

Article

The Rules of Attraction: An Empirical Critique of Pseudoscientific Theories about Sex in the Manosphere

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Abstract: Academic research is dedicating growing attention to the phenomenon known as the manosphere, where genders and (hetero)sexual relations are explained according to the so-called Red Pill philosophy and LMS theory. In this article, we critically analyze these theories and their pseudoscientific assumptions using a Bourdieusian framework, and we analyze the empirical effects they have in the Incel and Red Pill Italian communities through the example of the “Aranzulla case”. By exploring the “Redpill” blog and two Incel forums (“Forum of the uglies” and “Forum of the Incel”), we found that, on one hand, the Red Pill and LMS theories are strongly contradictory in themselves because, even if they combine socio-economic and biological theories to explain sexual relations, they assume a fixed vision of gender based on (supposedly) natural inclinations. On the other hand, our results show that these theories promote misogynistic content blaming women for men’s dissatisfaction, but they actually unveil intragender dynamics. Indeed, they produce tensions inside the manosphere, by creating hierarchies of masculinities, and around the possibility of escaping the biological destiny linked to the Incel condition.

Keywords: Red Pill theory; LMS theory; post-truth; manosphere; masculinities



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1. Introduction

Academic research is dedicating growing attention to the phenomenon known as the manosphere. In his self-published book, Ian Ironwood [1], an exponent of the manosphere who also coined the term itself, defines it as “the nascent and evolving collection of blogs discussing topics of masculine interests and men’s issues. Every day, hundreds of thousands, if not millions of men, visit these sites in search of wisdom and understanding about what it means to be a male in the 21st century, particularly in the face of a culture irrevocably changed by feminism”.

This expression in academic literature usually refers to the network of online communities and platforms that, on a global basis, are diffusing misogynistic and antifeminist positions [2,3]. Contesting gender and men’s studies, the manosphere’s groups, despite their internal differences and even conflicts, elaborate alternative explanations of contemporary gender relations and masculinities.

Among them, one of the most diffused is the Red Pill “philosophy”, which, based on a (distorted) socio-biological vision of genders [4], also provides an understanding of sexual relations among men and women. Other research has shown that this theory interprets heterosexual sexual relationships as a marketplace where every human being has a sexual market value (SMV) [5]. Men’s discourses about sexuality in the manosphere posit a hypergamic vision of sex and the existence of a hierarchy among men based on their success in having sex with women: at the top lie Alpha males (also named Chads), followed by Betas and Omegas [2,6]. According to the Red Pill philosophy, women are inherently promiscuous because of the evolutionary need to find the most fit mate. For this reason, they engage in sexual relationships with Alpha men, profiting from their genetics

and sexual abilities, and at the same time take advantage of Betas' financial and emotional resources [6]. This difference in status between Alphas and Betas is well illustrated by a popular motto in the Red Pill communities: "Alpha fucks, Beta bucks". In their vision, in fact, women use promiscuity to exploit men and eventually to dominate them: Beta males, indeed, are weak and less manly because they are "forced" to trade money, power, and emotional intimacy in exchange for sex, resulting in a passive, powerless position in relation to women [4].

However, the SMV is not fixed but can be increased according to the so-called "LSM (Look, Status, Money) law" [7]. A man can, in fact, increase his SMV either by improving his physical attractiveness or by gaining a higher socio-economic status [5,7].

Therefore, the Red Pill philosophy's immediate goal is open men's eyes to the status quo and "to give heterosexual men more power in pursuing individual sexual relationships within the existing system" [5] (p. 89), restoring an "authentic" masculinity and manhood compromised by the societal pressures to enact a Beta masculinity.

From this brief literature review, it emerges that an essentialist vision of gender dominates in the manosphere and in the Red Pill philosophy, justified by biological essentialism combined with some aspects of the neoclassical economy [5]. Indeed, on one hand, the manosphere displays traits typical of the post-truth society, where, through social media, certain aspects of scientific theories are cherry-picked and selectively juxtaposed to create one's own truth that merely sounds scientific [8]. On the other hand, the marketization of private life is typical of late capitalism, and these groups of men are the product both of its crisis and of the diffusion of its logics into all social relations [9]. This is also reinforced by the affirmation of a postfeminist discourse [10] sustaining an ideal female subjectivity characterized by self-empowerment and entrepreneurialism, including investment in body capital and bodywork.

The folk appropriation and misuse in the manosphere of evolutionary psychology and economic theories, employed both to explain gender, and especially sexual, relations among men and women [4–6,11] and to build a "misogynistic aggro-truth" [12,13], has been widely acknowledged. However, a systematic analysis of the contents of these theories is still missing.

The aim of the paper, then, is to fill this gap in the literature, providing a sociological analysis of the main pillars of the (pseudo)scientific theories diffused in the manosphere, reading them through a Bourdieusian lens, and also explaining their effects on intragender and intergender power dynamics. In "Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste", Bourdieu [14] tries to explain similarities and differences in tastes by connecting them to dispositions—named "habitus", i.e., patterns of classificatory schemes—which derive from the incorporation of positions in social space. Those positions depend on three dimensions: the volume and the composition of the capitals (economic, cultural and social capital) possessed by individuals and the change in these two properties (creating trajectories). For Bourdieu, the different forms of capital can be converted one into the other, even if without the same level of interchangeability: for instance, inherited cultural capital may promote the acquisition of educational capital, and the latter can give access to good professional opportunities and therefore to a good income. On the contrary, embodied cultural capital (for the aristocracy, "table manners or the art of conversation, musical culture or the sense of propriety, playing tennis or pronunciation") [14] (p. 70) is less often acknowledged as a capital in itself, and is less directly interchangeable with forms of capital. Instead, its appearance of naturalness ensures its possessors a privileged position. For Bourdieu, the body is the social product of the materialization of class taste, and it is "perceived as the most natural expression of innermost nature. There are no merely 'physical' facial signs; the colour and thickness of lipstick, or expressions, as well as the shape of the face or the mouth, are immediately read as indices of a 'moral' physiognomy, socially characterized, i.e., of a 'vulgar' or 'distinguished' mind, naturally 'natural' or naturally 'cultivated'" [14] (pp. 192–193). Therefore, the body is at the same time a social product in its materiality and in the way it is perceived, classified and evaluated.

Building on Bourdieu's abovementioned theory of capitals, Hakim [15] posited the existence also of an erotic capital. The author believes that, in our hypersexualized society, erotic capital is a fundamental asset in mating and the marriage market and also in other social and economic domains. In her view, women have more erotic capital, both because they are less interested in sexual life and because they invest more on their appearance. However, the patriarchy has historically prevented women from using it (with feminism reinforcing this process) by morally judging women's enactment of sexuality.

Another fruitful approach to developing Bourdieu's concepts is Green's theory of sexual field, i.e., social domains composed of material and virtual sites and inhabited by individuals interacting with the aim of the pursuit of partnership [16]. What is relevant for our analysis is that, for Green, the social criteria defining desirability in terms of physical characteristics and self-presentation skills—what he calls, similarly to Hakim, "sexual capital"—can strongly vary from one specific sexual field to another (e.g., a gay online dating platform or a downtown heterosexual city nightclub). Different sexual fields imply different logics of desirability, therefore requiring different lines of action and self-presentation. "The precise attributes that determine sexual capital vary across sexual fields as different sexual fields are organized by different characteristics of desirability. In this sense, sexual capital is not simply a characteristic of individuals—e.g., having a fit body or pleasing facial features—but rather, is simultaneously a property of individuals and a property of the sexual field" [16] (p. 275). Sexual capital, then, must be understood as a relational resource regarding the interaction among individuals in a specific sexual field.

In this paper, starting from these premises, we will analyze the fundamental pillars of the Red Pill theory and the LMS theory as explained in an Italian blog called *Il Redpillatore* (The Redpill). Moreover, we will focus on a specific discussion born in the Italian Incel community into the two blogs *Forum degli Incel* (Incels' Forum) and *Forum dei Brutti* (Forum of the Uglies) around a very famous Italian informatic blogger, Salvatore Aranzulla, and his attempt to modify his SMV.

From our analysis, it emerges that the Red Pill theory uses the LMS law to explain heterosexual relations in order to "scientifically" prove women's power over men. The LMS theory, in fact, by combining some aspects of socio-biological and economic approaches, overturns power dynamics and uses the ideal of "capitals" in a strategic way to promote a misogynistic vision of sexuality. In this way, the influence of the social construction of genders and especially inter and intragender power dynamics that produce hierarchies among masculinities and men are completely neglected. The discussion around our case study in the Italian Incel community provides empirical evidence of the intragender dynamics that provoke internal tensions inside the manosphere, and of the contradictory aspects of the LMS theory.

2. Materials and Methods

The aim of the paper is to provide a sociologically-informed critical framework to address the (pseudo)scientific theories diffused in the manosphere about sexual relations and their effects in terms of construction of masculinities, as well as intra and intragender power dynamics.

Therefore, we decided to examine two of the main communities of the Italian manosphere: the Redpilled and the Incels. We chose the first one because the blog *Il Redpillatore* (The Redpill) can be considered a sort of Italian manifesto of the Red Pill theory, especially since The Red Pill subreddit (r/theredpill) was quarantined on Reddit, with a Facebook page that counts more than 11,000 followers and 9000 likes.

The blog is open to the public, though to post people need to have a registered account, and is organized into several sections: "Dinamiche sociali" (Social Dynamics), "Cultura e società" (Culture and Society), "Pillole di vita" (Life Pills), "Bellezza" (Beauty) and "Fenotipi" (Phenotypes). Beyond these topics, there are more general sections about the website: "Accedi" (Login), "Chi siamo" (About us), "Contatti" (Contacts), "Regolamento" (Rules), "Glossario" (Glossary), "Privacy Policy" and "Archivio" (Archive). The "About us"

page overlaps with the “*Che cos’è la Red Pill*” (What’s the Red Pill) article which clearly illustrates the main pillars of the theory and of the blog. In particular, it shows a bulleted list containing all the main elements underlying the Red Pill theory, with some internal cross-referenced links to other articles of the blog that elaborate the different points. We took into consideration all the articles connected to beauty, biological differences, survival and reproduction, market value, hypergamy and polygamy, and sexual power (see Table 1).

Table 1. List of consulted articles on the blog *Il Redpillatore* organized by title, keywords, link.

Title of the Article	Keywords	URL
Le Basi Teoriche della Redpill	Sociological theory; LMS theory; Incels and Redpilled	https://www.ilredpillatore.org/2020/11/le-basi-teoriche-della-redpill.html (accessed on 15 October 2022)
Le 3 Cose Principali che le Donne Guardano in un Uomo	LMS theory; Beauty; Money; Status	https://www.ilredpillatore.org/2018/01/ecco-cosa-attrae-le-donne-3-punti.html (accessed on 15 October 2022)
Il Valore di Mercato Sessuale: Sopravvivenza e Riproduzione	Sexual market value; Survival and Reproduction; Hypergamy and Polygamy; Supply and Demand	https://www.ilredpillatore.org/2018/07/il-valore-di-mercato-sessuale.html (accessed on 15 October 2022)
Prostitute, non Lasciateci Soli con le Femministe!	Legalization of prostitution; Feminism; Sexual freedom; Male suicide; Rape	https://www.ilredpillatore.org/2018/02/legalizzare-regolamentare-prostituzione-italia.html (accessed on 15 October 2022)
Come Andare a Prostitute: Vademecum del Buon Cliente	Prostitution; Pros and Cons; Practical advice; Money	https://www.ilredpillatore.org/2018/06/come-andare-prostitutevademecum-del.html (accessed on 15 October 2022)
Il Potere Sessuale	Sexual Power; Rape; Women’s privileges	https://www.ilredpillatore.org/2017/11/il-potere-sessuale.html (accessed on 15 October 2022)
Perché la mia Ragazza non Vuole Farlo?	Sexual market value; Women’s power; Hierarchies of masculinities	https://www.ilredpillatore.org/2021/03/perche-la-mia-ragazza-non-vuole-fare-sesso-orale.html (accessed on 15 October 2022)
La BELLEZZA è Oggettiva o Soggettiva?	Beauty; LMS theory	https://www.ilredpillatore.org/2017/08/la-bellezza-e-oggettiva-o-soggettiva.html (accessed on 15 October 2022)
Johnny Depp, Brad Pitt o Leonardo DiCaprio: chi è più bello	Beauty; Phenotypes	https://www.ilredpillatore.org/2022/09/johnny-depp-brad-pitt-o-leonardo-dicaprio-chi-e-piu-bello.html (accessed on 15 October 2022)
Perché gli uomini di potere attraggono le donne	Status; LMS Theory	https://www.ilredpillatore.org/2018/06/come-attrarre-donna-conquistare-ragazza.html (accessed on 15 October 2022)

The Italian Incel community, on the other hand, operates mainly in two virtual spaces: *Forum degli Incel* (Incels’ Forum, <https://ilforumdegliincel.forumfree.it/>) (accessed on 28 November 2022), which counts more than 1300 members and *Forum dei Brutti* (Forum of the Ugliers, <https://ilforumdeibrutti.forumfree.it/>) (accessed on 28 November 2022), which has more than 10,000 registered users.

These places are very interesting sources of data to explore how the LMS theory “works” in practice and how it builds intra and intergender relationships and hierarchies. Similarly to The Red Pill forum, both the Incels forums have some free access sections, based on the platform forumfree.it, and others requiring a registration. The *Forum dei Brutti* provides a more limited free access area, including an introductory space for self-presentation of the participants and two sections, “*Vita da brutto*” (Life of an ugly) and “*Look*”. On the contrary, the *Forum degli Incel* offers a richer array of free access sections: after an introductory area hosting a section for self-presentation, the rules of the forum and a section for surveys and contests, the forum explicitly showcases the “*Manifesto degli Incels Italiani*” (Italian Incels Manifesto). Moreover, the *Forum degli Incels* provides free access to a list of other sections on the language used in gender studies, academic theories and research on male issues, as well as articles on the topic. Last, the section named “*Il cuore del Forum*” (the Heart of the Forum) is devoted to an Observatory of feminism, to a critical section on research and articles addressing the Incels and to the abovementioned forum “*Una vita da brutto*” (shared with the *Forum dei Brutti*).

Both of the forums also allow visitors to make queries with specific keywords. In order to find empirical materials on the effect of a transformation in the volume and composition of the LMS in defining the SMV, we focused on a specific case, that of a well-known Italian IT expert, Salvatore Aranzulla, who improved his Money and Status and has tried to change also his Look. We selected threads of discussion on the subject (Table 2)—avoiding those threads where the keywords were only named without fostering a real debate—and thereby found richer material in the *Forum dei Brutti* (nine threads) compared to the *Forum degli Incel* (three threads).

Table 2. List of consulted discussion threads on the *Forum degli Incels* and *Forum dei Brutti* organized by title, keywords, link.

Title of the Article	Keywords	URL
Salvatore Aranzulla, esperto di informatica	Aranzulla, gymcell, LMS	https://ilforumdeibrutti.forumfree.it/?t=73385186 (accessed on 20 October 2022)
Nella vita di Salvatore Aranzulla, che ne pensate?	Aranzulla, gymcell, LMS	https://ilforumdeibrutti.forumfree.it/?t=79266878 (accessed on 20 October 2022)
Aranzulla era un cesso anche coi capelli	Aranzulla, gymcell, LMS	https://ilforumdeibrutti.forumfree.it/?t=79089486 (accessed on 20 October 2022)
Cocozza	Aranzulla, gymcell, LMS	https://ilforumdeibrutti.forumfree.it/?t=72153618 (accessed on 20 October 2022)
Le vignette del brutto vero	Aranzulla, gymcell, LMS	https://ilforumdeibrutti.forumfree.it/?t=69717608&st=1530 (accessed on 20 October 2022)
Brutto vero che ha scopato grazie al fisico	Aranzulla, gymcell, LMS	https://ilforumdeibrutti.forumfree.it/?t=77809895&st=30 (accessed on 20 October 2022)
Bluepillati tipici (GamesMachines)	Aranzulla, gymcell, LMS	https://ilforumdeibrutti.forumfree.it/?t=75545054 (accessed on 20 October 2022)
Effetto palestra	Aranzulla, gymcell, LMS	https://ilforumdeibrutti.forumfree.it/?t=78512139 (accessed on 20 October 2022)
Ho iniziato a far palestra	Aranzulla, gymcell, LMS	https://ilforumdeibrutti.forumfree.it/?t=73705988 (accessed on 20 October 2022)

Table 2. Cont.

Title of the Article	Keywords	URL
La trasformazione di Aranzulla	Aranzulla, gymcell, LMS	https://ilforumdegliincel.forumfree.it/?t=77980796 (accessed on 20 October 2022)
Finita per Aranzulla	Aranzulla, gymcell, LMS	https://ilforumdegliincel.forumfree.it/?t=77126894 (accessed on 20 October 2022)
Gymcell estremo	Aranzulla, gymcell, LMS	https://ilforumdegliincel.forumfree.it/?t=77985466&st=15 (accessed on 20 October 2022)

We decided to focus on the Italian case for two reasons. On one hand, the theories diffused in the manosphere, the Red Pill in particular, are simply translated from one context to another and share the same principles on a global basis. On the other, though, the ways this theory affects men's relations and discussions in the manosphere are peculiar to specific geographical contexts [3].

3. Results

In this section, we discuss the main results of our study. In the first subsection, we will give some coordinates about the “sexual market”, a metaphor used by the Red Pill community to describe (sexual) relations between men and women. In the second subsection, we will analyze and critique each of the three pillars of the Red Pill and LMS theories: Look, Status and Money.

The third subsection, finally, shows the LMS theory “in practice”, connecting the theoretical pillars of the LMS theory to the discussion surrounding the case of Salvatore Aranzulla. We will use this case to illustrate empirically how the LMS and Red Pill theories interact with the performance of masculinities and the creation of hierarchies in the Italian Incel community.

3.1. The Sexual Market: Heterosexual Relationships as Economic Transactions

To understand the theorization of the LSM principle, it is important to describe the wider interpretation that the Red Pill theory gives of heterosexual relationships.

The most important element is the idea of the existence of a sexual market where “men and women trade their sexual/reproductive value with the aim of establishing a long term or short-term relationship potentially convenient for both” [17]. In this vision, both economic and biological strategies are combined in the search for a sexual partner, with the objective of reproduction and the survival of the species.

Indeed, every human being has a market value. For women, it is the result of the combination of beauty and fertility, meant to assure reproduction, while, for men, it comes from beauty and socio-economic status, meant to assure survival. Therefore, the LMS principle works for men and not for women because women are located on the “supply side”, while men are on the “demand side”: women tend to hypergamy, i.e., choosing sexual partners with the higher status, while men tend to polygamy, i.e., having many sexual partners. This situation is supposed to advantage women, since the women's liberation movement and feminism called into question marriage and the cultural (and practical) mechanism that regulated heterosexual relationships: monogamy.

Indeed, women are considered powerful or, better, provided with a high sexual power which not only grants them access to hypergamy, but also to other economic, professional and social benefits. Conversely, men are forced to accept hypogamy or, alternatively, to give up on women—like Incels and MGTOW—or to pay for prostitutes. Prostitution, in fact, is considered a men's right and a tool to rebalance the sexual power between men and women. Indeed, sex is considered an economic good that should be regulated by the

State applying the nondiscrimination principle: “the State should implement strategies to rebalance men and women sexual power. If I had a bar and I would refuse to serve some kind of clients I would be reported and punished for my discrimination [. . .]. I do not see why the same principle does not apply to sex” [18].

The other tool to change the power relations is rape. Rape, in fact, is defined as the “negative side of having a higher sexual power” and described as statistically less relevant than male suicide [19].

From this brief list of the main theoretical assumptions about the sexual market, four elements emerge.

First, in this vision, gender power dynamics are completely overruled. Women are in charge rather than men, who are, instead, “victims” of their biological needs and the impossibility of satisfying them. The only exception is the minority of men with a high LMS, the only ones who can not only choose the best women on the market, but also obtain the most of them. Here, the social construction of masculinities and the hierarchy among them, built and maintained by men themselves, is totally neglected. Furthermore, the insistence on biology as the main driving force in men’s sexual relations is part of the problem. Moreover, the combination of biological elements and economic elements allows these men to discursively distance themselves from the accusations of being misogynists and, at the same time, to make their assumptions “real”, inasmuch as they exist and are shared in an online environment far from the material reality of gender and sexuality.

The second element is the contradictory depiction of women’s status: the dehumanization and objectification of women, who are considered a commodity to be gained and obtained in the market of sexual relationships, coexist with agency. However, that agency is reduced to the possibility of exercising their sexual power in exchange for socio-economic benefits. This approach is very similar to Hakim’s [15] thesis of the existence of an erotic capital. However, these theories present a very simplistic vision of gender relations. They do not take into account the systemic and systematic disadvantages women experience in every domain of social and economic life, disadvantages that in some cases force women to use their erotic capital. Nor do they account for the social pressure society exerts on women to care for their appearance. In this sense, “erotic capital” is far from being an asset. It is more a necessity that, in many cases, becomes a form of gender-based violence, and/or a source of societal pressure to conform to social norms about femininity. In addition, the social stigma around women’s sexuality is still very high, and, unlike for men, for a woman to have many sexual partners means incurring social judgement.

This approach to sexual relations also reinforces a stereotypical vision of masculinity—well expressed in Hakim’s words: “men’s demand for sexual activity and erotic entertainment of all kinds greatly exceeds women’s interest in sex” [15] (p. 505)—without problematizing the social construction of virility as determined by sexual desire.

The third point to note is the interpretation of rape and its implicit justification. Beyond the minimization of the phenomenon, sexual violence against women is interpreted as an instrument used by men to regain control and to react to the extreme power of women. This is particularly interesting because several sociological studies have arrived at the same conclusion, but they do not justify violence against women; instead, they see the social construction and performance of masculinity as the problem, rather than the power of women.

Finally, no other sexual orientations are acknowledged, and a heteronormative vision of society is reinforced.

3.2. *Discussing the Look, Money, Status Law*

3.2.1. Look: An (Allegedly) Objective and Measurable Capital

The Red Pill theory is assumed to be simply “descriptive,” merely giving information about sexual relations and behaviors. Since it is grounded in a socio-biological approach, the theory posits that all the relations between men and women are regulated in the first place by physical attraction.

According to this theory, beauty is not subjective but objective, and is even measurable on a scale from 1 to 10. Indeed, in the words of the Red Pill, “if beauty was subjective, everyone should have the same probability to be considered attractive” [20], while the very existence of the concepts of “beautiful” and “ugly” testifies the objectivity of esthetic canons.

To “prove” this principle, the blog [21] cites an experiment conducted with one thousand students who, when asked to choose the most attractive among six photographic morphs (i.e., images gradually modified through computer animation techniques) of a female face, all labeled the same two morphs as beautiful.

Moreover, the Red Pill theory considers beauty to be determined by facial, and, to a lesser extent, by bodily attractiveness. In one of the blog articles [22], for example, the facial traits of Johnny Depp, Brad Pitt and Leonardo DiCaprio are compared. The distances between their eyes and noses are given so that they can be rated, in order to establish who is the most beautiful according to this “objective” measurement.

This theory is interesting because it does not deny the socio-cultural construction of beauty, and it recognizes its variability in time, among cohorts of different ages and epochs, and space, among different geographical areas.

However, the empirical evidence that supports this theory is quite weak: the results of the research mentioned above are a perfect example of “cherry-picking” and of the distortion of scientific results. Several results, in fact, show that the judgments are context-dependent, that the average face is usually rated as beautiful and that the process of categorization itself influences the perception of beauty. Pouring over data from peer reviewed journals and applying it out of context is a way for adherents of the Red Pill theory to justify their misogyny while presenting their “theories” as simply descriptive of how social relations objectively work.

Moreover, this theory does not take into account other elements that can contribute to the social construction of beauty, as well as the changes in individual “erotic capital” over time.

Finally, even if it is true that normative standards of beauty exist, this theory underestimates the variability and the fast-changing character of these standards even in the same historical moment and geographical area. Furthermore, as we will also see in Section 3.2.3, desirability in terms of physical characteristics and appearance is variable according to specific sexual fields [16].

In this way, instead of problematizing the social construction of norms and their influence on social relations, the LSM theory reifies them, making appearance an inevitable destiny and transforming women’s oppression, which derives from the high social and cultural pressure to conform to beauty standards, into advantage and power.

As a result, this theory reinforces a socio-sexual determinism wherein physical characteristics determine the kinds of sexual relations and other capitals one has access to, in a way that favors women. Adherents of the theory depict as emblematic of these relations women’s refusal to engage in some sexual practices, such as oral sex, as a strategy to enact power over men, setting them aside for alpha attractive men. In their words, “if a woman does not take the initiative in bed, if she does not want to do oral sex, if she does not give you her b-side, if she does not like your sperm: the problem is not her, it is your low sexual market value” [23].

3.2.2. Money: The Same Old Story

The misogynous idea that women exploit men for their money is not new. Therefore, it is not surprising to read such accusations on this blog. The interesting aspect of the Red Pill theory, though, is how the forms of capital combine and interact with each other.

According to the LMS law, money is less important than physical appearance in the sexual market, but it still counts. Indeed, in a market regulated by biological needs, while beauty assures “good genes” and therefore reproduction, money assures survival.

Money, then, can rebalance the inequalities between men and women in sexual power because it allows men to afford women, even if they have a low market value in physical

appearance. Moreover, according to this vision, money can also interact with beauty, making rich men more physically attractive to women.

Interestingly, despite the strong emphasis on economic exchanges in the sexual market that supposedly advantage women, the Red Pill theory neglects the actual role of women as “goods” to be exchanged among men in order to prove their social and male status. Therefore, women are less likely to have access to economic capital exactly because of their gender, which cannot be compensated, as the LSM law posits, with their erotic capital. On the other hand, men can indeed use women to prove their masculinity in front of other men (and also women), reducing women to “ornamental commodities” as a form of status symbol.

It is interesting to point out that feminist theories already elucidated the contractual nature of heterosexual marriage and sexual relations. For example, Pateman [24] argues that marriage institutionalizes inequalities between men and women, giving men the right of sexual access to women’s bodies and to their labor as wives and mothers. In this sense, the Red Pill theory has a point in affirming that feminism freed women and thus created instability in gender and sexual relations, since women are no longer (or at least less likely to be) forced to enter into a marriage to survive. In the same way, it is true that the courtship rituals are a form of socio-economic exchange and that, to some extent, prostitution and dates share a similar nature, with men using money to “buy” women. However, what is missing in the Red Pill theory is the exercise of power by men in these exchanges, which puts women in a position of inferiority and lack of agency. In fact, as argued by Pateman herself [24], women continue to enter into sexual relationships and marriages as individuals conceived in patriarchal terms: “sexuality, what it means to be a sexual being, is to possess and to have access to sexual property. [. . .]. In modern patriarchy masculinity provides the paradigm for sexuality, and masculinity means sexual mastery. The “individual” is a man who makes use of a woman’s body (sexual property)” [24] (p. 185).

The right to have sex and the call for the legalization of prostitution go in the same direction. Again, prostitution can be considered a peculiar form of contract (i.e., exchange of money for sex), but as an institution it cannot be considered egalitarian because it is rooted in women’s subordination. In fact, prostitution allows men to overcome all the “obstacles” that derive from women’s agency, such as the freedom to refuse sexual advances and to have sex. On the contrary, prostitutes only rarely can refuse clients, freeing men from “the psychological dependence that derives from the dispensers of sexual favors (this is what women are de facto in the contemporary sexual market” [25]. Yet, even if the quest is for a commodity and a mere service, it is non-satisfying because the service should be delivered by a person, even if, as the Red Pill theory admits, a prostitute cannot provide personal and sexual validation. Therefore, again, what is at stake is reciprocity and the difficulty for these men of engaging in an equal relation with women that cannot be compensated by money.

3.2.3. Social Status: The Centrality of Other Men

The last element that composes the LMS theory is social status. Of course, money and status are strongly interconnected and can be converted into each other. However, in the Red Pill theory, social status is conceptualized as “the reputation that a person has in a specific social context” [21].

Unlike Bourdieu’s theory of the social capital [14], status is reduced to a sort of psychological imitating process where the opinions of other people affect human decisions and behaviors. In the case of sexual relations, according to the Red Pill theory, women, because of their biological instincts, tend to choose men who are desired by many women, following the equation “desired = with high value” [21].

Status, in the LMS theory, is considered the most invariable capital in its importance: while the values of money and physical attractiveness can vary among different women and social contexts, status is always important. Social status, though, does not have an absolute value, but is relative to the social context and makes a man attractive because

women aspire to feel important “by osmosis,” and because women consider this kind of man to be resilient because they can survive to competition and social pressure [26].

For our analysis, there are two interesting elements here. First, the relative nature of status shows the inconsistency of the entire LMS theory. Indeed, the importance of individual resources is connected to and affected by the social context, and the role of homogamy in the choice of partners is well known in sociology. Since homogamy is the tendency to look for partners similar for some ethnic, religious or socio-economic elements, all the absolute assumptions at the basis of the LMS theory fall apart.

This does not deny that some people are in general socially considered more beautiful than others or that money and status can grant access to resources, including personal and sexual ones, but it means that their value is always relative. Therefore, the importance of the capitals and even their natures are variable in each social context or sexual field, in Green’s words [16], and the hierarchies of masculinities are variable according to specific social contexts and communities of practice [27].

This leads us to the second point. Despite a strong insistence on women’s power and privilege, hierarchies of masculinities and social status are built and reproduced by men. Social recognition is in the first place granted by other men in homosocial contexts, so women in the best-case scenario are spectators of performances of masculinity. In this sense, the logics and processes in the sexual market are determined more by intragender dynamics (among men) than by intergender ones (between men and women).

3.3. *The LMS Law and the Red Pill Theory in Practice: Incels and the Case of Aranzulla*

3.3.1. *Incel, Red Pill and LMS: What’s the Relation?*

The recent history of the Incel phenomenon [28] contains some ironical elements: in fact, the first person to use the word “incel”, in 1993, was a lonely high-school girl, Alana. This girl, facing difficulties in finding a partner and having an active sexual life, created a blog, “Alana Involuntary Celibacy Project”, to share her sad experiences with other unlucky single people. The blog was the starting point for the creation of an Incel themed mailing list in 1997, collecting both boys and girls who had not yet had sexual experiences or had not had affective relationships for a long time.

The evolution of this “project” promoted the development of a real online subculture, totally different from the original notion of the Incel. This digital subculture mainly includes young males without a partner, often virgins, who have great difficulty interacting with the opposite sex, and who blame women and their conquest of sexual freedom for their uneasiness. The current Incel community is composed of many online groups and platforms sharing certain beliefs, values, codes and in-group jargon, engendering and supporting a sense of unity and emotional closeness among its members [2,7]. Moreover, the language, emotional tone and contents of Incel discourses is resentfully misogynist and racist [2,4,7].

The LMS theory provides a (pseudo)scientific basis for the definition of the Incels themselves. Indeed, Incels are those men having a Look value inferior to four, even if, in their ideological stand, there is room for a tension between different interpretations of the LMS theory. For some Incels, the Look value is the most influential factor in sexual interactions. As a forum participant states, “For a 5 there is still some hope while for a 4 is death decreed” [29], and 4 is the Look value that determines “a real ugly” [29]. For others, instead, the lack of facial beauty can be compensated by high values in Money and Status, while, for a few, a low Look value can also be transformed through physical modification to improve one’s physical appearance (cosmetic surgery, fitness activities, etc.), adopting a practice defined, in the Incel jargon, as “Looksmxing”.

Before moving forward, it is important to point out the difference between Incel and Redpilled. As the Red Pill theory itself affirms, “to be redpilled is an ideological position of a person who knows the redpill and declares himself this way in a voluntary and active way. Being incel, instead, is a passive existential condition that one suffers [. . .], remaining excluded by the sexual market” [30].

This aspect is very important because, despite this difference, Incels and Redpilled are products of the same matrix: Incels, in fact, would not exist in this form and with this label without the Red Pill theory, and labeling themselves according to the principles of the LMS theory makes Incels also Redpilled.

In the following sections, we will focus on internal tensions around the construction of the Incel's identity and of the LMS theory, investigating a specific case study in the Italian context: the story of Salvatore Aranzulla and his designation as a "gymcel" within the Incel community.

3.3.2. Salvatore Aranzulla as a Gymcel

Salvatore Aranzulla is the most famous Italian blogger and computer advisor, an entrepreneur providing problem solving tutorials for information technology (especially software) for the general Italian public [31].

At the beginning of his career, he was acknowledged by the Incel community as a hero: a nerd who gained success through his intelligence, despite his physical appearance. For instance, a participant in the *Forum dei Brutti* points out: "I have great respect for him. Not only because his site has often been useful to me, but also because it has built the future from scratch" [29].

In both the *Forum dei Brutti* and *Forum degli Incels*, we can find shared pictures of his physical development from youth to adulthood. Those pictures often foster debate on the Look value Salvatore Aranzulla deserves: the scores range from 3 to 5, but the average score is 4, which is, as we have seen, the boundary defining a real ugly.

Recently, Salvatore Aranzulla posted a series of pictures representing his physical improvement in bodybuilding, a practice for which he has been given the label of "gymcel" (that is, an Incel trying to modify his Look through gym exercises).

The pictures were shared in the Forums [32], and this public display of an attempt to be included in the alpha men category provoked a lively debate within the Incel community, which we will try to reconstruct and discuss.

The debate revolves around two issues: the figure of the gymcel and the legitimacy of "looksmaking", on one side, and the functioning of the LMS law, more specifically, whether high Money and Status can compensate for a low score in Look and give access to the female body, on the other.

3.3.3. Face as a Destiny

One topic discussed in the Forums is the possibility of changing and improving one's look: talking about Aranzulla, some participants in the *Forum dei Brutti* acknowledge that hard gym work may increase one's Look score, "lookmaxing" the subject. Other participants, instead, adopt an inflexible position: pumping iron to construct a muscled body has little impact, since "99% is the face at play" [29].

In another thread discussing the notion of the gymcel, other participants share their useless experiences with gym work, complaining that, without a beautiful face and an adequate height (more than 1.70 mt), a muscular body is not so relevant [33].

Therefore, for a real Incel with an ugly face, there is no hope, and an ugly face on a muscled body is the object of jokes and cruel mockery, both from the homosocial gaze of the Incel community and in the reported comments of women: "He still has the appearance of a nerd-loser" [32].

The prevalent position, therefore, reifies the distinction between a beautiful face ("*Bel faccino*", BF) and being a "real ugly" as a matter of natural destiny and as a given privilege/disadvantage in the sexual market. Aranzulla's attempt to change his physical nature is considered not only as useless and ridiculous, but also as a betrayal of the Incel community.

3.3.4. It Is a Matter of Money and Status

More than attempting to improve their physical appearance by lookmaxing practices, in the *Forum dei Brutti*, some participants invite Incels to search for economic success, both to show their value and to gain access to women.

In the case of Aranzulla, he was highly respected, within the Incel community, for his self-made career that brought him a high status and media visibility. Money and Status allow him to have access to hypergamy, i.e., to attract women with a higher Look value. As a participant in the *Forum dei Brutti* states: “He’s rich, he can have better pussies than a 7 can have barely making ends meet” [29].

At the same time, however, using money to attract women can expose him to the “Beta bucks” trap, i.e., to being exploited by beautiful women targeting his wallet. This unmasks a contradictory aspect of the LMS theory: on the one hand, Money and Status can compensate for a low Look value, but, on the other hand, money can lead to exploitation by women. In some memes, we have iconic examples of this discourse, with a beautiful woman asking for IT advice and refusing to have a coffee with Aranzulla, but having second thoughts once he has become a millionaire [29].

Moreover, by focusing on Money and Status, Aranzulla risks assuming the role of the “beta-nerds” [34], those “doormats” who are active in videogames, cosplay and comics and who display a less misogynistic attitude, thereby attracting women looking for someone to support them economically.

This debate points out a contradictory element in the LMS theory: for Incels as “real uglies”, it seems impossible to gain an SMV that would give them access to women, because the LMS formula is weighted towards the Look dimension, which is an unmodifiable, biological destiny, despite the (inter)changeability of Money and Status.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The article aimed at critically analyzing the pseudoscientific frames diffused in the manosphere about (hetero)sexual relationships, taking into consideration discourses diffused in the Redpilled and the Incel Italian communities.

Such discourses rely upon an ideological knowledge constructed with the typical post-truth mechanisms [35]: the appeal to emotions; the foundation in social media as a source of echo chambers, fake websites, and other devices promoting manipulation, anonymity, simplification, polarization and the brutalization of language; the attack on critical thinking, such as feminism; and the refusal of intellectualism and elitism.

Unsurprisingly, the main analytical framework adopted in both these contexts is a rearrangement of the socio-biological understanding of gender relations [2] combined with an economical notion of the sexual field interpreted as a market [5], reliant on outdated versions of both concepts. This approach is derived from the Red Pill theory, which posits the existence of universal and objective laws regulating the sexual market, where everyone has a Sexual Market Value (SMV) produced by the intersection of three capitals: Look, Money and Status (LMS).

Thanks to the use of Bourdieu’s notions of “field” and “capitals” [14] and subsequent contributions [15,16], we pointed out one contradiction and two tensions inside the Red Pill theory and the LMS law and inside the manosphere itself.

Despite this combination of sociological, economic and biological approaches, the Red Pill theory is deeply grounded in a strong assumption which is rarely thematized: that men and women are animals first and foremost, and men’s sexuality is mainly driven by biological instincts. This leads, of course, to an immutability of gender models, practices and relations that becomes a sort of destiny for men and women, neglecting the socio-cultural influences on their construction.

Such an assumption represents a contradiction within the Red Pill theory and the LMS law that, on the contrary, are supposed to adopt a more dynamic vision of gender and sexual relations. This aspect is well exemplified by a discussion on the *Forum degli Incel*, fostered by a participant with a female nickname who introduced to the debate a quotation

from Bourdieu. She referred to a notion of bodily capital, that is, the body as a matter of investment, work and transformation used to gain a better position in the economic, social, and sexual market. If the first replies seem to take the question seriously, discussing to what extent the body can be a flexible capital, the cynical reply of the former administrator of the forum (a participant with a high status) ends the debate abruptly:

“Beauty today is a capital. Not the beauty of artistic representation, but the one tied to the hole in the middle of the legs. And what those few really attractive men have. Pussy is therefore a capital, not beauty ‘in itself’. Now, the problem of the woman is to make this capital (the cunt) work. That of the men, to nail women down. That’s why men and women will always have different interests, always. The first will have a hole to make money, in which to put the nail better. The second one has the nail and is just looking for a fucking wall/hole where he can stick/stick it. Capitalism (as a trend, not a conspiracy) in the last 70 years has achieved this perfect marriage between the female condition and consumerism. Feminism is the ideological cover of all this” [36].

In this statement we can see a strong contradiction: Look is relevant for both women and men, but the real bodily capital for women is independent from their facial or physical attributes and resides in their vagina. The vagina is always a capital, while the penis is a cost, due to the natural laws of attraction that drive men to “nail women down” by any means.

The two tensions, instead, involves the relationships inside the manosphere and, in particular, the hierarchies of men and masculinities built inside it.

The first one is linked again to the strong importance given to the “biological destiny” represented by ugliness and especially by an ugly face. Indeed, the very definition of “Incel” derives from the categories constructed by the Red Pill theory that distinguish Redpilled and Incels. While every man can be redpilled because it is a choice and an expression of agency, being Incel is a destiny, “an existential condition” [30] linked to a low value in Look. Again, it seems that the three capitals that constitute the LMS triad are not equivalent, and that the biological one derived from an ugly face is somehow inescapable. This existentially lower positioning of Incels in the male hierarchy, however, can also be read as a privileged position of fully understanding, in an embodied way, the Redpilled worldview.

This leads to the second tension internal to the Incel community. The discussion around the “Aranzulla case” allows us to point out the existence of two opposite ways of interpreting the (inter)changeability of the LMS capitals in determining an individual’s SMV. Some believe that, since the SMV is the product of the three dimensions of LMS, Incels can expand it either by combining the three capitals in different ways, for example, by increasing their Money or Status, or by converting them into each other, for example by investing Money to improve their Look. Another possible strategy is to increase the Look score by doing, for example, hard gym work. In all of these cases, the SMV is adjustable by intervening on some of its components.

For others, on the contrary, all of these efforts are just a waste of time and also exemplify a contrary, “bluepilled” attitude. From this perspective, the Look component is an unchangeable fate to be accepted. To work on one’s own body, like a gymcel, is worthless and ridiculous. Moreover, even those who acknowledge that gym work can make an Incel more attractive to women argue that this exposes them to the risk of becoming beta providers exploited by women. Similarly, gaining access to women through Money and Status put “real ugly” Incels at risk of being harnessed as “beta-nerds”, the worst status (also labeled as “blackpilled”) in the male hierarchy.

The Aranzulla case is also interesting in that it shows how the manosphere combines some global tendencies with local specificities: on one hand, marketization and post-truth are global, as are the decontextualized and supposedly universal laws of the functioning of gender relations. On the other hand, though, the discussions surrounding the law are illustrated using examples and public figures embedded in the local context.

For the future, it would be useful to expand the research on other connected topics discussed the manosphere, such as prostitution and violence against women, and also to include in the analysis non-Italian groups.

To conclude, we think that this exercise of unpacking the “capitals” through a Bourdieusian lens was useful in showing the inconsistencies of these pseudoscientific theories and the effects they have on the construction of relationships both among men and between men and women.

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