesis on public perception of different types of online

forum posts. In the following, you will be shown fictional forum posts and asked for your

judgement on different measures related to their content.

Please be aware that the content of these forum posts might reflect opinions about women and

men that you find disagreeable. If you wish to terminate your participation due to discomfort,

you may do so at any time by closing your browser tab. Incomplete data will be excluded

from analysis.

Participation will take about 10 minutes. All your data will be anonymized and cannot be

tracked back to your identity. Please note that by participating, you agree to your anonymous

data being used for possible future publication. In line with the policy of the University of

Twente, data will be stored for at least 10 years to guarantee trustworthy

research. Participation is completely voluntary and can be terminated at any time without

further consequences by closing the browser tab.

For further questions or inquiries, please contact the researcher Jana Krawinkel

(j.s.krawinkel@student.utwente.nl).

Debriefing Form

This study was conducted as part of a master's thesis on public perceptions of forum posts made by individuals who identify as Incels (involuntary celibates). Incels are members of an online community who express feelings of frustration and isolation due to difficulties in forming romantic relationships. Within these communities, members share their experiences and perspectives on modern dating, often discussing their belief that modern society has set unreachable expectations for men. Some members attribute these challenges to feminism which they claim has contributed to the shift in relationship dynamic. These discussions can shape how readers interpret their viewpoints and assign responsibility for the Incel's perceived difficulties.

Appendix C

Table C1

Group Means, Standard Deviations and Statistics of the Exploratory Analysis for Blame Attribution

	Internal Blame		External Blame		Feminist Blame	
Feminist Identity	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Non-Feminist	3.42	1.18	2.90	1.19	1.92	1.11
Feminist	3.64	1.23	2.65	1.14	1.47	0.94
Hypothesis Test	$F = 1.24$, $df = 1$ (103), $p = .267$		$F = 0.29$, $df = 1$ (103), $p = .591$		$F = 0.003$, $df = 1$ (103), $p = .956$	
Severity	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Low	3.37	1.21	2.91	1.11	1.69	1,08
Medium	3.74	1.19	2.58	1.20	1.60	0.99
Hypothesis Test	$F = 2.91$, $df = 1$ (103), $p = .089$		$F = 0.95$, $df = 1$ (103), $p = .332$		$F = 0.61$, $df = 1$ (103), $p = .436$	
Message Frame	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Internal	3.12	1.07	3.09	1.05	1.49	0.86
External	3.97	1.21	2.40	1.18	1.79	1.16
Hypothesis Test	$F = 3.36$, $df = 1$ (103), $p = .068$		$F = 0.05$, $df = 1$ (103), $p = .829$		$F = 19.07$, $df = 1$ (103), $p < .001$	

Interaction Effects	Internal Blame		External Blame		Feminist Blame	
Message Frame : Severity	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
External / Low	3.74	1.26	2.68	1.18	1.90	1.23
External / Medium	4.20	1.11	2.13	1.11	1.69	1.09
Internal / Low	2.99	1.03	3.15	0.98	1.47	0.86
Internal / Medium	3.27	1.09	3.04	1.11	1.51	0.87
Hypothesis Tests	$F = 5.14$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .464$		$F = 5.14$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .024$		$F = 0.25$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .616$	
M. Frame : Feminist Identity	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
External / Non-Feminist	3.57	1.28	2.70	1.28	2.19	1.30
External / Feminist	4.23	1.09	2.21	1.07	1.54	0.99
Internal / Non-Feminist	3.26	1.04	3.11	1.06	1.64	0.80
Internal / Feminist	3.05	1.08	3.08	1.04	1.39	0.89
Hypothesis Test	$F = 0.25$, $df = 1$ (318), $p < .001$		$F = 7.54$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .006$		$F = 9.73$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .002$	
Severity : Feminist Identity	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Low / Non-Feminist	3.20	1.14	3.06	1.12	1.98	1.14
Low / Feminist	3.47	1.24	2.82	1.10	1.50	1.0

Medium / Non-Feminist	3.63	1.18	2.75	1.24	1.86	1.09
Medium / Feminist	3.80	1.20	2.48	1.16	1.43	0.88
Hypothesis Tests	$F = 0.03$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .602$		$F = 0.03$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .85$		$F = 0.15$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .695$	

Table C2

Group Means, Standard Deviations and Statistics of the Exploratory Analysis for Morality

	Morality	
Feminist Identity	M	SD
Non-Feminist	2.07	0.96
Feminist	1.89	1.08
Hypothesis Test	$F = 0.22$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .642$	
Severity	*M*	*SD*
Low	2.02	1.02
Medium	1.89	1.06
Hypothesis Test	$F = 0.089$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .765$	
Message Frame	*M*	*SD*

	2.36	1.05
Internal	2.36	1.05
External	1.55	.861
Hypothesis Test	$F = 0.662$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .417$	

Interaction Effects	Morality	
Message Frame : Severity	*M*	*SD*
External / Low	1.72	0.93
External / Medium	1.38	0.76
Internal / Low	2.31	1.03
Internal / Medium	2.41	1.07
Hypothesis Tests	$F = 1.35$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .246$	
M. Frame : Feminist Identity	*M*	*SD*
External / Non-Feminist	1.77	0.87
External / Feminist	1.41	0.83
Internal / Non-Feminist	2.36	0.97
Internal / Feminist	2.36	1.10
Hypothesis Test	$F = 5.74$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .017$	

Severity : Feminist Identity	*M*	*SD*
Low / Non-Feminist	2.12	0.89
Low / Feminist	1.95	1.09
Medium / Non-Feminist	2.01	1.02
Medium / Feminist	1.82	1.08
Hypothesis Tests	$F = 0.03$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .851$	

Table C3

Group Means, Standard Deviations and Statistics of the Exploratory Analysis for Acceptability

	Social Acceptance		Individual Acceptance	
Feminist Identity	M	SD	M	SD
Non-Feminist	2.14	0.99	2.12	1.05
Feminist	2.0	1.21	1.91	1.20
Hypothesis Test	$F = 0.18$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .669$		$F = 0.13$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .715$	
Severity	M	SD	M	SD
Low	2.15	1.15	2.08	1.18

	M	SD	M	SD
Medium	1.95	1.10	1.91	1.11
Hypothesis Test	$F = 2.57$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .109$		$F = 0.22$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .638$	
Message Frame	M	SD	M	SD
Internal	2.49	1.15	2.48	1.18
External	1.62	0.94	1.51	0.88
Hypothesis Test	$F = 0.65$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .419$		$F = 2.45$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .119$	
Interaction Effects	Individual Acceptance		Social Acceptance	
Message Frame : Severity	M	SD	M	SD
External / Low	1.81	1.03	1.65	1.01
External / Medium	1.43	0.79	1.37	0.71
Internal / Low	2.49	1.17	2.51	1.19
Internal / Medium	2.48	1.12	2.45	1.17
Hypothesis Tests	$F = 1.41$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .235$		$F = 0.324$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .569$	
M. Frame : Feminist Identity	M	SD	M	SD
External / Non-Feminist	1.83	0.89	1.74	0.91
External / Feminist	1.48	1.48	1.36	0.83

	M	SD	M	SD
Internal / Non-Feminist	2.45	2.45	2.51	1.05
Internal / Feminist	2.51	1.23	2.46	1.26
Hypothesis Test	$F = 6.49$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .011$		$F = 3.62$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .058$	
Severity : Feminist Identity	M	SD	M	SD
Low / Non-Feminist	2.29	2.29	2.20	1.03
Low / Feminist	2.07	2.07	2.0	1.27
Medium / Non-Feminist	2.0	2.0	2.05	1.07
Medium / Feminist	1.92	1.92	1.83	1.12
Hypothesis Tests	$F = 0.80$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .371$		$F = 0.01$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .909$	

Table C4

Group Means, Standard Deviations and Statistics of the Exploratory Analysis for Harm Perception

	Feminist Harm		Harm Intention	
Feminist Identity	M	SD	M	SD
Non-Feminist	2.67	1.34	2.90	1.51
Feminist	3.39	1.48	3.42	1.57

	Feminist Harm		Harm Intention	
Hypothesis Test	$F = 18.83$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = < .001$		$F = 12.11$, $df = 1$ (318), $p < .001$	
Severity	M	SD	M	SD
Low	3.06	1.41	3.08	1.54
Medium	3.16	1.53	3.36	1.58
Hypothesis Test	$F = 0.33$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .570$		$F = 0.001$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .983$	
Message Frame	M	SD	M	SD
Internal	2.45	1.31	2.22	1.30
External	3.77	1.32	4.22	1.11
Hypothesis Test	$F = 2.31$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .130$		$F = 24.04$, $df = 1$ (318), $p < .001$	
Interaction Effects	Feminist Harm		Harm Intention	
Message Frame : Severity	M	SD	M	SD
External / Low	3.58	1.31	3.94	1.20
External / Medium	3.96	1.32	4.50	0.93
Internal / Low	2.55	1.33	2.23	1.37
Internal / Medium	2.36	1.29	2.21	1.24
Hypothesis Tests	$F = 0.60$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .439$		$F = 0.64$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .425$	

M. Frame : Feminist Identity	M	SD	M	SD
External / Non-Feminist	3.18	1.36	3.85	1.23
External / Feminist	4.15	1.15	4.45	0.96
Internal / Non-Feminist	2.17	1.11	1.96	1.13
Internal / Feminist	2.64	1.39	2.39	1.38
Hypothesis Test	$F = 6.38$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .012$		$F = 0.83$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .362$	
Severity : Feminist Identity	M	SD	M	SD
Low / Non-Feminist	2.68	1.28	2.81	1.47
Low / Feminist	3.31	1.44	3.25	1.57
Medium / Non-Feminist	2.67	1.40	2.99	1.56
Medium / Feminist	3.48	1.53	3.59	1.56
Hypothesis Tests	$F = 0.80$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .371$		$F = 0.72$, $df = 1$ (318), $p = .397$	