

Understanding the Psychological Determinants of Incel Identity in Male Young Adults



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Abstract: *The present study investigated the relationship between perceived social rejection, attachment styles, and incel identity among young adult males in Pakistan. Using a quantitative correlational research design, data were collected from 190 males aged 18–35 years recruited from universities in Karachi and through social media networks. Participants completed a demographic form, the Interpersonal Rejection Sensitivity Scale (IRSS), the Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ), and the Incel Trait Scale (ITS). Prior to participation, informed consent was obtained, and data were collected anonymously through Google Forms. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. The findings revealed a significant positive correlation between perceived social rejection and incel identity ($r = .189, p = .009$), indicating that higher levels of perceived social rejection were associated with stronger incel identity. Attachment styles were also significantly positively correlated with incel identity ($r = .214, p = .003$), suggesting that attachment insecurity is linked to greater incel identification. Furthermore, a significant positive correlation was found between perceived social rejection and attachment styles ($r = .510, p < .001$). Overall, the results supported the proposed hypotheses and demonstrated that higher perceived social rejection and attachment insecurity are associated with higher levels of incel identity among young adult males in Pakistan.*

Keywords: Incel Identity, Social Rejection, Attachment Styles, Pakistani Young Adult Males

Introduction

There is an increasing amount of research showing how psychologically and socially involved in the incel community people can be when they choose to identify as an involuntary celibate (incel). The concept of “incel” emerged as a gender-neutral online support network for people who feel lonely in the 1990s but has since grown into a primarily male online subculture consisting of people who have negative beliefs about intimate relationships, resentment, feelings of rejection, and social isolation (Baele et al., 2021). In many cases, incel members who identify as incels face deep psychological trauma, loneliness, depression and interpersonal conflict (Costello et al., 2022), although few members of incel communities engage in violent or extremist behaviour. As such, it is now an important issue in the realms of psychology, sociology, criminology, and mental health studies (Fowler, 2022).

However, unsuccessful romance is not the sole reason for the development of the incel identity. Instead, it seems to be a combination of several psychological, interpersonal and social influences that affect the way people perceive rejection and assess themselves (Jones, 2020). Of these factors, perceived social rejection has been gaining more prominence as being a factor that can impact an individual's beliefs of their social value, relationships, and future expectations. Perceived social rejection is the expectation, perception, and exaggerated responsiveness to rejection in interpersonal contexts (Downey & Feldman, 1996). People with rejection sensitivity tend to see negative cues as rejection or exclusion, which can result in anxiety, emotional distress, withdrawal and hostility. These reactions can further affect social relations and lead to increased feelings of loneliness and social isolation.

The theoretical foundation of the present study is mostly Rejection Sensitivity Theory (Downey and Feldman, 1996). This theory is based on the idea that repeated interpersonal rejections cause one to develop

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an anxious expectation of future rejection. This means that they are hypervigilant for the presence of exclusion and may read social events negatively. This cognitive-emotional process is a factor in causing inappropriate interpersonal interactions, emotional upset and problems in developing healthy relationships. In the incel world, ongoing romantic failure could further reinforce the sense of permanent undesirability and social isolation, which in turn could foster a stronger attachment to incel beliefs and communities (Downey & Feldman 1996).

Another psychological factor related to interpersonal functioning is the attachment style. According to Attachment Theory, Bowlby (1982), and later Hazan and Shaver (1987), for adults, their early interactions with caregivers also create the internal working models of self and others. These internal models affect emotional self-regulation, interpersonal relationship regulation and dealing with interpersonal difficulties in adulthood. Securely attached individuals tend to have higher levels of trust, emotional stability, and relationship satisfaction, while those with anxious or avoidant attachment types may have lower levels of trust, emotional stability, and satisfaction with their relationships and more difficulty forming close bonds (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). These traits are similar to many psychological traits shared by people who consider themselves as incels.

There is empirical support for the link between insecure attachment and relationship problems. Studies have found loneliness, diminished relationship satisfaction, increased rejection sensitivity, depression, and poor coping skills to be linked to insecure attachment styles (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Likewise, people who have been romantically rejected frequently say that they feel more socially disconnected and experience more psychological suffering, which can also foster incel identity. Beyond just romantic rejection, psychological vulnerabilities are linked to incel identification, as Costello et al. (2022) have found that it correlated with depression, anxiety, loneliness and interpersonal alienation.

Recent studies have also highlighted the psychological nature of the incel identity, rather than just a purely ideological one. According to Baele et al. (2021), there are several common cognitive beliefs among the incel community that revolve around rejection, social exclusion, manhood, and the sense of hopelessness in relationships. Often these beliefs are supported by an online community where people validate and reinforce each others experiences of rejection and create increasingly negative perceptions of themselves and others. This suggests that psychological factors like rejection sensitivity and attachment insecurity may be significant in explaining why some socially rejected people become incels while others do not (Lindsay, 2022; Zimmerman, 2024).

Even with the growing international attention, there is only limited research around the incel identity, especially in non-western societies. There have been few studies from South Asian countries, and most of those that have been carried out have been done in North America and Europe. The sociocultural environment in Pakistan is distinct, with traditional gender norms and roles, collectivistic family structures, limited pre-marriage dynamics and high societal demands for marriage and masculinity. These cultural factors can shape adolescent boys' sense of rejection in romantic relationships, their relationships with others, and their sense of belonging. There is limited empirical evidence, however, about the psychological processes involved in the construction of incel identity amongst males in Pakistan.

The present study is thus designed to explore the interrelationships between perceived social rejection, attachment styles and incel identity among young adult males in Pakistan. The study aims to build upon the current body of knowledge by exploring these psychological factors in the context of Pakistani culture, offer empirical data from under-researched population, and offer culturally appropriate psychological interventions for people facing continuous social rejection and interpersonal challenges.

Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between perceived social rejection and incel identity.
2. To examine the relationship between attachment styles and incel identity.

Research Questions

1. Is perceived social rejection associated with incel identity?
2. Are attachment styles associated with incel identity?

Hypothesis

H1: There will be significant association between perceived social rejection and incel identity among young adult males.

H2: There will be significant association between attachment styles (anxious, avoidant, secure) with incel identity among young adult males.

Methodology

Research design

The present research adopted a quantitative correlational research design to explore the relationships of perceived social rejection, attachment styles and incel identity among young adult males in Pakistan.

Sample

The sample consisted 190 male respondents aged 18-35 years who were recruited by purposive sampling from various universities, social media and community network in Pakistan.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Eligibility of the participants included being male and Pakistani, aged 18–35 years, being proficient in the English language, and giving informed consent. Cases were excluded if they were women, under 18 years of age, failed to give informed consent, or didn't return completed questionnaires.

Measures

Demographic Form

Demographic information was collected using a researcher-designed information form; age, educational qualification, employment status, socioeconomic status, place of residence, family system, previous romantic relationship experience, and history of romantic rejection were collected. These variables were used to describe the study sample.

Interpersonal Rejection Sensitivity Scale (IRSS)

Perceived social rejection was measured by the Interpersonal Rejection Sensitivity Scale (IRSS) by Berenson et al. (2009). The scale includes 13 items that reflect people's proneness to expect, sense, and overreact to interpersonal rejection. The Likert Format is used for participants' responses to each item, with higher scores reflecting higher rejection sensitivity and perceived social rejection. The reliability and validity of the IRSS have been shown to be satisfactory in previous studies with other populations.

Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ)

The Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ) was developed originally by Van Oudenhoven, Hofstra and Bakker (2003) in the Dutch language; later, it was translated into English by Hofstra et al. (2005). In this study, the English version of the Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ) was used to measure attachment styles. The version in the current study has 20 items that measure interpersonal attachment behaviors, including secure, anxious and avoidant attachment features. The statements for each participant were scored on a Likert scale with higher scores indicating higher endorsement of insecure attachment characteristics. The ASQ has exhibited satisfactory psychometric characteristics and is a commonly used measure in adult attachment studies.

Incel Trait Scale (ITS)

All incel identity was measured with the Incel Trait Scale (ITS) created by Scaptura and Boyle (2020). The scale features 20 items to assess beliefs, attitudes and experiences related to incel identity, such as perceived

romantic failure, social isolation and resentment, as well as negative self-perceptions. Participants answered on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 5, with higher numbers representing more agreement with incel-related qualities. The internal consistency and construct validity of the ITS have been satisfactorily reported in previous research.

Procedure

The participants were recruited by using an online invitation through the universities, social networking sites, and personal contacts, where they had been introduced briefly to the purpose of the study before data collection. Those who agreed to take part in the study completed the questionnaire via the link provided on a Google Forms site. The informed consent statement on the first page of the questionnaire included the purpose of the study, the confidentiality of the responses, that participation is voluntary, anonymity and that the participant may withdraw at any point without penalty. Those who gave informed consent only were permitted to go on to fill out questionnaires. The demographic information form, Interpersonal Rejection Sensitivity Scale, Attachment Style Questionnaire, and Incel Trait Scale were completed in order. The average duration was 15-20 minutes. The responses were screened for completeness and accuracy after data collection before statistical analysis. All information was confidential and not shared for any purpose other than research.

Statistical Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27 was used to analyse the data. The participant characteristics and study variables were summarized using descriptive statistics. The measures were determined to have internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was used to explore the relationships between perceived social rejection, attachment styles, and incel identity. The level of significance was set at $p < .05$.

Results

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 190)

Variable	Category	n	%	Mean	SD
Age (years)	18–35	190	100	24.38	4.32
Education	Matric	18	9.5		
	Intermediate	35	18.4		
	Bachelor's	91	47.9		
	Master's or Above	46	24.2		
Employment Status	Student	79	41.6		
	Employed	76	40.0		
	Self-employed	17	8.9		
	Unemployed	18	9.5		
Socio-economic Status	Lower	48	25.3		
	Middle	119	62.6		
	Upper	23	12.1		
Residence	Urban	139	73.2		
	Rural	51	26.8		
Family System	Joint	104	54.7		
	Nuclear	86	45.3		
Previous Romantic Relationship Experience	Yes	72	37.9		
	No	118	62.1		
History of Romantic Rejection	Yes	68	35.8		
	No	122	64.2		

Table 2
Internal Consistency Reliability of the Study Measures (N = 190)

Measure	No. of Items	Cronbach's α
Incel Trait Scale (ITS)	20	.674
Interpersonal Rejection Sensitivity Scale (IRSS)	13	.852
Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ)	20	.874

Table 3
Pearson Correlation Matrix Among Perceived Social Rejection, Attachment Styles, and Incel Identity (N = 190)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Incel Traits	-		
2. Attachment Styles	.214**	-	
3. Perceived Social Rejection	.189**	.510**	-

Note. $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

Results showed a positive correlation between perceived social rejection and incel identity ($r = .189$, $p = .009$). Likewise, incel identity was positively correlated with attachment ($r = .214$, $p = .003$) supporting Hypothesis 2. There was also a moderate positive correlation between attachment styles and perceived social rejection ($r = .510$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

In the present study we explored the relationships between perceived social rejection, attachment styles and incel identity in young adult males in Pakistan. The results showed a positive correlation between perceived social rejection and incel identity ($r = .189$, $p = .009$), and attachment styles and incel identity were also positively correlated ($r = .214$, $p = .003$). In addition, there was a moderate positive correlation between attachment styles and perceived social rejection ($r = .510$, $p < .001$). The results corroborated with Hypothesis 1, and suggested that people who perceive more social rejection would be more inclined to report higher incel related characteristics. This result is similar to Rejection Sensitivity Theory (Downey & Feldman, 1996) which posits that exposure to rejection raises sensitivity to rejection and leads to interpersonal problems. Other studies have also found that members of incel communities tend to feel lonely and socially isolated, and that they may experience repeated interpersonal rejections (Baele et al., 2021; Costello et al., 2022). The results also have implications for Hypothesis 2, indicating that attachment styles have a significant relationship with incel identity. As per Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1982; Hazan & Shaver, 1987), those who have more insecure attachments might struggle with developing healthy relationships and regulating their emotions, which could leave them more susceptible to incel-related beliefs and experiences.

The positive association between attachment styles and perceived social rejection indicates that attachment insecurity is associated with increased perception of interpersonal rejection. While the correlations observed were statistically significant, the magnitude of the correlations found were relatively small, suggesting that the incel identity might be affected by other psychological and social parameters like loneliness, self-esteem, depression, and involvement within online communities. Overall, the findings suggest some preliminary evidence that perceived social rejection and feelings of attachment insecurity are important psychological correlates of incel identity in young adult male Pakistanis.

Conclusion

In the present study, the relationship of perceived social rejection, attachment styles and incel identity among young adult males of Pakistan was examined. It was found that there was a significant association between both perceived social rejection and attachment styles and incel identity, thus supporting the proposed hypotheses. The results indicate that psychological aspects of interpersonal rejection and attachment

insecurity are significant factors related to incel identity. The study also aligns with the few studies conducted on incel identity in Pakistan, emphasizing the need to cover interpersonal and emotional aspects in comprehending this emergent phenomenon.

Limitations and Recommendations

There are a number of limitations to the study. First, the cross-sectional study design is a limitation in the interpretation of the findings, as causal interpretations are limited. Second, the study findings may not be generalizable due to purposive sampling and self-reporting, and may suffer from response bias. Moreover, the study was conducted on a small sample of psychological variables with only male Pakistani young adults. Future studies should use a longitudinal design and larger and more diverse samples to enhance generalizability. Other factors, including loneliness, self-esteem, depression, emotional control, and participation in online communities, should be investigated. Future studies should also focus on the individual attachment style dimensions (secure, anxious, and avoidant) to shed more light on how these dimensions relate to the incel identity.

Implications

The results are of great theoretical and practical relevance. The study justifies the importance of Attachment Theory and Rejection Sensitivity Theory in the Pakistani context in understanding incel identity. From a clinical perspective, measuring perceptions of social rejection and an insecure attachment style can aid in determining young men who are at risk for interpersonal and emotional problems. Interventions to address mental health issues can be created to address social skills, healthy relationships, emotional regulation, and coping with rejection by mental health professionals and educational institutions. The study also offers a basis for further research on incel identity in the context of collectivist societies such as Pakistan.

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