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"If You're Ugly, the Blackpill is Born with You":
Sexual Hierarchies, Identity Construction, and Masculinity on an Incel Forum Board

by
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Honorable Mention

2020 Joyce Durham Essay Contest in Women's and Gender Studies

"If You're Ugly, The Blackpill is Born With You":
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Abstract:

The manosphere is one new digital space where antifeminists and men's rights activists interact outside of their traditional social networks. Incels, short for involuntary celibates, exist in this space and have been labeled as extreme misogynists, white supremacists, and domestic terrorists. This project aims to understand discussions happening among incels and situate them within social understandings of masculinity. I downloaded 4,532 threads posted on incels.is and randomly sampled 100 for analysis. Through grounded coding methodology, I identified the importance of making meaning of manhood on this site, particularly with respect to sexuality. Further, I found that incel ideology rests on the creation of sexual hierarchies that emphasize perceived attractiveness. Finally, I explore the debates within this space on who is able to claim membership and how borders of the space are policed. This is significant because it reveals how marginalized men respond to and reproduce gendered hierarchies.

Two mass killings within the decade by men claiming to be "incels" propelled the group into the national spotlight. In May of 2014, Elliot Rodger killed 6 people and himself in Isla Vista California. Before his rampage, Rodger posted a video online titled, "Elliot Rodger's Retribution," in which the twenty-two year old proclaimed, "I don't know why you girls aren't attracted to me... it's an injustice, a crime." Four years later in April of 2018, Alek Minassian drove a van through a crowd in Toronto, Canada, killing 10 people. It remains the deadliest vehicle ramming in Canadian history. Before the attack, Minassian declared on facebook, "The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow the Chads and Stacys! All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!"[1] Since these events, major news outlets (including The New Yorker, The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, USA Today, and the Washington Post) covered incels and labeled them extreme misogynists, white supremacists, and domestic terrorists.

"Incel," short for involuntary celibate, is an identity claimed by some men in the "manosphere," or the online space where antifeminists and men's rights activists converge. As the name suggests, men who call themselves incels want to have sex and be in intimate relationships with women, but have a perceived inability to do so. Incels cite a host of socially structured reasons for their celibacy, including their unattractive qualities and socially awkward personalities; the feminist agenda that has made it so women can choose to reject ugly men; and society itself, which has systematically denied them the right to sexuality. Ultimately, incels reflect the convergence of antifeminism, technological advancement, and marginalized

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[1] In this quote, a "Chad" is the term that incels use to describe the most attractive men in society who are sexually active. These men embody those characteristics which are typically associated with hegemonic masculinity--they are physically strong and attractive, they are successful in professional life, and they have sex with women as often as they desire it. A "Stacy" is a woman who conforms to conventional beauty standards, and is powerful because of her looks. She is promiscuous by incel definition, but chooses to only have sex with those who she thinks are also attractive, namely a Chad.

masculinities, presenting a unique case for understanding theories of masculinity and it's links to sexuality in modern times.

While it is certainly important to recognize that there are incels who commit violent crimes, it is also important to understand the vast majority of men who visit sites in the manosphere and call themselves incels do not make national and international headlines. It is easy to make broad assumptions about these men, given the coverage of incels in the media. However, the average incel is not overtly violent in the ways that Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian were. Rather, he is a heterosexual man who posts on clandestine parts of the internet where he can converse with other men who share his experiences and ideology. These comments are not harmless; they often reflect deeply-rooted beliefs about the way society should be organized hierarchically based on social categories (gender and sexuality being the most salient). However, these comments can also provide one starting point to examine one way that men deal with changing gendered and sexual meanings associated with specific identities in the digital era.

The goal of this study is to utilize discussions on an incel forum board to understand how men who call themselves incels make sense of their identity and navigate their sexual and gendered performances according to incel ideology. This study begins with a review of current literature. There exists little academic literature on incels, so this review is intends to outline a theoretical framework for understanding incel masculinity, identify the importance of gender to identity construction, examine the links between sexuality and masculinity, and discuss the performance of masculinity in online spaces. Next, I give an in-depth explanation of the data collection and content analysis methods used in this study. I follow this by describing the results of this study and discussing the findings. I identify three dominant discourses among incels: sexual hierarchies and the placement of incels within those hierarchies, identity construction

and border patrolling according to "incel traits," and reframing of masculinity in accordance with incel experiences. Finally, I conclude this paper by explaining how this study relates to broader sociological discussions of masculinity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In general, there exists little academic literature on online masculine identities and only a handful of articles that explore the incel community from an academic perspective. Documented recently in the social sciences is a commitment to understanding men's rights movements through printed texts, but few studies have been conducted which analyze the online presence and influence of men's rights activists more broadly, and incels in particular (Schmitz and Kazyak 2016). In this literature review, I piece together current theories of masculinity to better understand how incels both affirm and challenge those theories. Ultimately, I recognize that there is not one theory of masculinity which completely explains incel masculine performance; rather, I aim to situate incel performance within several different sociological theories explaining masculinity. Next, I explore the literature on identity construction in the context of gender. I pay particular attention to the construction of gendered identities, noting the importance of performativity and the work of creating and policing identity boundaries. For online incel communities, the process of difference-making and social border construction is important when exploring who is able to claim the identity in online spaces. I then explore the connections between masculinity and sexuality. Recent research points to the importance of heterosexual bravado to performing masculinity. Therefore, I also explore issues around virginity and celibacy as they relate to masculine identities. I proceed to assemble research on how men navigate masculinity online by explaining the manosphere and masculine performance within this space. Finally, I highlight two important studies which have analyzed masculine performance among incels.

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Theorizing Incel Masculinity

Masculinity is not composed of a specific set of behaviors, beliefs, and presentations, but rather is variant, culturally specific, and time bound. As such, it is critical to consider the current social climate within which some men congregate online around incel identity. Some scholars insist that hegemonic masculinity is situated at the top of a hierarchy of masculine performances. Hegemonic masculinity is the currently accepted behaviors, beliefs, and presentations associated with maleness which ensure the proliferation of patriarchy and establishes power of men over women and power differences in relationships between men (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1985; Connell 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Diefendorf 2015; Wilkins 2009). Hegemonic masculine performance is specific to the setting and time in which it exists, dependent upon relationships between individuals, and unattainable to nearly everyone (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Wilkins, for example, argues that, "the elusive idea of hegemonic masculinity creates particular gender dilemmas for different boys and men as they struggle to create socially recognized masculinities" (2009:343). One aspect of hegemonic masculinity is its dependence upon sexuality—heterosexuality in particular. In this framework, it is important for men to flaunt heterosexual bravado among their peers, reinforcing hierarchies over women and among groups of men (Diefendorf 2015; Pascoe 2007).

The concept of hybrid masculinities serves as a newer extension to previous considerations of hegemonic masculinity. This term refers to "the selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalized and subordinate masculinities and—at times—femininities into men's gender performances and identities" (Bridges and Pascoe 2014:246). In essence, this means that privileged men incorporate certain behaviors into the dominant masculine ideology which have historically been coded as "black," "gay," or "feminine," among other marginalized identities. According to Bridges and Pascoe

(2014), this hybridization leads to at least three main consequences (see alsoBridges 2014).
First, hybrid masculinities allow straight, white men to distance themselves from hegemonic
masculinity, while still reinforcing gendered relations of power and inequality. Second, hybrid
masculinities allow privileged men to strategically borrow from subordinate groups in order to
more easily disguise their heightened social power and to more rigidly contain these practices
within their subordinate identity groups. Finally, by obscuring symbolic and social boundaries
between identities, hybrid masculinities further entrench and conceal systems of inequality
along racial, sexual, gendered, and class boundaries.

Finally, inclusive masculinity offers an alternative theoretical framework which
conceptualizes masculine performances as organized horizontally, rather than hierarchically
(Bridges and Pascoe 2014). From this perspective, men increasingly accept diverse
performances, allowing for contemporary meanings of masculinity to include a broader selection
of performances that "count" as masculine. In instances where there is less reason for men to
fear being perceived socially as gay (diminished homohysteria), there is room for both orthodox
and inclusive masculinity to arise (Anderson 2005, 2009). Orthodox masculinity does not
remain culturally hegemonic, but men who adopt this performance do remain tactically and
emotionally distant from one another (Anderson 2009). Conversely, men performing inclusive
masculinity demonstrate emotional and physical homosocial developments by including gay
men in social circles and valuing heterofemininity (Anderson 2009). Ultimately, inclusive
masculinity theory provides one explanation for the observed decrease in overt homophobia,
particularly among all male groups, despite the fact that covert homophobia and
heteronormativity still exist and have significant impacts (Anderson and McCormack 2018).
However, this theory is not without critique. Some have pointed out that "inclusive" behaviors

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function only for straight, white, and middle-class men to secure economic, politic, and social power in the era of gay rights (de Boise 2015; Bridges and Pascoe 2014; O'Neill 2015).

For this study, I recognize the relevance and importance of each of these theories for understanding masculinity. While they are at times conflicting, putting them in conversation with one another allows for the articulation and exploration of the nuances of male identity and experiences. A singular and rigid understanding of manhood is not sufficient to explain all of these nuances. Additionally, each of these theories is helpful in understanding parts, but not the entirety, of incel masculinity. Thus, it is my hope that by presenting various theoretical perspectives regarding the social performance of masculinities, I can illuminate the complexities of experiences of incels, and for other male-identifying individuals, who do not or cannot conform to the social expectations of manhood.

Gendered Identity Construction and the Politics of Masculinity

This research understands masculinity, and gender more broadly, as a socially constructed social identity that is culturally bound, mutable, and based on social performance. In West and Zimmerman's words, gendered performance, is "not a set of traits, nor a variable, nor a role, but the product of social doings of some sort... gender itself is constituted through interaction... and [can] thus be seen as 'natural,' while it is being produced as a socially organized achievement" (1987:129). An individual's ability to fit into a gendered category is dependent upon their ability and willingness to act in ways that are consistent with the group to which they aim to claim membership (Ridgeway 1997; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). Gendered performance is one way that researchers can assess group membership and cohesion.

Critical to understanding social identity construction is understanding the nature of a collective identity. Collective identity is based on the "we-ness" of the group; members are expected to internalize qualities of the group, creating a single, unified experience against which

people both within and outside of the collective can compare their experiences (Cerulo 1997; Lamont and Molnár 2002). Since gender is traditionally conceived as a binary in which everyone is expected to fit into one of only two categories, the meanings associated with "men" and "women" collective identities are critical in this study (Ridgeway 1997; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). Further, this understanding is important when considering the outcomes for men who feel that they do not conform to expected performances.

It is also important to consider the ways in which membership (whether voluntary or involuntary) within collective identities leads to the creation and maintenance of difference. Among gendered identities, expected performance by members in each group creates difference between masculinity and femininity and among variations that exist within each category. It is through ongoing, methodical, and situated accomplishments of social identities that difference is constructed and maintained (West and Fenstermaker 1995). Thus, it is the "doing" of gender in accordance with expected ways of performing that creates differences between groups based on gender. Literature on boundary creation suggests a distinction between symbolic boundaries and social boundaries. Symbolic boundaries are distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practice, times, and spaces, while social boundaries are objective manifestations of social difference, indicated by unequal access to and distribution of resources and opportunities (Lamont and Molnár 2002). When symbolic boundaries become widely agreed upon, they can constrain social interactions and contribute to the formation of social boundaries (Lamont and Molnár 2002). This interaction between symbolic and social boundaries is observable when considering gendered boundaries. Individuals automatically assign others into gendered categories with expectations associated (symbolic boundaries); when those expectations are violated, punishment and stigmatization follows (social boundaries) (Lamont and Molnár 2002).

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While the gendered identity-forming process goes beyond the binary creation of maleness and femaleness, gendered boundaries also exist within these binary categories, resulting in an uneven distribution of power amongst different groups of men. As a result, the performance of masculinity becomes politicized both in relation to women and other men. While all men experience power due to the socially constructed meanings associated with gender, it is not helpful to talk about men as a monolithic entity because of the myriad differences and inequalities among men (Messner 1997). As such, men who hold different identities learn to navigate masculinity differently. For this project, it is helpful to acknowledge the difference in experiences, power, and access to resources afforded to white men in particular.[2] Key to understanding white masculinity is the concept of aggrieved entitlement. Many white men still buy into the ideals of traditional masculinity, yet economic and social changes have happened fast and made many men feel cheated, unhappy, and unfulfilled (Kimmel 2013). As a result, white men can become angry that they do not have the same opportunities to access resources and power to which they may feel entitled (Kimmel 2013). Instead of questioning systems of inequality, white men may attempt to perform an exaggerated masculinity, emphasizing physical strength, self-control, and power. Researchers have, at times, documented a link between aggrieved entitlement and violence, including mass murder and suicide (Kalish and Kimmel 2010; Kimmel 2013; Vito, Admire, and Hughes 2017).

Masculinity and (Hetero)Sexuality

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[2] By making this claim, I do not intend to assert that all men who post on incels.is are White. In fact, given the international presence on the website, it is reasonable to expect that the site is actually quite diverse. However, given that the unit of analysis for this project is not the men who post but the posts themselves, and given that the posts are often written from a lens which perpetuates racial hierarchies with Whiteness as the most powerful group, it is helpful to consider how these men are cloaked by anonymity on this website. Essentially, men are able to perform White masculinity within this space, regardless of whether or not they actually identify as White.

Incel identity is primarily defined by the desire, but perceived inability, to create and maintain sexually intimate relationships with women—hence the term involuntary celibate. Thus, in order to make sense of incel masculine performance in online forums, it is imperative to address the ties between masculinity and sexuality. When centering sexuality, masculinity can be understood as a system of sexual discourses and identities that indicate power, dominance, and control (Pascoe 2007). With this understanding, masculinity need not be attached to the male body. For men doing masculinity, discussing heterosexual experiences is about affirming, "much more than just masculinity; they affirm subjecthood and personhood through sexualized interactions in which they indicate to themselves and to others that they have the ability to work their will upon the world around them" (Pascoe 2007:86). "Compulsive heterosexuality," describes the ritualized interactions which eroticize male dominance and female submission; rather than being about pleasure, compulsive heterosexuality is about affirming masculinity through sexual mastery and dominance (Pascoe 2007).

Noting the importance of sexuality to masculine performance, it is also relevant to dissect an individual's motivations for engaging in sexual activity. Men are more likely to cite personal motivations for having sex (i.e. sex is an important part of a relationship, sex feels good, sex makes me feel loved, I want to see what it feels like) while women are more likely to cite partner-centered motivations (i.e. I want to express love and intimacy) (Patrick, Maggs, and Abar 2007). Further, one study finds that men who evaluate their physical appearance more positively are more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior than men who do not (Gillen, Lefkowitz, and Shearer 2006). Thus, it is not solely the broader association of heterosexual bravado and masculinity that is important to note, but also how masculinity is performed in an individual's sexual experiences.

Finally, it is important to consider virginity within the context of masculinity, given the prevalence of discussing virginity on the site. Researchers explain virginity through three metaphors: a gift, a stigma, and a process (Carpenter 2002, 2005). Interestingly, researchers have pointed out the importance of analyzing gendered power relations in early sexual experiences. A "disempowering" sexual narrative or experience is one that leaves an individual confused about whether and how to act on sexual desires (Carpenter 2002; Tolman 1994). While there were both men and women in this study who ascribed each of the virginity metaphors, it is notable that the "gift" metaphor typically disempowers women while the "stigma" metaphor typically disempowers men (Carpenter 2002, 2005). Regardless of which metaphor an individual compares their own experiences to, it is rare for the experience of virginity loss to be disempowering among both men and women (Carpenter 2002). Despite these narratives of virginity loss, college-age men generally reported feeling more pressure than women to lose their virginity soon (Sprecher and Regan 1996). A life course analysis of virgin involuntary celibates shows that participants reported a lack of experience at several key transitional points throughout adolescence (Donnelly et al. 2001). Once these individuals felt "off course" in their sexual development, they attributed continued involuntary celibacy to several other factors including shyness, troubles with body image, and precarious living and working arrangements (Donnelly et al. 2001). Consequences for these involuntary celibates include deep unsatisfactoriness with the course of their life and a sense of feeling "off time," as if opportunities that their peers have had simply passed them by (Donnelly et al. 2001).

Navigating Incel Masculinity Online

Incels exist as one group in the "manosphere," a loose confederacy of men who are, "united by an antagonism towards women, a vehement opposition to feminism, and the production of hyperbolic misogynist discourse" (Jane 2018:662). The groups that occupy this

space are often associated with "cyberhate" and other forms of online harassment that, at times, can and should not be completely separated from violence that happens in the real world (Van Valkenburgh 2018). This violence is particularly apparent in discussions of sexual violence, which often frame rape as a gender-neutral problem that has been exacerbated by the feminist movements (Gotell and Dutton 2016). There are several different identities that populate this space, including incels, "Men Going Their Own Way," and "Pick-Up Artists" (Ging 2017; Gotell and Dutton 2016; Jones, Trott, and Wright 2019).

Participants in the manosphere often ascribe to what they call "Red Pill Ideology." Men who are "red pilled" have become enlightened to the true nature of society, where male and female sexual behaviors rely heavily on genetic determinism and women are, among other things, "irrational, hypergamous, hardwired to pair with alpha males and need to be dominated" (Ging 2017:12). Sexuality in this space becomes economized, in that sexual relationships are often understood only in terms of quantity rather than quality (Van Valkenburgh 2018). Under this system, there is little room for pleasure in sexual relationships; rather, sexuality in the manosphere reflects the adoption of neoliberal principles into the understanding of sexual relationships (Van Valkenburgh 2018). However, men in the manosphere often describe women without agency of their own to participate in the sexual marketplace. Red pill ideology insists that women will always choose to have sex with an alpha male but will settle for and financially exploit beta males if this is not an option (Ging 2017). From this perspective, zeta males (including incels) are left, against their desires, to celibacy. Incels are unique in their beliefs because of a further adoption of "Black Pill Ideology," which recognizes the many of the same principles of red pill ideology and adds the belief, in understanding one's position in the world, he also understands that he cannot change his position in the sexual hierarchy. In contrast to some groups in the manosphere that aspire to become alpha males, incel communities, "rail

against rather than aspire to the alpha males of jock culture," adopting a language of victimhood to describe their social positioning (Ging 2017:13).

Finally, it is important to consider the online space that incels occupy and how people in this space "do" masculinity. Participants in the manosphere have learned the importance of developing an online subculture, which includes the use of repeated language patterns and specialized programmatic features (Kendall 2000). As such, individuals in online spaces are still able to reveal parts of their identity (like race, gender, class, sexuality, and age) which shape interactions, despite the absences of often taken-for-granted visual cute present in other social situations (Kendall 2000; West and Fenstermaker 1995). Additionally, race and gender attach meaning to certain bodies (Kendall 2000). While bodies remain hidden online, references to the bodies behind virtual identities become even more important because, "the assumed congruence between certain types of bodies and certain physiological, behavioral, and social characteristics results in the expectation by online participants that aspects of the hidden bodies—of, in effect, other participants' "true" identities—can be deduced (if imperfectly) from what is revealed online" (Kendall 2000:260). Thus, the importance of social identities should not be dismissed, despite the perception of anonymity in online spaces.

METHODS

The goal of this research is to understand the discourse happening among incels to gain a better sense of how they are making meaning of manhood and masculinity. This project takes an inductive and qualitative approach to the research process. To achieve the goals of this project, I chose to conduct a content analysis of the website incels.is.[3] These methods make the most sense

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[3] A previous iteration of the site was called incels.me. This version of the site was deleted in 2017, and incels.is was created in it's stead. The posts on incel.me did not carry over to the new site. After the collection of the data for this project, the IP address for the site was changed to incels.co. However, all of the comments were preserved in this transition. As such, comments tracing back to 2017, the start of incels.is, are still accessible on the site incels.co.

since data from online message boards is readily available and ethically obtained. Other methods that require more researcher-subject interactions would be impractical, given the anonymity that incels.is provides and the potential ethical conundrums of falsely claiming an incel identity to actively participate on the site.

Incels congregate in many different online spaces. Some post on messageboard-style websites like reddit.com, 4chan.com, and 8chan.com. Others post on independent forum boards, like incels.is. I chose to analyze incels.is because it has been cited in several popular news sources (Binder 2018; Tolentino 2018; Emba 2019), it is easily accessible, and contains data that extends back to the site's creation in 2017. The popularity of this site among incels also points to it's importance as a hub. By January 2020, according to statistics publicized on the site, there were over 163,000 threads containing more than 3,510,000 comments. There were nearly 11,000 members; if the time spent on this website by all members was added up, it would amount to more than 32 years. Incels.is is a discussion based website, where an original poster may create a new thread by giving a title (usually indicating the topic of the discussion) and the first comment. Other users can respond by leaving subsequent comments. There are three main groupings of threads that appear on the landing page of the website: "Inceldom Discussion," "OffTopic," and "Meta & Feedback." For this project, I chose to analyze threads in the "Inceldom Discussion" tab because it is most relevant to discussions of incel identity.

Given the vast amount of information present, I decided that I would only analyze threads containing more than 50 comments. This decision is methodologically defensible for several reasons. First, I wanted to ensure that I would be able to capture and analyze discussions. There are many threads on this website that have very few comments, so it would be difficult to capture discourse if these threads were a part of the data set. The majority of threads located in the "Inceldom Discussions" section of this website fall into this category, so

this procedure ensures that threads with only a few comments did not dominate the data sample. Second, I wanted to capture only the most important discussions on the website. While there are a number of reasons why one thread may get more comments than another that are not related to the importance of the topic discussed (time of day posted, for example), this is also one of only a few ways to measure the importance of a conversation given the information available on this site. Finally, the time and resources available for this project limited the amount of data that could be collected and analyzed. Only using threads with more than 50 comments narrowed the amount of data to be collected while still ensuring that enough data would be used in the study to make it significant.

Anticipating variation in the types of conversations that would occur at different times of year, I decided that my research study should span an entire year; the data used in this project spans 2018. I downloaded every thread posted in this timeframe with more than 50 comments, which amounted to 4,352 threads each with between 50 and 2,585 comments. I then randomly selected 100 threads to code. Using a qualitative data analysis software (ATLAS.ti 8), I first coded 20 threads (1424 comments) inductively using a grounded theory approach. In this phase, I identified 65 themes and subthemes that occurred frequently in the data or that seemed important and pertinent to this study. Since each thread contained a different topic, it was important to continue to add to my codebook during this beginning phase as new themes emerged in the threads. For the remaining 80 threads, I organized and restructured my codebook to form 13 substantial themes according to the conclusions that I wished to make. These themes can be found in Appendix I. In total, the 100 randomly sampled threads contained 7,767 comments that I analyzed as a part of this project. In the presentation of this analysis, I cite direct quotes by referring to the screen name of a person posting on the site. All screen names that are directly quoted in the results section of this paper are included in Appendix II.

Given the nature of this research as graphic, violent, and emotionally charged, I feel the need to locate myself within this process. When I first learned about incels from a reading a New Yorker article, I was shocked, yet captivated. At the time, I was just beginning my study of Sociology and working at a global NGO specifically advocating for sexual rights and access to reproductive health care. I was a sexual violence peer educator, with a commitment to having conversations about the role that everyone can play in eliminating violence. These men seemed to lie at the intersection of many interests for me: gender, and masculinity in particular; sexuality; pop culture; and power and privilege. However, the beliefs they held also seemed to be in direct opposition to many of my own.

For me, accounting for this dissonance was important at every step in the research process. I am not under the impression that my own beliefs, identities, and experiences are completely separated from this study. Rather, I maintained an awareness of how my relationship to the comments that compose my data set shaped my analysis. This is not something that is unique to my experience. Kathleen Blee, in reflecting on her field work with white supremacists, said, "the vast gulf between my beliefs and those of racist group members made intersubjective understanding nearly impossible, but it highlighted the puzzle of how they came to adopt these beliefs. So too did the unintelligibility of their worldviews pull my eye toward how someone could find these ideas plausible and reasonable" (2019: 756). In alignment with this, I recognize that my disagreement with the views shared on incels.is sparked a fascination, and at times near obsession, with understanding the discourse taking place on the site. Simultaneously, however, my disagreement made sympathizing with this group laborious at best (and, at worst, damn near impossible).

Nodding to qualitative feminist research traditions, I intend to account for my emotions in this research as well. Kristin Blakely writes that emotionally engaged research requires

researchers to ask questions that are unsettling, uneasy, and anxious; sitting with those questions allows the researcher to appropriately address responsibility and representation within their research. Taking responsibility for emotions in the research process, "involves recognition of ourselves as imperfect or as thinking and feeling, emotional researchers in imperfect contexts... Our research is and can be only partial in its outcomes, data, method, design, and setting, as well as in its understanding of the research participants and the studied subject itself" (2007: 63). Each time I visited data for this project, I took time to free write on the experience. These free-flowing, informal pieces often contained the initial thoughts that shaped my results. They also, however, often contained reflections on personal reactions to the data. Throughout the research process, I engaged with peers and advisors on what I was observing and the emotional response that those observations provoked in me. This reflection—both in isolation and in community—was critical; understanding and managing my emotional response to the data was deeply important when considering how I chose to shape my analysis and discussion. Recognizing this, I offer a research project that is rigorous, academic, and complex, yet still deeply entwined with my experiences, emotions, and beliefs.

DOMINANT INCEL DISCOURSES

"The Literal Bottom of Society"

Incels believe sexuality functions much like an economy. Some are at the top of the hierarchy, and therefore have the most power in the market; these people have the most sex, but are also able to choose when and with whom they would like to have sex. Men at the top of this hierarchy are often called "Chads." "To be a true Chad," says Arrogantcel, "you don't just need to be attractive you must also have some sort of status. Chad isn't just some pretty effeminate guy, he's also somebody with many friends, knows a lot of people, extremely confident, has a strong will, and is looked at as a "higher" person." Incels position others are in the middle of this

hierarchy. Men in this group are often described using the phrase, "alpha fux beta bux" indicating that women will choose to first sleep with "alpha" men (those at the top), and later settle for a "beta" man (those in the middle) who has money. 37YearOldVirgin explains that, "hot girls only get with ugly guys for money or status. This is hypergamy and not genuine attraction." Finally, there are those at the bottom of this sexual hierarchy. Incels place themselves in this category, and insist that they are denied access to sexuality in the marketplace. Incels often assign individuals to a position in a 10 point scale based on where their looks place them within this sexual hierarchy.

Incels insist that sexuality is monopolized by those at the top of this hierarchy, and that the gap between those at the top and those at the bottom is increasing. "Times have changed," says 37YearOldVirgin, "and in the new sexual marketplace there really IS a massively widening disparity between the sexually wealthy and the poor." Another quote by a poster with the screen name Lubricare explains that there is not only a widening sexual wealth gap, but that people who were previously considered attractive are now more disadvantaged that they previously were: "even a normie can become incel in a sexual market like today's. With ever rising standards for men, sometimes I feel the line between normies and incels gets blurry. What was a normie 5 years ago, today could be either roping or wanking until urethra inflammation ensues." Although there exists some disagreement, incels generally agree that blurring the "line between normies and incels" has made all men who are not at the top of the sexual hierarchy disadvantaged. Blackpill101 says that, "any sub8 male is a truecel in the 2010's+, since women all truly go for Chads and rarely give a chance to a sub8 male in looks… there's no point in trying if you're a sub8 male."

Regardless of this perceived widening wealth gap and a recognition of the disadvantages that most men have because of this hierarchy, incels insist that their position at the bottom of

this hierarchy is worse than any other position. The user Dispair is not articulating anything out of the ordinary when he says, "we are the downtrodden, the literal bottom of society." Further, it is not uncommon for incels to exacerbate their perceived position in this hierarchy. In a thread titled, "[News] [Dogpill] Irish hag-whore chokes on dog cum and dies," StoicNihillist says, "It's still depressing to me though... women would rather fuck dogs than me."

Race and ethnicity play an important role for incels in determining placement within this hierarchy. There is debate about what qualities are most important in determining position within the sexual hierarchy, but all incels agree that race and ethnicity ranks among the most important. One incel with the screen name Raper says, "race > face > height > frame > penis size." Rather than challenging racialized standards of beauty, incels acknowledge and reproduce racial hierarchies in their discussions of sexuality. In some instances, the reproduction of these hierarchies is blatant.. Using an inequality expression, a poster with the screen name 13k says, "white > latino > blacks > asian > cats > dogs > a pile of horseshit > arabs > curries." Incels adhere to a white standard of beauty, wherein whiteness is valued above all other racial and ethnic categories (despite the fact that incels.is draws men from around the world, including countries that are not predominantly white). Incels will often debate the JBW (Just Be White) theory in their chats. While many refute that this is even possible, let alone helpful in moving up within the sexual marketplace, they do discuss it at length, often bringing up that the advice they get from people outside of the community aligns with this theory. In response to another incel posting about race, TheGoodGuy writes, "I guess you believe in JBW and you are most likely black because blacks envy whites so fucking much and believe 'JBW' and then the girls will be drawn to your dick like a fucking magnet." Incels are against interracial relationships, mainly because they allow for greater competition within the marketplace. TheGoodGuy elaborates on

this point: "People should stick to their own races and I don't like the idea blacks or ethnics being with white girls, stay with your own damn girls."

Until this point, I have intentionally excluded women from the discussion of this sexual marketplace, since their position seems to be the most fraught with disagreements and internal contradictions. These disagreements, I believe, are because some participants describe their observations of how they think women currently function in the sexual hierarchy, while others assert their beliefs on the position women ought to hold. Beginning with the former, most incels insist that women are at the top of the sexual hierarchy because they have the power to make decisions. Essentially, women can choose to have sex whenever they want and with whomever they want. FeminismsCancer says that this is due to biology: "I'm not PUTTING myself below women, BIOLOGY does that for me. The individual with more options and choice is obviously superior to the individual without any." Others attribute this to social power given to women and not to men (or at least not given to men who aren't Chads). Yoyo insists that, "women live life on celebrity mode." Dominance in the sexual marketplace is often extended to account for success in other aspects of women's lives. For example, in response to a thread titled "[NSFW] girl on reddit fucks 100+ guys before she turns 18," Hunchback explains, "In 10 years she will probably be a doctor, lawyer or maybe even an engineer, a woman with a body like that can't lose." Finally, incels often claim that women exploit their sexual positionality, intentionally excluding some men from the sexual marketplace: "almost every foid out there gets off to the suffering of men, especially incels whether they like to admit it or not," says Sgtpinkie.

When describing the place that women ought to hold in the sexual hierarchy, incels diverge from their previous descriptions. First, many insist that women should not receive privilege simply because they were granted a higher status. In response to a post about a woman who had sex with many men, Alone75 asks, "What kind of challenge is that for a vagina monster

anyway? That's like me being proud I managed to take a shit everyday." Others insist that

women should not have agency over their own sexuality: "Whores should be used but not

respected. She exploits her SMV [sexual market value] in order to leave an easy life," says

Existentialhack. Usually, incels say women's sexuality should be controlled through social

pressure. For example, Lthelthe says that, "Harlots need to be shamed. This sort of behavior

shouldn't be acceptable or celebrated. It needs to be denounced." Others are more descriptive in

their controlling mechanisms: "The solution (I think) is... institutional monogamy (aka 1 pussy

for 1 dick. Period). And it doesn't need to be enforced through law or force either. Only social

convention and ostracism if those who deviate," says 37YearOldVirgin. Ultimately, Incel views

on women are generally summed up in an anecdote told by JewsCreatedFeminism:

> Browsing through her Facebook profile, she had absolutely everything going for her. Beauty and money and she lied to her family and said she worked at a salon so she could maintain her good girl reputation. She got her cake and ate it to (which really annoyed me), everything was looking up in her life. She would constantly tell me about her vacations and all the stuff guys got her and the constant good news she got. I needed her to feel my incel pain and need to bring her down a peg.

For women, race is less critical for incels in determining position within the sexual

hierarchy than it is for men. Rather, race is used as a marker for understanding sexuality and

promiscuity. For example, Spicycurry says, "South Asian girls are the biggest traitors in the

world. Anyone can get a south asian girl." Further, Spicycurry also says, "Moroccan woman are

some of the biggest whores on the planet. This is not surprise as Morocco is used as a whore

house by Saudi Arabian men." Essentially, a woman's race and ethnicity functions less as an

indicator of position and more as an indicator of whether or not she "matters" in the first place.

In each of the previous two examples, South Asian women and Moroccan women matter less in

the sexual market because of their perceived promiscuity. Incels spend a significant amount of

time debating which women "matter" and come to little conclusions. Incel Scum, however, does

articulate one common theme among these debates: "The only women who matter at attractive

girls between the ages of 18-24... When the girls get older they look for more stable type of males."

Finally, incels often discuss the possibility of mobility within this sexual hierarchy. Many refer to breaking their involuntary celibacy as "ascension." However, for most this is only something to theorize about. On the contrary, many insist that, as long as they are truly an incel (a "truecel"), ascension is impossible. Cali_Incel insists, "There is no escaping the hell we currently reside in even if we try, if you try it will just get worse." Some argue that there are physical traits that can be altered in order to move up in position (this process is called "looksmaxing"). However, many insist that, for truecels, looksmaxing does not actually improve one's status: "Gymcelling doesn't work. We all know that. You need good genes to succeed at gymcelling, and if you have such genes you'll never need to gymcel anyway because women will be naturally attracted you and you'd have been getting validation for as long as you were getting pubes," says OrangeFez2311. If someone does ascend, then they must not have been a truecel to begin with; instead, many would label them a "fakecel," or someone who claims the incel identity but is not actually an incel. In light of this lack of mobility, many incels do not mind justifying misogyny; if they cannot ever ascend, then the logic is that they might as well hate those who are at the top and who are hoarding all of the wealth. Lesbianwalrus articulates this point well: "In life, incels have a choice between being an unfuckable misogynist and being an unfuckable white knight. Regardless of your choice, your celibacy will remain intact."

"It's Not About Virginity"

While the basic premise of being an incel is described in the name (someone who is involuntarily celibate), many discussions point out that being an incel is much more than just not having sex. UBERCEL articulates this point very bluntly: "You don't understand the meaning of INVOLUNTARILY CELIBATE. It's not about virginity." Recognizing this complexity,

there are many discussions on incels.is aiming to understand who is allowed to call themselves an incel and what it means to claim such a title.

By now, it may be apparent that women cannot be incels. Because incels believe that women are among the most sexually wealthy in society, it follows that women should be able to have sex whenever they want and, therefore, could not be *involuntarily* celibate. Not only do the rules of incels.is ban women, but many restate this rule in discussions, particularly when they suspect that a woman might be lurking on the site. For example, Bronzehawkattack says, "Femoids aren't allowed because they can't be incel. I agree with both disallowing roasties and the fact that they can't be incel." Similarly, the rules of incels.is ban gay men from participating in discussions, nodding to the stereotype of promiscuity among gay men. "Scooby [another user] is actually gay, so not a cel," says Dekim. This rule is often employed to patrol the borders of the website. Just as some incels might suspect that women are lurking on the website, they also may suspect that gay men are not abiding by the rules and participating in discussion. For example, in a conversation with some disagreements about incel ideology, Bronzehawkattack says, "I'm glad this thread is at least outing some of the faggots who don't belong here."

Beyond excluding broad categories of people, the question still remains of which men allowed to call themselves an incel. Many say that he must not only must be involuntarily celibate, but he must also accept the incel ideologies, collectively called the "blackpill." (Included in this ideology is the sexual hierarchy described in the previous section.) Bronzehawkattack explains the importance of being "blackpilled" to claiming the incel identity: "This guy and many others here believe they belong here simply because they want to go to war with the damn femoids and cucks reeeeee, and that's literally their only common goal with those of us who actually claim to be incel. Many aren't even blackpilled." However, it is difficult, given the online and anonymous nature of the space, to determine who is truly blackpilled. As a result, other

measures are developed to determine whether someone is actually an incel. This short quiz,

posted by Yoyo, is one attempt at identifying who is allowed to consider himself an incel (and

therefore use the website) and who is not:

> Consider the following and add all the points. The more you get, the more subhuman you
> are:
>
> - Never kissed a girl (+1)
> - Never had a girlfriend (+1)
> - Does not have any real life friends (+1)
> - Has no hobbies or talents (+1)
> - Parents dislike you / Don't talk to you (+1)
> - Has been called "ugly" by another person (+2)
> - Spend at least 1 hour on this forum a day (+1)
> - Masturbates more than once a week (+1)
> - Has attempted suicide (+2)
> - Not educated / Not in Training / No Job (+1)
>
> Add all the points up, indicate your subhumanity below with totals.
>
> >10 Points = Extremely Subhuman. Rope Now.
> Between 6-9 Points = Genetic Trash. No one likes you.
> Between 3-5 Points = Below Average, could improve possibly.
> Between 1-2 Points = You have hope if you just work a bit.
> 0 Points = Fakecel out.

The questions posed by Yoyo hint at many of the important characteristics that incels

hold. Among the most important is recognizing physical difference (in Yoyo's quiz, this is

represented by the question "has been called 'ugly' by another person"). Incels are often quick to

point out that there are things about their bodies that are different from other men, and which

have led to their inceldom. For example, Harvey_Weinstein_Here says, "FACE rules all. you

either have it or you don't. Chads are not made they are born," in reference to the fact that an

"ugly" face makes someone an incel. Robtical insists that weight, acne, facial shape, and hair are

among the most important physical characteristics: "He has a lot of weight and acne to lose. If

he does the nose and chin surgery, he would shoot up at least 2-3 points. His eye area and hair

aren't so bad at least." Others, like MayorOfKekville say that height is the most important

physical feature: "Tall or incel. Choose one." Still others comment on nearly every other aspect

of men's bodies that can be critiqued based on culturally specific beauty standards.

While physical difference is emphasized in many discussions on incels.is, many insist

that inceldom is a learned social behavior. For example, leeringlurker says that, "blaming

everything on one aspect of your body is 80% cope. The biggest problem is probably what's

going on in your head." Men who hold this view insist that it is the experiences with sexuality (or

lack of experiences with sexuality) early in life that make him an incel. Leeringlurker proceeds to

say that, "the horrible thing about being an incel is the positive feedback loop that happens... if

you don't date in HS like everyone else, you lose social skils everyone else gets... You might get

better looking with age and your acne goes away, but you're still stunted socially/mentally." For

this reason, there are disputes over the age at which one can claim inceldom. CopeWithTheRope

insists that men who are under 18 cannot be incels, since they have not yet graduated high

school or experienced the effects of aging: "18 and undercels think they're ugly now. JFL [Just

Fucking LOL]. WAIT TIL YOU START BALDING AND VISIBLY AGE FROM THE OUTSIDE.

It's fucking over... if you don't use the small window of opportunity NOW." Others,

predominantly younger members, insist that they can call themselves incels, despite being

younger. Some return to arguments about biology, stating that many incels who are trying to

exclude younger men have also said that inceldom is something passed down through genetics.

Others insist that social ostracization can start young, and men who experience it should be

allowed to call themselves incels. For example, superighteous says, "I feel like I, as a teen, should

be allowed to post here considering there's been a rumor going on since 7th grade that I fucked

my dog. People avoid me like the plague."

Mental illness is often used as another justification for being an incel. Discussions about

mental illness often parallel discussions of social isolation and inexperience with sexuality

because many incels assume that mental illness imply a lack of social skills. For example, BridgeJumper says, "Try being ugly and having schizophrenia, its JFL when incels who are only ugly try to make mental illness seem like its nothing... You can live a normal life while being ugly, you cant do that when you have a mental illness." In many of these discussions, mental illness is used to position incels with mental illnesses (often referred to as "mentalcels") at a lower position in society than those who are "just ugly," implying that these men have more credibility when claiming the incel identity. Simply put, CopingGymcel says, "I'm mentally fucked AND unattractive to foids. You're much better off if you're mentally healthy."

Beyond physical difference and social inexperience, it is not uncommon for incels to comment on race and ethnicity when determining the authenticity of someone's claim to inceldom. While race and ethnicity were discussed previously as a tool used to locate someone in the sexual marketplace, they are also used to determine the ease with which someone can claim the incel identity. For example, spicycurry says, "STOP THE COPE NOW. The only ones who should be complaining about race are us curries who are literally at the bottom of the pile." "Curries" is often used to refer to South Asian men, who are rated among the least attractive racial and ethnic categories by incels. In this quote, spicycurry insists that South Asian men should more easily be able to claim the incel identity, simply based on their racial and ethnic identity. He explains this further by saying, "South asians are by far the most incel race. Egyptians are only ugly because some of them look like Indians. If they look more arab than they do better than the ones that look like Indians with curly hair." Further, different standards are applied to men of different races. Penis size, for example, is a more important determinant of inceldom for black men than it is for other races, as explained by blackletcel: "penis size is pretty important for blacks, i promise you bbc hoes won't fuck tyrone if hes not atleast avg."

Despite so much discussion of what makes someone an incel, all of these "incel traits" are constantly disputed, and therefore often require some proof that one is truly an incel. One way to prove this is by describing the number of times someone has asked a girl on a date and been rejected. The number of "approaches" someone has completed, in conjunction with a description of the qualities that makes someone an incel, is often (but not always) enough to establish credibility. For example, when questioning someone's incel status, Cynistic says, "I dont think you really have been rejected 2k times. If that really is the case you must be severely deformed." Further, it is common for incels to use dating apps (most commonly Tinder) to prove their inceldom. By posting a picture of himself and receiving no matches, someone can prove that he is at the bottom of the sexual marketplace. MaxZM98 reflects on using dating apps as a way of proving his identity: "i have been gymmaxxing... if not a single girl will swipe right on tinder, it shows how doomed i am." If an incels credibility comes into question, it is often cause for other members to demand proof that someone really is an incel. If they are not able to produce sufficient evidence, then they will be shamed on the site. This dynamic occurs in a conversation between TheGoodGuy and FACEandLMS:

> TheGoodGuy: I'm incel because girls don't climb into my basement and rape me. I have done 0 approaches because approaching means you're ugly. No man ever approached a woman and ended up dating her. In the history of mankind.

> FACEandLMS: On a forum for men who have approached 100s of women and who would just like ONE of those women to say "OK sure, I'll go on a date with you", for you to have the audacity to think that you should be approached shows me that you are the fakecel meme that @13k and @Bagelcel talk about.

When a man is able to publicize on the site the qualities that make him an incel and establish his credibility, many admit that they find solace and even enjoy their time on the site. "Since I found this forum a few months ago," says St. Yams, " it's the friendliest place on Earth! Compared to groups that self-police and prevent you from saying what you want, it's nice to have somewhere unfiltered. Plus the fact that discussion os still so civil and the general culture

of belief is pretty similar for all of us." What St. Yams disregards is the ways in which many on the site do police the spaces borders, often according to many of the attributes described throughout this section. Some suspect that gay men are using this site and attempt to ostracize them from it. Others insist that mental illness is not an excuse for someone to be an incel. Jewsel does both in the same comment: "Well,you are severe gaycel,or an extreme mentalcel. Just go to therapy and stop being this loli creepy guy and you would escape inceldom easily." Others insist that race alone does not make someone an incel. For example, spicycurry says, "Arab men can get Indonesian/Pakistani/Back girls without a problem. If you only try for white girls then you are a fakecel." If all else fails and someone is simply saying something that does not align with dominant blackpill ideology, he is often men with swift and general chastising. In response to a comment arguing that non-virgins should be allowed on incels.is, BlkPillPres says, "Statements like this is what males me think someone is a larp and isn't actually incel, becuase you know full well you wouldn't like that shit as an incel." Perhaps St. Yams is correct in recognizing that incels.is can be a supportive, open, and friendly place--but only if one buys into the dominant narratives and is able to prove that he does belong. If he does not meet enough of the criteria that makes someone an incel, if he does not reflect the ideas of the blakcpill in everything that he types, or if he is not able to establish credibility as an incel, he quickly realizes that he cannot belong on this site without changing aspects of his behavior.

CONCLUSIONS

Through this analysis, I hope to provide a deeper understanding of the ways in which men who are unable to perform hegemonic masculinity still work to reproduce gendered hierarchies. Incels provide an interesting case study because news sources often dramatize their beliefs and actions, while very little rigorous academic research exists on the group. Labeling groups like incels as extreme misogynists, white supremacists, and domestic terrorists (as is

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often done in the media) comes less from a place of understanding and more form a place of condemning. This research takes a different approach. By working to make sense of the conversations that are being shared on incels.is, this project aims to provide a basis for understanding the logic of inceldom. In the future, these findings can be utilized to address the social and cultural forces that have led some men to perceive themselves as being denied the right to sexuality, to staunchly oppose feminism, and to attempt to reclaim a sense of masculinity through their comments and actions.

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Appendix I. Restructured Thematic Codes	
Code	**Example Quote**
Sexual Hierarchies	
Sexual Market (and the place of incel)	"But I do believe we're experience a sexual wealth disparity that is analogous to the actual wealth disparity that was extant in both France and Russia before their respective revolutions." *37YearOldVirgin*
The Place of Women	"Whores should be used but not respected. She exploits her SMV [Sexual Market Value] in order to leave an easy life." *existentialhack*
Race, Ethnicity, and the Geopolitics of Sexuality	"All curry girls in the west want a white guy but yes it still would be pretty easy for an arab guy to get a paki girl as most pakis see themselves as inferior to Arabs." *Krispinwah*
Possibilities for Mobility	"Just go to therapy and stop being this loli creepy guy and you would escape inceldom easily" *Jewsel*
Identity Construction	
Importance of Physical Difference	"Height is mega cope. It's all about face." *RREEEEEEEEE*
Importance of Marginalized Identities	"I'm mentally fucked AND unattractive to foids. You're much better off if you're mentally healthy. Even if I had no social anxiety and could talk to foids, I would probably still be incel." *CopingGymcel* "Tellem has a 7/10 face but looks black and so gets nothing on Tinder." *Bronzehawkattack*
Reinforcement of Foundational Beliefs	"Any sub8 male is a truecel in the 2010's+, since women all truly go for Chads and rarely give a chance to a sub8 male in looks, or even worse, a repulsive manlet like ER [Elliot Rodger] himself." *Blackpill101*
Proof of Difference	"People said London was so multi-cultural that any black man could get laid there. A user did a Tinder experiment with @PrinceOfCope in London, who is a 8/10 looking blackcel, and he got nothing." *Bronzehawkattack*
Border Patrolling	"What the fuck am I reading? This is absolute bullshit. I have no female friends whatsoever. One stupid asshole on here even said he SLEPT AT A FEMOID'S HOUSE.

	I FUCKING HATE THESE IDIOTS." *anincelforlifelol*
Reframing Masculinity	
Violence: Others	"I don't even want pussy anymore, I just want a nuclear holocaust which kills very Stacy, roastie, femoid, WK [White Knight], cuck, and SJW [Social Justice Warrior] on Earth." *MayorOfKekville*
Violence: Self	"im genetic trash and i should hire a hitman on myself." *whogivesafucc*
Entitlement	"I TURNED FUCKING 18 AND IM HERE FUCKING ROTTING THIS IS MOTHERFUCKING BULLSHIT" *CroMagnonBoy*
Victimhood	"Femoids have ruined our lives. Modern feminism will destroy society eventually." *thetruecelibate*

Appendix II. Screen Names of Incels Quoted in Results		
"The Literal Bottom of Society"	*"It's Not About Virginity"*	
Arrogantcel	UBERCEL	
37YearOldVirgin	Bronzehawkattack	
Lubricare	Dekim	
Blackpill101	Yoyo	
Dispair	Harvey_Weinstein_Here	
StoicNihillist	Robtical	
Raper	MayorOfKekville	
13k	leeringlurker	
TheGoodGuy	CopeWithTheRope	
FeminismsCancer	superighteous	
Yoyo	spicycurry	
Hunchback	blackletcel	
Sgtpinkie	Cynistic	
Alone75	MaxZM98	
Existentialhack	TheGoodGuy	
Lthelthe	FACEandLMS	
JewsCreatedFeminism	St. Yams	
Spicycurry	Jewsel	
Incel Scum	BlkPillPres	
Cali_Incel		
OrangeFez2311		
Lesbianwalrus		